

## MACIEIRA DE ALCOBA (ÁGUEDA) – A RURAL AREA IN A CONTEXT OF CHANGE

**Cármén Ferreira**

Geography Department  
Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto  
CEGOT Researcher  
dra.carmenferreira@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

Macieira de Alcoba is one of the eastern most parishes of the council of Águeda, located on the western slopes of the foothills of Serra do Caramulo between the river valleys of Águeda and Alfusqueiro. Águeda is the nearest town, at a distance of 25 Km.

In the 1990s, Macieira de Alcoba had only 164 residents, a tavern, a primary school, old rundown granite houses, and forests, woods and a bucolic countryside. Its scarce population retains many traditional habits, such as a community type of living, typical of a mountain village.

Twenty years on, depopulation in this mountain village continues and the aging of its population is the major problem in the parish. Today, this changing village has 84 residents. Although the population in Macieira de Alcoba is scarce and aged, the City Council of Águeda, the Parish Council of Macieira de Alcoba, the various local associations and the population itself have already taken the first steps to implement a sustainable development project in this mountain village. With the focus placed on its exotic landscapes, pedestrian trails were prepared to allow close contact with the cultural, heritage, natural and landscape features of one of the most beautiful villages in Caramulo, houses were rebuilt for rural tourism and old spaces were put to new use. A new village was reborn and is revitalised especially on weekends and holidays by a stressed urban population seeking the tranquillity of these redesigned rural areas.

**KEYWORDS:** Macieira de Alcoba, Serra do Caramulo, rural área, changing territory.

## INTRODUCTION

Located in central Portugal, Serra do Caramulo is 30 Km long and stretches NNW/SSE, parallel to the coastline, with a maximum height of 1 071 meters. Its slopes have distinct geomorphological features which, in turn, are reflected in how the human occupation is structured. The eastern slope corresponds to an escarpment with different levels of about 800 meters. The steep slopes on this side of the mountain and almost absence of arable terraces are the cause of the low village density on this slope. The western slope of Caramulo, however, also called Serra de Alcoba (which in Arabic means “dome”) has geomorphological features different that those on the eastern slope, being less sloping and gradually descending to the shore, cut by humid valleys sheltered by rounded hills in granite and schist. The presence of terraces and fertile sheltered valleys fed by water lines, favours the establishment of many micro rural clusters on this slope (Associação Etnográfica Os Serranos, 2010).

The isolation of the micro rural clusters led, throughout the centuries, to the development of a spirit of solidarity and natural techniques, which the generations of highlanders have managed to preserve to this day. Because they depended almost entirely on the mountain, they had to be frugal and economise on the natural and produced resources. The population living on the western slope of the mountain of Caramulo has become creative, determined and rigorous in their work, generosity, hospitality and patience.

Especially after the 1960s, new paradigms were introduced in the economic development of mountain cultures and villages. The introduction of “eucalyptus trees” and “dirty machines”, as referred by Manuel Farias of the Associação Etnográfica Os Serranos (pg. 7), distorted the area as if they were an “original sin”, causing the imbalance of the mountain paradise. The lack of roads, electricity and the isolation in which they lived forced the younger residents into moving to the larger coastal cities or abroad in search of a better quality of life, causing the depopulation of the villages.

The concept of economic development changed with the introduction of sustainable development. Having been sustainable for a long time, these spaces are now perfect for “tranquillity”, “balance”, “contact with nature”, and are complementary to urban spaces. This is a new challenge for Maceira de Alcoba, a parish whose rural area has now been redesigned, becoming, in fact, a rural area in a changing context.

## MACIEIRA DE ALCOBA IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: A TYPICAL MOUNTAIN VILLAGE

Macieira de Alcoba is the home of one of the eastern most parishes of the Águeda council (fig. 1). It is located on the western slopes of the foothills of Serra do Caramulo between the river valleys of Águeda and Alfusqueiro. Águeda is the nearest town, at a distance of 25 Km.

