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Folk Culture and Political Power: Practices and Representations of *Moliceiro* Culture in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the painted panels of the *moliceiro* boat, a traditional working boat of the Ria de Aveiro region of Portugal. The article examines how the painted panels have been invented and reinvented over time. The boat and its panels are contextualized both within the changing socio-economic conditions of the Ria de Aveiro region, and the changing socio-political conditions of Portugal throughout the 20th century and until the present day. The article historically analyses the social significance of 'moliceiro culture', examining in particular the power relations it expresses and its ambiguous past and present relationships with the political and the economic powers of the Portuguese state. The article unpacks some of the complexity of the relations that have pertained between public and private, local and national, folk culture and 'art', and popular and institutional in the Ria de Aveiro region in particular; and Portugal more generally.

KEY WORDS

discourse / folklore / *moliceiro* / Portugal / power / representation / resistance

Introduction

This article analyses the painted panels of the *moliceiro* boat, a traditional working boat of the Ria de Aveiro region of Portugal. The article examines how the painted panels have been invented and reinvented over time. The boat and its panels are contextualized both within the changing socio-economic conditions of the Ria de Aveiro region, and the changing socio-political conditions of

Portugal throughout the 20th century and until the present day. The boat's complex decorations are seen as corresponding to the way groups and individuals represent themselves and their surrounding environment, these images conveying forms of common knowledge and related social practices. The boat has become an important symbol and expression of the region's popular culture, despite the fact that today it no longer possesses the economic and social role that it once enjoyed, having become primarily an object of commodification by the tourist industries. The article historically analyses the social significance of '*moliceiro* culture', examining in particular the power relations it expresses and its ambiguous past and present relationships with the political and the economic powers of the Portuguese state. In so doing, the article unpacks some of the complexity of the relations that have pertained between public and private, local and national, and popular and institutional in the Ria de Aveiro region in particular, and Portugal more generally. In seeking to analyse such matters, the article unpacks to unpack the complexities of one particular community's transformative practices and creative processes. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to broader understanding of the uses, dynamics, and appropriations of so-called 'folk culture' under changing social, political and economic conditions.

The Natural and Social Environment of *Moliceiro* Culture

The *moliceiro* boat is to be found within the region of the Ria de Aveiro, the large lagoon-estuary of the River Vouga on the west coast of Portugal.¹ The Ria de Aveiro is the most extensive shallow coastal lagoon in the country. It is located on the Western Atlantic coast of Portugal, between Espinho and Cape Mondego, in a geographical area situated south of Oporto and north of Coimbra. The area covered by the lagoon corresponds approximately to a minimum of 66 square kilometres, at low spring tides, and a maximum of 83 square kilometres at high spring tides. There is an extensive and densely populated sand barrier along the coast, protecting and separating the enclosed lagoon from the Atlantic Ocean, where seasonal tourism, cattle breeding and agriculture coexist side by side.

Built of pine, the *moliceiro* boat is flat-bottomed, wide across the beam, with very low sides, a shallow draught and an unmistakable, extremely curved bow that reminds one of a half-moon shape or a bird's beak. The stern is also slightly curved. Traditionally propelled by a trapezium-shaped canvas sail, a pole or track rope, outboard engines are not uncommon additions in the present day. The first documented references to the *moliceiro* boat date back to the first half of the 18th century. This does not mean that *moliceiros* did not exist before this time. But it does indicate that this type of artefact and the social practices related to it did not gain the attention of political and religious authorities until this period.

The *moliceiro* boat was traditionally designed for gathering and transporting the seaweed (*moliço*) that grows in the Ria de Aveiro, and is used to fertilize the surrounding sandy soils that are cultivated by the subsistence agricultural practices of very small family farms. *Moliceiros* were also occasionally used to carry people,

goods and cattle across the water. They still operate in this regard today inside a geographic area that covers the entire surface of the Ria de Aveiro. But the boats were originally designed as an instrument for the sorts of agriculture practised in a particular amphibious ecosystem, a lagoon that is constituted of both sea and river, and land and water.

The term *moliceiro* also traditionally applied to those people who worked aboard the boats: the boat-owner, and/or one or two paid employees (the 'comrades'), and/or an apprentice (the 'boy'), organized in a rather loose hierarchy. The boat owner could be a farmer collecting seaweed for his own land, or a professional wholesaler of *molicho*. Either way, those on the *moliceiro* boat were drawn from a community of poor peasants who had to complement their incomes with occasional fishing in the Ria de Aveiro, with micro-scale agriculture, and with some cattle breeding, among other irregular occupations. Most proprietors owned just one *moliceiro*, which would be repeatedly sold and resold during the two decades of the boat's average life-expectancy, although there were some rare exceptions to this rule on the part of some moderately wealthy landowners. For those who worked aboard the *moliceiros*, the levels of poverty were often very great. As a result of conditions of often crushing poverty, there was massive emigration from the region in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in the loss of most of those men who hitherto had worked on the *moliceiro* boats, this situation in turn leading to the demise of the *moliceiro* industry.

As a consequence of these economic and demographic changes, the purpose of the *moliceiro* has changed considerably in the past few decades. The former invaluable instrument of an entire region's economy has been reconfigured as a tourist attraction, a symbol whose preservation depends on each individual owner's goodwill and financial ability. Pollution, economic change and emigration have driven many people away from this particular way of life. Chemical fertilizers have replaced the seaweed as fertilizer for the sandy soils, the local salt industry has gone into decline, and new roads have usurped the *moliceiro* role as the main means of transportation for the riverside population. Although a thousand *moliceiros* were registered with the Aveiro Port Authority in 1935, nowadays there are less than forty vessels registered. The building of new *moliceiros* almost ceased altogether during the period of mass emigration in the late 1960s and 1970s, but since the mid-1980s *moliceiros* have been revived to some degree as 'local' cultural assets. With increasing frequency, local mayors and authorities are ordering new *moliceiros* to be built by the surviving artisans in the boat-building trade,² to be used for touristic purposes, such as for guided tours of the Ria, for display in local museums and international exhibitions, and for public display in a nearby canal which serves as a 'cultural heritage' site. Private companies also now operate sightseeing tours aboard *moliceiros*. Thus the *moliceiro* remains very present in the region, both materially and symbolically, as it has been adapted to fit new social and economic circumstances. Without its reinvention as a part of the contemporary tourist industries, the *moliceiro* boat and the cultural and social practices which surround it would have inevitably gone into decline and eventually died out altogether.



Moliceiro boat in Ria de Aveiro (2002).

