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## "The Impecunious Anthropologist: 30 Years of Field Work in Portugal"

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*a conclusão*

## Prologue

I never intended to spend thirty years researching a folk village in Portugal. In 1965, still working on a Masters degree in Anthropology from Harvard, five years short of my PhD, I was traveling in Portugal, made a side trip from Lisbon on a lark, and discovered a village that would capture my heart and my career.

Aldeia is not the real name of the village; the word *aldeia* means "village" in Portuguese. I've used that name to give privacy to the villagers I studied and describe.

Most anthropological field work studies are brief—maybe a summer or a year—and typically funded by grants or other sources. The Aldeia Project, as I came to call it, was entirely funded by my own resources, and extended over decades that included Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution. It became a rare kind of work called a longitudinal study.

I made my last trip to Aldeia in 1995 and meant to analyze and publish the results of my enormous collection of research, but life got in the way. With a family including two daughters to support, my efforts went into full-time teaching as a professor at a small liberal arts college. Then post-polio syndrome struck and I had no extra energy beyond my day to day work.

This past year I retired. I have an entire alcove in my office/library of Aldeia notes and research. It's time the story was told.

Bill Bestor  
July, 2020

Part 1  
Aldeia: A Village in Portugal

*Happiness is wherever we find ourselves, but we never find ourselves where we are.*  
Portuguese proverb

## A Day in the Life of a Portuguese Folk Village

### *Madrugada*

The first person to know that the *madrugada*--dawn—has begun the day is the miller. Sitting in his outpost on the highest hill of the village, he has been up all night, listening and waiting for the intermittent winds to turn the *velas* of the windmill. All the flour for bread and cakes is ground between the heavy round stones. He is paid a portion of the product, and must use the wind whenever it blows.

The early morning smells and sounds of Aldeia begin in the cold and damp. The hawing of burrow, the crowing of roosters, and the barking of dogs as well as the kindling of the morning wood fires blend together down in the village proper, sheltered from the miller's winds in a stretch of red-tiled roofs along a descending ridge.

Inside the houses, in small bedrooms and attics, the villagers of Aldeia get up from their mattresses stuffed with eucalyptus leaves to begin the day's work. Breakfast is put off until the first light chores in the courtyard and house are completed. In the cold air, some older men warm themselves with a large shot of strong brandy before going to their work. No one thinks of coffee at breakfast time. Last night there was unusual weather. Heavy winds and rainfall made everything damper than usual. The farmers leave for a quick inspection of their crops to see if the storm has damaged the tomato plants or affected the vineyards. The rain is a mixed blessing: too much can be devastating, as too little. The weather is a constant subject of concern and conversation.

The waist-high fires are covered with pots, boiling potatoes and reheating the previous evening's dinner, to be eaten as soon as the first chores are done. The woman of the household checks on her animals. Chickens and rabbits are fed in their cages; the pig is fattened in a small enclosure and grunts expectantly when he hears the sounds of his food coming. In some households there is a barn for the oxen. These are the most expensive and most prized animals of all. Even if they have plenty of fodder, they deserve a pat on the rump and a word of greeting or two.

Children old enough to go to one of the four grades at the village school begin to pack their *caderno*, their notebooks and pencils in the square brown cardboard satchels they tie across their backs. In their four years of walking up the central cobbled street of the schoolhouse, they acquire a consistent and well-formed handwriting, a knowledge of arithmetic and history, and most of whatever formal knowledge of the world beyond their own experience of life they will possess. As the boys and girls go to school they say *Boa dia* to the many other people out on the street doing errands. At some time during the day the children are likely to see at least once most everyone whom they know well.

The village general stores have opened as soon as the storekeepers awoke. In front of the biggest is a large flat stone in the cobbles of the road. By convention this is the place that the day laborers gather. Men who wish to work in the fields for wages, finished with their own *fazendas* or who need money, assemble to meet with the man who has work to offer. Often these arrangements are settled the night before, but the storm has created a new urgency to finish the spraying of the vineyards. The actual work of any day cannot be predicted until the morning had arrived. Burros are loaded with a wooden support which can carry full baskets as well as heavy loads of cut fodder or firewood. The lashing of packs to accompaniment of the burros' aspirated hawing is the most common sound of the *madrugada* in Aldeia.

