

# VOICING SOULS

## Embodying Uncertainty in a Portuguese Borderland Village

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Focusing on the ritual of the Commending of the Souls in Penha Garcia (Portugal), this article analyzes how its recasting as heritage is re-inventing a declining rurality and aiding an uncertain future. A renewed vernacular engagement with the ritual, along with the local use of heritage policy to render it intangible heritage is 1) generating a vernacularization of Portuguese Catholicism (analogous to “religious pluralization”), and 2) construing heritage-making as an efficacious technique of religious belief. This article argues that the collective engagement of local actors in the processes of vernacularization and transforming of this ritual into heritage is (re-)enchanted the virtuosity of their local religiosity, which embodies and suspends a structural uncertainty.

*Keywords:* vernacularization, religious heritage, Portuguese Catholicism, uncertainty, ritual experience

### Uncertainty and Ritual Re-invention

In the village of Penha Garcia, in the municipality of Idanha-a-Nova (Beira Baixa, Portugal) in the early afternoon, on Friday, March 17, 2017, I met Maria Nabais and Luzia Gameiro sitting together in front of a computer transcribing the lyrics of the Lenten ritual, *Encomendação das Almas* (the Commending of the Souls).<sup>1</sup> As Nabais slowly sang the Commending of the Souls (henceforth Commending), Luzia typed each syllable, including orthographic adaptations (e.g. elisions, contractions, spelling changes) to match the village’s specific accent. Amongst us there was also the voice of a dead woman, Emília do Tó Correia. Maria Nabais had brought with her an audio tape with the recording of an old performance of the Commending. During this process of cultural re-creation, whenever they had a doubt about the accuracy of their reproduction, they pressed the play button of the cassette player to recall missing

melodies, intonations, or vocal inflections. Now and then, the sound of the voice of their deceased neighbor moved Nabais to tears, touched by the feeling of loss and distance from her beloved friend. As Luzia and Nabais proceeded with the transcription of the ritual lyrics, neighbors from the village rang Luzia’s doorbell to drop off “free, prior and informed consent” forms to be included in a Unesco Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) application that was due by the end of the month, on March 31, 2017. Idanha-a-Nova Council authorities were preparing a heritage application to Unesco’s ICH Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (cf. Unesco 2003).

The Commending of the Souls is a ritual practice in which women gather outdoors late at night, whilst others in the village are sleeping, and walk together to high locations of the village to sing and pray for the souls of the dead. In their singing, they appeal to those who are asleep to wake up and join them

in their prayers from their beds. With their actions, they commend the souls in purgatory<sup>2</sup> (*encomendam as almas do purgatório*) to the divine entities (God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary), desiring for the souls to be released to heaven. In Penha Garcia, the Commending is practiced during Lent at midnight on Fridays<sup>3</sup> chosen by the group.

The study of the Commending of the Souls has been published in a comprehensive set of texts, mostly printed before 1974 and produced in the fields of ethnography, folklore, ethnomusicology, and anthropology (cf. Dias & Dias 1953); therefore, it is a “classic” theme of the Portuguese anthropology. Previously practiced all over the country, in the 1950s the ritual was depicted by several authors as having already undergone a period of devitalization. With the strong movement of rural exodus and the increase in emigration, the mechanization of agriculture and the progressive decoupling of the productive cycle from the agricultural and religious calendar that structured rural society, many of the rituals and customs that punctuated the rural calendar also declined (Brito 1996). Commending the souls was one of those rituals. Its decline was also associated with the action of the local clergy, which in various places sought to purge from their parishes religious rituals and manifestations with popular autonomy that did not conform with the “purity” of the institutionally prescribed religiosity (cf. Dias & Dias 1953). In many Portuguese localities the social processes of demographic loss and declining of a rural mode of life was reflected in the process of the ritual’s devitalization. Considering this connection and having observed the work of heritage-making in Penha Garcia, I will explore in the following to what extent the heritage-making of a ritual may re-invent a declining rurality, addressing the demographic crisis in Idanha-a-Nova, which is faced with an uncertainty in the re-production of traditional forms of socializing and cultural loss.

For “ritual” I will be using Victor Turner’s re-elaboration of Arnold Van Gennep’s *rites de passage* – a set of culturally prescribed forms of collective action (ritual symbols) employed in processes of social transformation ([1967]1986). In that framework, the performance of a ritual comprehends three inter-

connected phases: the separation of the individuals from their everyday life (the pre-liminal); the proper ritual situation where its practitioners are moved into a state of ambiguous behavior, thus subjected to experiential transformations (the liminal); and, the re-aggregation of the ritual’s participants in the regular social structure (post-liminal) (ibid.).

However, one of the compelling developments of Turner’s approach to ritual as a process concerns the role of the body, in the liminal phase. The body is used as a privileged site for the ritual actors to experience religious, cosmic ideas and processes, mainly through a condition of ambiguity and paradox, thus “regarded as a sort of symbolic template for the communication of gnosis, mystical knowledge about the nature of things and how they become to be what they are” ([1967]1986: 107). Thus, by drawing on Turner’s “liminal” conception of ritual, this article emphasizes the affective and experiential connections that are lived during the ritual process, echoing and developing Émile Durkheim’s ideas of ritual as a form of collective effervescence (cf. Cavalcanti 2018; Di Giovine 2011; Leal 2016; Olaveson 2001). Furthermore, I view the centrality of the ritual’s corporeal experience as a methodological<sup>4</sup> approach to study the ritual’s transformative processes. I had the opportunity to participate in the ritual by following the ritual action and/or by being myself corporeally and spiritually engaged in the process of commending the souls.

