The Social Productivity of Farming: A Case Study on Landscape as a Symbolic Resource for Place-making in Southern Alentejo, Portugal

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ABSTRACT This paper deals with landscape in relation to the production of place and of social identities perceived as ‘local’. It offers an interpretation of why residents in a particular village in southern Portugal (Alentejo) perceive landscape change the way they do. Drawing on ethnographic data, the paper argues that residents of Aldeia mobilize landscape as a symbolic resource when facing changes in land-use that question established farming practices as the best use for the land. The argument is developed through a processual approach to place-making. After an introduction to the case study, attention is paid to narratives regarding village life and the role that farming and kinship play in it. For residents in Aldeia, landscape is related to two contrasting forms of social conduct, which are evaluated morally according to their distinct impacts on village life and epitomized in references to two distinct social groups, the local villagers and the non-local large landowners. These conceptions reveal the symbolic boundaries that organize spatial and social differentiation in the case presented and that are embodied in the appearance of the land. As a conceptual tool, landscape is of interest here for its emphasis on form and its capacity to render intangible values manifest.

KEY WORDS: Place, place-making, social identities, Alentejo, landscape

Introduction

How does landscape change affect place identity? Landscapes are significant symbolic resources, as they are mobilized by social actors for identity constructions drawing on territoriality. The associations between landscape and permanence get people to ponder the continuity beyond life contingencies (Lowenthal, 2007). Yet what happens when changes in land use openly challenge such constructions?

Landscape attachments embody the concrete and situated experience of place, in which particularity is emphasized (Tuan, 1977). In spite of change, investments in place remain important and lead, in a world that is increasingly structured by global processes, to the will to preserve places as situated foci of resistance and cultural
difference (Harvey, 2000). The risk, however, is to objectify such spatial entities as fixed realities.

This paper focuses on perceptions of landscape change by residents in a village located in southern Portugal (Mértola, Alentejo) and the role of landscape’s materiality in the intangible process of making place. Through the identification and description of symbolic boundaries, and the way those boundaries are thought to be manifested in landscape contrasts, it aims to document a process of spatial and social differentiation in a village here named Aldeia, located in the district of Mértola, Alentejo.¹ The paper argues against the vision of place as an achieved, ‘frozen’ fact, through ethnographic description.

Anthropologists concerned with how differently people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds experience landscapes (Bender, 1993; Hirsch & O’Hanlon, 1995; Feld & Basso, 1996) have questioned the objectification of places and communities as unproblematic juxtapositions of territory, culture and society (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Such works document how human identities draw on the permanency of the land to signal continuity but are also actively negotiated in the course of social life. It is such a process of articulation of social identities that is discussed in this paper.

The approach developed here was inspired by the phenomenological work of Casey, for whom place has ontological and phenomenological primacy over space. Place does not amount to a cultural, historical or experiential specification of space, but is rather a key element in the perceived coherence of lived experience (Casey, 1993, 1996, 1998). This requires the “gathering effect” of a horizon that is intrinsically social and cultural, insofar as social and cultural phenomena play a constitutive role in perception (Casey, 1996, p. 26; 1998). The symbolic boundaries of place, examined here, are “a positive power within which place is made”, in the Heideggerian sense that a limit is actually where something “begins its presencing” (Casey, 1998, p. 262). However, the symbolic boundaries of place dealt with in this paper are not exclusively conceptual, since they are known—objectified—in the tangibility of lived experience. This is where landscape becomes so central. My point is made ethnographically, documenting how residents in Aldeia attend to the formality of the land’s appearance as an instance that manifests the social and moral productivity of social conducts.

‘Landscape’ is of interest here particularly as it points towards an emphasis on form (Ingold, 2000), that is, the fact that whilst being itself constituted in lived experience, it assumes an object-like character insofar as it is capable of appearing detached from the immediate engagements of agents (Ingold, 2000; Olwig, 2005). Landscapes have the power through their materiality to make intangible entities (political and social) present (Olwig, 2002; Hirsch, 2003; Munn, 1970).²

This paper examines relations between farming and the production of place as residents in Aldeia see it. Below I will use the expression “the social productivity of farming”, inspired by Strathern’s notion of land as an intangible resource (Strathern, 2009), to account ethnographically for the idea that, for my interlocutors in the village, farming entails not only material but also particular social outcomes, that are revealed in the land’s appearance.