Before leaving for the long journey to the fields, which are checked regularly even if there is no work to be done, the men cut themselves a breakfast of salted codfish and thick slices of bread, using a single stroke of the knife. The knife rhythmically brings the large bite to the mouth, where it is chewed quietly; at breakfast there is too much to do for conversation.

If it is Monday, the trip to the market town changes the daily routine somewhat. The green donkey carts are made ready and piled with the garden surplus the family will sell, using the money to buy things that are available only in the town stores. Mondays are always the busiest of any day of the week. The additional complexity of arrangements accelerates the usual tempo of early morning.

### *Alta Manha*

Cool breezes clear the often heavy fog of the dawn, and the sun shines in an almost cloudless sky. The damp and the cold are dissipated by *alta manha*, the mid-morning. The entire village is extremely quiet at this time of the day.

Then comes the sound of a small brass horn. Its call is distinctive and carries through most of the village. A young man who owns his own red motor scooter arrives on the main street, going from one to another of major groups of houses to sell fish. He has purchased the fresh fish in the darkness of the morning from coastal fisherman unloading their catch. He is one of several middlemen who supply Aldeia with produce it can't produce itself.

The task of bickering over fish is exclusively women's work. It brings the housewives out together. When one has bought, she waits to see how the pricing and purchasing will go for her neighbor. Each day's catch is slightly different; the prices are set by custom and demand, but vary slightly every day. There is always the chance to argue: "For this little thing you want two *escudos*?" "Weigh this big one for me!" The bartering is in good faith, long established by tradition. The purchase depends primarily on the planned menu for dinner. There is no way to conserve the fish; it must be cleaned and cooked on the day it is bought. Some women will fold the fish directly into the dough of the bread they plan to bake that afternoon. This delicacy is a reward for heavy day of work and special fish are selected for it from the containers on the motor scooter.

Some men laboring on a new house come over and buy a platter full of *carpau* mackerels for their lunch. At noon they gut them and toss them onto the woodfire burning scraps of lumber. The taste of the fresh fish heavy with woodsmoke is also a favorite food, and the aroma is a signal for the lunch hour to begin.

But at mid-morning everyone is hard at work. The household structures, with the house proper, the kitchen and ovens, the wine *adega*, the animal quarters, all lack any running water, so an important daily task is to bring water in large metal or earthenware containers from the springs.

The hill on which Aldeia is built has four of these springs, called *fontes*. Convention has established which family uses which water source. Three of the *fontes* have troughs for laundry. Thus the clothing can be scrubbed at the site of the water source. The wet clothes are brought back to the courtyard or draped over the plants of the family's *fazendas* and fields. Women rotate the responsibility of cleaning and scrubbing out the *fontes'* troughs, a task which is a continual source of bickering in the village. Children who are not in school must carry the water for the home, for cooking, washing, and for the animals. The time spent in school is regarded by many villagers, children and adults alike, as a time of relative leisure, of the fun of being together with friends of the same age, free for a while of the heavy chores of the Aldeia household. Girls learn early to carry extremely heavy loads of water balanced on their heads, protected with a rolled scarf or towel. Boys, like men, always carry the water over their shoulders; they never master the precise balance and carriage required of the girls.

The clothes are scrubbed by hand and thrown and beaten on the smooth stones of the water troughs. The soaps help, but daily laundry is really accomplished through heavy, muscular effort. Clothes with tears and rips are put aside until a rainy day to be mended. A man's shirt may be mended in twenty places before it is discarded. In the heat of the sun everything dries quickly. When there is much washing, all the plants and bushes and trees are covered with drying clothes and sheets. The village stores offer competing brands of detergent. This is one of the first signs of modern advertising and merchandising in the village. Different premiums are offered to the purchasers of specific products. Yet the additional cost still makes the heavy unwrapped cakes of ordinary soap the best selling item.

The courtyard of the household is the focus of much of the morning's activities, since so much time must be spent in the preparation of food. Feeding domestic animals, picking fruits and vegetables from their garden and orchard, long hours of stewing and baking, keep most women inside their own homes. They emerge to negotiate the sale of a few rabbit skins or a live chicken to an itinerant trader passing through the villages to sell in town. As he walks along, he has a distinctive call that reaches all those who have anything they want to sell.