By virtue of the non-institutional nature of the Commending, and to make sense of its embeddedness in the local history, I will be drawing on Dorothy Noyes’ concept of the “vernacular”, a traditional invention that is “made from objects and vocabulary and people at hand, is moored by indexical links to the lifeworld [...] itself reworked as necessary, it acquires thick layers of historical resonance” (2016: 259). The practitioners of this vernacular ritual use the terms “passage” or “transition” to refer to the experience and meaning of what they are performing, and they generally co-opt the term “tradition” to designate what I am referring to as a ritual. In so doing, they are already construing the ritual as cultural heritage. Thus, I would suggest we look at and analyze heritage-making (Ciarcia 2006; Harrison 2013;

Macdonald 2012, 2013; Testa 2017) from below: how are these religious communities of practice using Unesco's ICH application (cf. Isnart 2015)? When many of those who left the village returned, they used the ritual techniques as what as I will call *past-future-heritage* in a ritualization of rural society (Boissevain 1992; Godinho 2017) as an experiential reality. It is argued here that the functional meaning of the ritual as a form of guidance of the transitional process for the souls, a second burial in a Hertzian sense, is now being used to address the social drama of the society's own death, as a whole.

On a wider scale, the local use of the ICH convention to frame this socio-cultural phenomenon has legitimized an inner pluralization of Catholicism, analogous to an ongoing national "religious pluralization" (cf. Dix 2008, 2010; Teixeira 2018; Vilaça 2012). In the described context of religious heritage-making, I understand this particular form of revitalization (Boissevain 1992) as a process of vernacularization. The performative (artistic and technical) solutions found by the local actors in the re-making of their traditions are re-enchanting the virtuosity of local religiosity, thus promoting wider visibility to these rural communities. Moreover, the ritualization of the local tradition of the Commending increased a will to "re-invent the real" (Ciarcia 2006) of those localities, which generated a collective re-enchantment (Testa 2017) of and by the local religious repertoires. Hence, it is a central argument of this article that religious enchantment cast by these local traditions are being used as a resource for global projections of local realities, thus attempting to re-produce their own local cultures in a globalized context.

In that process, heritage-making was put into practice as a form of religious belief, whose exchange actions and *mana* (Mauss [1950]2002) envisioned a regeneration of the local social reality. Therefore, a ritual around the death of individuals is being institutionalized here as a form of cultural display to ward off the death of the rural societies as a whole.

Observed at the ground level, it can be seen that this religious heritagization produces effervescent collectives or *communitas* (Durkheim [1912]1995; Turner 1977), which under the heritage framework summon and thus re-connect many of the dispersed

migrants who have left the village. I argue that the experiential nature of the ritual process, sutured with collective emotions triggered by its embodied experience, creates in their practitioners a sense of affective commitment to their localities. This form of social reconnection through ritual commitment includes both practitioners who are only returning for the short time of the ritual period (Lent and Easter), but also those who have returned to stay on a more permanent basis and, thereby, are trying to re-vitalize the villages where they now live.

### **The Enduring Force of Ritual Techniques as Past-Future-Heritage**

Maria Nabais was born in 1933 in Penha Garcia and at the age of 12 she began joining the group of around five to seven women in the performance of the Commending in the village. At that time, she lived with her parents in a small farm-house located on the outskirts of the village. Every Good Friday she would come with her sister to the village to participate in the ritual. Her parents were peasants, like most of the population, and made a living off that small parcel of land. Apart from domestic agriculture, her parents' familial income was complemented by the production of charcoal made from wood extracted from a forest nearby, which they sold, illegally, to their neighbors.

When she was just a teenager, Maria Nabais began to work in one of the largest rural properties in the country, Vale Feitoso, which is dotted with a series of small-scale villages (locales), with different names. Those localities, today abandoned and ruined, harbored many rural workers. Like Nabais, a great part of the population of Penha Garcia lived in those locales and worked in their surrounding fields. Many people in Penha Garcia, nowadays, have their childhood memories and sense of home and belonging attached to those micro-localities. In Vale Feitoso, Nabais worked six days a week and slept in a small shack made of straw with the other workers. During Lent, Nabais and the other numerous farm workers got together to do the Commending in Vale Feitoso, although since those lands are flat, they had to climb into pigpens to sing and pray for the souls.

On January 2, 1969, Nabais left Penha Garcia to pursue a better life in Paris. Like many migratory life stories, the migratory journey leading to the prospect of a better life was made illegally, thus with a great uncertainty and risk. Similar to most other inhabitants of the village, Nabais travelled illegally to France. During her first seven years there, Nabais worked as a cleaning lady, and in the following seven years she worked as a concierge and cleaner in Parisian buildings.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Idanha-a-Nova suffered a progressive social-demographic crisis in the municipality. This demographic crisis had started already in 1946 when the construction of the local dam (Barragem Carmona e Costa) was over and the workers left. That demographic crisis was further accentuated in the decades following the 1970s when 12,000 people out of 33,000, a third of the population, disappeared from the county; some went to Lisbon, others went abroad, namely to France. According to the latest national census, conducted in 2011, the municipality of Idanha-a-Nova had a total of 9,716 inhabitants, with a loss of 17% of its population since 2001 (cf. INE 2012). From the remaining population nearly 50% were found to be elderly people, aged over 65, thus most of them were living on retirement pensions or social benefits. Despite that decline recorded between 2001 and 2011, Penha Garcia is still one of the most populated villages in the municipality today, with 748 inhabitants (*ibid.*).

The loss of population in Idanha county was felt throughout the country and gave rise to a structural crisis in the Portuguese rural countryside. Like many other rituals, the Commending has declined or disappeared from most of the villages in Idanha-a-Nova. Since the departure of Maria Nabais in 1969 and still today, most of the farming lands around Penha Garcia, and across rural Portugal, have become increasingly uncultivated and in the present day this overall political neglect has severely affected the agriculture and the consequent devaluation of the rural countryside is clear to see.