Illustration I

The most original characteristic of the *moliceiro* boat is the set of four different panels that adorn the bow and the stern, all of which are covered with distinctive paintings in bright colours – blue, yellow, green, red, black and white – underlined with hand-written phrases. The bow panels follow the curve of the ‘beak’, while the stern panels are almost rectangular in shape. Both sets of panels have a bright border of several coloured strips of flowers and geometric figures. There is a multitude of subjects in the panels of a *moliceiro* boat, in styles that range from the crudest drawings to very visually sophisticated painted images. The artist, who might also be the builder or a reputed amateur hired for the task, chooses the subject spontaneously or the theme is suggested by the boat owner. An examination of more than 500 panels, recorded during regular periods of fieldwork between 1988 and 2004, confirmed the existence of five main groups of images and inscriptions, and several subcategories therein. These were: *comic* (satirizing sex and sexual attitudes, work, social institutions and famous characters); *religious* (celebrating Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints); *social* (depicting work – e.g. gathering seaweed, fishing, farming and ship-building – ecological issues, nature, popular culture and local festivals, or illustrating common sayings and words of wisdom); *historical* (images of kings and queens, knights and soldiers, writers and explorers); and *entertainment* (referring to folk tales, television, the cinema and football).

Scattered and isolated communities, such as the ones that originally produced the *moliceiro* motifs, usually develop their own codes, myths, heroes and social patterns. In this case, the artists originated a distinctive cultural object that uses pictorial and linguistic codes simultaneously, producing coexistent semiotic



Panels of Moliceiros (late 1990s).

Illustration 2

systems that create a phenomenon arguably without parallel in broader Portuguese culture. This phenomenon symbolizes both the confrontations and the compromises involved in the relations between the local community on the one hand and the outside world on the other. Following the ideas of Gramsci (1976), De Certeau (1980) and Bakhtin (1984), one might say that objects like the *moliceiro* boat can, under certain circumstances, operate as vehicles for the expression and affirmation of specific identities and for the representation of specific spaces, socio-cultural contexts, and particular forms of existence. In the present case, ‘people who paint their boats and launch them into the waters of a lagoon, [have] created an album of images through which they express their vision of the world’ (Rivals, 1988: 254).

The present study adopts an epistemological paradigm close to Foucault’s premise of the ‘archaeological method’, namely his search for discursive formations that mark different periods in history and which shape various social practices and orders (Foucault, 1972). The study was also inspired by Gramsci’s idea of the ‘inventory’ (Gramsci, 1971, 1976). According to Gramsci, cultural investigation must begin with an inventory of the complex yet invisible assortment of historical processes – the ‘historical imaginary’ – that shapes present-day thoughts, experiences and practices. Thus the popular historical inventory is part of a society’s collective, but heterogeneous and frequently contradictory, notions as to the meaning of history. It is precisely the emphasis on the heterogeneity of the historical imaginary that makes Gramsci’s understanding of the inventory such a potentially useful heuristic tool.

The data collected for this research derived initially from participative fieldwork developed in the Ria de Aveiro region between 1988 and 2004,

involving the collection of photos and videos and also interviews with the surviving local boat-builders and painters, and with former employees of the *moliceiro* industry (Sarmiento, 2008). Images prior to the 1980s were collected from national and local collections and museums, both public and private. At a later stage of the research, I collected material from a range of sources, including local and national museums, archives and collections, newspapers, and parish and municipal records, with a special focus on collecting materials to do with iconography, as this figured in, for example, tourism-related documentation, maps, local newspaper reports, school textbooks, and various forms of popular literature. A particularly important source came from the archives of the Aveiro Port Authority, namely the Register of Boats, a handwritten collection of books that cover the period between 1914 and 1998. From the Historical and Municipal Archives of Aveiro, I collected official correspondence exchanged between the 1940s and 1974 by the various institutions of local and central government. The research also involved the critical reading of more than one hundred monographs on the history of the *moliceiro* and of the Ria de Aveiro region that have been published from the late 19th century until the present (e.g.: Braga, 1885; Coelho, 1896; Magalhães, 1905; Madahil, 1934; Castro, 1943; Chaves, 1945; Lima, 1968; Filgueiras, 1981; Lopes, 1997).

Moliceiro Culture and the Portuguese *Estado Novo*

In order to understand the nature of the complex of ideas and practices surrounding the *moliceiro* boat in the present day, one has to understand the recent history of such matters. To that end, I will now discuss *moliceiro* culture as it was practised and experienced in the major part of the 20th century. Between May 1933 and April 1974, Portugal was subjected to an authoritarian political regime, known as the *Estado Novo* ('New Order'), inspired by fascist ideologies and headed by António de Oliveira Salazar (1889–1970), which replaced the disordered sequence of governments of the first Republic (that originated in 1910) and a brief military dictatorship that existed between 1926 and 1933.

Like the regimes of Mussolini in Italy and Franco in Spain, the fascist movement headed by Salazar was an authoritarian response to the crisis of liberal democracy in Europe in the interwar years. Salazar was not a histrionic political character like Mussolini and did not face a similar violent end. Like in Spain, it was the dictator's death from natural causes which opened the door for social and political change. While remaining officially neutral during World War II, despite his obvious fascist sympathies, Salazar's main concerns in the years after 1945 involved the safeguarding of Portuguese colonies (which led to a tragic colonial war between 1961 and 1974) and the neutralization of any kind of opposition at home. Salazar's efforts to organize 'the nation' in spatial, ideological and social terms were particularly expressed in three different but related ways: first, laudatory descriptions of metropolitan and overseas provinces and their supposedly distinctive cultural characteristics; second, propagandistic promulgation of the

(vague) notion of 'people' and their alleged social and cultural characteristics; and third, a strict policing of highly conventional social roles. At the level of both discourse and practice, nothing was left to the individual's choice, everything was dictated by the State; and according to the official line, this situation was eagerly accepted by the people, whose key attributes were a spirit of self-sacrifice and a noble sense of embracing the established social order.

Authoritarian ideologies operate around radically simplified discourses, in order to offer clear, unquestionable principles that present both the elite's right to command everyone else as something natural and legitimate, and also any thoughts of resistance as futile and useless. According to authoritarian principles, the duty to obey is as simple and inevitable as a natural phenomenon. Hence, the real value of an authoritarian political discourse lies in its disciplinary function, much more than in its specific precepts. Such is the case of Salazar's paradigmatic speech made on 28 May 1936, during the celebrations held to mark the 10th anniversary of the so-called 'National Revolution', the military dictatorship established in 1926. In this speech, Salazar identifies the 'unquestionable truths' of his new order: 'To the souls that have been shattered by the doubts and negativism of this century, we return the comfort of great truths. We do not question God and virtue; we do not question Country and History; we do not question Authority and its prestige; we do not question Family and morals; we do not question the glory and duty of Work' (Mattoso, 1994, my translation). 'God', 'Country', 'Authority', 'Family', 'Work' – all these quintessential principles of general fascist discourse were the sacred principles of the Portuguese *Estado Novo*.

