

# National identity on the Portuguese-Spanish frontier

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This is an ethnographic account of national identity in the day-to-day lives of village residents who live on opposite sides of the Guadiana River on the Portuguese-Spanish frontier.<sup>1</sup> I examine 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995), particularly the perceptions of differences in national culture and identity in two villages which face each other across the frontier area where the Portuguese region of Alentejo meets the Spanish region of Extremadura.<sup>2</sup>

I understand identity in terms of Brubaker and Cooper's (2000: 4-5) idea of a 'category of practice' used by ordinary social actors in day-to-day settings 'to make sense of themselves, of their activities, of what they share with, and how they differ from, others'. Politicians use it in this way too, aiming 'to persuade people to understand themselves, their interests, and their predicaments ... that they are (for certain purposes) "identical" with one another and at the same time different from others, and to organize and justify collective action along certain lines'.

As in other localities along the Spanish-Portuguese frontier, despite the elimination of barriers to mobility between Portugal and Spain, the symbolic boundaries of culture and identity of the nation state continue to persist (Amante 2007; Kavanagh 2011; Rovisco 2013). This case therefore differs from other frontiers on the Iberian Peninsula. Driessen (1998), for example, demonstrates that the southern border of Spain was reinforced and converted into a European frontier, leading to the emergence of new categories of group identification and new internal boundaries between its majority and minority populations: European and African, Moors and Christians. Other anthropologists (Bray 2011; Leizaola 2000) show that the opening of the French-Spanish frontier has not weakened the experiences and expressions of Basque identity that defy a unified sense of state national identities in the Pyrenees, and that symbolic boundaries persist or are constructed anew.

## **The frontier**

At more than 1,200 km in length, the land frontier between Portugal and Spain is one of the longest, oldest and more stable frontiers of Europe, maintaining the limits set by the Treaty of Alcanizes (1297) to a considerable extent. However, there is a sector on this frontier where the limits have yet to be formally demarcated, on account of a conflict over the possession of Olivenza and its territory.<sup>3</sup> The Guadiana River was selected as a fiscal or surveillance line on this disputed border section, namely, between the mouth of the Caia river in the municipality of Elvas and the mouth of the Cuncos creek, close to Mourão.<sup>4</sup>

The villages of Montes Juntos and Cheles are situated some 8 km away from each other as the crow flies, on opposite sides of the frontier on the Guadiana River. The oldest reference we can find to the current Portuguese village of Montes Juntos (municipality of Alandroal) dates back to 1888. Historical records mention the repair of the customs station, which was shut down much later in 1993 when the Schengen Agreement was extended to Portugal and Spain. At present, Montes Juntos has about 200 residents, most of whom are Portuguese. It had 420 residents in the late 1990s, including five Spanish individuals, of whom two are still alive.

The current Spanish village of Cheles (province of Badajoz) was founded in 1670, a few years after the end of the Portuguese Independence Restoration War (1640-1668) which depopulated a previous settlement. It was originally inhabited mainly by new families, most of whom were Portuguese; in the mid-19th century, most of the resident 'families' came from Portugal and spoke Portuguese (Madoz 1847: 313). At present, Cheles has approximately 1,200 Spanish residents. It had 1,360 residents in 1998, of whom six were Portuguese, all of them now deceased.

The resident populations of both villages are elderly and relatively poor, particularly in Montes Juntos. In both cases, the main sources of income for local families are employment in public or municipal administration and the construction sector, small-scale retail and money transfers from pension and retirement payments, complemented by cattle farming and small-scale agriculture for family consumption.

Montes Juntos village is the place where villagers live, socialize, marry and attend festivities and church. People mostly work in the village and its outskirts, the municipality of Alandroal and the neighbouring municipalities of Vila Viçosa and Reguengos de Monsaraz. These municipalities, as well as the district capital (Évora) and national capital (Lisbon), are where people normally go to buy goods and services. People live in single-family houses, mostly single-storey houses which are whitewashed or have white, painted facades. The population almost doubles in August, when locals living and working in other parts of Portugal return to spend their summer holidays. As in Cheles, on 15 August, residents celebrate a festivity in honour of its immigrants, which includes live music and bull-running events.

Similarly, the village of Cheles itself is the central place where its residents live, study (up to high school), socialize, marry and attend church and festivities. Many residents work in the village or on its surrounding lands, while others work in the adjacent municipalities of Alconchel and Olivenza or Badajoz. Occasionally, residents go to Badajoz and Madrid to buy goods and services. Residents live mostly in single-family houses, single-storey or double-storey houses often with white, painted facades. The population increases in August when locals living and working in other parts of Spain return to spend their summer holidays.

We find a sense of the transnationalism of border life (Martinez 1994) in both village populations. Many residents admit to having ancestors from the other side of the frontier in their genealogies. However, cross-

frontier interdependence and informal transnational interactions have declined significantly since the early 1990s. In part, this is a consequence of the construction of the Alqueva dam on the Guadiana River that in the mid-2000s made the traditional crossing of the frontier (by fording) impossible. Meanwhile, the shortest road connection between the two villages is a 70 km stretch.