On February 2, 1982, Nabais returned to Penha Garcia and shortly after, she joined the Commending. Since then, many other emigrants have returned and participated in cultural re-creation,<sup>5</sup> revitaliza-

tions and celebrations of their own traditions and past ways of life (cf. Boissevain 1992). In Penha Garcia this movement has included several cultural initiatives such as the creation of folklore ensembles and the production of seasonal public celebrations of the village's past.

Tourism and heritage-making projects have also started to flourish in the village. Currently there are three museum complexes in Penha Garcia – an interpretative center of old rustic mills, an iconological park, and the museum of São Pedro de Alcântara. The local religious repertoire has also been integrated into the village's cultural renaissance. This has included the restoration of the village's chapels of Espírito Santo and São Lourenço and the revitalization of the local religious vernacular rituals, including the Commending.

However, it's important to note that despite the increasing flow of tourism into the village, there is only residual interaction with the village's inhabitants. During my fieldwork, very few people observed the Commending (no more than 5–6), and they were all family, friends, or friends of friends.

Therefore, when Maria Nabais and Luzia Gameiro were sitting together in front of the computer listening to that old cassette with the recording of the Commending and re-typing its lyrics for the purposes of applying for Unesco status, they were engaged in the revitalization of local traditional practice. That process can be seen as part of a broader European phenomenon, as theorized by Jeremy Boissevain, referring to renewed collective engagement in processual practices of revitalizing declined rituals. Revitalization was then at the base of a florescence of public celebrations in diverse local contexts, attached to broader social and economic dynamics (cf. Boissevain 1992).

Underlying the present revitalization of this local tradition, under the paradigm of heritage-making, there is a collective need to overcome the village's depopulation and to address an uncertainty toward the future of this rural society. Yet, for these women, the future and uncertainty are not locally comprehended as synonyms of one another, nor is the second perceived as a state of irreversible and static crisis – quite the contrary. As was recently argued by

the Portuguese anthropologist Paula Godinho, the “future” is mostly made up from possible practices (*práticas possíveis*) encompassing the material force of ideas and the spaces of experience (2017: 21). In that sense, the experience attached to communal traditions has been locally perceived (or idealized) to convert shared expectations into an inspiring “not yet”, as foreseen by Ernst Bloch (Godinho 2017: 18). Hence, I frame this process as a form of *past-future-heritage*, whereby a collective engagement in the (re)cycling of the local vernacular traditions as intangible heritage is used to invent a possible future; in that process a creative interplay between uncertainty toward the future and believing in a shared experience is eliciting the ritualization of a rural world.

The temporal, corporeal and sensorial differentiation of the quotidian world produced in the context of the ritual process creates a concentrated, intense, cognitive, affective and behavioral experience projected upon the rural reality itself (cf. Isnart & Testa 2020, this special issue); that process will necessarily re-structure the material and ordinary reality, as it will be shown in the following sections. Hence, the ritual technique of the Commending has an enduring productive force in this locality.

### **The Commending of the Souls in the Vernacularization and Pluralization of Catholicism**

On a winter afternoon, in conversation with one of the oldest practitioners of the group from Penha Garcia, Maria Alice told me about her anxiety over the future of Roman Catholicism in Portugal. The night before, on Wednesday, December 5, 2018, she stayed up until late watching a live TV debate about religious plurality in Portugal, entitled “Religious Freedom”. With that in mind she lamented the present situation of her own religion:

People complain that Portugal is a country without faith, and it is one of the nations in the world that is losing the Catholic religion. Because we have many other religions here... today each one follows the one he or she wants to and that is more suited to their [spiritual] needs, as people are free. Yesterday evening I watched a program on the television which showed that Portugal has many other non-

Catholic religions [...] they also said that there are very few practicing Catholics, and that there are many others who are non-practicing Catholics. But, the number of other religions in Portugal is increasing. There are many people choosing different religions, converting to Jehovah’s, to the IURD [the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God], and to all other sorts of religions out there.

That TV program about religious identities instigated a debate on broader themes of religion in Portugal: modernity and secularism; the individualization of belief; the emergence and growth of minority religious groups (non-Catholic); and religious pluralization, against the backdrop of the loss of power of Portuguese-Roman Catholicism.

Watching the TV debate on the rise of religious plurality in Portugal brought Maria Alice a feeling of uncertainty toward the future of her own religion. In her eyes: “Catholicism is falling apart!” In fact, Portuguese Catholicism is today publicly understood and unambiguously qualified by many researchers and also in the public domain, as the major faith in the country, embedded in a society that is characterized as increasingly religiously plural and inclusive. As Steffen Dix has rightly pointed out “[t]he religious history of Portugal is usually told as the history of a monolithic Catholic system of belief” (2008: 60). Less attention has been given to “ambiguous identifications” (ibid.: 73) and/or to the “inner pluralizations” (ibid.: 81) in the Roman Catholic Church in Portugal, in the past as well as in the present.

