Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais / Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2026, e026001
https://doi.org/10.21814/rlec.6689

The Voices of the Bells: When Bells Spoke in North-Eastern Trás-os-Montes

Manuel Duarte João Pires
Faculdade de Línguas e Tradução, Universidade Politécnica de Macau, Macao, China

Abstract

This article examines the role of bells as a medium of communication and community interaction, highlighting the functions and influence they exerted in the daily life of Avelanoso, a frontier village in north-eastern Trás-os-Montes. Through a qualitative approach that emphasises the importance of oral history in preserving cultural memory, interviews were conducted with a group of individuals over the age of 70, whose knowledge and experiences are crucial to understanding the diachronic dimension of local sociocultural practices. Oral history is a key tool for promoting local narratives, ensuring the transmission and preservation of the knowledge and practices of communities in the northeast of Trás-os-Montes, with a view to contributing to the understanding and dissemination of their cultural heritage and identity. The main objectives of the study include analysing bell communication and the various purposes that bells fulfilled in a context that has undergone significant demographic and social changes in recent decades. The findings reveal that the bells represented an essential symbol of communication, identity and social cohesion that has since faded. In times of assimilation, acculturation and globalised references, it is urgent to safeguard the elements that constitute the intrinsic identity of communities marked by aging and rurality, and to foster an inclusive recognition of the singularity and cultural diversity they embody.

Keywords

bells, communication, north-eastern Trás-os-Montes, oral history

As Vozes dos Sinos: Quando os Sinos Falavam no Nordeste Trasmontano

Resumo

O presente artigo aborda o papel dos sinos como meio de comunicação e interação comunitária, destacando as funções e a influência que exerciam no quotidiano de Avelanoso, uma aldeia raiana do nordeste trasmontano. Através de uma abordagem qualitativa que destaca a importância da história oral na preservação da memória cultural, foram realizadas entrevistas com um grupo de indivíduos com mais de 70 anos, cujos conhecimentos e experiências são determinantes para a compreensão diacrónica das práticas socioculturais locais. A história oral configura-se como um instrumento determinante para a valorização das narrativas locais, garantindo a transmissão e a preservação dos saberes e práticas das comunidades do nordeste trasmontano, com vista a contribuir para o conhecimento e divulgação do seu legado cultural e identitário. Os objetivos principais do estudo incluem a análise da comunicação sineira e dos diversos desígnios que os sinos cumpriam num contexto que sofreu significativas mudanças demográficas e sociais nas últimas décadas. Os resultados revelam que os sinos representavam um símbolo imprescindível de comunicação, identidade e coesão social que se desvaneceu. Em tempos de assimilações, aculturações e referências globalizadas, urge cuidar dos elementos que compõem a identidade intrínseca das comunidades marcadas pelo

envelhecimento e interioridade, e promover um reconhecimento inclusivo da singularidade e diversidade cultural que representam.

Palavras-chave

sinos, comunicação, nordeste trasmontano, história oral

1. Introduction

Bells, as both sonic and cultural objects, play a fundamental role in community life. Since ancient times, they have been used not only as instruments of communication but also as symbols of identity and social cohesion in different societies and cultural contexts (Pinto, 2020; Taras, 2021). Bells were introduced into Christian communities as a means of marking time and calling the faithful to religious services. Their presence in churches and chapels became a central element of community practices, serving as a medium of communication not only among community members but also between humans and the divine (Le Goff, 1964/1984). The ringing of bells announced significant events such as weddings, funerals and religious festivities, thereby contributing to the construction of collective identity (Boyer & Wertsch, 2009/2012).

According to Vögele (2023), clocks and smartphones have replaced mainly the functions once fulfilled by bells. In the past, bells had a significant social function, as they enabled people to structure time — organise their days, weeks, months, and years. The liturgical calendar played a fundamental role in organising time. While the bells served as a means of marking significant moments, the basis of this temporal structuring lay in the liturgical calendar, which established festive periods and religious celebrations, while also defining daily and seasonal cycles. Thus, the interdependence between the liturgical calendar and the bells formed part of the temporal harmony within communities, allowing people to connect with both the sacred and the rhythms of daily life. Individual and communal life were confined to small or delimited spaces; therefore, those who could not hear the bells were deprived of critical information — both secular and congregational (Machado, 2010).

The language of bells was multifaceted, as each ringing conveyed a specific message depending on the occasion. Through their sonority, bells communicated the passage of time and the need for congregation, reaffirming the social structure of the community (Correia, 2005/2012).

Beyond their religious function, bells also played a crucial role in communicating practical information. In earlier times, both in urban and rural communities, when communication means were limited, bells were used to alert the population to significant events such as outbreaks of fire, meetings or emergencies (Parafita, 2012). This utilitarian aspect of bell communication highlights its importance in ensuring the safety and well-being of the community. Through specific ringing sequences, people could identify the nature of a

given event and take appropriate action in response to each particular situation signalled by the bells (Llop i Bayo & Álvaro, 1990).

Preserving the practices associated with bells is a way of keeping collective memory and cultural traditions alive, ensuring that future generations can understand and value their heritage. Within Portuguese-speaking countries, the recognition of bell soundscapes in Brazil, dating back to 2009, as intangible heritage reflecting the history and culture of its communities, has been granted by the Instituto do Património Histórico e Artístico Nacional (Brazilian Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage). The ringing of bells is a significant aspect of Brazil's intangible heritage, particularly in specific communities in Minas Gerais, where the tradition is deeply rooted in local culture. In addition to their practical communicative function, bells are considered symbols of identity that reflect the history and religious practices of their communities (Carvalho, 2021; Rayel, 2016). The particularity and diversity of ringing patterns in Minas Gerais highlight the richness of this culture, celebrated through the organisation of various festivals and community events (Gomes, 2017). In the historic cities of São João del-Rei and Diamantina, the bell-ringing tradition is recognised as a form of cultural expression that unites inhabitants. According to Albuquerque and Sá (2021), the ringing of bells serves as a link between generations, allowing older people to pass on their stories and experiences to younger ones, thereby valuing cultural and identity practices.