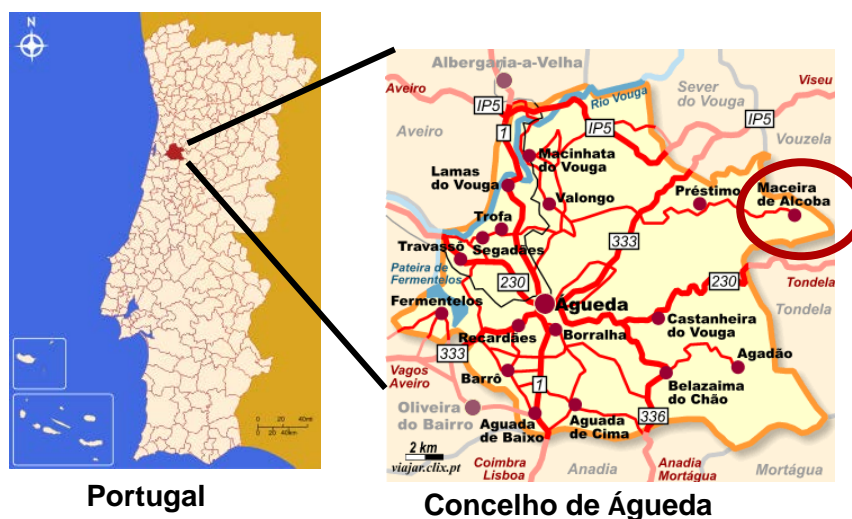


Fig. 1. Location of the parish of Macieira de Alcoba in the council of Águeda.

The parish of Macieira de Alcoba covers an area of about 9.39 Km and is formed by four villages or places, respectively, Macieira de Alcoba, Carvalho, Ribeiro and Urgueira. The latter stands at a higher altitude and is the westernmost village of the parish. The convex slopes, with mean slopes close to 20°, prevail, with altitudes ranging from 180 m, near Águeda River, and 762 m, in the hills of Urgueira (fig. 2).

The area of Macieira de Alcoba is in granite with fertile humic cambisols. In terms of climate, its winters present minimum temperatures between 2°C and 4°C, and fifteen to thirty days with minimum temperatures beneath 0°C. In summer, the maximum temperature ranges between 23°C and 29°C. Rainfall occurs mainly in autumn and winter, with an annual mean value of 1883.5 mm (Ferreira, C., 1995).