According to Gramsci (1971), ideological principles like these should be understood as underpinning ideals and practices that, when they are presented as universal truths, are in effect maps of meanings that uphold the power of certain social groups. In Gramsci's conception, ideology does not stand apart from everyday routines; ideology is rather rooted in people's commonplace activities. Ideologies supply, but in complex and mediated ways, the individual with the rules of daily behaviour and practical morality. A certain conception of how the world 'is' emphasizes corresponding forms of conduct. But despite the fact that ideologies can, as it were, present themselves as sets of coherent ideas, they more frequently appear as disparate, heterogeneous collections of common-sense meanings, which are in turn embodied and expressed in a variety of forms and representations. Cultural texts and practices both represent and enact complex - and often perverse - relations between, on the one hand, ideas that promote the interests of economically and politically powerful groups and, on the other hand, ideas that express the interests of less powerful groups. The State, as the (again, complex and mediated) embodiment of ruling class power, demands consent from the subordinate classes; but it also has to educate them in ways such that this consent is cultivated and reconfirmed over time. The State is, in fact, the entire complex of practices and theoretical activities which the dominant classes use not only to justify and keep their power, but also to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over subaltern classes. Therefore dominated groups have, particularly through forms of education both explicit and

implicit, to be persuaded that their social conditions are unchangeable and inevitable. As Pierre Bourdieu, following a Gramscian line of argument, puts it, 'every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness' (1977: 164). Under fascist conditions, the State represents as a sacred duty for every teacher in the public school system the promulgation of official truths through a curriculum that is purged of all potentially subversive elements.

During the years of the Salazar dictatorship, Portuguese culture and traditions (either those that actually existed or those which were invented by the regime) were taught in schools in such a way that they were used as a means to instil certain orthodox values and norms of behaviour through repetition, example and instruction. These pedagogic practices focused both on certain periods of history and on certain kinds of ethnographic depiction of the present day, using historical narratives and folklore as prime ideological weapons. History and folklore were put to the service of combating the supposed dangers of liberal, working class and urban mores and worldviews with a model of 'traditional' rural life that equated the 'people' with 'peasantry', that is farmers, fishermen or craftsmen. This was a conceptual strategy much assisted by ethnographers close to the regime who, in the 1930s and 1940s, promoted a conception of the people characterized by an emphasis on their supposed primitivism, illiteracy, humility and animal-like docility (Silva, 1994: 112).

Related to this, the idea of a 'pure popular art' that portrayed everyday life from the naive, non-critical viewpoint of 19th century ethnographers matched the Salazar regime's ideal of a nation rich in folklore and picturesque customs, involving a self-celebrating popular art, created by 'good people', mostly deeply religious peasants and fishermen who led austere and humble lives. The exaltation of handicraft, traditional costume, and rudimentary means of transport in these ideas did in fact represent a way of life that was to some extent similar to the subsistence lifestyle that characterized village life at this time.

During the *Estado Novo* period, popular art forms such as the *moliceiro* panels also echoed official mythology, as a more or less direct consequence of institutional channels of education and propaganda. Ideologically oriented stereotypes were both reproduced in popular collective memory and appropriated and reworked in various ways within it. In the specific case of *moliceiro* culture, control by the State was implemented both directly and indirectly: directly through supervision, regulation, censorship, manipulation, and propaganda, especially by the local representatives of central State power; and indirectly through the influence of State-controlled primary education and the inculcation of children into official ideologies.

As regards direct State control, in order to avoid subversive messages or 'shocking' images appearing on the *moliceiro* panels, during the most repressive years of the *Estado Novo* regime (between 1957 and 1964) all boats and the panels themselves had to be registered at the local Port Authority, registration involving a description of both the words and images on each panel. Particularly at this period, therefore, *moliceiro* culture was subjected to very high levels of official supervision and censorship.

Moliceiro panels have at other times also inspired a series of politically-oriented events whereby they have become 'cultural entertainment' that is consumed by outside publics. Since their inception, *moliceiros* have always taken part in local religious and secular popular festivals (*romarias*). At first, they were simply a means of transport, but in the 1950s their role began to change. From my extensive research, I was able to conclude that local press reports of popular festivals underwent an evolution throughout the 20th century, as an expression of broader social changes. During the first years of the century, and still under the influence of the Romantics, there was much public fascination with the supposed 'beauty and purity' of popular culture. With the onset of the 1910 Republic and the period of political instability that followed it, rival political factions attempted to take possession of popular festivals and to use them as political weapons, accusing each other of bad planning, management and propaganda, in bitter, often sensationalist articles. Later, when the forces of *Estado Novo* began to reorganize (or to 'normalize') the nation, their local representatives also endeavoured to manipulate local festivals, which became celebrations of the 'folklore' propagated by *Estado Novo*. After a moralizing clean-up that extinguished all vestiges of ancient pagan practices,³ the Catholic authorities took strict control over the religious aspects of these events. Consequently, press articles criticized the so-called 'immoral pagan practices' that had hitherto been expressed at the festivals, and emphasized instead what they saw as the virtues of the new, allegedly highly 'civilized' and 'orderly' festivities that attracted tourists and middle-class visitors from all over the country. Increasingly throughout the *Estado Novo* period, local people became secondary characters in the festivities, regulated and controlled by authorities who wished them to act out 'traditional' roles for the pleasure of visitors, both domestic and foreign.

Against this background, in March 1954, the city of Aveiro hosted the first *Moliceiro* Panel Competition – created, supervised and judged exclusively by local representatives of *Estado Novo* – in which the three most 'typically' decorated boats (that is, painted with colourful scenes of supposed rural bliss and ideologically harmless misspelled sentences) received a great deal of official attention and press coverage but only a modest monetary reward. In Gramscian terms, this strategy of rewarding individual or group activities considered by higher authorities as worthy of praise and distinction has to be seen as a means of integrating grass-roots activities into the 'civilizing' structures of the State, thus emasculating them and rendering them politically harmless.

As far as more indirect State control of *moliceiro* culture is concerned, the explication of strategies of rendering it controllable by broader educational means requires some contextualization. The 1910 Republic tried, with limited success, to dignify primary education and its agents, whereas the *Estado Novo* successfully managed to reduce the social significance of primary education (Mattoso, 1994). In the period up until the early 1960s, compulsory education was even decreased from four to three years. Primary school teachers (who were mostly underpaid young women) were used as vehicles for political and religious indoctrination. Instead of emphasizing the primary school's educational role, the



The three winners of the first
Moliceiro Panel Competition, March 1954
(source: Portuguese Centre of Photography).



Four competing moliceiros, April 1962
(source: Portuguese Centre of Photography).

Illustration 3

Estado Novo regime instead valued its ideological and disciplinary functions. School had become a tool in the hands of the State, to be used to teach the moral virtues prized by *Estado Novo*, rather than professional or practical knowledge. Hanging a crucifix on the wall above the teacher's chair was compulsory in public primary schools, and private schools that refused to do so were closed down. In the school choir, students raised their voices to praise the glory of Portugal, the dignity of work, and their love for the Fatherland. Particular importance was given to teaching the students about the Portuguese overseas 'provinces', as the State felt that by impressing on everyone the exact notion of the value of the overseas empire, the entire nation would adopt an outlook favourable to the maintenance of Portugal's colonial pretensions.