In Aldeia, residents identify a landscape contrast and, with it, two competitive modes of land use linked to two different sorts of social actors. Ultimately, I mean to
show that in the case being discussed, attachments to established farming practices go beyond mere nostalgic resistance to change. They reveal the role of landscape in the play of identity and difference within a struggle over the definition of the best uses for the land. As pointed out by Lee (2007), “attaching significance to the land can be a future oriented process”, insofar as visions of “how relations with the environment are intended to be, or what land should become, rather than simply how it has been in the past” are at stake (2007, p. 90, original emphasis). This is highlighted as well in Hirsch’s point that landscape entails a cultural process relating “the concrete actuality of everyday social life” with “an ideal, imagined existence”; or perceived potentiality (Hirsch, 1995, p. 3).

Attachments by residents in Aldeia to established farming practices are linked to changes regarding not only land use, but also land users. Subsidies for the afforestation of previously farmed land (Reg. [CEE] 2080/92), in conjunction with national legislation safeguarding the sustainable management of hunting resources (Law 173/99), encouraged large landowners who had leased the land to local farmers to now manage their estates directly. Rather than farming, large landowners now devote their estates to recreational hunting. In this context, afforestation schemes offer a good way to manage the land more extensively, whilst obtaining some financial compensation. As a consequence, farmers find it more difficult now to obtain farming areas that are large enough to enable them to achieve a better scale for their production. In its varied display of pastures, sown fields, grassland and recently afforested areas, the landscape expresses a conflict of interests between large non-resident landowners and resident farmers, who carry out two competing forms of land-use: stockbreeding and cereal production by resident farmers; and game management by non-resident large landowners. The paper deals specifically with relations between perceptions of the resulting landscape contrasts and views of social conduct, identity and place belonging linked to what it entails to be ‘a villager’.

An ethnographic description follows, being the outcome of a qualitative, open-ended, research process (participant observation) carried out in the course of residing in Aldeia over a period of 12 months, between October 2002 and April 2004. Ethnographic research was chosen with the aim of achieving an understanding (in the Weberian sense of the term) that goes beyond simply acknowledging people’s perceptions and towards building an interpretation as to why they assess landscape change in the way they do. A distinctive characteristic of ethnography is a major concern with capturing the meanings given to the matters under research in peoples’ own terms. Therefore, all aspects and dimensions of social life that emerge during fieldwork may reveal themselves relevant to the research (i.e. methodological holism is important; see Agar, 1996; Pelto & Pelto, 1986; Ellen, 1984; Hirsch & Gellner, 2001).

Much of the empirical material used here has its origins in dialogues established between the researcher and her informants that were not completely controlled by the researcher. An important aspect is that the identity acquired by the ethnographer during fieldwork inevitably takes part in shaping the research. In this case, due to my female gender status, involvement in the public arenas of village life and the domestic lives of women played an important role. Opportunities for fieldwork on the land were provided mainly by collective events, especially hunting. They were limited in the case of farming by the fact that this activity is carried out by
men only and that accompanying them was not acceptable for a woman according to local norms of conduct. Access to land users was complemented by interviews with farmers and others in their homes, as well as informal interaction in the village’s public spaces. These characteristics of fieldwork played a role in focusing the research on relations between landscape, village life and village identity.

Much of the data presented here originated in informal conversations noted down in the fieldwork diary and recorded interviews. Structured means of data collection, involving thematic interviewing and surveys (of population, households, landholdings and farming activities), were used mainly at later stages of fieldwork, when the focus of research had been narrowed down to fewer aspects.

A presentation of the case study will follow, including a short description of the physical landscape and an overview of historical developments and regulations impacting on land use. The remaining sections focus on the interlinked conceptions that I have derived from my informants during fieldwork, which highlight the role of landscape contrasts in how residents in Aldeia constitute themselves as insiders to the place. Narratives that account for the origins of local life, and their implications in terms of how the local community is imagined; the association of landscape contrasts with moral conducts that entail different social outcomes; and finally, the role of farming in revealing place attachment and actively fostering its continuance will be considered.

Introduction to the Case Study: A Village in Mértola, Alentejo

Aldeia, with circa 150 inhabitants, is a village of Mértola, one of the largest but most sparsely populated districts in Portugal (six inhabitants/km²), an area of Mediterranean climate and poor, shallow soils, on the undulating terrain characteristic of the Alentejo peneplain of southern Portugal. The landscape pattern reflects the predominance of an extensive agro-silvo-pastoral system relying on a rotation scheme involving winter crops, pastures and fallow land, in open spaces or under tree cover (holm oak and cork oak, separate or mixed). Gullies carved by seasonal watercourses (barrancos) and their particular vegetation add variation to what has been considered an otherwise fairly homogeneous landscape (Lecoq, 2002; Cancela d’Abreu et al., 2004).