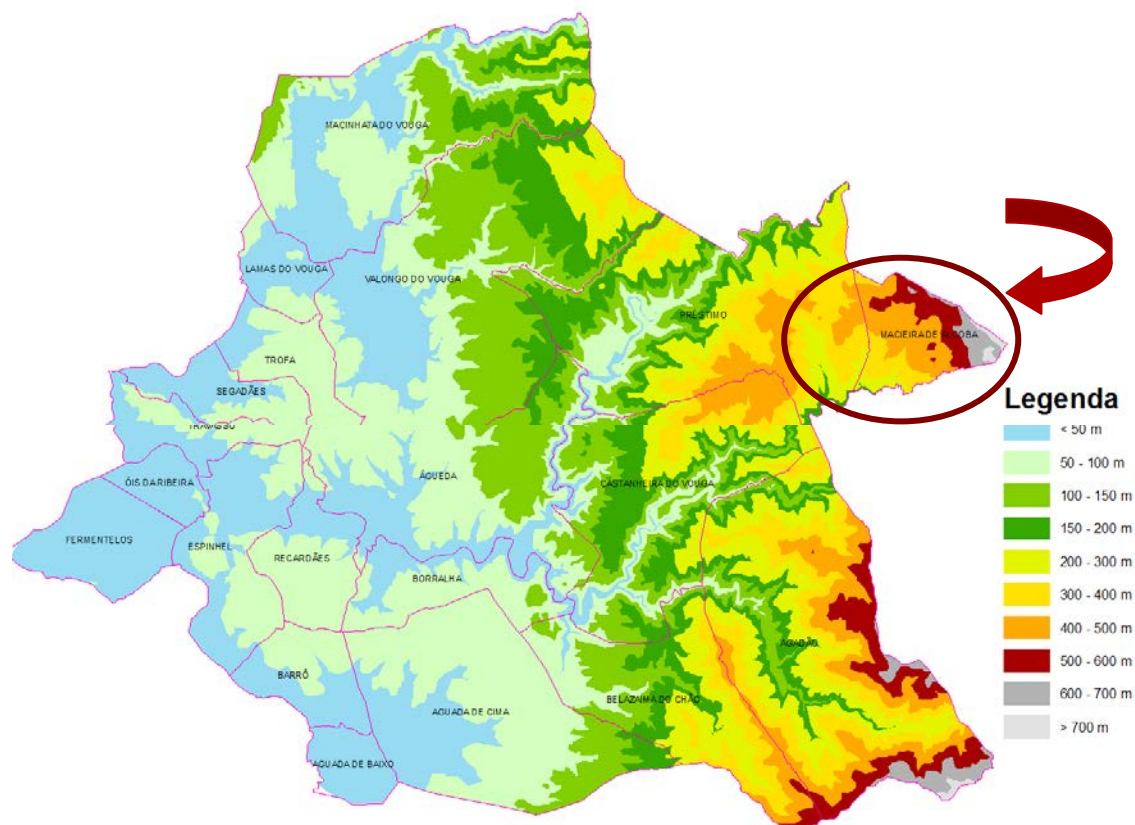


Fig. 2 – Altitude range in Maceira de Alcoba and in the council of Águeda. The altitude drops from the western slope of Serra do Caramulo, in the Eastern part of the council, to the coastal planes to the west.

The natural mountain vegetation is mainly formed by tree species such as oaks (*Quercus faginea*), cork oaks (*Quercus suber*) and sweet chestnut trees (*Castanea sativa*), while the shrub vegetation is mainly formed by broom (*Genista monspessulana*), *carqueja* [a flowering bush plant] (*Chamaespartium tridentatum*), heather (*Erica arborea*), gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and ferns (*Pteridium aquilinum*), among others. From the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new species were introduced in the area. Following the reforestation campaigns fostered by the Estado Novo, in the 1940s, we have the Maritime pine (*Pinus pinaster*) and later, in the 1970s, in an attempt to make better use of the land, the eucalyptus tree (*Eucalyptus globulus*) which, because of the forest fires taking place more often from this century on, has increasingly taken over the over.

Table 1 shows the evolution of the population in Maceira de Alcoba between the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21 centuries, highlighting the depopulation in the village as a consequence of the First World War and of the migration phenomena to the cities nearer the coast or abroad, where the economic development attracted this isolated population. It should be noted that

the only road link passing through the parish, the EN230, linking Águeda and Talhadas, was paved in the 1970s and 1980s, and the electricity grid, installed after the communication routes, only reached the villages of Maceira de Alcoba in the 1980s (Associação Etnográfica Os Serranos, 2010). Until the 1990s, telephones were rare, with only one public telephone in the parish and very few families with one.

Table 1 – Evolution of the population of Maceira de Alcoba from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Year	1900	1911	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1981	1991	2001	2011
Inhabitants	328	339	305	315	356	350	311	236	177	167	110	84

Source: INE. General Population Census.

The almost total absence of local communication infrastructures with the outside helped to preserve the community way of life and self-sufficiency of this mountain parish.

The agricultural area is decreasing as a result of the migration of the younger population and, consequently, the population is aging. Thus, whereas in 1965 the agricultural area took up 11.8% of the parish area, in 1993 the area decreased to 9.7% (Ferreira, C., 1995). Maceira de Alcoba was living almost exclusively on subsistence farming based on a small-scale property structure.

Without a significant commercial or industrial activity, except for the tavern and a small café, the economic structure of Maceira de Alcoba is poor. A grocery van comes by every week (fig. 3) and, not so regularly, a fish van. The village depends on the outside for all the activities beyond those of survival.



Fig. 3 – Weekly grocery van

In addition to the tavern and small café already mentioned, there are other services and equipment, such as the parish council office, the primary school, the church in honour of S. Martinho, and the chapels of N. Sra. de Fátima, Carvalho and N. Sra. da Guia, in



Urgueira, the milk depot and the post-office, which houses the public telephone and is in a private house.