Schools were compelled to use the official national textbooks. These were single volumes, one for each year of school, containing texts for reading, a section on mathematics, and a long section on Catholic doctrine, including prayers and devotional texts. These textbooks, inspired by Italian school manuals from the Mussolini period, very much focused on creating a collective nationalistic and Catholic mentality. Published under close government supervision by the Ministry of Education, they remained unchanged for decades, with minor formal changes made only as late as the mid-1960s.

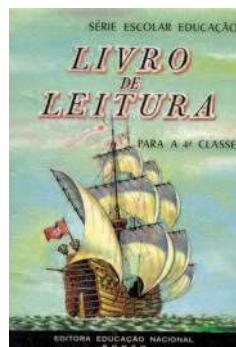
For people in the lower social classes especially, a person would read (perhaps even merely touch) relatively very few books during his or her lifetime. As these books tended to be the textbooks the government had designed and approved for use in primary schools, their importance and influence was potentially enormous. Through these texts, acceptance of a simplistic, unitary, good-versus-evil worldview was instilled into generations of children, learning by rote the dogmas preferred by the status quo. The teachings found in these textbooks were reinforced by clear, detailed and brightly coloured illustrations.⁴ The primary school textbooks placed their narratives almost always within rural Portugal. Even when the text itself had nothing to do with the rural world, the accompanying image would establish a connection with it. Any positive reference



First year textbook
(1950s).



Third year textbook
(1950s).



Fourth year textbook
(1960s).

Illustration 4

to the transition from a rural to an urban lifestyle, or from an agricultural to an industrial economy, was strategically and carefully avoided. Text and image were complemented with proverbs and traditional stories representing oral knowledge and the collective memory of a peasant society, and by patriotic and religious symbols (Ministério da Educação Nacional, 1958a, 1958b, 1968).

Eric Hobsbawm (in Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) classifies the traditions 'invented' after the Industrial Revolution into three categories:

- 1) those which establish or symbolize social cohesion;
- 2) those which establish or legitimate social and political institutions, authorities and status systems; and
- 3) those the main purpose of which is the inculcation of ideas, systems of values and patterns of behaviour. (1983: 17)

These three categories are all clearly present in the representations to be found in the *Estado Novo* textbooks. As children learnt to read, they were also learning the official world order. The latter offered a fetishized History of the Nation, which functioned as a foundation myth for the current regime (Lévi-Strauss, 1989: 167). As Paulo (1994: 91) puts it, '*Estado Novo* offered the Nation a new version of its past glory, (re)creating moments and characters according to the official interpretation of History, forging a new era, restoring a mythical golden age that set the model for every celebration' (my translation).

Such a state of affairs had diffuse, indirect but nonetheless palpable effects on *moliceiro* culture in the period. In poor fishing and peasant communities like those of the Ria de Aveiro, levels of illiteracy were very high. For most fishermen, attending school was merely a necessary chore, as the minimum level of compulsory education was essential for obtaining a professional fishing licence. As far as the *moliceiro*-making community was concerned, boat-crews, builders and painters



First image of the third year textbook (1950s).



Panel representing Henry, the Navigator (1980s).



Panel representing the poet Camões (1980s).



Text 'Camões', in the fourth year textbook (1960s).

Illustration 5

were either wholly illiterate or barely able to spell their names correctly when they applied for their licences or registered their boats with the Port Authority. Because of this rural community's low levels of literacy, the sentences that appeared under the painted panels tended to be written by the few 'literate' artists in the region. These artisans acquired their (very limited) literary knowledge in primary school, especially through the visual and verbal messages of the *Estado Novo* textbooks.

Thus the textbooks could exercise quite profound and generally sub-conscious influences on the symbols and images the *moliceiro* painters chose to put on the panels. This can be seen especially in those panels dealing in historical and religious themes, particularly those depicting historical characters such as King Dinis, the saintly knight Nuno Álvares Pereira, the explorers Henry the Navigator, Vasco da Gama, and Pedro Álvares Cabral, as well as the great national poet Camões, all of whom appeared in the primary school textbooks. On the *moliceiro* panels, all of these characters were portrayed over and over again in solemn, visually static ways, regardless of who actually painted them. As can be seen in Illustration 5, it is obvious how much the image that illustrated

the text about Camões in the fourth year school textbook influenced the depiction of the poet - set up by the regime as the symbol of a glorious national cultural tradition - in the *moliceiro* panels.

The supposed glory, faith, ingenuity and wisdom of such historical characters is conveyed, in both *moliceiro* panels and the schoolbooks, through symbolic motifs such as the sword, the flag, the ship, the castle, the map, the astrolabe, the compass and the book, in this case Camões' epic poem *Lusíadas*, the story of Portuguese maritime saga in the 1500s. The ever-present *moliceiro* symbol of the Maltese Cross, which represents the sails of the ships from the so-called 'Age of the Discoveries', was also the image that illustrated the cover of the fourth year school textbook. Omnipresent in all *Estado Novo* iconography, and so consequently also in the textbooks and on classroom walls, the Christian Cross was depicted as the hero's constant companion and source of inspiration. Testament to their ubiquity in State-promulgated culture, both the Cross and the Portuguese flag appear in every category of *moliceiro* panel except, as a sign of religious and patriotic respect, in comic panels.

Religiously themed panels very much represented the protective maternal figures of the Virgin Mary, Queen Saint Isabel and the local saint Joana of Aveiro. This was also in large part due to the influence on the artisans' modes of consciousness of the school textbooks. Selections of readings in these texts presented female characters not as active heroines in their own right, but rather as companions of male heroes, the women personifying the Catholic virtues of resignation, faith and charity. For the most part, were primarily associated with religion and Catholic virtues. Queen Saint Isabel and Saint Joana were the subject of several readings in the textbooks in which their sanctity and miracles were reported as true and unquestionable historical facts (Ministério da Educação Nacional, 1958a, 1958b). The cult of the Virgin Mary was reinforced not only in the reading section of the textbooks, but also throughout the long section entitled 'Christian Doctrine'. These teachings were - and still are - reproduced and illustrated in many of the most skilfully decorated panels.

Some moralistic texts were even directly transferred from schoolbooks to the panels of the *moliceiro*, such was their ideological impact, even as late as the 1980s (Ministério da Educação Nacional, 1968: 5). For instance, the panel entitled 'A Good Deed', where a young man carries an old woman's bundle of wood, copies both the title of the text 'A Good Deed', and the image accompanying it, from the fourth year textbook, as well as inspiring other panels.