The area studied is delimited to the east by the deeply carved Guadiana River, the main regional watercourse, and includes a set of landholdings to which residents feel particularly related. For those familiar with the territory, and in spite of the homogeneous appearance given by the predominant agro-silvo-pastoral system, contrasts in the landscape are noticed between farming areas (of pasture and sowed land) and areas devoted exclusively to recreational hunting. Stock-breeding (sheep and cattle) is carried out on land used by local farmers, who own smaller plots of land spread all over the area due to partition of land amongst children (see Figure 1). In hunting areas, established on the largest estates owned by non-resident landowners, permanent grasslands form a mosaic alternate with patches of scrubland and newly afforested areas (see Figure 2). These two modes of land use are perceived by residents respectively as ‘local’ and ‘non-local’.

Before examining that, however, I shall provide the reader with a grasp of how farming has expanded in the area and the social significance that it gained, especially
in relation to cereal farming, which remains a core reference in perceptions of landscape and social identity.

The cultivation of wheat has a particular place in the history of land use in the Alentejo, especially after the late 1800s, when an agriculturalist purpose for the region became hegemonic (Fonseca, 1989) and a series of policies were launched to promote the latifundist cultivation of wheat. The ‘Wheat Campaign’ (Campanha do Trigo), launched in 1929 by the Estado Novo, had the greatest impact on the expansion of farming in the Alentejo and, with it, of a regional landscape and a way of life in which class asymmetries between landowners and landless or near-landless labourers was a central feature (Cutileiro, 1971). The latifundist modality of wheat production relied heavily on the availability of uncultivated land (even if on poor soils) and a cheap and abundant workforce, leading to both the expansion of the cultivated area and the (seasonal and permanent) immigration to Alentejo of large numbers of wage labourers (Baptista, 1980, 1993; Sevilla-Guzmán, 1980).

However, the Wheat Campaign was not successful in the long term. In the early 1960s, when the expansion of cereals in the Alentejo reached its highest expression and farming employed almost half of the Portuguese working population (contributing one third of GDP), another dynamic was also already fully visible (Baptista, 1993, 1996; Veiga, 2000). Areas of urban-industrial development, including Lisbon and abroad (mainly France and Germany) attracted wage-labourers affected by structural unemployment and poverty in Alentejo. Between 1950 and 2001, emigration in search of employment caused a loss of 70% of Mértola’s...
population (Carmo, 2007). This emigration led to the drastic reduction of cheap wage labour available for farming, raising difficulties for the large-scale wheat farmers, who were also faced with the exhaustion of poor soils after years of intensified cultivation (which included a reduction of fallow periods), and with a decrease in public support. As pointed out by Baptista (1993), a duality emerged between a few farmers with better soils who were capable of investment and who intensified and diversified their production; and other landowners, who extensified or reduced their cultivated land. In Mértola, the second case prevailed (Casimiro, 1993).

The events after the fall of the Estado Novo (1974) seemed at first to go against this trend. In the post-April 1974 revolutionary period (1974 – 1977) farmland as a source of wealth and employment in the Alentejo came again to the forefront of public concern. However, this happened in close association with class conflict and the unequal distribution of land. In 1975 the Agrarian Reform was launched, while large landholdings were occupied by labourers, leading in the short period of 1975/1976 to the expropriation and nationalization of 1,093,895 hectares of land belonging to 1676 landowners (Veiga, 2000; Barros, 1986). These events were felt also in Aldeia, where after 1974 the largest properties were occupied by labourers, who kept on with cereal production and stockbreeding.

From 1977 on, however, new legislation was launched setting an emphasis on the support of small and medium farmers and cooperatives, whilst the return of occupied land to the earlier owners was also progressively implemented. Between
1977 and 1985, due to an atmosphere of uncertainty for all parties involved, the extensification of land-use, up to abandonment, was very significant (Veiga, 2000).

In 1986, when Portugal became a member of the European Community, the agricultural sector was still characterized by low productivity and lack of efficiency (Avillez, 2000). This led to the setting up of a specific program for the development of Portuguese agriculture (PEDAP). Mértola was typified as a less favoured area, with a high proportion (97%) of poor soils (considered to be unsuitable for cultivation), with a low and decreasing population density, and a high rate of agricultural employment (Casimiro, 1993). From 1987 to 1989 the district benefited from a special project (within PEDAD) for modernizing and increasing the efficiency of sheep production, which confirmed a shifting away from cereal production, towards the modernization and development of livestock breeding (especially sheep) (AAVV, 2002).