The appreciation of bell heritage in Minas Gerais constitutes both a form of resistance and an expression of cultural heterogeneity, celebrating the cultural (and sonic) diversity that characterises Brazilian culture. The sound codes enacted through bell ringing also vary from place to place. The same ringing can bear different meanings depending on the region. As Dumont (2021) emphasises, bell ringing is a language of its own that expresses feelings of faith, hope and belonging, reflecting the essence of community life. This symbolic dimension makes bell heritage a vital element for understanding the social and cultural dynamics that shape the historic cities of Minas Gerais, where bell ringing is considered part of Brazil's intangible cultural heritage. The history of bells is also the history of its people and their diversity — from the Europeans who introduced this tradition to the enslaved Africans who incorporated new rhythmic identities into the way bells were made to "speak" (Cruz, 2018; Galante, 2023). As Galante (2023) explains, when Europeans arrived on the African continent, the use of bells as a means of communication was one of the few practices they shared with local peoples. When enslaved Africans were taken to Brazil, bell ringing began to receive African influences, adding new dimensions and sonorities to its function, as it was often the enslaved who were responsible for ringing the bells (Galante, 2023). Bells thus assume an intercultural significance that integrates diverse references and contributions, representing a means of cooperation and humanisation (Alsina, 1999) amid the turbulent contact between cultures.

The identity value of bells is recognised as part of the country's intangible heritage by the Brazilian state. In contrast, in Portugal, they receive less attention or protection

as cultural assets from institutional, academic and community perspectives. A few academic studies constitute the exception to this neglect, sporadically seeking to counteract the oblivion to which bells have been consigned in Portugal (Gonçalves et al., 2015; Pinto, 2020; Sebastian, 2008).

The bell is considered an element of intangible heritage that reflects practices and meanings deeply rooted in Portuguese culture (Vieira, 2022). According to this author, the sound of the bell represents not merely an echo in space but a rich manifestation of history, ritual and community identity. Paula's (2021) research highlights how the sound of bells — or "bronze voices" — shapes the soundscape of cities such as Évora. Moreover, Paula (2019) analyses the "bronze sound" in the funeral liturgy of the Holy Patriarchal Church of Lisbon, emphasising the role of bells in social and religious rituals that transcend mere functionality, transforming them into symbols of communion and spirituality that weave connections between the sacred and the everyday.

Felícia's (2019) study on the Rio Tinto Bell Foundry further reinforces the historical and cultural significance of bell-ringing practice. The research highlights the importance of bells not only as physical objects but also as carriers of meanings intertwined with local and national identity. The author reflects on the absence of bell-ringers in contemporary times, which raises questions about the future of these sonic traditions and underscores the need for a more integrated approach that considers both technological aspects and sociocultural values. The discussion of bell ringing must address not only its practices but also its appreciation as part of intangible cultural heritage.

In Almeida's (1966) study, the symbolic and magical dimension associated with bell ringing is explored, with particular emphasis on the belief in its apotropaic properties — that is, the power to ward off evil and protect the community. The author argues that, historically, such beliefs were so deeply rooted that, in many cultures, women were forbidden to ring bells, as their participation was believed to alter the energies associated with the sound. This restriction reflected both gender norms and a profound reverence for the symbolism that bells represented in their connection to the liturgical realm.

This theme is also addressed by Felícia (2019) in her work explaining that superstitions have existed since the earliest stages of bell production. During the casting of the alloy into the mould, the presence of women was discouraged, as it was believed that "women had a pact with the devil and, since the bell was a divine instrument, their presence could jeopardise the success of the casting" (Felícia, 2019, p. 122). Bell ringing was regarded as a sacred function, reserved for men who, in turn, were considered guardians of traditions and rituals. This exclusion of women highlights the complexity of cultural practices and the beliefs that shaped society, revealing how the sound of bells transcends utilitarian purpose to become an element imbued with profound meanings and a cultural heritage that merits analysis in light of contemporary social transformations.

2. Methodological Approach

In small communities, where written records are scarce or non-existent, collecting oral testimonies becomes essential for understanding sociocultural practices. This article explores the relevance of oral history, emphasising the importance of this research method in contexts where written documentation is limited and rural, ethnographically grounded knowledge is rapidly disappearing.

Oral history has long been a crucial tool for preserving narratives that reflect the lived experiences of communities. According to Portelli (1991), oral history does more than document facts; it reveals individuals' perceptions and emotions, contributing to a richer, multidimensional understanding of the past. From Thompson's (1978/2000) perspective, oral cultures possess their own logics and structures that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods or textual analysis. By drawing on interviews and informal conversations, researchers can gain deeper insights into the cultural practices and traditions that shape community life. This type of data collection also constitutes an act of citizenship and resistance, enabling voices that are, to some extent, marginalised — due to advanced age or geographical distance from major urban centres — to be heard and recognised.

According to Frisch (1990), preserving these voices is vital, as they convey unique perspectives and details often neglected in official narratives. As these individuals age and become less accessible, the risk of losing valuable testimonies that help shape the cultural and historical identity of a community increases. Preserving the narratives they share enriches historical knowledge and reinforces a sense of belonging for younger generations.

It is worth noting that oral history is not without its challenges. Issues of subjectivity or potential distortion of memory are relevant, as collective memory is influenced by social contexts, meaning that oral accounts may be shaped by factors such as group identity, cultural norms or social pressure (Boyer & Wertsch, 2012; Halbwachs, 1925/1992; Matos & Senna, 2011). This context dependence can result in distortion or omission in narratives, reflecting the personal interpretations of interviewees and the expectations of the groups to which they belong. Ethnographic research emphasises the experiential dimension, focusing on "attention to the details of daily life within the broader social context" (Baptista, 2009, p. 457), seeking not objective truth but understanding of the meaning of social and cultural discourses and representations, making it particularly suitable for the qualitative study of culture, lifestyles and identities.