The Commending of the Souls is a paradigmatic case of a cult that has been the object of a systematic religious differentiation within Portuguese Catholicism, as it has been historically repressed, underestimated and stigmatized by the clerical authorities and by the antireligious urban elites. Portuguese ethnographies written during the Portuguese fascist dictatorship regime of Estado Novo<sup>6</sup> (1933–1974) have blamed the clerical authorities for the decline of this ritual. In 1950 two Portuguese ethnographers, A.C. Pires de Lima and Alexandre Lima Carneiro criticized the Portuguese Catholic Church for banning the practice of the Commending. The

authors understood that its prohibition could lead to, firstly, a clerical “inability to keep troublemakers in order” (referring to the ritual practitioners); and secondly, that it would give scope to “indiscipline, as customs almost never die” (Lima & Carneiro 1951: 20, my translation). The Portuguese anthropologists Margot Dias and Jorge Dias saw in the Commending a “custom which has its roots in a medieval Catholic practice [...] that ‘o povo’ [the folk] in Portugal have appropriated, by adding to it, as usual, magico-pagan traditional elements” (1953: 75). The authors agreed with Pires de Lima and Lima Carneiro, remarking that the Church “in its urge for depuration, has lately tried to fight all these traditional customs, whenever the orthodox purity is not respected” (ibid.: 593). By then, Portugal had undergone a process of progressive secularization that culminated with the implementation of the Republic in 1911, and with the subsequent publication of the Law of Separation between Church and State (April 21, 1911).

Hence, the local clergy prohibitions and/or disapproval in regards to the Commending must be seen

as partly reactionary governmental strategies implemented by the Portuguese Church aiming for a requalification of Catholicism in the public sphere. In 1940, the Portuguese State signed a concordat with the Holy See (Vilaça 2012: 78). Amongst other things, the concordat envisioned “a consolidation of the Church’s position by establishing its right to be financed by the State” (ibid.). The concordat (1940) and the Church’s publicization of the national phenomenon of the apparition of the Virgin Mary to the three shepherds in Fátima, have also largely contributed to a revitalization and popularization of Roman Catholicism in Portugal (cf. Dix 2010).

In a public presentation of Idanha’s heritage program, on February 2, 2017, one of the heritage advisers stated that in a brochure produced by the municipality in 2009, one could count 173 manifestations of local tradition. Seven years later, in 2016, that same program listed 250 such manifestations. This increasing number is due to a collective and purposeful engagement of religious minority groups, along with homecoming migrants, and with



Figure 1: The religious group of Penha Garcia doing the “Louvado Nocíssimo”, which is one of the local Lenten traditions. Once the groups have completed the ritual, they gather to start commending the souls. The City’s heritage program, entitled *Páscoa na Idanha* (Easter in Idanha), includes all these Lenten and Easter rituals practiced across the municipality. (Photo: Pedro Antunes, 2017)

the support of local associations (e.g. brotherhoods, folk ensembles), to revitalize their past traditions.

Therefore, we are here looking at a phenomenon of increasing religious vernacularization within Portuguese Catholicism, analogous to religious pluralization. The use of imagination, improvisation and artistic/technical skills (voice, movements, text, and mimesis) in the ritual's re-invention, infuse it with a renewed artistry "charm". Underlying that creative process there is an intention to re-enchant the ritual's religious force and its local charisma. Thus, the ritual's re-invention, is itself a form of religious (re-)enchantment (cf. Isnart & Testa 2020, this special issue) – a cultural technique to produce social magic and fascination toward these rural societies. In this sense, the term "vernacularization" is here applied to describe a process of inner pluralization of Portuguese Catholicism, creating a localized version of a kind of Catholicism not within the mainstream. Furthermore, cultural heritage policy is being used by these groups as a form of collective engagement to negotiate between their vernacular rituals, Unesco's conventions guidelines, the local and national Catholic clergy agreement, and a diverse amount of available local and regional knowledge about heritage implementation (Noyes 2016).

Heritage-making is thus here serving as a legal resource to enhance and multiply the vernacular religious repertoires of these 17 parishes. In other words, what Steffen Dix designated the inner pluralization of Portuguese Roman Catholicism, in the case of the rural context of Idanha, can be better translated as a process of vernacularization.

### **Learning How to Commend: Ritual Embodying and Religious Enchantment**

Since October 2016 the Council of authorities of Idanha have been actively engaged in the development of the aforementioned heritage program, Páscoa na Idanha. With that purpose they promoted a collective appeal for Idanha's religious communities to collaborate in the heritage-making process as much as possible. In Penha Garcia, one of the leaders of the ritual invited the women of a local folk ensemble – Rancho Folclórico de Penha Garcia – to join the Commending the following Lent, in 2017.

The women in the ensemble were taken by surprise. Some giggled, imagining themselves dressed up in those black clothes, others were a bit frightened by the idea of having to go out into the streets at midnight to sing and pray.

Apart from three women who were already *encomendadoras*, the rest were middle-aged women who never practiced the ritual as the ritual is today generally regarded as an expertise and matter of the elder women (*as beatas*), who are more concerned with practices related to death and the after-life. Despite some periods of decline of the Commending, there is a strong social memory of it. All the women had seen the ritual in the past either accompanied by someone from their family or with a neighbor. Besides, the ritual's vociferous chorus in a silent rural village doesn't pass by unnoticed. In fact, most of the women in the ensemble accepted the offer to join the ritual.

On Friday, March 24, 2017, before the church bell struck midnight, the women moved next to an old baptismal font located in the church yard. This huge religious ashlar object has been there since the construction of the new church. Incidentally, many of these women were baptized in that large stone sink. There they formed a semi-circle and got ready to start the Commending. Their movements expressed a sense of uncertainty – for example, where to go, when to start, how to stand. From outside, I could also hear them deciding who would lead the "offer of the prayers", which precedes each Commending (a Holy Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be).

Some women had brought with them their smartphones, which they used to read the ritual texts. In spite of the melodic harmony in a plangent tone, some of the new *encomendadoras* mistook some of its lyrics and tones. As they sensed they were mistaken or lost they went silent; others, as they tracked the right tone and/or a textual point of entry, would go back into the melodic chorus. Above all, they were learning by doing – by mimicking the tones of the elderly, by keeping track of the textual inflections, or by trying to sustain their breath in order to release it in longer supplicant verses. The most experienced *encomendadoras* provided the basis for the ritual service by delivering its elementary structure and by

giving the ritual clues to the others, thus enabling them to follow its sequential rites. For instance, casting the right tone to its melody, controlling the pauses and the passages between quatrains, and keeping its (vocal) religious force. I could hear them singing out loud:

Wake up, faithful Christians  
From that sleep where you are  
Remember who you have there  
Your mothers and your fathers.