The post-1992 CAP reforms have not affected the above mentioned developments greatly, insofar as they have not forced farmers into making significant changes to their already extensive management practices (Lima, 2008). An exception, however, is the afforestation scheme in place since 1992 (Reg. [CEE] 2080/92), which aimed specifically at countering soil erosion, but which also envisaged the conversion of farmed areas whilst supporting landowners’ incomes. Reg. 2080/92 continued the already central role of public investment in the expansion of forested areas in Portugal. Distinctive features of the post-1992 afforestation scheme are, however, its environmental focus on fostering soil preservation, as opposed to a previous emphasis on production-oriented forests, and the replacement of direct state intervention by the initiative of private landowners (Radich & Baptista, 2005). Reg. 2080/92 financed tree-planting projects proposed by landowners on land previously devoted to farming. Costs of plantation, maintenance and 20-year-long income compensations were financed, with the condition that land thus afforested could not be used for farming or grazing.

Over the 1990s, the district of Mértola was one of those in which the impact of this policy was particularly felt (Cancela d’Abreu et al., 2004). In Aldeia, an important aspect of afforestation was that it was operated mainly by the largest landowners, with minor connections to village life and in conjunction with the establishment of private hunting grounds, in line with legislation from 1986 onwards. Whilst the support for afforestation helped large landowners to meet the costs involved in the preservation of game habitats, it was of no interest to farmers in need of land for extensive pastures.

The association of afforestation with hunting estates framed in decisive ways the understanding that village inhabitants have of current landscape change. To local eyes, the large-scale tree-planting ‘projects’ that were enabled by the Common Agricultural Policy were associated with denial of access to the land.

It is to the landscape perceptions of residents in Aldeia and their role in the imagination of place that we now turn our attention.

The Symbolic Boundaries of Place

The Mutual Constitution of Landscape and People

To its inhabitants, Aldeia is a “farming village” (uma aldeia muito agrícola) in decline. This decline is for them evident in the rural exodus and the decreasing
number of farmers and farms. Presently, many of the current inhabitants are natives who have returned to the village after retirement. Young people tend to leave to work or study elsewhere.

This view of a declining village is set against the idealization of the past wheat cultivation as a moment of fulfilment, which was embodied in the searas (wheat fields). By way of contrast, the older residents of Aldeia in particular portray the present as being “nothing” (isto hoje não é nada), with ‘nothingness’ being embodied especially in the expansion of scrubland, but also in afforested areas. There is a symbolic contrast here between the cultivated and the uncultivated as forms of inverse potentiality (see Hirsch, 1995) that goes beyond a nostalgic relation to the past. We also find such a contrast between scrubland and the wheat fields in memories narrating the origins of village life and of particular estates. The example below, extracted from a much longer account, narrates an incremental process of simultaneous agricultural development, the multiplication of people and the division of land:

My great-grandfather (...) took possession of an area, I mean a big area (...) They came here, but here there was nothing (não havia nada). There was only wolves and everything was covered with wild strawberry trees. It was only later that my father and my uncles began doing some things. (...) This was not explored [used], in the beginning they didn’t plough the land with animals or anything. They had a kind of large knife [cutelo], one calls it a roçadoira, with which they broke the estevas [Cistus] and then with large alferces [another tool] they pulled them out and they started by sowing rye. It was poverty; it was something very poor. Then they got some cows, but they had nothing here, not even to feed the animals or anything (...) My father and my uncles went [further north] to get hay to feed the cows; you can imagine the misery that this was here. The other animals [goats], when the spring arrived they took them up the Guadiana River, up until Moura where people already sowed something. They fed them during those six months and then the rest of the year they gave them food here. They walked up there, all on my grandfather’s back, you see ... But let’s keep on with the story. After they were here and after my great-grandfather’s death, they divided the property. All this part below the land entitled Freixo (...) was kept for my grandfather and the other part for my aunt (...). Well, my aunt, she married a man called Anibal. As there were no children, that Anibal divided the property in half when my aunt died. He kept half but he sold it. (...). She [the grandfather’s sister] left her part to the nephews and nieces (...). That’s the whole story.