The interviews were conducted in August 2024 in the village of Avelanoso, municipality of Vimioso, district of Bragança, located in the extreme north-east of Trás-os-Montes near the Portuguese-Spanish border. The group of interviewees comprised ten individuals over the age of 70 — six men and four women — who spent their childhood and youth in the village before migrating elsewhere to pursue professional lives. It is essential to note that during the summer months in northern inland Portugal, many people from these communities return temporarily, often residing elsewhere in the country or abroad, primarily in France.

The research adhered to ethical principles, particularly regarding participants' permission for the collection and treatment of data anonymously and impartially, in accordance with good scientific practice. The interviews were conducted in a roundtable format, promoting inclusive and interactive discussion. Interviewees shared their "intensive information centred on an individual or small group that, without time limits or with considerable freedom, exposes their points of view" (Sousa & Baptista, 2000, p. 81). Although some participants were more engaged than others, convergence or agreement was observed regarding the arguments and information discussed. The interviews focused on three general topics: the ringing of bells and their communicative functions, their role and importance in community life, and the characteristics of the individuals who gave voice to the bells.

As Ritchie (1994/2003) argues, the richness of human experience and the diversity of assertions emerging from oral interviews provide a unique opportunity to understand the complexity of community life. This study also aims to serve as a voice of citizenship and responsibility in valuing and preserving cultural diversity, contributing, to the extent possible, to ensuring that the identity and heritage of practices in north-eastern Trás-os-Montes do not fade amid the ebb and flow of time and memory.

3. The Voices of the Bells in North-Eastern Trás-os-Montes

The village of Avelanoso is a border settlement situated seven kilometres from the Spanish town of Alcañices and 14 kilometres from the municipal seat of Vimioso. The first documented reference dates to 1258 in the Inquiries of King Afonso III, with the village experiencing cycles of settlement and depopulation over the centuries due to the instability of border regions, which prompted the flight of populations. Its population is believed to have become definitively established in the sixteenth century (Capela et al., 2007). Avelanoso was part of the territory of the Terras de Miranda until the twentieth century, which explains not only the origin of the parish name but also the fact that it is a space with peculiar sociolinguistic characteristics, in which Mirandese, once spoken in the village, has left still-identifiable traces in toponyms and the linguistic reproduction of its inhabitants (Ferreira, 2001; Meirinhos, 2014; Pires, 2022; Vasconcellos, 1900).

The current Parish Church of Avelanoso, also known as the Church of São Pedro, was completed in 1739 and features a bell tower with two bronze bells, weighing between 300 and 500 kg, suspended from a wooden and steel frame. They produce sound when struck at the lower base by an iron clapper suspended inside, connected to a sisal rope operated by the bell-ringer. The current bells are not original and bear only inscriptions indicating the foundry and year of manufacture. Both were produced at the Braga Bell Foundry, Serafim da Silva Jerónimo, in 1964 and 2007. According to information available on the foundry's website, their bells are composed of 78% copper and 22% tin (Jerónimo – A Fundição de Sinos de Braga, n. d.). The bells of Avelanoso's Parish Church were never

automated, although the church has had, since the 1980s, a clock linked to loudspeakers signalling the exact hours, half-hours, and quarter-hours.

Based on contact with participants aged between 71 and 82, born in the 1940s and 1950s, ten types of bell-ringing were identified for various purposes at different times of day. In this study, the temporal reference spans the late 1950s to the early 1970s. The following describes each type of ringing, highlighting the most illustrative or expressive statements from the interviewees.

3.1. Ringing for the *Avé-Marias* and the *Trindades*

At first light (*Avé-Marias*, morning Angelus) and at nightfall (*Trindades*), the bells signalled the beginning and end of the day, regulating a cosmic order that did not correspond directly to the precise measurement of time by modern clocks, but instead to the rhythms of nature that marked a new day or night. In the absence of a mechanical clock, time was measured by the sun's movement. The *Trindades* ringing constituted a call unlike a factory siren or school bell, but an invocation made of natural imprecision with a community-wide reach. The obligation to ring the *Trindades* was delegated to the "mordomo das almas" (soul steward), appointed annually by the village priest, preferably residing near the church, whose role was to perform the ringings and tend to the altars dedicated to the souls in the church, where figures of saints were displayed. Participants recalled that "seven or eight tolls" were given, spaced by approximately five seconds.

Both the *Avé-Marias* and *Trindades* shared the same tone or sonority, as did the midday ringing, remembered by participants as occurring roughly "between the spring and autumn equinoxes" (António, personal interview, August 10, 2024) when days were longer. It was necessary to mark the time before wristwatches were widespread, since people often "were absorbed in fieldwork and lost track of time" (José, personal interview, August 10, 2024). It is also reported that during the cereal harvests, especially wheat and rye — which were among the most significant agricultural tasks — the noon ringing served as a signal for the women to bring lunch to the workers.

The ringing at nightfall ("à boca-noite") indicated that minors should return home at the last toll. Upon hearing the bells, people would say, "they are ringing for Trindades", and children would rush home in a lively manner, much like a curfew. It is also mentioned that in the morning, the right-hand bell was used, producing a higher and more piercing sound, while in the evening, the left-hand bell, known as the "bordão" (bass bell), was rung, producing a lower and deeper tone. The *Trindades* ringing is one of the most vividly remembered, marking a past quotidian that musically measured the days of childhood.

3.2. Ringing for the Day's Mass

This ringing, performed on days when the priest celebrated Mass for the deceased faithful or for other special occasions, was also a common practice. The interviewees

reported that 12 to 15 consecutive strikes were rung on the right-hand bell to "call people to Mass". As soon as the priest entered the church, five strikes were rung, and people would say, "it's already five", indicating that the Mass was about to begin; when the priest took his position at the altar, three more strikes were sounded, marking the official start of the religious ceremony. During the "Sunday Mass", as on other days, this ringing announced the religious ceremonies, summoning people to the church.

Through the ringing of the bells, the community was reminded of the importance of rituals in collective life; each toll carried an emotional weight, evoking feelings of hope, reflection, and even nostalgia, especially when the Mass was celebrated in memory of deceased parishioners. The participants gathered not only to attend the ceremony but to experience a space of communion and spirituality, reinforcing community bonds and the continuity of religious traditions.