Similarly, the text entitled 'Two Portuguese' indicates the notion of 'one great united Nation', which involved a situation whereby children were taught that 'Portugal extends from the Minho province [in the north west of the country] to the province of Timor [in Southeast Asia]'. Such sentiments were the inspiration for panels with titles such as 'Our Blood Is the Same Colour', 'We're Both Children of God' and 'Different in Colour, But We Share the Same Country' where different ethnic groups are portrayed as worshipping the Cross and the Portuguese flag as equals.



Virgin Mary (1990s).



The Virgin (image and prayer), in the first year textbook (1950s).



Saint Joana of Aveiro (1990s).



Death and miracle of Saint Joana of Aveiro, in the third year textbook (1950s).

Illustration 6



'A good deed', fourth year textbook (1960s).



'A good deed' (1980s).



'I wish I was young' (early 1960s; source: Municipal Archive of Aveiro).

Illustration 7

Although these ideological messages were conveyed in books aimed at children aged seven to ten years, this does not mean that we should consider *moliceiro* art as itself in any way childish. In actual fact, *moliceiro* painters retained, reproduced and, in some cases, adapted in significant ways the teachings they had learnt in primary school. It is to creative adaptations of official culture within the *moliceiro* panels that we now turn.



'Different in colour; but we share the same country' (early 1970s).



'Two Portuguese', fourth year textbook (1960s).

Illustration 8

Elements of Cultural Resistance: Eluding Control

Despite what has been said about the effects of officially sanctioned ideas and images on *moliceiro* culture, the reproduction of these was never wholly uniform or without challenge. Sometimes messages with double meanings – both official and unofficial – could be present. Although local *Estado Novo* authorities were keen to try to control *moliceiro* painting, the threat of subversion was always potentially present. In the poor communities of the Ria de Aveiro, *moliceiro* paintings were the main unauthorized and anonymous method by which the local people could seek to express themselves. As identified by Bakhtin (1984), such a state of affairs may well lead to the encouragement in popular art-forms of images expressing parody, grotesquery and subversion of official values and ideas, and this was indeed the case in certain ways in *moliceiro* culture during the *Estado Novo* period.

Under the cover of anonymity, *moliceiro* artists came to develop their own visual codes, myths, heroes, and, more broadly, sets of social standards and norms. Geographical isolation, homogeneity of socio-economic conditions, and mutual inter-dependence among the subordinate classes of the Ria de Aveiro fostered the development of a distinctive localized culture, often expressed through a strong 'us versus them' imagery, aimed against the powerful classes. Bakhtin (1984) evocatively described this kind of culture, made up of discourses and images oriented towards the symbolic defiance of power, and its characteristics of anonymity and festivity indicating popular rejection of the claims made by elites.

For a long time, *moliceiro* paintings were regarded by urban elites as the products of a crude, simple and naive rural culture. For almost a century, essays and ethnographies written by intellectuals focused in on their apparently homespun characteristics, such as the apparent simplicity of the images and the

spelling mistakes in the titles beneath them, allegedly evidence of the simple-minded peasant culture which had spawned them. However, sometimes, social actors can stage for outsiders their own supposed ignorance, creatively exploiting those stereotypes designed to depreciate and dominate them. Considered as ignorant by political and scientific authorities, and very much aware that any kind of direct complaint would be severely punished, *moliceiro* painters could hide the social criticism implicit in the panels behind the mask of peasant ignorance in order to divert the authorities' attention away from the coded messages in the paintings. As Hobsbawm (1973: 13) has stated, 'the refusal to understand [the claims of elites] is a form of class struggle'; so too, we might add, is the sly performance of stupidity sometimes taken on by the subordinate.

In the case of *moliceiro* panels, the kinds of epic symbols favoured by *Estado Novo* propaganda, for instance, were not just mindlessly and uncritically reproduced, but were also actively adapted to represent more local types of 'heroes'. Thus the ship-builders and sailors who worked within the world of the *moliceiro* boats were often pictured on horseback, in a warrior-like attitude, armed with sword and shield, and with a flag and castle pictured in the background. These sorts of images represent original and subversive adaptations of the heroic national historical saga favoured by State propaganda, towards the depicting of more local sagas to do with everyday life under harsh conditions of subsistence, making quotidian struggles of peasants and fishermen seem equally, if not more, heroic than the stories of aristocrats and colonialists eulogized in school textbooks.

Also in this regard, it is notable that explicitly pro-regime political texts such as 'Estado Novo', 'The Head of State' and 'The Government of the Nation', predictable presences in each year's school textbooks, had little or no discernible influence on *moliceiro* images and inscriptions, although some ethnographies of the period tried to deny this fact (see e.g. Lage et al., 1940: 72).⁵ *Moliceiro* culture was quite content to celebrate ancient history, a remote past with semi-legendary heroes, as a wealthy and peaceful golden age; but it did not tend to accept contemporary history in the mystified fashion through which it appeared in school textbooks, a very eloquent absence in this context.



Panel celebrating a local ship-builder (2001).



Peasant worker on a white horse (1955; source: Portuguese Centre of Photography).

Illustration 9



'Money's charity too'
(1940s; source: Portuguese Centre of
Photography).



'King D. Dinis, the
Farmer', 1261–1325
(1980s).



'I have always fought
for my country'.
King D. Carlos,
1863–1908 (1960s).

Illustration 10

Moliceiro panels generally ignored explicitly 'political' issues, even major issues, such as the colonial wars of the 1961–1974. While they did not openly criticize the authorities, they did not praise them either. As Scott: (1990: 157) argues, 'the distinctiveness of subordinate group cultural expression is created in large part by the fact that ... the process of cultural selection is relatively democratic'. Subordinate groups tend to select for representation and verbalization images and ideas that they themselves want to emphasize. They adopt and adapt these for their own uses, and thus they create new cultural practices and artefacts to meet their own practical needs and feelings. What is expressed within popular cultural forms is largely dependent on what people in subordinate groups collectively feel is worth accepting and transmitting (Fiske, 1989). This does not imply that popular cultural practices are wholly unaffected by more dominant cultures, only that the former are less effectively controlled by the latter than some kinds of dominant ideology thesis are willing to admit (Abercrombie et al., 1980).

We can see these general points exemplified in the case of gender norms. *Estado Novo* textbooks exposed children to stereotypes of women as being only suited to be mothers and housewives, a 'noble mission' girls had to accept from early childhood. According to the *Estado Novo* ideology, women happily sacrificed their lives, working diligently in the home for their family, with children as their reward and major blessing. A passage in the second year textbook typifies this way of thinking: a thankful brother exclaims in the last sentence 'How lovely are the girls who know needlework!' Agriculture was the sole non-domestic activity the textbooks allowed and celebrated for women.