The development of land and people appear here as two facets of one place-making process, insofar as both land and people rely on each other in the unfolding of the narrative. In the account above, the narrator speaks of a progression through modes of cultivation, from transhumance to land clearings and then the cultivation of crops. This transformation of the land both relies upon and enables the multiplication of people and households. In the settlement to which it refers, residents hold the view that they all descend from “one siblinghood” (uma irmandade). The culmination of such an incremental process is narrated through
memories of the Wheat Campaign, when “only stone remained unploughed” and “great amounts of wheat and barley were harvested” (fieldwork notes). References to that period emphasize especially the sharecroppers’ effort, and their power to transform the land. In line with this, the older residents recall with satisfaction that in the same period the area was inhabited by large families, “with ten children and more” and like to point out that the school (now closed for lack of students) had to function in two shifts, in order to accommodate all the children. Accounts such as this refer to the land not only as an asset and the source of livelihood. Rather, the land is mobilized for expanding human life, leading to the proliferation of people and land-based households. Associated with the seizing and transformation of the land we find the expansion of kinship.

Narratives like this one are distinct from others regarding the origins of land concentration by non-resident owners. The most current account states that in the past a humble and well known tradesman made a sudden fortune; after which he bought land from several local landowners, thereby assembling the land in large estates which he later sold on to non-resident owners.

These two types of accounts narrate incremental processes of a different kind, which we could schematize into an opposition between ‘accumulating land’, as large landowners are perceived to do, and ‘accumulating people’ (relationships), through the ‘circulation’, so to speak, of land (the movement of inheritance and joining within the lifecycle of households). The following section shows how these distinct ‘incremental processes’ are evaluated in moral terms. That is, how contrasts between ‘the accumulation of land’ versus ‘the accumulation of relationships’ are linked to the notions of ‘selfishness’ (egoísmo) and ‘wanting to know’/‘caring’ (querer saber de) (about others; about things).

Incremental Processes: Accumulation versus Distribution as Two Forms of ‘Growth’

At the initial stages of fieldwork, transformations under way at the largest estates were framed to me in the following ways, as recorded in my field notes:

November 2002. On the edge of the settlement I met H., a man in his seventies, to whom I asked what were the gates visible in the fields ahead of us. H. explained it was the way into a herdade (a large estate) that, he explained, belongs to “people from Lisbon” (uns de Lisboa), and is used “just for their hunting”.” They fixed the monte (the houses?) but it’s just for business”; it is “solely for their own use. They come on the weekends and so, during the hunting season.” H. added that in former times (antigamente), the herdade “used to be the Paradise” (antigamente aquilo era o Paraíso), there were wheat fields (eram campos de trigo). Now [instead], the Alentejo is just for business (Agora o Alentejo é isto, é só para negócio). For H., the land became so inhospitable that nowadays “even the birds” (partridges) tend to leave the land and look for the company of people in the villages. (Edited field notes)

The explanation offered by H. touches on several themes meaningful for residents in Aldeia when commenting on landscape change. He recalled that we gazed at land owned by “people from Lisbon”, who use it in a non-productive way. The fact that
H. uses the term ‘business’ (‘just for business’) is interesting here. Generally speaking, commercial hunting is nowadays referred to as ‘a business’ (um negócio) in the district of Mértola. However, H. also indicates that this landowner uses the land “just for their hunting”, “solely for their own use”. Residents establish a contrast between cases in which landowners use the land for sport (playfully) with their private guests (‘friends’) and cases of commercial hunting, which are expanding in other parts of the district. When H. uses the term ‘business’ here, he draws on these recent connotations of hunting, but his emphasis is on a lack of concern with the land’s productivity. The dominant distinction is between hunting and farming. In the perspective of H. and other residents, farming entails an aspect of ‘distribution’ because it enrols local leasers, farmers and sharecroppers, to work on the land. There is here a notion of farming’s productivity that goes beyond producing food and other raw materials, to include also the social relations created and maintained by this activity. The conversion of the herdade to recreational hunting is (in H’s perspective) an expression of ‘selfishness’ due to the fact that the landowner, now using land “just for himself” and a strict circle of friends, and terminating farming, ceases relations with former leasers of the land (farmers), and between these and local labourers.

The moral approach to changes in land use and their association to personal conduct is clear as H. says that in earlier times the estate used to be “the Paradise”. H. explicitly invoked biblical imagery, thereby suggesting associations between the putative land’s barrenness and human misbehaviour (Cronon, 1996; Olwig, 1996).