3.3. Ringing for Catechism

This occurred in the afternoon after school ended and during the school term, from spring — "around March, when the weather began to improve" (Manuel, personal interview, August 10, 2024) — until the end of the school year. This ringing took place after school, around "three or four in the afternoon", and consisted of about a dozen consecutive tolls.

The catechism ringing symbolised the call for young people to attend religious instruction. The church functioned as a central space where children were taught without question or opposition. The everyday practice and acceptance of Christian religiosity were unquestioned at a time when the community faced profound socioeconomic hardships, yet spiritual nourishment provided by the clergy was abundant. Although there are various records of misuse of church bells from past times, as noted, for instance, in Sebastian (2008), the participants in this study do not recall any such instances. The values and teachings of the faith were transmitted from one generation to the next, reinforcing the importance of religious education in the holistic formation of individuals.

3.4. Ringing for the Rosary

This occurred in May and October, particularly at sunset, and consisted of about a dozen strikes of the right-hand bell. This ceremony may have been linked to Marian devotion, commemorating the ceremonies of the Fátima Rosary during these months and marking the apparitions of Our Lady at the Cova da Iria, although its precise purpose is uncertain: "the parish priest dictated the calendars, and the people obeyed as best they could. The important thing was to fear God" (António, personal interview, August 10, 2024). In any case, despite the unquestioned religiosity of the time, gathering for the Rosary was a moment that evoked, above all, the devotion and spirituality of the women in the community. The bell summoned the women to gather for a ritual of prayer, which also served as a

space for sharing, reflection, and the strengthening of female social bonds. This ritual was marked by an "atmosphere of serenity" (Manuel, personal interview, August 10, 2024), where women gathered to pray and support one another on their spiritual and personal journeys. The Rosary, with its repetitions and introspections, offered a time for retreat amid the daily chores. Thus, the ringing of the bell for the Rosary functioned as a call for female convergence and solidarity, reinforcing both religious and communal identity.

3.5. Ringing for the Souls

This occurred during Advent, in December, when people were called to pray for the coming of Christ in preparation for Christmas, and also to pray for those who had already passed away. This ringing consisted of three strikes of both bells. People did not attend church services but were expected to pray at home, fostering spiritual unity and preparing for the celebration of Christmas.

According to the interviewees, the "ringing for the souls" usually marked the end of the evening gatherings; after the bell had tolled, those assembled would return home. It should be noted that there was no electric lighting, and the sun's light was used to measure time. In winter, when darkness fell early, people would have dinner and then gather to "asserenar" (quietly wind down). Typically, they went to the homes of grandparents, uncles, or other relatives, as well as to neighbours or other nearby households. Individuals or families with fewer resources would gather at the homes of wealthier families, both for socialising and for practical reasons, so that households would not have to "burn wood" (Maria, personal interview, August 11, 2024) in multiple homes during a time of scarce resources. The ringing for the souls occurred around 9 or 10 pm, before people went to sleep, prompting reflection on the departed souls and preparing the living for the celebration of Christmas. This sound is associated with memories, highlighting the importance of unity in times of scarcity, emphasising solidarity as a fundamental aspect of communal life.

3.6. Ringing for the Village Council

Early in the morning, the ringing signalled a gathering in the village centre of the men (along with their animals and animal-drawn vehicles), previously assigned to communal tasks. The ringing was similar to that for the Mass, although without the final series of five and three tolls. These communal tasks could include repairing streets, walls, bridges, causeways, and weirs, as well as cleaning paths and water sources. The specific duties depended on the village's needs; for example, if a storm blocked a path or knocked down a wall, it had to be repaired. Some interviewees recalled that the village's first public trough with a piped water supply was installed under this council system in the 1960s. In the churchyard, after Sunday Mass, the village council, led by the village head (equivalent to today's parish council president), would communicate the tasks required. It is worth

noting that a significant portion of the population was illiterate, so messages had to be conveyed orally. Participants emphasised that, until a few years ago, parish council presidents maintained the practice of announcing important messages in the churchyard, and that such announcements are still occasionally made today. The ringing for the council reinforced the importance of collaboration and dialogue in village life, fostering a sense of shared commitment and responsibility among the inhabitants.

3.7. Alarm Ringing

Both bells would ring frantically for as long as necessary to ensure there was no doubt that the message had been understood, signalling a state of danger or emergency. Typically, this occurred in cases of fires large enough to require the help of the entire population. The gathering point was in the centre of the village, "by the water tank" or the fountain. There were no firefighters, nor telephone or motorised road communication systems, so in such situations "all help was needed" (Carlos, personal interview, August 11, 2024). Participants particularly recalled fires approaching the residential area of the village, as well as one occasion when the bells were rung in defence of the common good to oppose a process of afforestation — that is, the conversion of farmland into pine forest — around the mid-1960s. The villagers gathered together, rising against a group of technicians and workers from the Ministry of Agriculture who had come to explain an afforestation project that was never implemented, perhaps due to this resistance — or outcry — from the population.

The alarm ringing, beyond being a warning signal, transformed the village centre into a place of convergence and solidarity. This practice of community mobilisation reflected a sense of collective responsibility and well-being. In times of crisis, the community united in the face of adversity. The voice of the bells was a voice of convergence and shared purpose.

3.8. The Death Knell

This occurred when someone residing in the village — or a native who had passed away elsewhere — died, at the request of relatives, as soon as they received news of the death. It was also rung during funerals, on All Saints' Day, and on Holy Thursday in the afternoon to announce the death of Christ. From that moment, the bells would remain silent until Easter Sunday, when they once again rang to proclaim the Lord's resurrection. During the Paschal Triduum, weddings and baptisms were likewise discouraged. Unlike a summoning ringing composed of consecutive peals, the death knell was an unmistakable sign of death and mourning, in which the left-hand bell — or "bordão" — produced a dry, spaced strike, followed by two in unison on both bells, with the process repeated about a dozen times. Participants recalled that this ringing was so striking and "chilling" that even a person unfamiliar with the local "dialect" of the bells would recognise its funereal tone. The death knell, with its intense and mournful cadence, served as a means of honouring

the memory of those who had departed, creating a sombre atmosphere of mourning and introspection (Paula, 2017).

