

# Ritual of blessing the tuna fishing nets in Algarve (Portugal), between the 30's and 60's

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper describes the religious blessing procedure of tuna fishing nets before being launched into the sea, in Algarve, between the decades 30 and 60, when it abruptly ended. The authors describe how blessing of tuna fishing nets was made, based on interviews with people involved in this art, using photos provided by those, complemented by documentary analysis and bibliographic research. In the course of the work it was discovered that such religious practice took place in Faro beach, in Algarve, for long decades, involving almost 200 families that lived there temporarily for 4 months per year, each year. The main results of this research are the awareness that this heritage, which is being lost, and the consequent urgency of an adequate registration and disclosure to the valuation of such sustainable asset, that is scarce.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 *General remarks*

This paper describes the religious blessing procedure of tuna fishing nets before being launched into the sea, in Algarve, between the decades 30 and 60, when it abruptly ended.

The choice of the 30's to 60's is related to the fact that it is during this period that more information is available, despite the scarcity, and therefore it is in this temporal range that the description of this ritual can be made.

The abrupt end of the tuna fishery mentioned before, is directly related to the decrease in the population of this fish and therefore to the quantity fished, which is no longer economically viable.

Geographically, Portugal is situated at the western end of Europe and the Algarve in the South of Portugal. It is bathed by the Atlantic Ocean, but the Algarve, due to its characteristics, is considered a Mediterranean area. In fact, the entrance of the Mediterranean Sea, where the Northern Bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus* LINNAEUS 1758) will spawn, lies not far from the Algarve, making here tuna's fishery possible. In continental Portugal, Algarve is even the only place where tuna is caught and, consequently, where the *Almadrava* technique is used. This technique constitutes a passive system and will be referred below.

Linked to the tuna fishery in the Algarve, there is an immense heritage, being the intangible heritage only one of these dimensions.

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In the course of the work it was discovered that such religious practice took place in Faro beach, in Algarve, for long decades, involving almost 200 families that lived there temporarily for 4 months per year, each year, during tuna fishing's season.

Limitations to the development of this work were found due to the scarcity of available information and to the advanced age of the people involved, who are now about 90 years old.

The main results of this research are the awareness that this heritage, which is being lost, and the consequent urgency of an adequate registration and disclosure to the valuation of such sustainable asset, that is scarce.

In the continuation of the development of this work, we begin with framing the type of heritage dealt with here, followed in the introduction by an explanation of the location of the *Armação de Cabo de Santa Maria, Ramalhetes and Forte*, situated in Faro, in the Algarve.

Then, the ritual of the blessing of the nets is described, emphasizing the prayers, especially the Hail Holy Queen of the Sea.

### 1.2 Heritage contextualization

In parallel with the evolution of the concept of heritage, since 1999 with the Burra Charter (ICOMOS, 1999), meaning the protection and conservation of the cultural significance of a place, taking into account its aesthetic, historical, scientific or social value, it is recognized that both tangible and intangible heritage must be protected.

However, the concept of intangible heritage and the importance of its preservation were only consolidated in 2003 with the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which attributes intangible manifestations to the heritage (UNESCO, 2003), recognized as cultural heritage by communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals (McCarthy, 2017).

In parallel with this evolution heritage's concept, there has also been an evolution of the criteria for the selection of cultural heritage. Initially, the only parameters were historical and artistic values, that is, the values intrinsic to the object, but they evolved in order to value the cultural value of the object (Gonçalves, 2016; Vecco, 2010).

The heritage linked to tuna fishing is a type of vernacular heritage, which is emerging and is gradually recognized as such (Gonçalves & Pérez Cano, 2012). In this way, the concept of something that is monumental does not apply nor does it serve to value intangible goods (Marcos Arévalo, 2010).

Nowadays, the value of heritage is considered as an expression of identity and the identity, as the cradle of tradition and continuity between generations, that is, cultural heritage. This means that the meaning of objects and manifestations is more valued than their material part: the intangible heritage that is characteristic of living cultural manifestations (such as festive rituals), or intangible culture functions as a depository of collective memory, implying a continuity, guaranteed by the various generations and local social groups (Marcos Arévalo, 2009).

However, while the goods of popular culture are primarily utilitarian, even if they are of great beauty, their main role is to be useful and practical, and therefore, they are not made to last beyond the period in which they are needed. Therefore, their disappearance - as is the case with the ritual described in this paper - or its modification cannot be prevented (Homero, 2006).

Therefore, it has to be found another way of preserving and keeping traditions alive. One way of maintaining these traditions is to recognize the collective memory, that is, to identify them from knowledge or previous experience (Marcos Arévalo, 2010), as is the case of the ritual described here, which (still) remains in the collective memory of those who lived this ritual, being now about 90 years old.