The example above shows how residents in Aldeia address land use and landscape change in terms of a moral contrast between a conduct revealing ‘selfishness’ and that implying an interest in others (querer saber), or ‘care’. The following example, in which a once powerful lavrador (a wealthy farmer) is set in contrast to his wife, reveals the specific meanings of this duality:

July 2003. According to A. and M.J., the lavrador B., “was an evil person”: “if an employee would ask for a better salary, he called the authorities and then shut the man in the stables, where he was beaten”. B.’s wife, however, was a good person. (…) While the lavrador always thought that his workers were given too much food, his wife instead ordered [after he went to sleep] that an extra portion of ham, cheese or so was added to the meals. (Edited field notes)

B., for whom many of the older residents of Aldeia have worked in their youth, is remembered for having accumulated land, including by taking possession of plots belonging to sharecroppers unable to pay back their debts. His wife, however, had the exemplary reputation of someone who ‘cares’ about others, particularly evidenced in stories of her acts of distributing food. The examples of B. and his wife narrate the contrasting outcomes of accumulating and distributing goods. Both involve incremental processes, but of inverse moral connotations. Concerns with material accumulation, as characteristic of the lavrador, set limits to someone’s capacity for ‘growing’ in the moral sense through an orientation towards others. In contrast with the desire for material accumulation, someone who reveals care for others grows in the regard others devote to them.9

This moral contrast finds expression also in spatial terms, and is key to the way residents in Aldeia claim their distinct ‘villagehood’, in opposition to the large
landowners. It is common to hear people of Aldeia refer to themselves either as “the little-folk” (os pequenos) or “the poor” (os pobres), in contrast with large landowners and upper-class members, to whom they refer as “the grand folk” (os grandes) or “the rich” (os ricos). This expresses a boundary between ‘being local’ and ‘non-local’.

The fact that ‘the grand-folk’ are perceived as being ‘non-local’ is not only a matter of their de facto non-residence in Aldeia. Their ‘non-localness’, so to speak, is predicated on an ideational boundary through which villagers constitute themselves as insiders to place (the village) in opposition to large landowners.

An ideology of social evenness infuses perceptions of what being a villager entails, which go hand in hand with the externalization, so to speak, of social asymmetry. Being villager or non-villager is not an absolute attribute of a person. In daily interactions, some people’s status tend to be ‘externalized’ (i.e. become that of a non-villager, referred to as ‘them’) when their relative wealth is foregrounded. This happens for instance with the larger local farmers, who are variably referred to as ‘us’ or as ‘them’. This ideology of social evenness is also well conveyed in the irony expressed towards a woman who emigrated for several years but who is clearly seen as an ‘insider’. The fact that she was said to have wished, upon returning to Aldeia, to be treated as Dona (a title reserved for the wives of large landowners) because she disliked being called ‘cousin’ (prima) was commented on by other villagers with mockery.

Conceptions of the village as a community of peers are aptly conveyed by the assertion, sometimes made, that ultimately villagers ‘are all cousins”—an idea picturing the village as a composite of households ‘linked’ (ligadas) together through kinship. Kinship is here established concentrically by reference to the subject, in terms of a group of people that ‘irradiates’ from the ego (Bestard-Camps, 1991). A further distinction is made between different gradations of distance, ranging between ‘one’s own people’ (os meus), especially those with whom domestic life is shared and, at the other extreme, those with whom one acknowledges relatedness but are also said to be ‘distant’ (desviados: ‘diverted’). In practice, actual relatedness is assumed within the nuclear family and does not go beyond two or at most three generations. Cousins are, in this context, truly a “boundary relative” in the sense given to the expression by Strathern (1981, p. 145). In her study of a British rural community, Strathern signals the need to look to kinship not only in terms of what connects people, but also in terms of how kinship sets limits to relationality. As a ‘boundary relative’, variously seen as ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of kinship, cousinship sets the emphasis on the achievement of connectedness, through what residents in Aldeia call ‘care’ (querer saber), that is, an orientation towards others.

The contrast between holding back (selfishness/greed) and engaging with others as a source of moral growth (mentioned so far in terms of an opposition between villagers and large landowners) is therefore a moral issue for villagers themselves, who praise the active creation of connectedness. Episodes—that people take note of and are quick to recall—of conflict and breakdown of relations around the division of inherited property between siblings, are perceived instances of socially unproductive ‘selfishness’. The incremental potential of acts of ‘care’, instead, is conveyed in positive evaluations of individuals as being “someone of many relations” (uma pessoa dada).

At stake are particular ideas of productivity, including what may be termed ‘social productivity’, which incorporates practices that are thought to lead to the expansion
of sociality. It is to this aspect that we will now turn our attention, attending also to how farming may embody such views or, in other words, how connectedness is thought to be practised and revealed through the cultivation of the land.