When the first Commending had finished, the group picked up their ritual materials (oil lamps, crucifixes, rosaries, and texts) and moved to the second ritual place. On the way I could sense a feeling of uneasiness, as they (and us/me) were in fact walking on top of a steep rocky mass, at more than 500 meters high, thus being exposed to an extremely cold wind. A few meters away the group stopped next to a big cypress tree in front of the village's old castle. A few years ago, the *encomendadoras* used to climb up to the castle top to perform the Commending. However, due to mobility restrictions of some women of the group, they changed the second location of the ritual. Looking down at the village's landscape, they started the second part of the Commending. This time, they bade their invisible auditorium (those asleep at home) remember the painful condition in which the souls remain:

Wake up faithful Christians  
From such prudent sleep  
The Souls of Purgatory  
Are on a burning fire.

From there we<sup>7</sup> continued to walk toward a residential area in Penha Garcia's historical center. After crossing a narrow road flanked by houses built in the region's reddish stone, we finally reached a house of relatively modern construction, which belongs to an immigrant. The *encomendadoras* went up to the balcony of the house and arranged themselves along it. I remained outside looking up. From there I noticed that some of the new *encomendadoras* were

moved by the enchanting commending of the souls. A few stopped singing as they began to cry and while being dragged into an emotional spiral, we could hear some of their voices trembling with emotion singing:

Wake up, faithful Christians  
From such deep sleep  
Remember the souls of Purgatory  
They are suffering in Hell's fires.

One of the most compelling effects of the performance on that evening was to see the way the new group of women joined in with their village's rituals. By dressing up in the ritual mourning clothing, handling the oil lamps and ritual texts, or mimicking its melody, they were also embodying their local culture. The heritage program in process was also perceived by them as a way to strengthen their traditions, thus eliciting their adhesion to the ritual. By giving voice to a local tradition they were creatively engaged in the re-creation of a local form of religion<sup>8</sup> – as it is argued by Cyril Isnart in this special issue, people's transformation of their local religion into cultural heritage was here an important device “to rearticulate religious feelings, beliefs, territory history, and group identity” (Isnart 2020: 49). That process was corporally accomplished through a series of micro-steps: inductions, hesitations, suspensions, predictabilities, duplications – for example, coming in and out of tune, hearing the others' voices, blending back into the collective chorus, or being touched by the emotions of the others.

On the whole, we can see here a process of collective restoration of the villages' intangibility (as a social and cultural endeavor). This is an “intangibility” that in Gaetano Ciarcia's epistemological proposal can be identified and re-traced in the *social uses* of tangible traces of the past, or “past-presencing” (Macdonald 2013), particularly in cases where the category “intangible heritage” is locally used, as it is in the present case. Through the ritualization, as discussed in the introduction of this special issue (cf. Isnart & Testa 2020), those traditional elements (speech acts, objects, melodies, gestures, etc.) were



collectively convened to “re-invent the real”, taking up a form of “auto-exotification” (cf. Ciarcia 2006). Despite the reticence and apprehension of the women of the folk ensemble in relation to the practice of the Commending, the ongoing heritage-making program application was in itself a prestigious reason to embrace the Commending. Hence, in this ritualization we can see what Ciarcia defined as a process of “social magic”, by which “we give an added value to things and their symbols, asking some for the ‘mana’ that is missing from others” (2006: 70, author’s emphasis; my translation). By pondering over the endangerment or frailty of the ritual in the village, with the public prestige of Unesco ICH listed items, they understood its re-enactment as a form of caring for their intangibility. Simultaneously, by adhering to the ritual, the women of the folk ensemble reinforced the genealogy of a religious repertoire that was once held as a minority tradition only kept by elderly pious women. Thus, the *mana* of the intangible heritage is here transferred back into the realm of the ritual, enhancing its charisma for more people in Penha Garcia.

In that sense, these women were co-participating in the vernacularization of a local system of belief, by being incorporated in its own historicity. In the neighboring villages, the vernacularization of these rituals has been put into practice in a different manner, adjusted to their own topography and social historicity.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the heritage-making functioned as an impulse to fire a broad process of religious “enchantment” of the vernacular repertoire. This classical Weberian concept can be recast as part of a dialectic tension between disenchantment and enchantment (intellectualization, secularization and bureaucracy vs. spirituality, magic and charisma). Just as Alessandro Testa has demonstrated, “re-enchantment” is an appropriate concept to designate a process through which local traditions become a resource for global projections of the local realities: “as a form of ‘global-local’ (or ‘glocal’) vernacular religiosity expressing itself mainly through a type of ritual magic formally connected to the past but rooted in existential and material needs of the present” (Testa 2017: 28).

As described above, throughout the ritual process, the new *encomendadoras* were emotionally enchanted by their own traditional techniques.

### **The Tangible Effects of Ritual: An “Everlasting End”**

By entering the ritual process for the first time, the women of the folk ensemble had to learn and interpret, handle and make sense of the ritual symbols. They also had to embody the ritual’s specific *techniques* (cf. Mauss [1935]1973), for example intonations, praying, positionalities, directionalities and its musical harmony. Beneath the more immediate visible experience of ritual, how were they (religiously) affected by it and how did they make sense of the ritual action?