More than this, however, the simultaneous integration of Spain and Portugal into the European Economic Community in 1986 and the subsequent constitution of the European Common Market in 1992 eliminated significant tariff differences. The issue is that until that time, as elsewhere along the Portuguese-Spanish frontier (e.g. Amante 2007; Kavanagh 2011; Rovisco 2013), the economic frontier had provided a resource for villagers to make a living out of smuggling goods and services cheaper ‘on the other side’. The disappearance of this opportunity has thus, paradoxically, reduced their mutual interactions across the frontier.

Pushed by a series of cross-frontier programmes within the framework of the INTERREG programme (e.g. European Commission 2007), there has been some formal bridging in the past two decades, as exemplified by a handful of *encuentros transfronterizos* (transfrontier encounters) promoted by the municipal authorities of Cheles. A transnational association of the municipalities around the Alqueva Lake was also created, mainly for the purpose of tourism development. The frontier and its crossings, including the former ‘smuggling route(s)’, have also been converted into a tourism resource, particularly in Cheles.

Paradoxically, given European Union (EU) integration, informal transnational interactions and collaborations between these two village populations have in fact become much less frequent. These are today mostly confined to the patronal festivities of Nossa Senhora da Conceição in Montes Juntos, celebrated in early May, and Santo Cristo de la Paz in Cheles, held in mid-September, as well as some summer activities, particularly on the beach at Cheles. Although Montes Juntos traders and other residents cross the frontier to buy goods that are cheaper in Spain, such as fuel, bottled gas and food for cattle, they no longer go to Cheles by crossing the Guadiana River as in the past. Instead, they go by car to more distant Villanueva del Fresno, Badajoz or Mérida. The same holds true for some Cheles residents, who now cross the frontier only for occasional tourist excursions to the cities of Elvas or Évora, two World Heritage sites in the Alentejo region.

Moreover, in both cases, the nation state continues to be the main point of reference for villagers to understand themselves and communicate and legitimize their place in the world. This is evident on three levels. First, there is an automatic identification of both villages with their respective national inclusion spaces, Portugal and Spain. Second, people living on either side of the frontier interact mainly as nationals of different countries. Third, there is a change, which tends to be systematic, from a discourse of local identity to a discourse of national identity, built around a rationale of ‘localising national differences and nationalising local ones’ (Sahlins 1989: 286), as the next section will show.

### **Counterpoised national features**

While some residents of Cheles and Montes Juntos do not perceive any differences between the people on either side of the Spanish-Portuguese frontier as substantive in any way, most of them perceive and voice the existence of both objective and subjective discontinuities that coincide with that frontier, notably in relation to culture and identity. Although culture and identity are two separate domains of life which do not always coincide (e.g. Barth 1969; Wilson & Donnan 1998a), they are taken to be coincident in this context.

In his study of Quebecois identity, Handler (1988: 32) mentions that although Quebecois perceive the nation as a bounded, continuous and homogeneous entity, they continuously contest and negotiate its

‘content’. From this perspective, a ‘culture’ is both objectified as an entity associated with a place and owned by a people, and subjectified as a context for relations which pursue the realization of the idealized goals associated with the objectified culture (Wilson & Donnan 1998b: 8).

This formulation is also useful for describing the differences between national cultures as perceived by the residents of Montes Juntos and Cheles. Villagers objectify and subjectify national cultures in terms of language, food, bullfights and festivities. As to language: in Montes Juntos, the idea that ‘they are Spanish-speakers and we are Portuguese-speakers’ is a common refrain in residents’ discourses and vice versa in Cheles.

Regarding food: in Montes Juntos, it is maintained that ‘Spanish food is different from ours’ and that ‘the Spanish cook differently’ because ‘they prepare very seasoned food, with lots of pepper, red paprika, that is spicy’. There are also items considered to be inedible on one side of the frontier but which are said to be consumed on the other, namely, snakes and lizards on the Spanish side, and eels, *túbaros* (testicles of pig, ox, or sheep) and bread soups on the Portuguese side. The latter is normally linked to the characteristics of the bread. Montes Juntos residents are of the opinion that, aside from having a ‘different taste’, the Spanish bread is better when eaten dry, not drowned in soups.

In a similar vein, in Cheles, people believe that unlike the Spanish, ‘the Portuguese do not eat lentils’, but ‘eat lots of bread and soups’ due to their ‘poverty’. Moreover, there is a widespread idea that ‘the Portuguese eat too much’, that ‘they are like the donkeys, since they eat all day long’. Food is also considered distinct in terms of the condiments used in its preparation. The notion that ‘we put lots of salsa, bay leaves, parsley and oregano in the food and, in Portugal, these condiments are scarcely used’ is a frequent refrain among residents’ discourses in Cheles. Plus, it is asserted that ‘the Portuguese eat very early, at noon, while in Spain, lunches take place between 2pm and 3pm’ (already accounting for the one-hour difference between Spain and Portugal).