**Ideas of Productivity: Farming and the Production of the Local Community**

S. is a farmer in his 40s, and the son and grandson of local landowners and farmers. He farms almost 450 hectares of land scattered across the local area and owned by different members of his kindred. According to this farmer, if it wasn’t for him the property would be abandoned or already sold, since most of the other owners have lived away for many years. This farmer grew up in the *monte* (farmhouse) where he now maintains the headquarters of his farm (whilst residing in the village). After the premature death of his father, and in order to ensure the continuation of the farm, S. dropped out of school early. He left the farm years later, when he enlisted for compulsory military service. From then on and until 1990, S. visited Aldeia regularly in order to ensure that the land was sowed, and “sold the pastures” (*vendeu as pastagens*) to other local farmers. When he returned to the village permanently in 1990, S. sowed his own land and used his tractor to work for other farmers. Over the years, he gradually increased the amount of land that “he sowed for himself”, ceased working for others and, following a general trend, shifted the focus of production from cereal cultivation towards stockbreeding.

As for other farmers, subsidies are important for S. These comprise headage payments for sheep and cattle and payments allowing for the production of fodder and the maintenance of pastures (with payments sustaining cereal sowing increasingly giving way to other sorts of support, including agro-environmental schemes encouraging extensive grazing). However, S. does not apply for subsidies for large-scale tree planting, although this farmer could hypothetically opt for them. When discussing the “tree-planting projects”, as village residents call them, S. argued that the afforestation scheme may prove to be more rewarding in terms of short-term revenue, but also that this may be done only by someone who is “not attached to the land” (não quer saber).

S. shares with other farmers the view that large-scale tree-planting spoils the land’s fertility, insofar as to benefit from the subsidy one is constrained to open deep furrows in the ground that prevent soil erosion. S. and other farmers believe that this intervention causes the land’s barrenness, because it mixes up “tamed land” (*terra mansa*) with the deeper layers of ground. This is thought to have implications for the soil’s fertility. As expressed by another farmer, “the land becomes ‘weak’ (*fróuca*), and one can no longer cultivate anything there” (não dá para fazer ali nada). ‘Tamed land’ refers to the ordered layers created by human management throughout several years. Ploughing and grazing are thought to ‘tame the land’, insofar as they gradually separate humus from stony ground and segregate valued from unwanted vegetation (such as scrub and weeds).

Soil fertility is not the only kind of fertility contemplated by S. when he mentions the ‘care for the land’ (*querer saber*). When, like H. (mentioned above), S. argues against treating the land exclusively as a source of material wealth, he also conveys something about the land’s role in the creation and maintenance of human relations.

As with other farmers, a particular network of relations allowed S. to expand the amount of land on which he relies for farming. Access to land has been facilitated
not only by close kin (his sister and his mother; his mother’s brothers and his father’s brothers), but also other kin with whom he keeps in close contact (his father’s second cousin and his sister’s husband’s father). The fact that he expanded the amount of land that he can rely on through informal agreements with several relatives shows the importance of relationships in ensuring access to land. This network is an important resource. Such agreements, however, do not merely recognize relatedness (kinship) between the parties involved. Rather, they actively restate connections between those involved. Those cases, in which landowners opt for leasing the land to local farmers, rather than afforesting previously farmed land, are interpreted by residents in Aldeia as prioritizing a continued engagement with local social relations. Thus, if kinship/local relationships open up possibilities for expanding access to the land, options concerning land use likewise reinforce the sort of connectedness seen to be the source of local life. With its particular visibility, farming gives tangible expression to that process of actively restating connectedness. The example of S. is again illustrative. In spite of relying on different plots of land, belonging to several landowners and located in different parts of the territory close to Aldeia, S. manages the land that he farms as a whole. All different parcels of land are integrated by the farmer in a single rotation scheme, following the alternation between crops, pastures and ploughed land that are characteristic of farming in this area. His farm, which is constituted and visible through the farmer’s activity, embodies kinship, that is, his relations with ‘his people’. As a prolongation of this, the farmed landscape embodies ‘village life’ more generally and the moral view according to which local life is predicated on people’s orientations towards one another (‘care’).

The example of S. is not unique. Other plots of cultivated land reveal other reciprocal arrangements between farmers and landowners. When the land is forested or becomes part of a private hunting area, from the perspective of these arrangements it ‘moves’ out of the local sphere. Drawing on the metaphors of circulation and accumulation through which I accounted for the meanings of ‘selfishness’ and ‘care’, one could state that rather than circulating amongst people, the land ‘stops in the hands’ of a single person—the landowner.