Maria Ramos only returned to Penha Garcia in 2011. In the village she started to look after the local church by, for instance, assisting seniors in the communion, helping with the cleaning and preparation of the church’s altar, and participating in the local vernacular rituals. When commenting on her participation in the Commending she emphasized the emotions that she felt:

We usually climb up to the balcony of a house. From up there I can see my house down here, and that touches me a lot. It is as if I can see my people there, my friends, my family. When I see the house from above, I can see myself in there. My beloved ones are no longer there, which is why I am commending their souls. Last Friday I felt so moved that I cried because there we were all naming the dead, and we feel it with such an emotion; it is because we are calling them. (Interview, Maria Ramos 2017)

Performing the ritual gave her a sense of reflexive detachment from her own domestic routines at home. By looking at her own house from afar, she experienced an introspective existential nexus. Thus, the ritual was also a privileged framework for her to make sense of her own genealogy in the village. She simultaneously felt a prospective sense of proximity with her deceased loved ones:

During the Commending, we meditate on what we are saying, we transcend ourselves and go to the other side. What we are doing is singing to our loved ones who are there. During that moment we are attached to them – it is as if we are already there, on the other side [...] It's like I am putting myself in their place, preparing for my own death. (Interview, Maria Ramos 2017)

That proximity she felt with her own death is here expressed through the generative propositional formulae: “as if”, being on the other side. That effect of transcendence amongst the group of the living was also religiously accomplished in a tight relation with her kin ancestors.

A meaningful sense of the present is also experienced by Luzia Gameiro when practicing the Commending. As described in the introduction, Luzia migrated to France where she lived and worked as a concierge in several buildings in the city. Luzia still maintains her residency in Paris, therefore she spends long periods away from her family (descendant kin and their families). Doing the Commending is for her directly tied-up with remembrances of a domestic world, migration, and homecoming:

The day I started to join in I felt so touched; I thought I would never do this again, because in my mind I would return changed to my land, without being capable of doing this, or even that I would not return alive at all. I had so many friends from here who died in Paris. Now, when I am doing the ritual I feel that the time didn't pass me by, because I can still do what I did as a young girl, with the same energy as ever. For me, the ritual is a sacrifice that I offer to God, but also a reward we receive from Him for a long life of sacrifice. When I am there I always say to myself “Oh my lord! I am back to my roots and am able to do what I have always known how to do”. (Interview, Luzia Gameiro 2017)

Against the backdrop of the uncertainty of never being able to come back, but also embracing it as a past-future-heritage, she experienced the ritual

as corporeal accomplishment, something that she did not expect to be doing at her age. Knowing that many of her migrant friends died driving back and forth on the motorways between France and Portugal, and that others became physically impaired in accidents, she now understands the reality of being back in the village and doing the ritual as a religious experience, a “gift” from God. For her the present is perceived as a “future” given as an unexpected existence. Thus, the present is itself a reward in the form of bodily ability and energy. The present, perceived as future, becomes a disruption of an everlasting dwelling (continuous sense of present).

Both Luzia Gameiro and Maria Ramos made sense of the ritual as affective corporeal experiences of engagement with their homeland, but also a self-reflective, emotional and meaningful experience of being back home. Their emotions and reflexive introspections show us a recurrent social-dialectic homecoming/ritual, or rather a ritualization of “home”, where the Commending was used as a privileged frame for past-presencing, as they were both “drawing on their life-long experiences to reconstruct and perform the past in their ongoing lives” (Macdonald 2012: 234). However, how are these dense, ritual and meaningful individual experiences transposed and reflected back in the realm of “intangible heritage” as collective identity?

Uncertainty is here used as a means to create a sense of vulnerability and the ritual perceived as perishable, thus valued as heritage. According to Rodney Harrison's critical approach to heritage, this process would be directly linked to a conception that is based on a sense of “linear time” whereby “the speed of its passage produces an underlying sense of *uncertainty* and vulnerability” (Harrison 2013: 39, author's emphasis). Hence, the feeling of “uncertainty” becomes an effective mode of “ordering, classifying, and organising heritage” and simultaneously “represents strategies for managing this sense of risk and uncertainty” (ibid.). This strategy of using “uncertainty” to produce an awareness of a risk that needs to be managed, is expressively represented in the text of one of the Lenten and Easter booklets:

In this world that seems overwhelmed by bewilderment, uneasiness and perplexity, accept the invitation to witness the strength of the identity of Idanha people, by participating in their community experiences, jewels of our intangible and oral cultural heritage; [an identity that] is reflected upon during the Lenten and Easter traditions, which gives us a renewal of our strength and invigorates the spirit; not only to the numerous [Idanha] natives who live inside or outside the country, but also to the visitors, national and foreign, whose numbers grow every year. (Catana 2010: 3)

“Bewilderment”, “uneasiness” and “perplexity” have been discursively used as descriptors of a structural uncertainty resulting from a “world” in crisis. Against this catastrophic background, these vernacular rituals (described as “intangible and oral cultural heritage”) are put forward and prescribed as a way to renew a spiritual existence in the world.

Perhaps the world is not ending, but certainly beneath the critical deconstructionism of “uncertainty” as a political category, as depicted by Rodney Harrison, there are real demographic and social problems in this territory caused by a long history of political neglect regarding the management of the Portuguese rural countryside.

However, and differently from Harrison’s argument, where heritage-making is depicted as producing and naming crisis or uncertainty thus making it more real, the question is not if crisis is real or not: the point is that people are feeling their world (not only “as if”, but in reality) in crisis. Therefore, the Council authorities’ use of heritage is aiming at a “re-invention of the real” – an expression that was insightfully coined and analyzed by Gaetano Ciarcia (2006: 6).