Interviewees also mentioned that this ringing was locally known as the ringing of "encordar" (roping) — people would say "estão a encordar" (they are roping) or simply "encordam" (they rope). One interviewee asked rhetorically, "could this term come from the ropes used to lower the coffin into the grave?" (António, personal interview, August 11, 2024). It is worth noting that the term "encordar" (roping) is not recorded in Portuguese dictionaries but is included in the Diccionario de la Lengua Española (Dictionary of the Spanish Language, RAE) with the general meaning of "to put on ropes" and the specific note that it is a term used in the cities of León, Palencia, Salamanca, Valladolid y Zamora — said of a bell: to toll for the dead (Diccionario de la Lengua Española, n. d.). The cities mentioned belong to the province of Castile and León, located in north-western Spain, adjacent to north-eastern Portugal. This linguistic particularity also reveals the sociolinguistic singularity of the speech patterns found in the village of Avelanoso.

3.9. Ringing for "Tende Anubrado" (Beware of the Clouds) for the House of Santiago

This occurred when low, thick, and threatening clouds appeared, announcing devastating thunderstorms, particularly at times when downpours were undesirable, such as during the harvest season in "late June, early July" (Carlos, personal interview, August 11, 2024). People were terrified of the "varejos" (strong, sudden, swirling winds) because they could destroy the ears of grain, causing the crop to fall to the ground and ruining a year's harvest, one of the primary sources of sustenance for the community: "people were terrified that their rye would be ruined. It was distressing because sometimes you would be harvesting and the rows would be full of grain, the work of an entire year lost — it felt like there would be no bread" (Carlos, personal interview, August 11, 2024). Beyond its practical dimension, the bells had a prophylactic and apotropaic function, acting as instruments that ward off evil forces and protect against disasters. The bell's sound, echoing through the heavy air before a storm, functioned as a ritual invocation, seeking divine protection for the crops. Popular beliefs and practices were intertwined with superstition, and the ringing served both as a warning and as spiritual support.

Thus, the "tende anubrado" ringing was not merely a weather alert but a symbol of the people's resilience and faith, a testimony to the daily struggle against nature's uncertainties and the ongoing quest for protection and prosperity. Its sound resonated with the sacred and the profane, science and superstition, fear and hope.

This ringing is difficult to explain in words: both bells were struck imperatively, forming a rhythmic melody that seemed to say "House of Santiago, beware of the clouds". This phrase, a kind of mantra, was repeated by the people as the bells rang. It is considered a distinct type of ringing, "with its own cadence as if meant to disperse droplets of water" (Carlos, personal interview, August 11, 2024). For some physical, suggestive,

or superstitious reason, it was said to "often work" (José, personal interview, August 11, 2024), dispersing unwanted clouds.

It should also be noted that Avelanoso was, in the past, part of the so-called Terras de Miranda and today is a village bordering the geographic territory of the Mirandese language, with many cultural and sociolinguistic similarities. For example, the term "anubrado" belongs to Mirandese rather than Portuguese, representing a case of rhotacism (the replacement of the [l] sound with [r]), a characteristic feature of the Mirandese language (Ferreira, 2001; Pires, 2022).

The reason for the reference to Santiago is unclear, since Saint Barbara is more commonly associated with protection against storms. Perhaps the expression has an onomatopoeic origin, inspired by the sound of the bell. Nonetheless, a reference to this specific ringing was found in a chronicle from the "Fuolha Mirandesa" (a section of the weekly *Jornal do Nordeste*, Bragança), which recounts a day of harvesting in the lands of Miranda in Mirandese. The excerpt presented here refers to the commotion caused by the impending storm while work was underway on the threshing floors:

> other memories from that time are somewhat unique: the uproar of the people when dark clouds appeared in the sky, announcing a summer storm. "Everyone to the threshing floors", strong voices calling to the place, the bells ringing the "Tende anubrado", and, as always, there were the women to help in the laborious tasks of life. The cleaning of the threshing floor marked the end of the harvest and the wheat cycle, now bagged, making it a day of celebration in the rural life of these farmhouses. (Esteves, 2023, p. 21)

Contrary to the aim of dispersing clouds, the ringing was also used for *novenas*, prayers led by the priest to Saint Peter asking for rain during extreme drought, "usually in April or May", to ensure healthy plant growth. These consisted of nine days of prayers to saints and holy figures, performed both inside and outside the church, as "sometimes people would leave the church and go to the fields to continue the prayers" (Maria, personal interview, August 11, 2024), to intercede for rainfall in those areas.

Interviewees recall that, in some cases, prayers — "a sort of novena" (Maria, personal interview, August 11, 2024) — were also convened to stop rain, particularly in winter, as villages would become very muddy, and people, animals, and ox carts would get stuck in the tracks. Often, several men had to gather to free animals trapped in the mud. The village was unpaved, footwear was inadequate, and many consecutive days of rain made the streets nearly impossible to traverse.

3.10. Ringing or "Repiquete" (Festive Ringing)

This was the most exuberant and enthusiastic ringing, reserved for festive occasions such as processions, baptisms, confirmations, first communions, and other feast days. It also occurred at midnight on Holy Saturday to announce the resurrection of Christ after

the silence of the Paschal Triduum — the only period in the liturgical calendar during which bell-ringing is generally suppressed. Metaphorically, when someone performs a notable act, it is still possible locally to say they "deserve a repiquete", meaning "they deserve a round of applause". This was a ringing of greater complexity and sonic beauty, so only a few bell-ringers mastered the art, able to extract the most melodious tones from the combination of the two bells. Interviewees recall a melody called "molinera", reminiscent of the sound of the word itself (*molinera, molinera, molinera*), which very few could perform. This particular *repiquete*, called "molinera" (literally "mill-like"), is also found in the neighbouring lands of Zamora (Llop i Bayo & Álvaro, 1990) and other communities in the Spanish province of Castile and León, with several videos online, such as Parroquia Peque (2020), showing the execution of this *repiquete* on the Spanish side.