To bake bread, the flour must be sifted and filtered many times. Baking involves building a huge fire, with a special wood that must be fetched from the family's supply. The clay oven is heated by this fire, then the cinders are scraped out, and finally the dough is put in with long wooden shovels. The oven is full of loaves. The thought of adding a *bola* or cake for Sunday might involve going to a neighbor and buying or exchanging something for the needed eggs. Bread, like codfish, is a staple.



Men are at work in their fields, a continuous monotonous set of chores which are absolutely essential for the village household economy. The *pedreiros*, masons and carpenters, have their own small fields and gardens which they must find time to tend in addition to their construction work. Even though they earn good wages, their standard of living is lower than that of the man who owns and works his own *terrenos* and sells the products of his agricultural and vinicultural labor. The money and land economy overlays a complex network of relationships between relatives and in-laws, who can help as needed on houses or in the fields. The richest family in the village can fall into poverty if it does not get the manpower it needs through its lines of relatives.

Two men work in the village itself. These are the two shoemakers who cut and fashion most of the leather worn by the villagers. They spend the day on small stools, cutting leather and sometimes rubber, and sewing thick-soled shoes that, nonetheless, are quickly worn out by the sharp pebbles of the fields and roads. The shoemakers are among the poorest of the villagers. Even while their efforts are needed by all, they barely earn enough to feed their families. The shoes are made without machinery; the physical effort is as great as working in the fields. New kinds of cheap shoes are coming to be sold in town and the cobblers faintly realize they will have to find some other kind of work in the coming years.

Although almost everybody in Aldeia lives in the village, during *alta manha* only a few people are visible in the streets. Two old men sit on stone post markers in the street, hardly stirring except to move into the sun or the shade. They wait through the morning for the activity of noon.

### *Meio Dia*

Noon in Aldeia begins around 1 o'clock. That is the time when the mail is expected to arrive. Men and women alike try to time their errands, if any, to coincide with the arrival of the letters. The letters are brought on foot by an old man, who passes through Aldeia and several other villages as he proceeds and returns by the same path, picking up the villagers' outgoing mail in a closed sack and bringing it to the town post office which services the entire district.

The letters are entrusted to one of the shopkeepers and his wife. Slowly the recipients are called out. If present, they are handed their letters. Someone says that she will take a letter to her neighbor. One newspaper comes to the village. Most pieces of mail are personal letters from relatives elsewhere in Portugal or abroad. There are official notices, some of which have to be posted on the glass-enclosed notice board in the main street. These are visible signs of the larger government of which the village is part. In Aldeia itself, there are no human representatives of the corporate state structure in Portugal. But draft notices, taxes, formal registrations, and other mail are its impersonal manifestation.

The man who carries the mail bags is given a tip if he carries a heavy package for a villager. Otherwise a lengthy trip to the rail town and its post office to retrieve it would be necessary. A system of trust facilitates mailing letters whose postage can't be estimated in the village. Mail, like most government services, is treated with respect and attention.

Older children come with their mothers to the noon mail. A frequent scene is that of the child reading a letter aloud to his or her mother. The older generation includes many persons unable to read. A letter from an absent son perhaps in the Armed Forces, or a father at work in the city or in another country, may consist of formal phrases and conventional wishes, but their personal significance of such letters to their recipients cannot be overestimated. Noon is often a time for gossip and joking, but for some it is a most serious and important moment.

The hottest part of the day has begun. Men in the fields take time for lunch, resting in the shade of olive trees or in small stick huts in the middle of a wheat field to give protection from rain or sun as needed. The noon lunch is prepared by men at a construction site or a field where the delicious smells of mackerel emanate from open fires that are cooking the fish. Herds of goats sink invisibly into the heavy shadows of a stand of pine trees. A long lunch will be served in houses where men who come home to eat and rest. Children or wives bring hot tin pots of food out to men who remain at work in the wheat fields. A short period of relaxation precedes the coming arduous tasks of the afternoon.

### *Tarde*

The longest part of the day begins with the afternoon. The day blends the working *tarde*, afternoon, with the work of the early evening. The *serao*, the lighter part of the evening, comes only when work is finished, regardless of the sun and *crepusculo*, twilight.