The urban cluster has a linear structure (fig. 4), with old rural houses mostly in granite, although we do find plaster and whitewashed houses from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

As regards transport, there was only a daily van stopping by Macieira de Alcoba in the morning, heading towards Águeda, and driving back at night. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were 13 cars and 3 motorcycles, often being used jointly by the villagers (Riobom, A. et al, 1983). The village did not have a sewage system or a public water supply to the houses. The population used the 2 public fountains, springs and wells.



Fig. 4 – Linear structure of the urban cluster of Macieira de Alcoba.

In the 1980s, the City Council of Águeda embarked on a series of initiatives together with the Porto School of Fine Arts to preserve the council's heritage, especially the mountain villages, such as Macieira de Alcoba, respecting their century-old past, cultural traditions and environmental value. The aim was to contribute to development, yet preserving the heritage.

### **MACIEIRA DE ALCOBA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: A RURAL AREA IN A CHANGING CONTEXT.**

The preliminary data of the 2011 population census shows that there are 84 residents in Macieira de Alcoba, which, according to the data in Table 1, means a decrease in population of about 23.6% since the last census. The current age structure (Table 2) shows

an aging population, with the age group of those over 65 corresponding to 62% of the resident population.

Table 2 – Age structure of the population of Maceira de Alcoba in 2011

<b>Age group</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Total</b>
0 – 14 years	3	0	3
15 – 24 years	1	1	2
25 – 64 years	10	17	27
+ 64 years	24	28	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>84</b>

Source: INE. 2011 General Population Census (preliminary data)

A key aspect conditions the evolution of the population of Maceira de Alcoba: the return of emigrants, as internal migrations are a practically irreversible phenomenon. The populations are connected to other places and such links are hardly broken to return to their home village. However, the village comes alive again during the holiday periods and weekends with the arrival of those who have left to the nearest towns or to the coastal towns – they are attracted by the life in the countryside, the call of the family, the nostalgia of childhood, to recuperate from the city bustle, by the silence and calmness of the mountain calling them.

The interest shown by the City Council of Águeda to develop tourism in this village dates back to 1977, when an article in the newspaper *Diário Popular*, of 15 September of that year (fig. 5) presented it as a future tourist village. Indeed, the mountain culture, with its fairs and festivities, dances and singing, gastronomy and the quality of its landscape strengthen this new function of the village. It was clearly a question of uniting wills - the municipality, the parish and the local population -, that have materialised in this rural area, redesigning it within a perspective of sustainable development, combining progress and heritage. The highlanders overcome the obstacles with a strong resolve and take responsibility for passing down their cultural and heritage legacy to the future generations.



Source: The newspaper *Diário Popular*, of 15 September 1977

Fig. 5 – The future of Macieira de Alcoba as a tourist village.

Thus, the rural area is transformed and is still undergoing transformation as a result of many initiatives: the improvement of road access to the village; the recovery of public buildings, e.g., the parish council building (fig. 6), and public facilities intended for tourism accommodation (fig. 7); the requalification of old, emblematic granite roads of the parish; the transformation of the primary school into a restaurant through a public-private partnership (fig. 8); the construction of a water reservoir with a capacity of 5 000 litres to supply the population; the purchase of a dumper for maintenance works to be done in the parish; the provision of a 9-seater bus intended for the transport of students, the elderly and the population in general, ensuring health care services; the rehabilitation of spaces into leisure facilities (fig. 9); the creation of two pedestrian trails to allow close contact with the landscape attractions of Macieira de Alcoba; the recovery of some festivities and traditions that had been lost in time, such as the reuse of the community oven in Urgueira, and its pilgrimage, thus becoming a parish attraction for the populations.





Fig. 6 – The recovery of the Parish Council building of Maceira de Alcoba.



Fig. 7 – The recovery of houses for tourism accommodation.



Fig. 8 – The restaurant “A Escola”. The recovery of the primary school of Maceira de Alcoba.



Fig. 9 – Chão do Ribeiro lagoon turned into a leisure park.

