

The Cante Alentejano – Traditional singing from the Alentejo, Portugal

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Abstract

The *cante alentejano* (singing), polyphonic, executed in a group and without instruments is originally typical from the Alentejo, a Portuguese region that establishes the Northern frontier with the river Tejo, and the Southern frontier with the Algarve. With a repertoire composed by *modas*, the *cante alentejano* is sung by groups which are formed by three base voices: the Point, the High and the Second Voices.

After the ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the safeguard of the intangible cultural heritage in 2008 and the recognition of *fado* as cultural heritage of Humanity in 2011, several groups of *cante alentejano*, local authorities and cultural associations have united efforts to set a candidature of the *cante alentejano* to intangible cultural heritage of Humanity.

This article intends to synthesize the main features of this cultural expression, enumerate the theories that exist about its origin and expose some data about its evolution.

Key words: *Cante Alentejano*, Alentejo, polyphonic *cante*, *modas*, intangible cultural heritage.

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The *cante alentejano* is usually defined by the melodic structure and the type of performative organization that characterizes it, that is, the polyphonic singing performed in a group and without instruments. Divided among the “Point”, the “High” and the “Second voices”, a group of *cante alentejano* has as a repertoire the *modas* (songs) that among other topics, talk about work, love, contemplation and nostalgia. This *cante* is called *alentejano* because it originally came from that Portuguese region, Alentejo, which is situated in the South of the river Tejo and above the region of the Algarve (Marvão, 1955, 1956, 1965, 1982, 1985, 1987; Castelo-Branco & Freitas Branco, 2003; Cabeças & Santos, 2010).

The conceptual definition of the *cante alentejano* is still centered in what distinguishes it from other similar cultural expressions: the slowness, the moderation of the accentuations, the melismas and even certain “harmonic anomalies” (Santos, 2010,p 9).

The origin of the *Cante Alentejano*

There are different theories about the origin of the *cante alentejano*, among them it is possible to highlight the three most common approaches:

- i. the one that defends that the birth of the *cante* is in the Gregorian practice of chorus;
- ii. the one that views the *cante* as a cultural legacy of the Arab presence in Portugal, defending the similarities that can be found between the *cante* from the Arabs and the *cante alentejano* and
- iii. the one that defends the *cante alentejano* as a way of polyphony centered in deep values of the soul of the people, that is, originally Portuguese and from the Alentejo.

Veiga de Oliveira (1966) referring to the works of Lopes Graça (1953) and António Marvão (1955, 1956, 1963b) synthesizes what these authors wrote about the origin of the *cante alentejano*. The author mentions that Lopes Graça distinguishes two perspectives – on the one hand he talks about “ancient sedimentation”, difficult to determine and that must have had its origins in different moments (putting forward the hypothesis that some specimens of *cante alentejano* have had their origin in “Medieval times”); on the other hand he enunciates the “modern influence”, recent, not further than the 18th century, “songs from major-minor tone, symmetric in terms of rhythm, elementary in terms of morphology” (Lopes Graça, 1953, p.43, quoted by Veiga de Oliveira, 1966, p.339).

António Marvão also identifies two distinct lines, he subdivides the *cante alentejano* into *modas* and “songs from the Alentejo” addressing the first ones to the classic archaic polyphony from the 15th and 16th centuries (with clear Gregorian influences) and the second ones, more recent, framed in the moulds of musical folk music from the Alentejo. António Marvão explains the appearance of the “songs” due to the influence and spread of modern music, fado and popular song in mid 30s of the 20th century (Oliveira, 1966).

As far as the singing from Low Alentejo is concerned, Nazaré (1979) refers that the tonal organization established a relationship with the previously existent modal structure. The modal system was used throughout all the Middle Age (it is the modal Greek system adapted by Saint Gregorian in the shaping of the Gregorian chant). The tonal system points to the era of the Renaissance. The metamorphosis of these two systems makes the pure and unique classification of the structure and origin of the *cante alentejano* ambiguous. (Nazaré, 1979; Rita, 2010)

In the present site of the Brotherhood of the *cante alentejano*¹ there is still another hypothesis , that the *cante alentejano* has had “ its origin in Serpa [a village from the Alentejo], in the end of the 15th century, in the transition from the Vocal Millennium to the Renaissance: a group of friars dislocated from St Paul’s Convent, in Serra de Ossa [situated in High Alentejo], to Serpa, will have been in its origin”.²

About roles of the singers and polyphony

According to Veiga de Oliveira (1966) polyphony is practised in several regions of Portugal, namely in Beira Alta, Beira Baixa, Alentejo, Douro Litoral and Minho. Referring to the work developed by António Marvão (1955, 1956 and 1963b), Veiga de Oliveira enunciates three types of *cante*: i) the majestic corals – *modas* to be sung in groups, in the street and in a cadenced step (also known as slow *modas*; ii) the religious corals – *modas* of a religious nature sung in churches, processions or in the streets (as examples the “Canto do Menino” (singing of the Child), in the Midnight Mass, the Alleluias in the processions or the “Janeiras” (Januaries) and the “Reis” (Kings) at the doors) and iii) the choreographic corals, or *modas* that are sung in dances and “rodas”³ (round dances).