The practice of ringing the bells, with its sonic complexity, was a symbol of communal celebration — a tradition that is now fading due to the lack of skilled bell-ringers. The "molinera" still heard during feast-day processions — although, they say, "no one can play it as well anymore" (António, personal interview, August 11, 2024).

Beyond these ten types of ringing, the bells of other villages could also be heard on certain occasions, conveying information or weather signals. When the bells of neighbouring villages were heard, they indicated a particular weather condition that was widely recognised. For instance, when walking in the term (the area surrounding the village core), one could hear the bells of neighbouring villages: if the bells of Serapicos were heard, it was a sign of rain, since almost all the rainfall in Avelanoso is "brought by the south-west winds" (João, personal interview, August 11, 2024). Conversely, if the bells of Alcañices were heard, they signified the inhospitable "winds of Burgos" (a city near the Cantabrian mountain range) — strong, cold, dry winds that brought "neve cisqueira" in winter (fine powdery snow) and frost that damaged plants in spring. Walking in the term, if the bells of Vilariño Tras la Sierra, another Spanish locality, were heard, it usually signalled late-summer thunderstorms.

The voices of the bells functioned as a communication and information system, both directly and indirectly, conveying knowledge in interaction with various elements of nature. This wisdom and communal symbiosis are declining today, a consequence of the human depopulation of inland Portuguese areas. Few ears remain capable of reading or discerning the diverse voices of the bells, and even fewer hands know how to make them speak.

4. The Hands That Made the Bells Speak

This part of the study focuses on the men and women who had the labour and skill to make the bells speak, as well as certain specificities related to some types of bell-ringing. Regarding the *Avé-Marias* and *Trindades* ringings — which marked the beginning and end of the day, respectively, and which, according to the interviewees, had precisely the same sound — it emerges that men were usually appointed to the role of "guardian of souls".

This was not due to gender discrimination, but because entering a dark church at night required a great deal of courage that not everyone possessed. Remember, there was no electric light: one had to enter the church, access the stairs of the bell tower, and climb the tower in complete darkness, broken only by the faint, dim glow of a lamp with a very fine wick constantly placed in the centre of the church, or the occasional olive-oil lamp carried by the bell-ringer.

The interviewees mentioned that, as the bell tower stood facing the cemetery, entering the church at night was not for every soul. They recalled that "before 25 April, the Masses were sinister" (António, personal interview, August 10, 2024), with priests constantly frightening people with the terrors of sin and the darkness of Hell. Preachers — priests sent by the Bishop of Bragança — often travelled through the villages, using rhetoric that terrified people, bringing them to tears with their gloomy and threatening narratives. It was even said that "a preacher who does not make people cry is not a good preacher" (António, personal interview, August 10, 2024). Masses were celebrated in Latin, and only after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was it permitted to celebrate Mass in vernacular languages; in practice, "many priests opposed this measure", so its local implementation came a few years later. Because of this grim vision of "fear of God" propagated by the priests during religious ceremonies, at night, the church walls adjoining the cemetery were a dark space that many people refused to enter.

At daybreak, there was more flexibility. In addition to the guardians of souls, it was common for their wives to ring the *Trindades*. It is noted that the task of ringing the bells was always assigned to men, but some — either because they were busier with other chores or, on the contrary, less nimble or energetic — passed the task on to their wives. While literature notes that, for apotropaic reasons — intended to ward off evil — women were forbidden to ring the bells (Almeida, 1966; Felícia, 2019; Sebastian, 2008), this study found no evidence of such restriction in the village of Avelanoso. In fact, some women rang the bells for Sunday Mass. Usually, it was the priest's sister — who lived in the village at the time and was responsible for only two villages — who performed this task, along with other devout women close to the church. Women's involvement was fundamental, albeit often subordinate, in religious and community practices. They were responsible for maintaining the tradition of ringing the *Trindades*, acting as a bridge between spirituality and the daily life of the faithful. This involvement reflected both women's devotion and their influence within a community that strictly adhered to Christian precepts.

The most esteemed ringing was the *repiquete*, for which there were many competitors. There was no formal training for bell-ringers; the craft was acquired empirically, much like other rural skills, through observation and practice (José, personal interview, August 11, 2024). Within this autonomous learning, particular individuals distinguished themselves for their superior skill in executing the festive ringing. Among the renowned local bell-ringers from this period were figures such as "Uncle António Correio, Uncle Pedreiro, Uncle Facilas (celebrated for his execution of the "molinera") and Uncle Zé Rabiola" (Francisco,

personal interview, August 11, 2024). Community members recognised bell-ringers by the unique sonority of their performance, as each had a distinct style. During processions, more than one bell-ringer often ascended the tower because two or three men were needed to take turns; processions were long, as the village was more populated, and residents wanted the route to pass by their homes. Sometimes the festive ringing was performed at Sunday Mass, and when Mass ended, there was another festive ringing, signalling a wedding or baptism, as there were many children in the village. The act of ringing often involved more than one person ascending the tower, either to perform or to learn the technique.

The most prominent bell-ringer of the village was António Galhardo, a member of the same age cohort as the interviewees, renowned for his vigorous "molinera". His performance "included deliberate variations, alternating the ringing of both ropes with strong tolls that acted as a refrain" (Francisco, personal interview, August 11, 2024). These variations prevented his "molinera" from becoming monotonous. His melodic execution did not pause, inserting stronger tolls amidst the continuous sequence, generating a sound that no other bell-ringer could match. Due to the originality of his style, he was occasionally invited to perform in different villages during festive occasions, such as São Martinho de Angueira, and particularly during the festival of Nossa Senhora do Naso in Póvoa (or Pruoba), the largest pilgrimage in the Miranda plateau. It is somewhat regrettable that this bell-ringer no longer exercises his art to bring the bells to life and did not transmit his bell-ringing skills (or no one wished to learn them), meaning that today no one excels as a bell-ringer. The transmission of knowledge would have ensured the continuation of a practice that still occurs, albeit sporadically, each August during the processions forming part of the emigrants' festival programme. The depopulation of the interior, the distancing from Christian values and obligations, and the development of automated bell-ringing systems have led to the disuse of these forms of communication, which once united people and structured community life, also making the figure of the bell-ringer increasingly rare and forgotten.