With respect to bullfights: distinctions are made in both villages between the two national traditions, namely, the killing of cattle in the arena during events that take place in Cheles and Spain in general, and the bloodless bullfights in Portugal, as well as the bull-running in Montes Juntos and other Portuguese villages. Portuguese-style bullfighting involves horseback fighting and *pegas* (catching) by groups of amateur *forcados* (catchers), while Spanish-style bullfighting involves *toreros* (bullfighters) fighting on foot and lancing the bull. These perceived differences are commonly associated with the existence of distinct ‘traditions’ and ‘legal framings’ of bullfights in both Portugal and Spain.

In turn, festivities are mobilized in residents’ discourses to establish two distinct national discontinuities, one regarding customs, the other concerning generalized character or personality traits. The former is projected at Christmas, particularly regarding the custom of offering gifts to children and family that occurs on Christmas Day in Portugal and on the Three Kings’ Day in Spain. The latter, and the most verbalized distinction in both villages, lies in the common notion that Spanish festivities are better than the Portuguese, because the Spanish are more ‘joyful’ and ‘fun-loving’.

Aside from these, residents’ ‘identity talk’ (Brubaker & Cooper 2000) includes other subjective discontinuities that coincide with the frontier line. In Montes Juntos, there is a widespread opinion that ‘the Spaniards’ way of being is different from ours’, that ‘they have a different mentality’. When it comes to styles of social interaction, of which festivities are an example, the Spanish are described as more ‘joyful’, ‘expansive’ and ‘noisy’ than the Portuguese, who are considered more ‘sad’ and ‘reserved’. As to those aspects

considered crucial for the definition of individual character and, by extension, national character, the Spanish are demonized as ‘cowards’, ‘false’, ‘dishonourable’ and ‘evil’, in contrast to the Portuguese, depicted as ‘brave’, ‘honest’, ‘honourable’ and ‘kind’ (see Silva 2016, for details).

Equally in Cheles, it is maintained that ‘the character of the Portuguese is different from ours’. However, the image of the Portuguese mentality is less negative than that of the Spaniards in Montes Juntos. ‘Sad’, ‘reserved’, ‘false’, ‘mistrustful’, ‘helpful’ and ‘polite’: these are the most relevant dimensions in the representation of the Portuguese way of being in Cheles, in contrast to the Spanish personality, characterized by ‘joyfulness’, ‘expansiveness’, ‘honesty’ and ‘impoliteness’.

## Conclusion

This article examined the ‘identity talk’ of villagers living on the Iberian Peninsula on both sides of the frontier between Spain and Portugal. European integration culminated in the removal of customs and passport controls between Portugal and Spain, and yet distinct senses of culture and identity continue along the boundaries of these nation states. This is clear from anthropological literature on other internal frontiers of the EU and its former European Community and European Economic Community in a ‘Europe without frontiers’. European nation states and state national identities, therefore, continue to be (re)produced in the daily interactions between its nationals (Donnan & Wilson 1999; Herzfeld 1997). Such findings are in line with the theory of national communities as a product of centralized and top-down nation-building activity (Gellner 1983; Löfgren 1989), but also of the imaginations of the people living with and close to historically constructed territorial limits, at the juncture of local and national rivalries. □

## Footnotes

1. Ethnographic materials were collected over the past two decades, notably between August 1997 and May 1998, in May 2015 and in October 2017.
2. I am grateful for two grants awarded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (PRAXIS XXI/BM/10614/97 and SFRH/BPD/93515/2013). I am also grateful to the editor, Gustaaf Houtman, and the two anonymous reviewers for their work. I especially thank the residents of Montes Juntos and Cheles for their collaboration in the study.
3. The claim by the Grupo dos Amigos de Olivença (Friends of Olivenza Group) that this territory rightfully belongs to Portugal dates back to 1945. It turns out that Olivenza entered into Portuguese domain by means of the Treaty of Alcanizes; it was annexed by Spain in the early 1800s and Spain signed the text of the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), in which it pledged to return the territory as quickly as possible, but this never happened.
4. The remaining sectors of the Spanish-Portuguese frontier were defined by two treaties: one signed in 1864 and the other signed in 1926.

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## Captions

**Fig. 1.** Location map of the case study area.

**Fig. 2.** Frontier line between Portugal and Spain along the Guadiana River.

**Fig. 3.** Bull-running during the patronal festival in Cheles, 1997.

**Fig. 4.** Bull-running during the patronal festival in Montes Juntos, 2018.

**Fig. 5.** Montes Juntos residents fishing by hand in the Guadiana, 1997.

**Fig. 6.** Procession in honour of Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Montes Juntos, 2018.

**Fig. 7.** Procession in honour of Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Montes Juntos, 1998.

**Fig. 8.** *Procession during Holy Week in Cheles, 1998.*

**Fig. 9.** *Cheles city hall, 2017.*

**Fig. 10.** *Former customs station of Montes Juntos, 2015.*

**Fig. 11.** *Donkey race during the patronal festivity of Cheles, 1998.*

**Fig. 12.** *The Guadiana River between Cheles and Montes Juntos, 2017.*