The majestic corals, the slow *modas*, characterize a large part of the coral groups of the Alentejo, *modas* sung by groups that are composed by three base voices: The Point, the High and the Seconds.

The Point begins and indicates the moda, presents the theme and the tone that then is returned by the High that only sings in the first notes and fills the pauses with the “vaias” (the end of the musical sentences, except the last one). The High gives the tone to the chorus, then the second voices come (Oliveira, 1966; Castelo-Branco & Freitas Branco, 2003; Santos, 2010; Rita, 2010).

Sónia Cabeças and José Santos (2010) refer that the *modas* “can be executed in several ways. However, with time, there was a way that imposed itself as a reference to most groups of singers”. The authors describe that way of performing as it follows:

“An initial stanza is sung (“cantiga”) followed by two stanzas known as “estribilho” (nowadays we would call it refrain), another new stanza is sung (another “cantiga”) and finally the estribilho is repeated. Each piece is formed by “cantigas” that are free stanzas and a “moda”, a set of two “fixed” stanzas. The “cantiga” can be modified, or even replaced by another one, according to the inspiration of the group, of the soloist or the occasion. As to the “moda”, it must be respected and unchangeable. In general, the “cantigas”, stanzas that do not correspond to the “estribilho”, are sung by a soloist. It is the “point” that sings the first “cantiga”. Immediately afterwards appear the two stanzas of the “moda” that are understood as the “core” of the musical piece. The moda will be initiated by another soloist, the “high”. The “high” will only sing solo a verse or a part of it (part of a word from the verse, a word or several words), and then the chorus (which is formed by the remaining voices, the “second” ones) joins it, accompanying it until the end of the second stanza of the “moda”. When the “moda” is over, the “point” sings a new “cantiga”, repeating the “moda”. (Cabeça & Santos, 2010, p.4).

About the performance

The *cante alentejano* was an informal and spontaneous expression that took place in the countryside. The *cante* marked a slow movement, the rhythm, the cadence of the daily work, namely the harvest that characterized the agriculture from the Alentejo – the reaping, the weeding and the harvest of the olives. The *cante* stimulated the competition among the workers, the collective *cante* sung in unisonous was the motto for men, women

and children to give their best in the agricultural tasks. Meanwhile, with the advent of agricultural enterprises, the rhythms of work changed and the stimulus of the *cante alentejano* ceased to have the importance it had had in the tasks in the fields (Castelo-Branco & Freitas Branco, 2003).

The *cante alentejano* then stars in taverns and parties and, in the 20s and 30s of the 20th century, the first coral groups are formally organized, with choreography, rehearsals and public performances.

In its origin the *cante alentejano* was a practice not only of men, but also of women, they both worked in the fields, they both starred that cultural practice. With the decline of the traditional agricultural economy, with the passage of the *cante alentejano* from the fields to the taverns, and from the 30s onwards, when the first coral groups were formed, the women that until then performed a role as important as the role of men in the *cante alentejano*, became silent. The idea that the *cante alentejano* is a masculine practice is entailed. When women stop having access to the place where, in a privileged way, the *cante* begins to happen – the taverns – these stay deprived from their role of interpreters. Only after 1974, with the revolution of April, with the new social and cultural movements, do women go back to singing, organizing themselves into female or mixed coral groups (Santos & Cabeças, 2010; Mendes, s/d).

The themes of the *modas*

Originally, the *modas* had as their main topics work, contemplation, love and life. More than claiming better living conditions, the *cante alentejano* served to purge the difficulties. According to Nazaré “by making the communion of men and women possible in the struggle to obtain the products of the land, it presided the creation and the perpetuity

of one of the most relevant aspects of the repertoire of the vocal music of oral tradition in the region: the work songs" (1979, p. 31).

With the decline of the agricultural economy and after the revolution of 1974, the coral groups, voluntarily or under political instrumentalization, introduced in their repertoires new themes, some of them inspired by the political events of the time, more demanding. Nevertheless, they did not stop singing the ancient *modas* of the popular songbook.

The existence of several coral groups in the region of Lisbon must be highlighted. It is a result of the diaspora, the people from the Alentejo that leave their places of residence and depart, looking for new opportunities near the capital city, the *cante alentejano* travels from the countryside to the city, from the agricultural region to the industrial region.

In a preliminary version of the "Inventory-catalogue of the groups of *cante alentejano*, a work document written by Paulo Lima, in 2012, with the proposal of the candidature of the *cante alentejano* to the list representative of the cultural inheritance of Humanity to present to the UNESCO, 250 coral groups are enumerated, of which 140 are currently active and 30 belong to the diaspora. In the same document the increase in the number of coral groups after 1974 is emphasized, groups that are associated to the Collective Units of Production and the Local Authorities.

From the 90s onwards actions of safeguard and transmission of the *cante alentejano* have been promoted, by creating, among other initiatives, the coral groups for children. Nowadays, the debate is centered in the questions of patrimonialization, namely in the national and global recognition of the *cante alentejano* as a cultural expression of the intangible inheritance.

¹ Created in 2008 and with its headquarters in Serpa.

² In www.confrariadocantealentejano.com, consulted in December, 2011.

³ According to Lopes Graça, in the work *The Popular Portuguese Song*, 1953, in the Alentejo also the “modas” sang in dances would be tempered with a certain tendency to melancholy.

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