

Looking for a regional identity in the Portuguese national framework: the case of Leiria

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Abstract

In this text we intend to reflect on central concepts of the anthropological discourse such as community, heritage and identity, in the context of the Portuguese region of Leiria. There would be so much to debate about those concepts, so often criticized for having led to the entrapment of entire peoples in geographic territories, holders of a unique and an immutable identity. Stereotypes were thus created about these people, far from their social and cultural reality. In opposition, we intend to think about the Leiria region as a symbolic space in permanent identity construction, seeking its affirmation in Portugal and in the globalized world.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Identity (ies), Leiria, Portugal, Regionalism, Europe.

Introduction

We will discuss the process and the complexity of the Leiria region construction and affirmation. The unifying theme of the narrative will focus on the discursive appropriation of the regional and the national heritage, located in the Leiria region, with the intention of incorporating and projecting the region in the global stage. The affirmation of a regional community in the twenty-first century cannot start from *the top to the bottom or from the bottom to the top*, like a unidirectional movement (Bourdieu, 1989). On the one hand, the group leader's legitimacy to enforce an identity space should be acknowledged. On the other hand, citizens have the legitimizing and the power tools allow ingleaders to set that identity space. A community is made from a multidirectional and dynamic movement among all those members who are part of it. Our goal is to understand how regional leaders assert a regional identity, in this case the Portuguese region of Leiria, a subject that will be discussed in the first part of the article. Then we will reflect on the use of the cultural heritage to objectify the region.

1. Leiria Region Identities

Concepts such as cultural identity or cultural heritage contain complexities worthy of reflection, when used in the study of the human societies and their organization. The researcher's task in the social sciences becomes even more problematic when cultural identity is related with cultural heritage, because they are unstable notions that tend to be used and manipulated by the essentialist way (Brito, 2006). Like all the social sciences concepts, cultural heritage and cultural identity easily lead to an objectifying dimension that symbolically encloses human groups, with the dangers that contain such external classifications to the subjects that make up the group. From there, prejudices about the group's cultural identity may derive, not corresponding to the reality. This way of thinking has implications on the formation of social attitudes, so we can observe that the leaders of the Leiria region tend to have discourses reflecting an essentialist or objectivist concept of cultural identity.

The idea acquires visibility in expressions such as *to have or not have* identity, or the alleged reference to traditional cultural traits of the population of Leiria, where the cultural heritage reflects a static and unchanging identity. However, in the post-modernity (Jameson, 1985) or in the super modernity (Augé, 1994), the globalization, the trans-nationalization of people, goods and ideas, increased social transformations, shortening the space and accelerating the time.

In this context, the opening of national borders, the growing movement of ideas, people and goods, across the nations, a consequence of the recent pathways and media development, make it difficult to establish what a Leiriacultural region should be. The challenges related to the building of a sense of belonging to a Leiria region is made by a hierarchically relation to the national Portuguese space. It is not intended to claim a nation inside a nation, but rather a region within it.

The five Leiriaregionalist congresses, held since the 90s, and the difficulty in its thematic denomination, demonstrate the complexity of the identification process at the regional level. In the first congress, called *First Congress for the Leiria and Alta Estremadura Development: What Future*, which took place in May 1991, the idea of a Leiria Region was reduced to eight municipalities.

As noted by Felizardo Prezado Santos, president of the Association for the Development of Leiria General Assembly [ADLEI], “*The Leiria and Alta Estremadura regions, composed of the municipalities of Alcobaça, Batalha, Leiria, Marinha Grande, Nazaré, Ourém, Pombal and Porto de Mós, being a region that is characterized by a balance of a complementary activities and diversification*” (Santos, 1995: 33). This idea is emphasized in the presentation of the Leiria and Alta Estremadura congress minutes, in which a brief geographical, populational and social description, concerning the eight municipalities, is elaborated.

The next congress, called *Second Congress of the Leiria Region and Alta Estremadura: Listen to the past, navigate in the future*, held in 1995, considered a wider region, able to cover more neighboring municipalities. Introducing a map of the region, it is referred in the meeting minutes that the *Leiria region and Ourém municipality cover a large area of the center of the country, extending from the North, with features from the province of Beira Litoral, to the South, which is influenced by the province of Ribatejo* (ADLEI, 1999a: 21).