The social memory implies the construction and representation of the past, what we remember as individuals, a past selected and sometimes distorted, but always conditioned by the fact that we belong to a certain collective that exists in a concrete cultural context (*ibidem*).

One way of preserving the intangible festive heritage in local cultures is through their knowledge and dissemination, and their knowledge must be made, among others, by the intergenerational transmission, explaining how they manifest themselves and the values that are at their base (Marcos Arévalo, 2009; Petronela, 2016). One of the aims of this article is to record

accurately and 'tell' this ritual that remains in the memory of who lived it but now is being lost. Due to the history lived in Portugal since the interval of years here focused (30's to 60's), and although today is still existing fishing tuna on the Algarve coast, the truth is that this ritual no longer has the importance that it had.

One of the most important examples of cultural consumption have been the festivals, such as ethnographic, folkloric or celebration, inseparable from the social recognition of collective identity and memory (del Barrio, Devesa, & Herrero, 2012), often suggesting modes as Catholic religiosity is used (Gupta, 2014).

However, when these manifestations become unimportant, it is difficult to maintain them because, without the people who participate, they disappear (Chan, 2017), such as it happened with the ritual of blessing the tuna nets that we are talking about.

### 1.3 *The Armação: Almadrava and Arraial*

*Almadrava*, an Arabic term meaning: "place of death" (Santos, 1989) was adopted as a designation for what represents a complex system of fixed nets intercepting shoals of tuna, called *atum rabilho*, northern bluefin tuna on its genetic migration from the Atlantic Ocean to the warmer waters of Mediterranean Sea to spawn, called *atum de direito* and in the reverse direction, after spawning called *atum de revés*.

In this migration cycle, the tuna crossed along the Algarve coast, the only zone in continental Portugal where it was fished from the most remote times. The *Almadrava*, located in the sea, was supported by the *Arraial*, located onshore, which consisted of the dwellings of the fishermen and their families, forming the *Armação*, a short-term fishing community, during the fishing season, for 4 months, every year.

Before the *Almadrava* had been launched into the sea there was the ritual of blessing the fishing nets. This article intends to describe this religious procedure in the *Armação* of Cabo de Santa Maria, Ramalhete and Forte, situated in Faro, in the Algarve.

Being a fishing system that already existed in the Algarve when the territory was reconquered from the Muslims in 1249 (Lyster Franco, 1947), and having as first known written reference to an *Armação* on the coast of Cabo de Santa Maria (Faro) in the XVI century (Baldaque da Silva, 1891), and, also, in the case of a monarchical system associated with the power of the Catholic Church, it is very likely that this ritual has been used since long centuries.

The oldest written known document that describes the practice of this ritual dates back to 1894 (Júlio Lourenço Pinto, 1894). In fact, there was a wooden chapel with a wooden altar and the image of Jesus Christ in the middle of the *Arraial*. After 1910, with the revolution of October 5<sup>th</sup> that put an end to the monarchy and gave rise to the implantation of the republic, with its policies to combat the excessive power of the Catholic Church, the chapel was destroyed (Prudêncio, n.d.). Since then, the ritual of blessing the nets continued, but the priest didn't live there anymore.

The *Armação* of Cabo de Santa Maria, Ramalhete e Forte, was the greatest in the Algarve since 1931, and the *Almadrava* had an extension of approximately 10,000 meters at sea surface and its central part was extended to a depth of 20 meters. There were used 70,000 meters of steel cable from 2 to 3.5 inches, 90,000 kilos of cork for the confection of floating and signaling buoys, 400,000 square meters of fishing net of various dimensions and were attached to the seabed through 350 iron anchors of 2 to 3 meters long which weighed a few hundred kilos each (Brito, 1943). All the works were carried out manually, without using mechanical means.

In 1935 (*ibidem*) the *Arraial* had 144 fishermen and their families living there, coming from the most different places of Algarve, namely, Faro, Quarteira, Albufeira, Armação de Pêra, Olhão, Santa Luzia, Culatra, Fuzeta and Tavira, resulting in an exchange of knowledge and habits, fostering mutual acculturation. Until 1935 they lived in about 30 reed houses (*junco* or *barrão*) with wooden doors and without windows, shared by 2 to 3 families each (information verbally provided). After 1935 and until 1967 (when the *Armação* finished), there was a change in the location of the *Arraial*, due to the change of the seafront, replacing the reed houses by six new wooden sheds shared by 20 to 24 families each.

Although there was a hard life, without electricity, drinkable water or sanitary infrastructures, between the *companheiros* (fishermen and their families), a spirit of camaraderie, union and mutual aid, was developed (information verbally obtained, which is confirmed by Brandão (1988).