Conclusion: Land as a Manifestation of Care

This paper examined the relationship between landscape change and place identity, adopting a processual approach to place-making. Ethnographic data were presented that account for the role of landscape in the articulation of ideational boundaries constitutive of a particular kind of people (the villagers) and a place (the village). We saw that in Aldeia, farming connotes ‘localness’, whilst afforestation and the use of land exclusively for recreational hunting are regarded less favourably. I have suggested that the way residents and farmers perceive landscape change is linked to the sort of social relations that are revealed and nurtured by different kinds of land-use.

The limitation of access to land previously available for farming is a crucial issue here. New afforestation schemes in conjunction with hunting legislation have encouraged the largest landowners to manage directly estates that they have previously leased to resident farmers. As a consequence, farmers find it more difficult now to obtain farming areas that are large enough to enable them to achieve a better scale for their production.
Changes in land use entail however a limitation of access that goes beyond considering land as a productive asset, and draw on the land as a means for the production of social relations. Notions of productivity include what I have here termed ‘social productivity’, or the creation and maintenance of links between people. By looking to conceptions of village life by residents, the paper argued that village life is thought to be predicated on an incremental process in which farming and kinship imagery are central. According to those conceptions, the continuance of place relies on social conducts revealing an orientation towards others (‘care’; querer saber), which foster the expansion of social connectedness within the village. Fields devoted to crop production and animal husbandry are positively valued by villagers because they associate these with the expansion of the local community.

The largest landowners, who are the main inducers of landscape change and who have no social ties with the village, epitomize for villagers a contrasting incremental process, characterized by the accumulation of land ‘just for themselves’. Attending to the villagers’ moral approach to landscape change led us to consider the process by which villagers constitute themselves as a particular kind of people (‘the little folk’), in opposition to the large landowners (‘the grand-folk’).

This paper offers an ethnographic interpretation of landscape perceptions that supports the theoretical consideration of place as something in the making, rather than a given fact. We have seen how the symbolic boundaries that shape the particularity of place are linked to social practice and that practice becomes evident in the tangible landscape.

Notes
1. Fictitious designations are given to people and also (due to its small size) to the village, as a means to protect the privacy of my interlocutors during fieldwork. The name of the district where the village is located (Mértola, Alentejo), on the contrary, is real.
2. An example is documented by Olwig (2002): the case of ‘the Thing’, an old Scandinavian political body. The author highlights the intertwined effects of customary rights, political bodies and the physical shaping of the land, in which the physical comes to embody a common arena of engagement (2002, 2005).
3. Weber considered that the study of people entails important differences vis-à-vis an investigation of the physical world, because in the first case the meanings that humans always attach to what they do are intrinsic to what is being researched and cannot be avoided (for short reference see for instance, Giddens, 1993).
4. This does not question the validation of the data and insights gained. An ongoing analysis, during fieldwork itself, of the empirical material obtained allows for the formulation of interpretative hypothesis, whose accuracy can than be methodically questioned through observation across multiple situations, and the consultation of a diversified range of informants. Content analysis and comparison of data continues during the post-fieldwork writing-up process.
5. The fact that no more than an approximate number of residents is provided here bears on the importance of the imprecision, since several inhabitants or house owners stay in the village during significant periods but not always. Their classification as residents or non-residents is open to discussion between villagers themselves and of interest to the question of what it entails to be a villager, which is addressed later on in this article.
6. Estado Novo was the name given to the authoritarian regime based on the corporative organization of society in power after the 1926 military revolt put an end to the first republic in Portugal. The regime came to an end in 1974, with the Carnation Revolution (called ‘25 of April’).
7. In the Alentejo the word monte is more commonly used to refer to the headquarters of a large estate/the houses of large farms (Picão, 1983). This is the meaning attached to monte in this sentence.
However, in Mértola and other southern locations the word *monte* is also used to refer to larger settlements with the characteristics of small villages.

8. The term *lavrador* refers to someone who farms the land (the literal translation would be ‘the one who ploughs the land’). In southern Portugal it indicates, however, a wealthy farmer, commonly also a large landowner.

9. A. and M.J., who told me this story, found great meaning in the fact that when the *lavrador* died he was all alone, whilst in his wife’s case an impressive number of poor people gathered around her. Although this aspect is marginal to the argument developed here, it should be noted (for the sake of understanding) that the capacity of someone to assemble a large number of people to prepare the ground for uncertain circumstances, such as the liminal period following death, objectifies a particular kind of personal power (Carolino, 2006).

10. These arguments reflect a more general approach to forms of structuration (segregation and division), as part of a movement from indistinctiveness towards distinctiveness through which villagers recognize the making of society (Carolino, 2006; see Douglas, 2004).

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