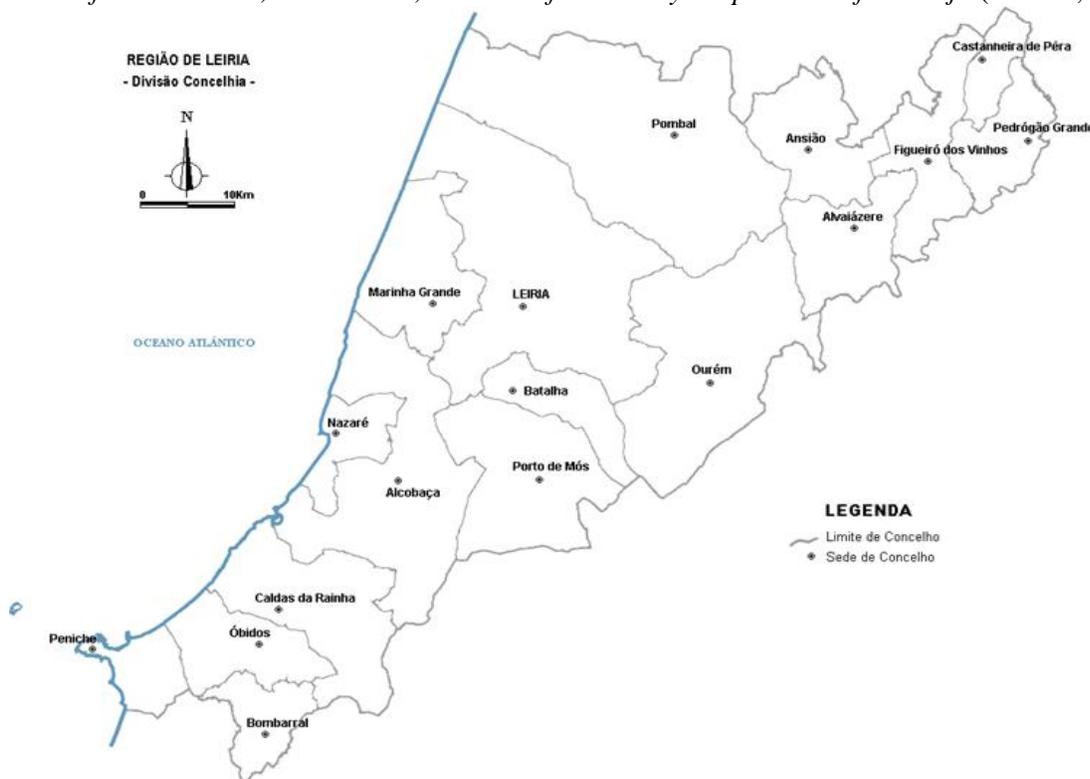


Fig. 1 – Map of the Leiria Region. Source: (Magalhães, 2012: 51).

The two major innovations of this congress were the extension of the region to the south and the implicit recognition of the regional diversity. The explanation for this name change came to answer the criticisms of the municipalities belonging to the district of Leiria, which had not been included in the 1st Congress, thus encompassing the entire district of Leiria and also, Ourém (Dias, 2005: 56).

District in Portuguese, *Distrito*, was a Portuguese regional division, implemented in 1836, when the country was divided into 17 administrative districts, including the Leiria district. This classification followed the ideals

advocated by Napoleon Bonaparte, precursor of the French political-administrative reorganization (Magalhães, 2012: 48). Districts were permanently extinguished in 2011, turning Portugal into an even more centralized country. However it remains in the regionalist leader's discourses as the most ideal form of regionalization. In the third congress, the space of the *Distrito* was understood as a region of Leiria, taking into account the insertion of the *Distrito* in a space that corresponded to the old province of Estremadura. This meeting was called the *III Congress of the Leiria District and Estremadura: The lines that unite us and move us*, and took place in 1999, after the national referendum on regionalization and the consequent rejection of a political and administrative division of the country, in five regions (Norte, Centro, Lisboa e Vale do Tejo, Alentejo e Algarve). The *Distrito* became part, again, of the leader's discourses about Leiria as an imagined community. As mentioned by Tomás Oliveira Dias, the *3rd Congress, held after the referendum on regionalization, took a position towards the revitalization of the Distrito of Leiria [...]. The great orientation is for the enlargement of the Region of Leiria to the whole "distrito" space and other areas namely Ourém and Fátima municipalities, as part of the natural and historical region of Estremadura* (Dias, 2005: 56; 57).