But beyond the idealized world of *Estado Novo* mythologies, in the often harsh, poverty-stricken world of the Ria de Aveiro, these stereotypes about women could not work in the ways the official representations and discourses intended. In order to guarantee the family's subsistence, women had to work a great deal outdoors, and housework and childcare were just one aspect of a long list of everyday duties. Such a situation was commonly depicted in the *moliceiro* panels. There, women are shown as agricultural labourers, as fishmongers, as



'Pride of a mother', third year textbook (1950s).



'Moonlight of January',
third year textbook (1950s).

Illustration 11

fisherwomen (working on the beach and hauling the nets, an essential and very hard task in the traditional fishing process), and generally always as workers in their respective working environments, depicted without any reference to childcare, housework or even maternity (except for the comic panels that satirize the foibles of pregnant brides). Similarly, the reading selections in the textbooks portrayed family scenes in a rural context, with clear social and gender hierarchies symbolized through the height of the characters, men depicted as being always taller than women. On the contrary, in the *moliceiro* panels, women and men are shown as being of similar height, and they are seen to share the same sorts of work activities, indicating that both genders are equally active, important and relevant in the everyday life of the Ria de Aveiro communities.

Both school textbooks and *moliceiro* panels traditionally shared a limited referential universe in time and space, one that was confined to small villages, rural environments, peasant communities, and everyday family and work activities. The notion that hard work in the open air was healthy and an advantage prevailed in both realms, although panels sometimes expressed complaints about the misery, difficulties and dangers of work in the countryside and at sea. The official image of the hard-working, self-sacrificing peasant was celebrated in some panels that eulogized the nature of work; but this set of notions could be satirized in comic panels as well, again pointing to the moral-political ambiguity of *moliceiro* culture as a whole. In addition, while *Estado Novo* imagery tended to set up the peasant as the locus of virtue, in a region so close to the sea, it was fishermen who were more celebrated in *moliceiro* panels, often depicted in almost epic manners. High-sea fishermen were never satirized in the panels. Here again we can unpack some ambiguities. While the eulogization of this group runs close to official attitudes – which represented them as the legitimate heirs of the heroes of the Age of Discoveries – *moliceiro* culture valorized them for other reasons, namely their hardiness in the face of natural adversity. Thus what looks from the outside like a direct reproduction of officially-sanctioned values, turns out on closer inspection to involve subaltern attitudes being expressed in symbolic forms that are only apparently congruent with official attitudes.



'The varina from Murtosa' (1980s).



'The queen of varinas' (1960s).



'Mother's Birthday',
third year textbook
(1950s).



Fisherman and varina with
caption 'Have you sold anything,
Rosa?' (1950s).



Image of couple and satirical
caption with sexual allusion
(early 1970s).

Illustration 12

Generally speaking, ideological supervision by both central and local authorities was never totally effective, with satire almost always breaking through officially approved visual rhetoric. Thus *moliceiro* painters often satirized the behaviour of what it saw as the typical drunkards to be found in any local *taberna*, deploying a sense of humour that went against the grain of institutionalized moralistic discourse. The *taberna*, the space that was in some ways most potentially symbolically disruptive of the regime's moral code, was indeed a locale that was in some ways beyond the reach of official rhetoric. While the *taberna* under the conditions of *Estado Novo* was generally not a space of organized resistance to the regime, nonetheless it had great symbolic efficacy, being – in some ways like Bakhtin's (1984) conception of the demotic marketplace – a symbolically charged point of unauthorized assembly for lower class people, and a site relatively insulated from official surveillance (Scott, 1990: 122). *Moliceiro* culture, unlike its official counterpart, looked upon the drunkards of the *taberna* benevolently. Unlike *Estado Novo* ideology, which uniformly condemned the iniquities of all drinking dens, we find that *moliceiro* depictions only criticized the *taberna* and its habitués in cases where a man was seen to spend all his working hours and waking energies there, thus making him useless for work and thus a parasite upon the common good. This practical and flexible attitude towards the powers and temptations of drink contrasts starkly with harsh official condemnations of such matters.



'We're feeding our sorrows'
(early 1980s).



'No barrel can resist me' (1970s).

Illustration 13

Moliceiro Culture in the Present Day: Staging Tradition

In the present day, at the same time as traditional agricultural practices slowly disappear in the Ria de Aveiro, the mental geography of the peasant communities of the region is changing too. As tourism has become an ever more important factor in the economy of the area, there has been a very powerful diffusion of tourism-oriented iconography into *moliceiro* culture, leading, in quite a marked degree, to the homogenization of the sorts of images to be found on the panels. *Moliceiro* culture has undergone a profound metamorphosis, not least because of the decline of the seaweed industry, which was the original context of the *moliceiro* boats. The *moliceiro* panels reappeared in the 1980s, in a fully democratic Portugal, as a cultural object of interest to tourists, regardless of their original functions, which could have been anything, as far as the tourist market was concerned. Tourism has replaced political ideology and control as the main 'external' force shaping *moliceiro* art in the present day. However, fragments of individual creativity and idiosyncrasy survive alongside the more standardized offerings oriented towards the tourist industry, even though permanent residents of the area have in large part become members of the tertiary sector in tourism and related economic activities.

In general today, *moliceiro* cultural production has become increasingly attentive to the tourism-driven market for cultural symbols. This refunctionalization of *moliceiro* painting is driven by the demand of tourists for products that are vaguely symbolic of what they regard as 'traditional Portugal'. Without succumbing to the romantic view that products such as *moliceiro* panels of the past somehow express 'the fundamental elements of Portuguese culture' (Dias, 1961: 97), untainted by commercial concerns, it remains the case today that *moliceiro* art is open to the possibility of becoming a commodity that has become wholly detached from the life of the community it purports to represent. The anonymity of the market and the need to earn a living can shape and transform the artisan



'May God be your guide, fishermen' (2002).



'Old times in Newfoundland' (1999).

Illustration 14

producers just as profoundly as these latter shape and transform the objects of their handiwork.

Generally speaking, in the ongoing recovery of the *moliceiro* panels for the tourist market, modern painters often tend to imitate, even directly reproduce, 'traditional' images. They try to re-stage the past in the present. They exaggerate their traditionalism as they reinvent tradition. The historical examples of great kings, warriors and navigators, along with the neo-epic celebration of high-sea fishermen, have survived from pre-tourism times. In fact, today these subject-matters are represented more than they were in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed Camões, the national poet eulogized by *Estado Novo*, is represented more often now than during the totalitarian period. In democratic Portugal, the iconography of *Estado Novo* not only remains within *moliceiro* culture, but has actually in certain ways been accentuated by the tourist market in *moliceiro* production. During my fieldwork, among many other examples, I found the following instances of panels echoing the ideology of *Estado Novo*: 'May God Be Your Guide, Fishermen'; 'God and Country!' (text accompanying a picture of a soldier-knight); 'The Whole Sea Is Ours!' (text accompanying a representation of Henry the Navigator); 'The Pen and the Sword in His Hands' (accompanying an illustration of Camões); and 'Old Times in Newfoundland' (accompanying a scene of rudimentary cod-fishing).