The resonant sound of the bells was an integral part of the soundscape of many Portuguese villages, especially in rural areas, where oral practices were often the primary means of transmitting knowledge and culture (Correia, 2005/2012). The loss of these skills is a lament that also serves as a call to revive the sounds that can still resonate in these communities.

5. Conclusion

Today, the bells of Avelanoso mark the hours through automatic programming, according to the clock of the church tower. The hour hand activates a mechanism that, in turn, pulls the rope attached to the clapper, which strikes the bell according to the timer. Nowadays, the bells "speak" in this impersonal, monotonous, and inexpressive manner,

lacking the purposes or emotions of yesteryear. Only occasionally are they roused from their stupor by worn hands to signal the aged Sunday masses or the emigrant festival in August. Even the ringing of the death knell is no longer performed to honour those who have departed. The bells no longer toll for anyone.

For centuries, the bells played a decisive role; however, in recent decades, their relevance has diminished or become residual due to changes in the church's role as a central space, rural depopulation, and the spread of various technological means. This represents a fading intangible and cultural heritage that requires study and preservation, mirroring initiatives across the Atlantic that engage both memory and new digital technologies (Lemos & Gosciola, 2022; Silveira, 2018).

In an era marked by technology and easy access to information, it is paradoxical that many aspects of Portuguese quotidian heritage from recent decades are at risk of disappearing before our indifferent gaze. In an era of assimilation, acculturation, and globalisation, it is urgent not to let the elements that make up the identity of our communities and the people who embody them fade away. This study aims to recover knowledge from the older population, who have lived experiences and contexts markedly different from the present, with habits and lives that, though increasingly distant, form a legacy requiring analysis and documentation.

Studying these experiences offers an opportunity to rethink how we perceive and understand the concepts of aging and rurality, challenging the weight of marginalisation and exclusion, and promoting a deeper recognition of their intrinsic value within the country's cultural diversity.

Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado

References

Albuquerque, F., & Sá, T. (2021). O soar dos sinos e seus sineiros: Patrimônio imaterial em Diamantina/MG. *Turismo, Sociedade & Território, 3*(1), e26961.

Almeida, C. A. (1966). O carácter mágico do toque das campainha: Apotropaicidade do som. *Revista de Etnografia*, *VI–2*(12), 339–370.

Alsina, R. (1999). *La comunicación intercultural*. Antropos.

Baptista, M. (2009). Estudos culturais: O quê e o como da investigação. *Carnets, Revue Électronique d'Études Françaises*, *1*(Spécial), 451–461. https://doi.org/10.4000/carnets.4382

Boyer, P., & Wertsch, J. (2012). *Memory in mind and culture*. Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 2009). https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511626999

Capela, J., Borralheiro, R., Matos, H., & Oliveira, C. (2007). *As freguesias do distrito de Bragança nas memórias paroquiais de 1758: Memórias, história e património*.

Carvalho, F. dos P. (2021). *Paisagens sonoras: O toque dos sinos na era digital*. [Master's thesis, Universidade Federal de São João del-Rei].

Correia, M. (2012). *Toques de sinos das Terras de Miranda* (2nd ed.). Âncora Editora. (Original work published 2005)

Cruz, L. (2018, October 23). *Conheça influência africana na linguagem dos sinos em São João del-Rei*. Portal Geledés. https://www.geledes.org.br/conheca-influencia-africana-na-linguagem-dos-sinos-em-sao-joao-del-rei/

Diccionario de la Lengua Española. (n. d.). *Encordar*. Retrieved June 13, 2025, from https://dle.rae.es/encordar

Dumont, P. S. (2021, November 16). *40 sons de sinos: Projeto imortaliza história de Minas. Hoje em Dia*. https://www.hojeemdia.com.br/horizontes/40-sons-de-sinos-projeto-imortaliza-hist%C3%B3ria-de-minas-1.304875

Esteves, C. (2023, August 01). Nas eiras. *Jornal do Nordeste*, 19–20.

Felícia, D. (2019). *De campanis fundentis: A Fábrica de Fundição de Sinos de Rio Tinto*. [Internship report, Universidade do Porto]. Repositório Aberto. https://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/handle/10216/121685

Ferreira, M. B. (2001). A situação actual da língua mirandesa e o problema da delimitação histórica dos dialectos asturo-leoneses em Portugal. *Revista de Filologia Românica*, (18), 117–136.

Frisch, M. (1990). *A shared authority: History and memory in the two worlds of the American West*. State University of New York Press.

Galante, R. (2023). *"Essa gunga veio de lá!": Sinos e sineiros na África Centro-Ocidental e no Brasil centro-africano* [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade de São Paulo]. Biblioteca Digital USP. https://doi.org/10.11606/T.8.2023.tde-23052023-132320

Gomes, A. L. de A. (2017). *O toque dos sinos em Minas Gerais: Materialidades e práticas sociais. Museologia & Interdisciplinaridade, 6*(11), 84–94. https://doi.org/10.26512/museologia.v6i11.17742

Gonçalves, A. P., Diogo, A., Duarte, J., & Santos, M. P. (2015). T*radição sineira: Entre o tangível e o intangível* [Online exhibition]. Google Arts & Culture. https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/tradi%C3%A7%C3%A3o-sineira/KwKCYEjpvgIiLA?hl=pt-BR

Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory* (L. A. Coser, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1925)

Jerónimo – A Fundição de Sinos de Braga. (n. d.). *O processo de fabrico dos sinos*. Retrieved June 27, 2025, from https://www.jeronimobraga.com/processo-fabrico-dos-sinos/