The two pedestrian trails of Macieira de Alcoba, endorsed by the City Council of Águeda, are an excellent excuse to visit the village and come into contact with its places and beauties. The two trails (PR3 and PR4) have different features to better suit the ability of visitors. A smaller landscape, cultural and historical trail runs through Macieira de Alcôba, called *Trilho da aldeia* (PR3), over a distance of 2.4 km, in a circle and of low difficulty, along rural and the village's paths, on foot or bicycle, and the environmental, landscape, geological, cultural and sports trail called *Trilho das terras de granito* (PR4) (fig. 10), in a circle over a distance of 8.5 Km, of medium and high difficulty, taking the visitor along pedestrian urban, rural and forest pathways (fig. 11).



Fig.10 – Trail *Trilho das terras de granito* (PR4).



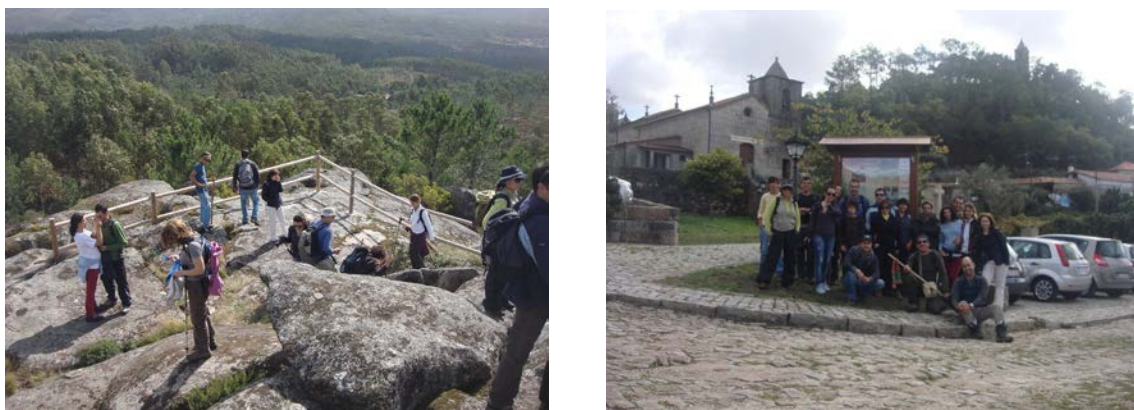


Fig. 11 – View of the granite trail (PR4) and end of trail near the local church.

In 2010, CARUMA (Centre for Arts and Rural Affairs of Urgueira and Maceira de Alcôba) opened a facility in Quinta de Santa Maria, Maceira de Alcoba. The aim of this Centre is to disseminate the villages, creating artefacts with references to typical objects of this mountain area. Each item is supposed to be linked to part of the symbolism, inspiration and tradition of the villages of Maceira de Alcoba and Urgueira.

The highlanders of Maceira de Alcoba have continuously fostered its village, and in 2011 they applied to PRODER with a project entitled "Maceira de Alcoba - Aldeia Pedagógica do Museu do Milho" (Maceira de Alcoba - Pedagogical Village of the Maize Museum).

This project aims to transform Maceira de Alcoba into a live museum, the Maize Museum, because, as the old proverb says, "Whether we like it or not, there will always be maize in Maceira". In ancient days, Maceira de Alcoba also had several rotation mills, of which there still are important traces, as well as the memory of those who used them most of their lives. Within the Maize Museum project, the intention is to rehabilitate the rotation mills, thus creating Mill Park associated to another pedestrian trail along the Chão do Ribeiro River. The aim of these projects is to promote the recovery and enhancement of the important natural and cultural heritage of this village, in particular its traditional mills, granaries, threshing floors, tanks and irrigation systems, landscape, gastronomy, traditions and hospitality of its people, thus contributing to local development and the preservation of their collective memory.

## CONCLUSION

Rural spaces are redesigned through a serious "dialogue" between the old and the new, the past and the future, where progress and heritage walk side by side in a process of sustainable development. Customs and traditions should be preserved in order to keep them

alive and part of the daily life. This village and its 84 inhabitants, 62% of which are over the age of 65, is an example to follow. The purpose of its transformation is such that everyone can be proud of building this new future for Macieira de Alcôba.

The preservation of the heritage of Macieira de Alcoba should therefore mean the recovery or redesign of a dynamics of local development that does not clash against, rather complete and justify the morphology of the village, its buildings and cultural traditions.

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