Following Ciarcia’s theory unpacking intangible heritage-making, in Idanha’s heritage program the “intangible” is acting as a “mirror”, or a *paradoxical obsolescence* (ibid.), whereby communities and/or individuals express their “need for earlier temporalities supposedly expressing the fullness, sometimes tragic or mythical, of a past relationship of men with the milieu of their existence” (2006: 71).

Thus, the perceived and discursively convened *acceleration of the time*, in Harrison’s terms, is here reinforced by an experience of rural medieval Catholicism conveyed by the ritual aesthetics, through the process of (self-)exotification motivated by an awareness of the ritual practitioners of “the symbolic and economic potential of their ‘singular’ tradition” (2006: 7). From an institutional perspective, that process has been discursively convened in an “economy of the exoticism”, whereby the transformation of the societies is used as a backdrop to display the image of a “bygone” society “that local actors maintain during their efforts to obtain a legitimation on the part of decision-makers” (ibid.: 7). Yet, that “bygone” time is ritually embodied and locally felt as a dense experience, allowing for escapist moments made of trans-temporal dialectics and opening up new horizons of expectation (Godinho 2017). The concentration of time that is experienced in the observation or participation in the ritual renders uncertainty into a practical accomplishment. In that sense, past-future-heritage reverses vulnerability.

Beyond the perils and crises experienced during a lifetime of migration and submission to subaltern work, and against the existential uncertainties related with their personal experiences of handling the deaths of dear ones, Maria Ramos and Luzia Gameiro experienced the ritual as a way to recall and re-order those uncertainties, and convert them into belief. In the heritage field, the exotification of the rural world becomes thus enduringly instituted and experientially embodied by resorting to traditional techniques in the making of an “everlasting end” (Ciarcia 2006: 71).

### **The Emotional Resonance of Commending the Souls: Migration and Re-connection**

Having analyzed different ways that the rituals establish a sense of re-connection with “home” and restore collective identity, I would like to present a concluding reflection focused on its religious force. For that I will cut across the issue of nativist or indigenous belonging and depart from the following question: how will I, or anyone who doesn’t belong

to that collective (by descent, affiliation or fictive kinship), experience the ritual?

I could only grasp its meaning by being engaged in the ritual practice myself. As in Penha Garcia, the ritual is only for women, but I asked permission to participate in the group of Monfortinho.

Knowing that in Monfortinho men had already practiced the ritual in the past, I dared to ask the leader of the group if I could participate in the performance, by singing and praying with them. I was very well accepted by the group, as the women were already familiar with my regular presence in the village. In the context of the ritual practice, whenever it was appropriate, some of the practitioners gave me small practical tips on how I could improve my performance. Those instructions were mainly related to vocal procedures or with specific forms to utter the ritual's lyrics.

During the first moments I was trying hard to focus on what I was saying. Meanwhile, one of the ladies standing right next to me started weeping. Right there I felt moved and had to breathe slowly

to keep myself calm and concentrated. All of a sudden, a torrent of personal memories and images of my loved ones passed through my mind. Then, I started to sing, placing myself back into the ritual, following the formality of the ritual's actions and procedures. Singing in a chorus and responding to a hidden assembly, were in fact very powerful religious experiences. When singing I felt as if I were entering and participating in an expansive collective (intangible) force, that can best be translated using Durkheim's description of an *effervescent assembly*. By singing out loud together we were driven by a sense of unity and shared intimacy, whose religious forces were "none other than the feeling that the collectivity inspires in its members, but projected outside the minds that experience them, and objectified" (Durkheim [1912]1995: 230). In this case, the religious experience of commending the souls is materialized (objectified) in the acoustic of the ritual's sung verses.

The ritual propositional contents and actions constituted a privileged form of becoming affectively



Figure 2: In the Lenten repertoire of Monfortinho, the majority of the rituals are carried out through a nocturnal walk in the alleys, in which two groups get involved in sequences of responsorial singing. The Commending of the Souls was here articulated together with the Martyrs of the Lord, in a combined performance. (Photo: Pedro Antunes, 2017)

integrated into the group. Moreover, those traditional techniques guided me through a process of individual ritualization, prompting me to create links and sensorial attachments between my own personal life and the ritual symbols and processual context (hence, my own ritualization of the ritual, cf. Isnart & Testa 2020), but also by being individually entangled and accountable within the emotional sphere of that group's performative actions and expectations (*ibid.*).

Above all, the intimacy and the emotions shared amongst the group together with its sonic resonance were the most generative elements in the production of that religious communion. That group experience resembles what Victor Turner defined as *communitas*: a state that arises from a shared "communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (1977: 96). As an outsider, I was affectively integrated into a local "community" as a sensorially lived and emotionally shared reality (Noyes 2016). Thus, there is a tight resemblance between Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* and Émile Durkheim's description of "effervescent assembly", as some authors have already described and analyzed (cf. Cavalcanti 2018; Di Giovine 2011; Olaveson 2001).

The particular benefit of this performative approach to the study of the ritual was that my own corporeal and sensorial involvement with the ritual actions functioned as a medium to access more subjective, relational and emotional dimensions in this religious performance, whereas observing the ritual from a distance, as it happened in Penha Garcia, I could be more focused on producing a detailed description of the ritual's chain of actions and be more attentive to the repercussion of the ritual's resonance in the village's acoustic ecology. In this sense, my positionality in the fieldwork in both localities was partially conditioned by culturally assigned gender ritual prescriptions. But in the specific case of Monfortinho's group, what are the effects of those effervescent aggregations on social reality?

Migration and (re)connection from/to the "homeland" (Macdonald 2013) play a central role in the ef-

fect envisioned by the heritage-making process. Most of the women in the ritual groups had to leave their homes to make a living abroad. When participating and/or observing these rituals, one is plunged into a dense experience of affects and shared emotions that establish a powerful form of (re)connection. Therefore, the rituals there are powerful emotional "performances of the community" (Noyes 2016).

