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Title of the presentation: Memory, Territory, and Depopulation Dynamics in a Village of Central Portugal

1. Pedrosa, Ana Paula(1) 2. Sales, Catarina (2); Reis, Bruno (3)

(1) Universidade Beira Interior. ana.p.pedrosa@ubi.pt

**(2) Universidade Beira Interior and Cies_Iscte;
catarinasalesoliveira@gmail.com**

(3) Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa. breis@autonoma.pt

Summary

In recent decades, Portuguese inner country has experienced an accelerated process of depopulation, with significant impacts on the territorial, social, and cultural configuration of small villages. Population decline, coupled with demographic aging, the discontinuity of public services, and the loss of both economic and symbolic attractiveness has redefined the inhabitants' daily life and relationship with the territory. However, very recently the country is receiving an entrance flow of migrants that is slowly contributing to a counter demographic trend.

Interested in understanding the impact of these flows, the project *Invisible voices* propose qualitative research into the dynamics of (d)epopulation in São Martinho (a small parish of Barroca, municipality of Fundão in the center of Portugal), through residents' memories. Using biographic interviews and participant observation in a action research perspective the aim is to understand how the inhabitants experience, narrate, and reinterpret demographic flows. The project is part of a master's research and will produce as an outcome a podcast developed to give visibility to the testimonies and contribute to the empowerment of the village and its inhabitants by transforming their experiences into records of collective memory and intangible cultural heritage.

General Objective

To analyze the impacts of depopulation and recent migration on the territorial and identity configuration of the village of São Martinho, valuing local narratives as a form of symbolic resistance and preservation of the bond with the place.

Specific Objectives

1. To understand how depopulation and desertification affect the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the village.
2. To investigate migration flows—both emigration and immigration—and their role in the territorial reconfiguration and the continuity or transformation of rural ways of life.
3. To produce and disseminate an audio archive (podcast) as a tool for preserving memories and valuing territories affected by population decline.

Research Question

How can depopulation and territorial reconfiguration in the villages of Central Portugal be understood and communicated through the memories of their inhabitants?

Theoretical Framework

This project is grounded in the intersection of territory, memory, and depopulation, based on three main axes:

1. **Depopulation and territory:** Based on the studies by Camarero and Oliva on the “rural gap” and the decline of low-density areas, analyzing the role of migration and the lack of adequate public policies in sustaining communities. Population desertification is seen not only as a demographic phenomenon but also as a spatial and symbolic transformation of the territory.
2. **Memory and lived landscape:** Inspired by Halbwachs and Paul Thompson, collective memory is understood as expressing rootedness in the territory and revealing historical dynamics of belonging. The life stories of São Martinho’s residents constitute a kind of “affective topography” that resists the erasure imposed by depopulation.
3. **Migration and territorial recomposition:** Migration, both outbound and inbound, reshapes the configuration of villages. According to Russell King and Elsa Peralta, migrants take part in processes of redefinition of social, symbolic, and cultural boundaries, acting as central players in the recomposition of territorial identities.

Methodology

The principal researcher is a newcomer to the village therefore it was assumed an action research perspective. Through qualitative and participatory methods, based on life history techniques, participant observation and group dynamics, the research will involve directly the community. The focus will be on collecting narratives from long-time residents, new

inhabitants, and returning migrants, in order to encompass different perspectives on the territorial transformations of the village. The methodology will be enriched with audio and visual resources, enabling a sensory record of local experiences.

The analysis will be guided by a socio-territorial perspective, highlighting how narratives reflect and reinterpret changes in the use of space, neighborhood networks, and bonds with the territory. The collected material will be transformed into thematic podcast episodes.

Podcast Production and Organization

The series will consist of seven episodes, addressing themes such as:

- The history and transformation of the village;
- Traditions and landscapes in decline;
- Emigration, return, and family recomposition;
- Experiences of loneliness and aging in the territory;
- The arrival of immigrants and their cultural contributions;
- Neighborhood networks and strategies for staying;
- Reflections on the future of rural territory.

The podcast will be distributed on digital platforms and, in the future, incorporated into an online repository with transcripts, images, and community interaction capabilities.

Data Analysis

The analytical process will seek to understand how life stories express territorial transformations and experiences of loss, resistance, and re-creation. The analytical methodology will be inductive and narrative, placing the participants' voices at the center.

Cultural feedback will be an essential element, promoting the recognition of local narratives as legitimate forms of knowledge about the territory and as symbolic resistance to the invisibilization process that accompanies depopulation.

This project proposes a sociological and territorial reading of the ongoing transformations in Portuguese villages, valuing oral memory as a tool for reflection and resistance. The creation of a participatory podcast allows for the documentation and dissemination of the narratives of those who experience depopulation not as a statistic, but as a lived experience.

By offering a replicable methodological approach, this initiative contributes to the international debate on the future of declining rural territories, promoting dialogue among science, culture, and community.

Keywords: rural depopulation, territory, collective memory, migration, oral history

Field of Knowledge: Rural Sociology / Territorial Studies and Depopulation

How will you present your contribution if accepted?

Oral presentation