## 2 THE RITUAL

### 2.1 General description

Before the nets being launch into the sea, there was the ritual of blessing (the nets) that was associated with the faith of the fishermen and the belief due to the uncertainty of each day of fishing.

The dangers they had to face every day, the precariousness of that profession associated with the poor class of society, the hope and eagerness to catch enough fish to survive and feed their families during the whole year, made them have a great devotion. This ritual of blessing (or baptism) of the nets began when the *Almadrava* was ready to be thrown into the sea in mid-April, always on a Sunday (information verbally obtained). On that day the fishermen and their families wore their best clothes (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Woman and child on the day of the blessing of the nets (source: authors' private archive)

To mark that day, as a special one, the directors gave to the fishermen 1 liter of red wine and 1 kilo bread and children received sweets.

The priest arrived at the *Arraial*, in a boat, accompanied by the directors of the fishing company and their guests; when they arrived at the beach, the priest made the preparations for the ritual inside a house for the purpose, after which he left accompanied by two fishermen, one with the kettle of holy water and the other with the cross of Christ. The remaining ones and their families, as well as the directors and their guests, opened wings for the priest to pass and followed him in procession (information verbally obtained). Then the nets, the cables, the floating buoys and the iron anchors, spread on the beach, were blessed (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Blessing of tuna fishing nets in 1957 (source: authors' private archive)

The priest preceded some children, who had a stick of chalk each, to mark with a cross everything which has already been blessed, avoiding repetitions. Then, the priest said the Creed and the Sermon (information verbally obtained), and the ritual ended with the blessing of the main net of the *Almadrava*, the *Copo*, in which the tunas were captured. After, everyone knelt down and prayed the Hail Holy Queen (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Blessing of tuna fishing nets in 1957. Fishermen on their knees over the main net, *Copo*, while the Hail Holy Queen was prayed (source: authors' private archive)

## 2.2 The prayers

As referred before, the prayers used in this ceremony were the Creed, the priest made a Sermon and, at the end, everybody prayed the Hail Holy Queen (*Salvé-Rainha*).

The Creed was a doctrinal formula or profession of Christian faith, which derived from the Latin: "I believe" (Credo), reinforcing the monotheistic Catholic faith in one only God.

The priest's Sermon usually consisted on votes of good luck and abundant fishery. Father Henrique, one of the last priests to go to *Arraial*, who was a very cheerful person and liked to tell jokes, once wished that fishermen would catch 'as many tunas as the berries of the beach', which provoked great joy. This episode was unforgettable and, nowadays is still remembered (information verbally obtained).

The Hail Holy Queen, in Latin “Salve Regina”, was a prayer attributed to the monk Hermano Contracto, who wrote it in about 1050 B.C. in a social context of great natural calamities, epidemics, misery, hunger and constant wars among peoples. He was a rickety and deformed child, and as an adult he walked and wrote with difficulty. It was in this situation that he created this prayer, mixing misery, suffering with hope (Salve-Rainha, n.d.), such as the fishermen’s life.

Like the Creed, it also inspired several composers at different periods, such as: Melgàs (Baroque), Schubert (Classic) or Poulenc (Contemporary), just to name a few, but, differently of Creed, which shows no musical uniformity, the Hail Holy Queen of this composers, has always the concern of transmitting suffering, and therefore, they are musical compositions usually slow and with a serious expression.

This is the prayer with which the rosary is finished and, in the case related in this paper, it assumed a particular character, being called Hail Holy Queen of the Sea or Hail Holy Queen in the Way of Armação de Pêra (*Salvé-Rainha do mar à moda de Armação de Pêra*).

*Salvé-rainha à moda de Armação de Pêra* was the Hail Holy Queen (*Salvé-rainha*) prayed at *Armação de Pêra* style, which was prayed in a vibrant way by two brothers who were from Armação de Pêra, a village located eastern from Faro. These two brothers lived in the *Arraial*, between the 30s and the 60s and their style of prayer remained between the fishermen (information verbally obtained).

There were slight differences between the *Salvé Rainha* usually prayed and the *Salvé Rainha à moda de Armação de Pêra*. In the last case, the lyrics had a difference in the accent, namely the way of traditional pronunciation from Algarve (Fig. 4), and, the orality, that is to say, the way of praying, was more declaimed and theatrical, almost singing, almost appealing with suffering, with more extended pauses.

Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life our sweetness and our hope.	Salvé Rainha, Mãe de Misericórdia, Vida, doçura (...) e esp(e)rança, <b><u>(nossa que a Deus nos)</u></b> salve!
To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve;	<b>(E)</b> A Vós bradamos, os <b><u>(degradados)</u></b> <b><u>(degradados)</u></b> (...) <b><u>(nossa vossa)</u></b> filhos de Eva.
To thee do we send up our sighs mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.	Vós suspiramos, gemendo e chorando neste vale de lágrimas (...).
Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy	Eia, pois, <b><u>(adebegada)</u></b> <b><u>(advogada)</u></b> nossa
toward us	<b>(A)</b> Esses Vossos olhos misericordiosos (...)
and after this our exile	A nós volve <b><u>(i)</u></b>
show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus.	E, depois des <b><u>(s)</u></b> <b><u>(t)</u></b> e desterro, <b><u>(nos)</u></b>
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary!	<b>(A)</b> Mostrai <b><u>(-nos)</u></b> (...) <b><u>(Ó)</u></b> Jesus, bendito <b><u>(seja o)</u></b> fruto do Vosso Ventre.
Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God	Ó <b><u>(Quelemente)</u></b> <b><u>(Clemente)</u></b> , (...) Ó Piedosa, Ó Doce <b><u>(sempre)</u></b> Virgem Maria. Rogai <b><u>(a Deus)</u></b> por nós (...) <b><u>(Santa Mãe de Deus, Que há um só Deus três pessoas três agora e sempre)</u></b> (...)
That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.	<b><u>(Para que sejamos dignos das promessas de Cristo)</u></b>
Amen	<b><u>(Sem fim)</u></b> Amém.
<b>Legend:</b> (...) Different stanza change / (X) Not pronounced letters / (X) Letters added	

Figure 4. Left: prayer of Hail Holy Queen; right: prayer of Hail Holy Queen to the Armação de Pêra style, with the differences to the ‘normal’ Portuguese prayer (Source: Authors)

This kind of expression was the result of a mix of the identity and cultures of people from many different places of Algarve, as said before, but with the same religiosity combining misery and suffering with hope.

This prayer marked a very strong moment, intense, with many tears and became chilling for those who assisted.

### 3FINAL REMARKS

The specificity of ethnological assets is that on the one hand, they remain alive and on the other hand, they are located somewhere between what is material and what is immaterial, functioning as a resource that belongs to the past but which serves to interpret the present and to construct the future. The historical experience and tradition that is transmitted socially are the bases for each social group to build its cultural differentiation (Marcos Arévalo, 2010).

The fact that festivals are a type of living, dynamic heritage, and in permanent process of change and transformation, causes them to undergo an evolution that can culminate in the loss of their identity. However, these act on individuals as factors of awareness of the sense of belonging and are part of the collective memory of communities; they are essential sources of identity deeply linked to the past (durability, continuity) but also to the present (temporal change, transformation) (*ibidem*). The fact that this tradition is continuously updated and transformed, being dynamic, can be changed and adaptive, playing the role of a link between the past and the present (Marcos Arévalo, 2009).

The acceptance of the identity of each social group or of each cultural community passes through the internationalization of a shared heritage, making one become aware of its own identity and specific style of life. Life styles that are relevant and culturally significant to a given community or group that created them constitute heritage and the heritage, whether tangible or intangible, is always constituted by representations and symbols (*ibidem*).

Festivals such as religious, allow us to experience goods that expire after being (re)produced, giving us an insight into the cultural background and cultural capital accumulated by a particular group of people, who, as they are passed down through generations and generations, are constantly being recreated (del Barrio et al., 2012), like the case of the Hail Holy Queen of the Sea or Hail Holy Queen in the Way of Armação de Pêra, but also ensure the continuity of cultural identity (Petronela, 2016).

The ritual described here disappeared completely in continental Portugal, with the extinction of tuna fishing companies, with the exception of Tavira, where even today the tuna fishery has an important economic aspect. However, this ritual no longer has the importance of formerly, and therefore is not always realized, as it happened this year (2017). In this sense, this paper is an appeal to the authorities and stakeholders to preserve the collective memory of a good that was a *modus vivendi* of a profession that disappeared from the Algarve. Its way of being, its rituals, religiosity and beliefs have almost been lost in a territory that has been assaulted for decades by mass tourism.

It will be a tribute to the families involved all through these decades and an awakening of memories, minds and consciences. Also, we hope that it will influence general society in the sense that it will be an alert to a value that has been lost and forgotten, either by the local authorities and the local religious community itself.

To conclude, we will cite Petronela (2016, p. 731), who states that:

*“... the intangible heritage create bridges between past, present and future, they make continuity and change the structure of the society...”*

So, this paper hopes to clarify the future generations about this practice, result of the alliance of the religious and fishery traditions, both centuries-old, helping them to get a better knowing of themselves.

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