We can comprehend the framing and use of these rituals as intangible heritage in the form of past-future-heritage, or a resonant technology. Given the prominently vocal nature of the ritual's performance, the term "resonance" here takes on the meaning of echo, reflex, and/or a reverberating sound. The re-production of this form of acoustic materiality is projected from the past and, paradoxically, echoes in the present as anticipation, or feedback, of the future. The Commending is felt like a body resonance that results from the most immediate effect on its performance. Thus, the sensorial and social experience that occurs during ritual practice, translates into what Victor Turner identifies as a "lived experience". The experience lived by the *encomendadoras* in the performance of embodied ritual symbols produces strong bonds with the land (locality), which translate into ideas of ritual commitment to their homelands. Therefore, a great part of the individuals that integrate the ritual groups of the Commending today are out-migrants, who return to their villages.

Touched (or drawn back) by *the ritual's experiential force and social commitment*, many of the dispersed migrants opted to return to their villages permanently, as it was in the cases of Maria Nabais and Maria Ramos. On the other hand, others opt for regular returns, giving priority to seasons when they can actively participate in the village's ritual complex, as in Luzia Gameiro's case. In Monfortinho only 2 women out of 10 *encomendadoras* live in the village and in Penha Garcia 11 out of approximately 20 were or still are migrants – some of them have already settled in the village; others have dual residency.

Going back to the initial question of the paper: How is heritage-making re-inventing a declining

rurality? The practical engagement of a minority of elderly people with their vernacular rituals, together with its political framing as intangible heritage by the local institutions (political and religious) is (re-)enchanted these rural societies. The ritual's renewed visibility as intangible heritage is encouraging kin-groups (or relatives) who live outside, to participate in the ritual, thus re-connecting them with their home (seasonally and/or permanently). Hence, the Commending has proven to be an efficacious technique to re-invent these rural societies as translocal communities, engaged in their own past-future-heritage.

### Conclusion: The Voice as Projective Matter

In this paper I have attempted to comprehend how the religious community of Penha Garcia uses the vocal ritual of the Commending of the Souls as a tool for the reinvention of a declining rurality. The vernacular here represents a practical solution of re-enchantment of a rural society, and allows to overcome social and religious uncertainties. These old forms of singing knowledge and sociality helped, paradoxically, to redress that experienced crisis. In that process, the vocal ritual becomes a projective matter awakening and resonating an internal will passing through bodies. It is also itself the outcome of a technical process of corporeal transcendence of a (collective) self. Re-enchanted by "heritagemaking", the tradition to sing for the souls reinvents these villages as translocal communities, experientially bringing the past into the present, and echoing a prospective future. These affective artefacts give its practitioners a temporary possibility to reach and recover a tangible horizon of things beyond our tangible (corporeal) contention. Thus, to sing out loud together is a form of transcendental expansion, to rescue an experiential absence within the limits of our aural horizons.

### Notes

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- 2 Purgatory is locally and conceptually understood here as a sacred place exerting its impure supernatural powers. Hence, it is a sacred and impure place (cf. Hertz [1907]2004).
- 3 The ritual must be done according to an odd schedule and equally the group can only be formed by an odd number (three, five, nine, and so on). These kinds of elements have been identified by Portuguese anthropologists as remnants of "magico-pagan" traditional elements (cf. Dias & Dias 1953).
- 4 Although my fieldwork was focused on the ritual and the people who practice and relate to it, my research was grounded in ethnographic knowledge that could contextualize the ritual in people's everyday lives. To that end, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork research amongst the religious communities of Penha Garcia and Monfortinho for a period of approximately seven months in each village – from November 2016 to October 2017.
- 5 The first folk ensemble in Penha Garcia (O Rancho Folclórico de Penha Garcia), was formed in March of 1983 and it lasted until 2010 when it was "reformulated with the integration of members of another group" (Ventura 2016: 26). That second folk ensemble was called Grupo Etnográfico "Os Garcias" and it was formed in 1985 as part of an initiative of an Association for the Protection of the Natural and Cultural Heritage of Penha Garcia (cf. Ventura 2016), a local NGO that is still active in the present.
- 6 Estado Novo (New State) was a corporatist regime founded and led by Oliveira Salazar, which lasted for 41 years. The country had previously undergone a military dictatorship (1926–1974); therefore, the Portuguese dictatorship is the longest in Europe in the twentieth century (cf. Rosas 2012). Estado Novo supported the Portuguese Catholic Church which, in turn, guaranteed the social prestige of the government, also acting as a vehicle for the dissemination of government information. Overall, Oliveira Salazar's regime was ideologically rooted in the values of Catholicism, rurality, and humble lifeways.

- 7 In Penha Garcia, Commending of the Souls is strictly marked as a female practice, therefore I did not ask the members of the group if I could participate. However, I was allowed to follow and to observe the group's actions from afar like any other kin or neighbor. Although this position in the field contrasted with my ritual performative participation in the group of Monfortinho, it allowed me to describe its technical, relational and performative actions, as well as to feel the ritually generated emotions and their resonance in the village.
- 8 This process of religious adherence can thus be regarded as a collective engagement with the re-creation of "local religion", just as William Christian has defined it: a system of customs aggregated to specific forms of knowledge and values, learnt at home and "tied to a specific place and a historical constituency" (1989: 178).
- 9 For instance, in Monfortinho, a smaller village that is 30 km away from Penha Garcia, the Commending has been culturally articulated (cf. Leal 2017) with the ritual of the Martyrdoms of the Lord (Os Martírios do Senhor).

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