Present-day painters depict such symbols as if they were the remnants of a lost rural paradise, as they attempt to represent what they consider to be 'picturesque', 'genuine', 'popular', and elementally part of the national heritage. In so doing, they unintentionally reproduce, under the guise of peasant cultural authenticity, the sorts of symbolisms fostered quite self-consciously as a reaction against modernity, by a totalitarian elite bent on presenting to the peasantry an idealized portrait of itself.

A key point of interest in understanding the new mode of *moliceiro* production is that some of the present-day painters, far from being the simple peasants of yore, not only have a secondary school education (a very unlikely accomplishment for previous generations of *moliceiro* artisans), but may even have graduated from art school.⁶ But these sometimes quite highly trained individuals set aside the modern artistic techniques that they have at their disposal, seeking to create what seems to be genuinely 'popular' art, and attempting to obtain what is now regarded as the prestigious (and economically lucrative) social status of true 'popular artist'. In this way, a seemingly lowly, mundane object – the panels of a wooden boat meant to collect seaweed – is transformed into a delicate work of art, in part by the power of the label of 'artist' attaching to those whose skill involves, paradoxically, a simultaneous hiding of skill and public presentation of earthy, peasant-like 'natural talent'. Indeed, the pressures both to build new boats to display to tourists, and to renew the panels on time for presentation at the numerous summer festivals, as well as the tourists' preferences for standardized paintings, has led to a growing demand for new and relatively highly skilled painters. Such producers sometimes find it difficult to resist a manifest display of their artistic skills, leading to the possibility that their supposed peasant credentials may be exposed. At a less elevated level, some boat-owners continue to engage in panel-painting. Under touristic conditions, there are considerable pecuniary rewards available for widely recognized 'amateur' talent, with such amateurism now being very much enmeshed with the professionalizing practices of the tourist industry.

Despite the apparent emphasis on tradition and authenticity, *moliceiro* production today has actually altered – sometimes subtly, sometimes less so – the nature of the representations to be found on the panels. For example, during the last two decades, there has been a clear rise in the number of comic/erotic panels, the humour of which seems greatly to appeal to tourists, although these subjects were traditionally in the minority and less explicit in terms of the messages they expressed. Before the influx of tourism, the comic effect was usually the product of verbal innuendo. Resorting to more and more unequivocal and elaborated imagery, present-day comic/erotic panels attract professional and amateur photographers who, in turn, disseminate their images to other potential visitors and to the media, all of these functioning as potent sources of profit for the tourism industry of the region.

Representations of women combine elements of older and newer dispositions. Women are depicted in two ways. The differences between the 'local woman' (always a fishmonger or a countrywoman) and the 'other' woman (the woman from the cinema and television, from the city, the modern urban woman) are denoted by their clothing and functions – work and working garments (headscarf, blouse, round skirt, apron, bare feet) in the first case; leisure and leisure clothing (suggestive dresses, high heels, long hair, swimsuit or underwear) in the second. Needless to say, the latter figure was absent from *moliceiro* culture during the *Estado Novo* period. The female fishmongers continue, as in the past, to be



Comic erotic panels (2003–4).

Illustration 15

presented as strong, full of spirit and able to engage in quick comebacks to troublesome customers, subservient to men in theory but actually powerful in practice. The ‘other’ women are never included in laudatory panels such as those that praise fisherwomen. On the contrary, the ‘other’ woman is the object of extremely satirical paintings, where she is mocked because of her sophistication and laziness. These women are represented in their beds and boudoirs, lying on couches watching television, sunbathing on the beach, or strolling around the spaces where the locals work.

Here we see, in what is in some ways a radically changed social context, a strong echo of anti-urban, anti-modern *Estado Novo* sentiments. Modern (an *Estado Novo* synonym for ‘immoral’) young women are often represented in erotic situations, where they are the objects of sexual desires and involved in sexual encounters. But not all panels are simply patriarchal in nature – more often than not women are presented as men’s equals when it comes to expressing sexual intentions. Thus in panels satirizing the use of condoms, women are seen to instruct ignorant men on how to use them. When women are represented as fishmongers, rural workers or mothers, the visual and verbal discourse surrounding them may be poetical and laudatory, but parody still prevails, with witty remarks and comments full of sexual innuendo, where women lead the way. But those ‘modern’ young women do not necessarily have to be city-dwellers or foreigners. They are sometimes portraits of local young women who have refused tradition in their appearance and practices, and who are presented as tending to favour leisure rather too much over hard work. However, it is also notable that the panels never satirize those women who have refused tradition in order to proceed with their education, as this is considered, within the world of contemporary *moliceiro* production, the most respectable way of obtaining a better and rewarding status for themselves and their families. Having a university graduate daughter/son – if possible, a medical doctor, a lawyer or a judge who does not forget her/his origins – is actually a rural family’s highest pride and aspiration. Overall, then, representations of women in present-day *moliceiro* panels exhibit both conservative traits inherited from the *Estado Novo*, and some more politically and socially progressive attitudes.



'Which one has sinned the most?'
(1998).



Satirical
representation of
former Prime-Minister
António Guterres
(circa 2000).



Satirical representation
of former Prime-
Minister Mário Soares
(circa 2000).



Portuguese MP represented as a
donkey (1990s).



Moliceiro man drinking and defying
police authority (2002).

Illustration 16

We saw above that *moliceiro* culture was never completely controlled by the *Estado Novo* authorities. Mocking and degrading carnivalesque imagery, of the kind identified by Bakhtin (1984), exists more explicitly under present-day conditions. Donkeys, for example, are frequently depicted with human characteristics, as bad students, wise-guys and, especially, as politicians. There is often a reversal of human-animal roles, such as a man carrying a donkey on his back or pulling a cart whose reins are held by a donkey, comments on the seemingly inescapable poverty of Portugal. This sort of satire is particularly aimed at the authorities and politicians held to be responsible for local and national ills. Police authority, for example, is always satirized. And so are priests and monks, because of their hypocrisy – one popular panel, where a girl in a red mini-dress attends confession, reads 'Which One Has Sinned the Most?' – but the Christian religion itself is under no circumstances satirized, indicating the strongly enforced symbolic limits of *moliceiro* social critique. Nonetheless, it remains the case that under the conditions of tourist-led production, a space has been created for more explicit social critique than was ever thinkable under

Estado Novo conditions, with the previously officially revered agents of Church and State now subject to quite open mockery, albeit in a highly commodified commercial environment.