The fourth congress was conducted by a group of professors and researchers from the School of Education and Social Sciences of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria. This congress had the theme: *Thinking about the Region of Leiria*, and intended to reflect on the cultural identity of Leiria as a complex and relational process (Barth, 1969). In the aforementioned congress, held in 2003, as part of the research project "Identities and Diversities: the lines with which belongings are sewn", Ricardo Vieira says that the *distrito* is just one of the many regions of Leiria that can be imagined.

On the one hand, we have the political-administrative divisions, inheritance of modernity, as are the *political and administrative maps* that can be dated and supposedly objectified. On the other hand, are the *feelings of belonging that in opposition to what is often thought, can trace another social geography, that of identity maps, which are dynamic and can change due to the accessibility, to the emergence of new shopping and cultural centers, hospitals, etc.* (Vieira, 2005: 25). Of the many imagined regions for Leiria, the author has the *Distrito* and the Ourém municipality as a point of reference to present some data about Leiria and its region.

Finally, ADLEI held the *Congress Region of Leiria: Innovation and Opportunities*, in the year 2007. The book of proceedings of this congress excels by the absence of geographical maps. Its objective is to interpret the economic and cultural potential of an open region rather than to define geographical boundaries. The Leiria Region is observed as *an unclosed concept. It is as open as the evolution of their economic influence areas over the time and the social and cultural dynamics that they originate. In a traditional idea, the Region would be the "Distrito". In a new idea, we see the Region of Leiria through the eyes of the population that have never been part of the "Distrito", and are now intimately related to it by their work or their lives. Autonomy and complementarily are thus the challenge for the innovation and new opportunities* (Sousa, 2008: 39).

These ideas follow Frederich Barth's line of thought, rejecting conceptions proposing that the ethnic groups constituted and maintained in isolation. The author argues that the maintenance of cultural differences between two ethnic groups depends less on geographical boundaries and *"absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence [...]. Ethnic groups are not merely or necessarily based on the occupation of exclusive territories [...]"* (Barth, 1969: 10; 15).

The differences are and persist in the inter-ethnic meeting insofar as there is a system of negotiation that regulates the *"situations of contact, and allows for articulation in some sectors or domains of activity, and a set of proscriptions on social situations preventing interaction in other sectors, and thus insulating parts of the cultures from confrontation and modification"* (Barth, 1969: 10; 16). Identity is not static and unchangeable. There are a number of economic, social and political factors that can lead to a change in one or more dimensions of cultural identity. Individuals assume different cultural identities according to the circumstances and the income that they can withdraw (Barth, 1969: 25). Today, the appeal to the tradition essence, as well as the social reproduction based on tradition, and on the elders' knowledge [...] is beginning to be questioned (Giddens, 1990; 2000). However, many contemporary conceptions of regional identity, in Leiria, are still influenced by the process that led to the construction of the national communities, based on tradition arguments. In this sense, to reflect about the regional identity, in the Leiria context, involves discussing the Portuguese identity, where the region is inserted.

Some Portuguese researchers and famous writers, like Jorge Dias or Jaime Cortesão, defined a *Portuguese national character* (Dias, 1990) or a *universalism of the Portuguese culture* (Cortesão, 1995); “longing” and a certain tendency towards nostalgia ... associated with lyricism (Mendes, 1999). Jorge Dias adopts the regional division of the country, based on the three areas defined by the prominent Portuguese geographer, Orlando Ribeiro. The Mediterranean, the Northwest and the Northeast would correspond to many cultural zones,

Linked to a number of particularities related to material culture, patterns of settlement, types of family and social organization, religious beliefs, etc. Despite this diversity, Portuguese popular culture showed, according to Dias, a strong cultural unity. This cultural unit was based on the Portuguese national character, which Jorge Dias analyzed in "The Basic Elements of the Portuguese Culture", a short essay that remains one of the most influential texts ever written by a Portuguese anthropologist(Leal, 2006: 71).

