

Miranda Donkey: A tale of heritage construction and rural revival

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Introduction

I will be telling you the tale of the Miranda Donkey, the only Portuguese indigenous breed of donkeys. I'm bringing this topic to you not only because most of you are probably unaware of its existence, but also because the path that it has taken in the last decade might contribute to one of the main debates that brought us together: what is the future of donkeys? What new roles may it have today, in our world?



This discussion is particularly relevant if we consider that the region where this breed is from has been struggling with rural abandonment for the past 50 years: it is not just the future of this breed, and of donkeys in general that is at risk; the future of the local culture, of the whole region is also at stake. As we will see, it turns out that donkeys can be key-elements for development and rural revival.

I had prepared a presentation which was probably too academic – and boring – for this crowd, so I've decided to make it more empirical. However, I will be happy to further explain the theoretical framework that I have used.

My own standing: volunteer work between 2008-09, and have been coming back or collaborating from a distance whenever possible. I am, therefore, personally engaged with this project, but I do not come here today as its representative.
Double role: anthropologist and member.

Theoretical premises

Main concept is heritage, and heritage-making: dynamic process and not static object, socially created and manipulated.

Why is this concept relevant for this discussion? Because heritage is about the construction and attribution of value, it enables our understanding of the new values – and therefore new roles - that donkeys have and may have in the future.

Context

Miranda do Douro is the easternmost municipality of Trás-os-Montes, a region which sits in the Northeast of the country.

Like most of Portugal's countryside, it was emptied by the 1960s' wave of emigration that took away most of its labor; and at this point, it becomes difficult to tell if that came first, or if it was the mechanization of agriculture. In any case, only a few stayed, and the ones who did, were mostly older people, above 50-60 years of age. The memories and representations of the countryside as a place of hardship and poverty, have been keeping the young from coming back. In Miranda, constituted by around 15 villages, 7400 inhabitants, 2000 live in the (small) city; Atenor has 200.

Activities: After this, a turn to tourism (cultural value, the language, the music). However, small-scale agriculture is still very relevant for family economy: old people living on 150€monthly pensions must rely on farming and cattle.

The fact that this culture is still alive, and is more than just memories, makes this region especially appealing, as heritage does not have to be recovered from its own ashes; there is something to work with, from the start, that is still alive. And this means that the Mirandese rural culture is a mixture of the traditional and the modern, the urban and the rural.

Donkeys are the example of just that: traditionally, they were used for: 1) transport (people, vegetables, firewood), sometimes with carts; 2) for ploughing the fields (small vegetable gardens, vineyards, to sow potatoes). And they still are, even though they are not the main agricultural tool anymore. At the same time, they are also kept as pets, which is was unthinkable 50 years ago, and which points to the emotional connection (memory, reminiscence of the past).

As the owners become extinct, so do the animals; as the owners feel abandoned, so do the animals.

AEPGA and Miranda Donkey

This was the picture in 2001 – still is, to be true. A couple of young vets was working at the time at the International Douro Natural Park when they noticed that even though donkeys were still used by locals, they were in decline and their welfare was not being assured. Furthermore, they noticed that several donkeys presented similar characteristics, only to be found in that region of the country. Thus, in 2001, AEPGA was founded to study and protect donkeys, just as indicated by the name. AEPGA stands for Association for the Study and Protection of Donkeys.

Miranda Donkey: rather tall, the height at the withers is, on average, 130 cms (Gigante is as tall as myself); dark brown fur, often thick and long (blondish); white fur on the muzzle and around the eyes; long, furry ears; large hoofs and joints; docile temperament.

Locally, they were used for the production of mules, to work in the region and to be taken to the Douro wine region.

Very similar to Baudet de Poitou, in France, and the Zamorano-Leónes, in Spain. Pereira has given two possible explanations for the distribution along the Atlantic coast of donkeys with such specific characteristics: 1) due to their robustness, they would be used by pilgrims to walk the Way of Saint James; 2) they would have been taken from France to the Galician and Northern Portuguese coast, to be shipped to the South American colonies. I must say I haven't done much research on the subject, so I couldn't quite confirm these theses.

2005: 2000 individuals, most of which were old (average is 16 years old); 900 jennets.

Authentication, 2003, officially recognised as the only Portuguese indigenous breed of donkeys. AEPGA was appointed as the breed's steward (responsible for managing the breed registry)

Goals and actions

(1) Prevent extinction by promoting controlled reproduction: 1) subsidies to jennet or stallion owners (around 170€/year, not much but still relevant); 2) stallions that are taken from village to village upon request; 3) AEPGA has a breeding centre, with selected females and stallions. Good results, as in 2005 there were 20 births, and in 2012, 110 (excluding those that are not registred). Plus, we went from 150 breeders, concentrated in Miranda region, to 325, spread all around the country. (population numbers in 2011: 1500, 650 jennets).

(2) Donkey welfare: more often than not, owners do not know as much about it as would be desirable; 1) veterinary support, provided by various vets who go around the villages and charge less than other colleagues; 2) experts in hoof trimming and expeditions; 3) fostering centre for donkeys, most of whom are weather old or sick, with the support of the Donkey Sanctuary .

(3) Research and volunteer work: all areas.

(4) Finding new roles: 1) donkey assisted therapy, but, again, most therapists don't seem to take the area seriously; 2) environmental education programme for schools; 3) tourism. The latter is the one getting more attention, as it brings very precious income; visitors' centre – visits and walks; more organised walks; organised activities/ festivals, that promote not only the donkey, but other natural and cultural resources of the region (l burro l l gueiteiro). In 2005, 200 visitors; in 2011, 4000.

(5) Rural revival: to preserve an endangered culture – the cultural and the natural are one. Because it is not just the donkeys that are endangered, but also their owners, it is impossible to think the donkeys' conservation independently from the region's and vice-versa.

Finally, a last goal is transversal to all that have been mentioned so far: awareness raising and valorising the donkey. Sponsorship.

Conclusion

Constructing the Miranda Donkey as heritage has fostered the creation of new, added values to it. It is not just its usability that is valued, but also, and mainly, its genetic and cultural relevance. Yesterday, someone mentioned that the place that

donkeys hold, could be roughly understood in two axis: protection vs. usability; North vs. South. These dichotomies match the ambiguous standing of both the Miranda region and the Miranda Donkey.

Indeed, local populations have changed their representations and now valorise donkeys more (although they still laugh at the thought of someone who, in his right mind, decides to have 100 donkeys). And visitors buy the opportunity of experiencing the “endangered”, which is also desirable: a beautiful breed of donkeys, its picturesque owners, the declining culture that brings them together – and, therefore, what seemed to be long lost, valorised, moral values.

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