There are certain aspects of life that *moliceiro* representations never venture towards: the most striking example is middle class urban life, which never appears, only the peasantry and nobility really ever figuring prominently. However, television imagery has begun to emerge as a ripe source of representation, and its influence appears not only in some images directly, where TV sets are actually represented, but also in new characters and events portrayed that appear in the panels. These include: famous football players like Figo and Jardel; the diva of the *fado*, Amália; 'menino Toncecas', a childish character from a popular sitcom; democratic politicians like Mário Soares and António Guterres, and the crises and scandals they had to face; the feud between a mayor and the president of a local football team; the Portuguese entry into the European Union in 1986; the (illusory) prosperity of the 1990s driven by injections of European funding; the single European currency; Expo98, Lisbon's universal exposition; the notorious reality TV show *Big Brother*; renowned socialites who become overnight TV commentators and hosts of chat and quiz shows; the national crazes surrounding the 2004 European Football Championships and the 2006 World Football Cup; the rivalry between local football teams, among many other examples. TV and tabloid news events, such as illegal bullfights in Alentejo, or the 'controversy' surrounding the Brazilian nudist community of Colina do Sol, may rapidly generate new panels for rapid consumption, and are subsequently soon replaced by other topics gleaned from the popular media.

Except for the football-related examples, all the other kinds of cases noted above are represented in quite grotesque traces and subjected to satirical observations. Television itself merges images and words, in some ways just like a *moliceiro* panel, and so becomes a hugely productive source of inspiration for painters, especially when everyday local reality has run out of subject matters for scorn. But just as Christianity is off-limits for *moliceiro* satirists, so too is a more secular version of the sacred. The Portuguese national football squad, as well as local football teams, are revered symbols and regarded as proud representatives of the nation, city, village or region, and are therefore untouchable subjects for satire, portrayed accordingly. The national saga of the Age of Discoveries, systematically celebrated by *Estado Novo* and found in *moliceiro* panels both in that period and today, has encountered in football a suitable though unexpected successor, for both create a sense of national pride, at the same time as they help divert attention away from the many serious problems Portugal faces at the present time. We see again how both social critique and conservative ideologies are to be found within the apparently innocuous guide of wooden boat panels.



'I'm the boss of Oporto!'
Satirical allusion to the feud between
the mayor and the president of Oporto's
football team (2006).



'Hooray for our team!'
The football star Figo wearing the
colours of the national squad and
Portuguese flag (2004).



'We want Ecu!!!'
Pun with the first designation of the single
European currency (early 1990s).



The smell of real life.'
Satirical representation of the reality
show *Big Brother*, with a contestant in
the WC, observed by a grotesque
portrait of the show hostess (2002).



Humorous allusion to the Brazilian nudist
community of Colina do Sol
(circa 2000).



Humorous allusion to the illegal bullfights of
Barrancos, with world-upside-down images
(circa 2003).

Illustration 17

Conclusion

In this article, I have traced out the history of the *moliceiro* boat and its painted panels. In the early 20th century, it was a purely local phenomenon, tied to the traditions of a regional folk culture. Nowadays, it is used as a potent symbol for a particular region of Portugal in international tourist circuits. As I hope to have shown, the meaning and significance of *moliceiro* culture have changed in complex and often ambiguous ways over the course of the last century. From the anti-urban rhetoric of the *Estado Novo* regime, to the tourist-oriented market of today, from the eulogization of Church and State, to the satirizing of contemporary television programmes, the *moliceiro* panels have proven to be remarkably flexible means of expressing radically varied sets of concerns and ideas at different points in time. What might seem at first glance to be an inflexible repertoire of crude, standardized symbols and painting techniques, actually turns out to be something much more interesting, namely a supple means of expressing popular feelings as well as official ideologies, contemporary concerns as well as tourist-oriented picturesque. Whether under conditions of political repression or the tyrannies of tourist markets, *moliceiro* culture has proven resilient, in that it has never just been a mouthpiece of official ideology or just a vehicle for tourist kitsch. This is so despite the fact that first repressive political power, then later processes of tourist-driven commodification, have sought to present and regulate *moliceiro* panel production as unequivocally ‘folk culture’, as genuinely ‘of the people’. The key lesson to be drawn from the consideration of its history is that *moliceiro* culture has indeed expressed more genuinely ‘popular’, grass-roots concerns, precisely because it has never fully conformed to the definitions of ‘folk culture’ interested parties wanted it to conform to. The remarkable thing about it is that it has never been exactly what those who control it would want it to be; it has always retained elements of the excessive, the uncontrolled, and the unregulatable.

Notes

- 1 47 km long, the Ria de Aveiro has a maximum width of 7 km, in spite of increasing silting-up. The depth varies between 1 and 2 metres and may rise to 4 to 6 metres in the central canals. The Ria covers a liquid surface of more than 6000 hectares that divides into four main branches: Ovar (north), Mira (south), Murtosa (northeast) and Vagos (southeast). There is also a myriad of minor branches that create a large labyrinth of islands, channels, drains and creeks across the entire area.
- 2 However, the current financial crisis has forced local authorities not only to cancel or slow down orders, but also to delay the payment of many of them. During the optimistic year of 1998 (the year of Lisbon’s Expo98 international exhibition), the municipality of Aveiro ordered circa 25 new *moliceiros*, but that project is currently suspended. The main shipyard closed down as this article was going into print.

- 3 Such as bathing the wooden image of a local patron saint (Saint Paio of Torreira) in red wine, in order to obtain protection against some common illnesses. That 'holy' wine was consumed in great quantities afterwards, with predictable consequences.
- 4 Indeed, I would argue that the ideology of *Estado Novo* successfully influenced – and still influences, under a thin cover of evolution – not only the cultural environment of *moliceiro* production but also Portuguese culture in general. For example, in my own case, from earliest childhood (born in Oporto in 1970) until my late teens, I was haunted by the nickname 'Clarinha e as Pombas' ('Little Claire and the Doves'), whenever I stated my name to any adult in any region of Portugal. This was due to the ubiquity in Portugal of this phrase, which was used for many years in the third year primary school textbook, even though this book had already been altered and the specific text replaced a decade before I was born.
- 5 See the 1940 text by Luís de Pina, 'Popular Art', in Francisco Lage et al.'s *Vida e Arte do Povo Português* ('Life and Art of Portuguese People'), published and supervised by the Secretary of National Propaganda, about the panels of the *moliceiros*: 'the artist updates his creations and, therefore, one can now find social and political allusions: busts of Salazar, legionnaires, members of the Portuguese Youth [the 'Mocidade Portuguesa', a fascist youth organization that every student had to belong to]. He updates and modernizes his characters, groups figures, and suffers the influence of international politics'. However, the research undertaken for this study did not find one single representation of Salazar, of legionnaires, or of members of the Portuguese 'Mocidade' (except for a sole and curious image that combines a boy dressed in the Portuguese Youth uniform with the portrait of King D. Manuel II, deposed in 1910), that would have certainly been the first images to be reproduced and publicized by the Secretary of National Propaganda, if they had actually existed.
- 6 At the present time, there is even a reputed female *moliceiro* painter, who is also a secondary school teacher of Visual Arts.

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