By the middle of the twentieth century it still seemed possible to close the Portuguese in a territory, attributing to it physical, cultural or other characteristics whose legitimization was enshrined in national monuments. However, at the present, the central question is not whether Leiria, or rather, the inhabitants of Leiria, do or do not have a regional cultural identity, or whether they are only part of the national community. What we want to research is the possibility of assigning an identity to a group, without taking into account the visions that the social actors of this group have about themselves. To discuss the Leiriense identity is, first and foremost, to refer to a cultural construction, a dynamic process that does not exist outside, or without, the subjects, that underlines this identity, in particular, in relation to the adversity or the otherness. One cannot speak of a single and unchanging personal or cultural identity, but of various identities, in which present societies recognize the multiple fragmented and mutable identities that exist within them (Bauman, 2006). Subjects are free to choose what they want to “be” with whom to identify. This diversity and choice of identification processes could lead, according to the Stuart Hall (2003: 17), to the disintegration of modern societies. However, they do not disintegrate because there is an articulation, however partial, between their social elements and the construction of identity. If, on the one hand, such ideas become disturbing, as Stuart Hall (2003: 17) points out, on the other hand, they open the way to new possibilities, where no one is excluded because of their group choices or belongings. The anxieties of some regional leaders, who think about the Leiriense regional identity, can be understood in this context. Acácio de Sousa said in 2003, on the occasion of the congress *Thinking about the Leiria Region*, that the Leiriaregion nowadays faces deep difficulties of geographical delimitation (Sousa, 2005).

The new world order, after World War II, and the social and cultural changes that came to be verified thereon, uncovered contradictions that have always been and were part of our societies, but that were made invisible by a *main stream* that not being necessarily the majority, had the power to define what each could or should be. In the twenty-first century this is no longer the case, and the differences, the fragmented identities referred by Bauman, Giddens or Hall, are now recognized and respected within these social fields. According to this scenario, imagined communities such as Leiria, namely the individuals who compose them, seek to reinvent or even invent their cultural identity, claiming common feelings of belonging built around their cultural heritage.

Institutions such as the Association for the Development of Leiria, the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, the Cultural Heritage Center of Estremadura, the academic work of the historian Saul António Gomes (1990, 1994, 1997, 2004, 2007), the literary studies of Cristina Nobre (2001; 2003) or the anthropological research of Fernando Magalhães (2012a; 2012b), among others, allow us to observe the attribution of multiple identity languages to the monuments located in the Leiria region.

Identity is constructed through the connection with otherness, and this becomes more discussed with globalization, since it made cultural encounters much more frequent. The affirmation of the Leiriense identity awareness is done with a proportional intensity to the greater recognition of the existence of different cultural groups. In other words, the processes of transnationalization, that we are living within this century, accelerated the people’s meeting, making them aware of their cultural particularities. The emergence of transnational spaces such as the European Union has increased intercultural contacts between various regions and cultures of Europe. The imagination of a Leiriaregion oscillates, therefore, between a closed sociocultural context, the Portuguese one, and a wider other, the European context, or even a global context.

Vitorino Vieira Dias, a lawyer and consultant on European affairs and a frequent player in the discussions on the Leiria region, highlighted these factors at the 2003 congress...., during which the European Constitution Treaty was being debated. *It is in this context of a European Union, endowed for the first time in its history with a European Constitution, that the metropolitan Leiriaregion, as a mere functional region, can play a role of European value. It has all the requisites for this: a strategic central geographical location, articulation with the different levels of governance (community, national, regional, metropolitan) and transnational cooperation*” (Dias, 2005: 338).

In summary, it can be said that the discussions about Portuguese cultural identities, always incipient, have moved from the Portuguese national framework to the European transnational framework. It would be interesting, in the future, to continue this research, in order to ascertain if this transition from the Portuguese context to the European one could not be a response to the traditional Portuguese centralism and its reluctance to promote the construction and affirmation of regional identities within the national community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the definition of a regional place in the national context or in a wider space such as the European Union is not an easy or even a consensual task. The leaders of the Leiriaregion have the tendency to say that the difficult affirmation of this region is due to endogenous reasons, namely due to the fact that it is located between two of the main Portuguese cities, Coimbra and Lisbon. Being a place of people, goods and capital transition, its importance as a Portuguese or European region, seems weaker, given that no roots are created in this same region. They are wrong because they confuse the construction of a regional identity with the concept of roots. It would seem easier, though unrealistic, to build and affirm the region of Leiria, if it were to be closed to migratory flows.

For exogenous reasons, the fact that Leiria is located between two of the major national centers, such as Coimbra or Lisbon, can present a huge challenge to its affirmation as a regional space. However, even here, what appears to be under discussion is the size of this region and its ability to attract and aggregate other local communities, such as municipalities or urban centers. The intention is to form a region with critical mass and capacity for intervention not only in the national context but also within the European framework and in the world context.

Regional resources, which allow its affirmation, do not seem to be lacking. From a thriving economy to the meeting place of some of the most symbolic national and world monuments (Magalhães, 2005; 2012a), Leiria brings together a set of potential instruments (Magalhães, 2008) which, if used effectively and correctly, can serve as a dynamiting part in its affirmation as a region on the global level.

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