Le Goff, J. (1984). *A civilização do Ocidente medieval* (Vol. II, M. Ruas, Trans.). Estampa. (Original work published 1964)

Lemos, U., & Gosciola, V. (2022). Ecos do passado: O sino e o sineiro como símbolos da história do mundo e como patrimônios culturais brasileiros. *Iluminuras, 23*(60), 93–103. https://doi.org/10.22456/1984-1191.117686

Llop i Bayo, F., & Álvaro, M. (1990). *Campanas y campaneros*. Centro de Cultura Tradicional Diputación de Salamanca. (Original work published 1986)

Machado, J. B. (2010). *A linguagem do toque dos sinos de São João del-Rei*. São João del-Rei, Tiradentes e Ouro Preto Transparentes. https://saojoaodelreitransparente.com.br/works/view/1224

Matos, J., & Senna, A. (2011). História oral como fonte: Problemas e métodos. *Historiæ, 2*(1), 95–108.

Meirinhos, L. M. (2014). *A evolução da Terra de Miranda: Um estudo com base nos sistemas de informação geográfica* [Master's thesis, Universidade do Porto]. Repositório Institucional Aberto. https://hdl.handle.net/10216/78276

Parafita, A. (2012, October 25). *A etnografia dos sinos: um poderoso meio de comunicação que se vai perdendo*. Dar a Palavra. https://darapalavra.blogspot.com/2012/10/a-etnografia-dos-sinos-um-poderoso-meio.html

Parroquia Peque. (2020, March 04). *Repique de campanas Peque (Zamora) – Repique la molinera* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVgUzMYqiFE

Paula, R. T. (2017). *Os sons da morte: Estudo sobre a sonoridade ritual e o cerimonial fúnebre por D. Maria I, no Brasil e em Portugal (1816–1822)* [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade Nova de Lisboa]. Repositório Universidade Nova. https://run.unl.pt/handle/10362/28839

Paula, R. T. (2019). O «som brônzeo» da morte: Poder e liturgia fúnebre a partir da torre sineira da Santa Igreja Patriarcal de Lisboa (1730–69). *Revista Portuguesa de Musicologia, 5*(1), 93–116.

Paula, R. T. de. (2021). Vozes «brônzeas» na paisagem sonora eborense. In A. F. Conde, V. de Sá, & R. T. de Paula (Eds.), *Paisagens sonoras históricas. Anatomia dos sons nas cidades* (pp. 1–37). CIDEHUS. https://doi.org/10.4000/books.cidehus.16834

Pinto, D. (2020). As vozes do milagre: O toque dos sinos no imaginário colectivo. In E. Lessa, P. Moreira, & R. T. de Paula (Eds.), *Ouvir e escrever paisagens sonoras: Abordagens teóricas e (multi)disciplinares* (pp. 199–216). Universidade do Minho/Centro de Estudos Humanísticos.

Pires, M. D. J. (2022). Português de expressão mirandesa: Contiguidade na aldeia de Avelanoso. *Lletres Asturianes, 127*, 34–54. https://doi.org/10.17811/llaa.127.2022.34-54

Portelli, A. (1991). *The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories: Form and meaning in oral history*. State University of New York Press.

Rayel, R. (2016). *A linguagem dos sinos em Diamantina (MG): Rotas turísticas na paisagem sonora* [Tese de doutoramento, Universidade Estadual Paulista]. Repositório Institucional Unesp. http://hdl.handle.net/11449/147053

Ritchie, D. A. (2003). *Doing oral history* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1994)

Sebastian, L. (2008). *História da fundição sineira em Portugal*. Trajectos da História. Câmara Municipal de Coruche.

Silveira, L. (2018, June 21). *São João Del-Rei: Da linguagem dos sinos à internet*. Diocese de São João del-Rei. https://diocesedesaojoaodelrei.com.br/sao-joao-del-rei-da-linguagem-dos-sinos-internet/

Sousa, M., & Baptista, C. (2012). *Como fazer investigação, dissertações, teses e relatórios – Segundo Bolonha* (3rd ed.). Edições Lidel.

Taras, Y. (2021). Bells towers, bells and the ringing of church bells in folk culture of Pokuttia. *The Ethnology Notebooks, 3*(159), 507–523. https://doi.org/10.15407/nz2021.03.507

Thompson, P. (2000). *The voice of the past: Oral history* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1978)

Vasconcellos, J. L. de. (1900). *Estudos de philologia mirandesa* (Vol. I). Imprensa Nacional.

Vieira, Y. H. (2022). *"Ring them bells": Instrumentos musicais e tecnologia numa fábrica de sinos e relógios de torre em Portugal* [Master's thesis, Universidade Nova de Lisboa]. Repositório da Universidade Nova. https://run.unl.pt/handle/10362/155868

Vögele, W. (2023). Sound and silence: Ringing of the bells in the period of reformation. *Carillon and Bell Culture in the Low Countries, 2*(1), 73–86. https://doi.org/10.5117/BKL2023.1.003.VOGE

Biographical Note

Manuel Duarte João Pires holds a PhD in Portuguese as a Foreign/Second Language from the University of Lisbon (2022), as well as a master's degree (2014) and a bachelor's degree (2007) in the same field from the same institution. He is currently a lecturer at the Polytechnic University of Macao, where he also coordinates the undergraduate programme in Portuguese. Previously, he taught at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China. His research includes dozens of articles published in international academic journals in the fields of Portuguese studies, cultural studies and language teaching. He is a member of the American Organization of Teachers of Portuguese. In 2024, he received the Fernão Mendes Pinto Award 2023 in recognition of the quality of his academic work in the field of Portuguese language studies. The award is attributed by the Association of Portuguese Language Universities and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries to acknowledge academic works that contribute to the promotion of the Portuguese language.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1242-5319

Email: manueljp@mpu.edu.mo

Address: Universidade Politécnica de Macau, Rua de Luís Gonzaga Gomes, Macau, China

Submitted: 07/07/2025 | Accepted: 01/09/2025