In Aldeia work is not regulated by the clock but by the task. Even wages are given for the day's work, not reckoned by the hour. Most of the work in fields has its own rhythm and must be done before nightfall. But collecting food in the gardens, buying in the stores, settling accounts or other tasks can be done in the evening hours.

In the afternoon the children emerge from school, chasing one another down the street. Although some pupils trudge off to isolated houses that are several miles distant, most live in the village. The schoolteacher tutors a few pupils in her own house after the school is over. She is not from the village and is better educated than almost anyone in it. She is treated with a great deal of respect, and conversation always uses a formal mode of address. As an unmarried woman without a family, there is little she has in common with the villagers; she lives quietly with a relative in a rented cottage at the edge of the town.

Most women are busy with preparing some part of the evening meal. A light snack may be taken around 5 o'clock; the main meal comes at nine or ten. The meal will be served and eaten by the light of a kerosene lamp. Soon afterwards everyone goes to bed.

As *tarde* wears on, the burros begin to return with their loads. Anyone who has gone to the market town tries to be back before dark. Very few villagers have actually spent a night away from the village itself. The nature of Aldeia life, with fields and animals and household requiring constant attention, prevents trips and excursions and extended absences.

The general stores have a room called a *taberna* which is really only a wooden counter in a room like the other rooms of the store. But here the red wine of the village is sold in varying size

glasses, and men come in for *una copa*. One of the shoemakers begins a garrulous conversation with anyone who passes. On most days he can get into a friendly argument, or start telling a long tale, so that his late afternoon is spent in the company of men, away from his wife, and his work stool, and he can consume the extra glasses of wine that he is famous for. No man likes to drink his wine alone, anymore than he likes to be called drunk. As the afternoon closes with the twilight, the shoemaker gets happier.

The smells of the village change imperceptibly: now there is the odor of fresh-cut grass for the oxen, the animal droppings as more burro loads are brought through to the courtyards of the village households, the smoke from the burning evening fires. The sounds also change. It is no longer quiet: people call out to each other, scold their children, exchange a hurried bit of gossip in the streets. Although there are no cars, a delivery truck may come into the village to leave supplies or carry off crates of fruit or barrels of village wine.

But standing on a hill just outside the center of the village, one is struck by the general atmosphere of quiet in the village, despite the fast pace which is unconsciously noted by the villagers and is more important than time told by a clock; and the evening *serao* begins.

### *Serao*

When Aldeia villagers pass one another on the road in the early evening, they exchange the greeting "Until late," by which they mean that they will see each other the next day. But they always add the phrase, "if God wishes"

At dusk the street becomes the major focus of activity in the village. Men return from the fields with the distinctive bells ringing on their animals; deep bells for the oxen, smaller, higher-pitched bells for the goats. Women are preparing meals by going to a store and shopping. Children are sent on numerous errands. The taverns are filled with men on their way home, stopping for a large glass of red wine, telling stories and jokes, laughing, and enjoying the end of a hard day's work.

Burros loaded with grass to feed other animals pass up and down the steep streets. An oxcart can hardly make it up the incline, and some men come out to help push. Young men who have walked into town to work for a wage on some heavy manual construction return to the village for the night.

At the top of the street is the general store, which houses the postal service. People who miss the mail call at noon drop by for any letters. By now the postmistress knows who has received mail and not picked it up, so that the stack is not sorted through again and an inquiry can be answered immediately.

The schoolteacher gives makeup lessons and special tutoring to pupils who are preparing for the examinations at the end of their fourth year of schooling, the last class many will attend.

Supper is always served late, long after dark has fallen, so that evening is a time of intense activity. Supper is generally the last thing before retiring and is a leisurely end of day activity for many families.

A man who needs help on his land or in building or repairing his property visits the taverns and makes arrangements for the next morning, which begins very early. During the harvest and planting seasons, work is fast-paced, and a variety of interpersonal encounters are involved in this busy, intensive evening period.

All of this social activity reflects the community's social system in which the inhabitants of Aldeia spend much of their lives. The evening activity is a kind of microcosm of the entire lattice of interpersonal relationships within the community. It is a predictable pattern, in part, for in many of the activities each person is performing an aspect of his "role" as defined by the community. Men are engaged in occupational activities, women with their domestic concerns; the schoolteachers, the store owners and other members of the community are carrying out behaviors that are expected of them by the social system of the community.