

# Religious freedom, civic rights and magical heritage: The case of Sintra, Portugal

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## Sintra: Monumentality and sacredness as heritage

Sintra is a charming village situated circa 30 km away from the Lisbon city centre, used since the Middle Ages (and even before, during the Muslim period), as a second residence by the nobility and the royal family. But Sintra is much more than the village itself: it encompasses a large area of mountain, with forests, lagoons and waterfalls, private parks and large estates with magnificent villas, palaces, chapels. Known to have a micro-climate, much fresher in the summer than the capital, it became, in the eighteenth centuries and nineteenth, a trendy place for the high bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. From being a refuge from summer heat and plagues for the Portuguese court, and a renowned hunting ground, the fame of Sintra grew. In the 19th century both the village and the mountain became part of the European Grand Tour. Ferdinand II, came to Portugal to marry Queen Mary II, fell in love with the place, and had a fairy-tale palace built at the top of the hill, over the ruins of the ancient Hieronymite monastery. Following the Romantic taste of the epoch, he surrounded the palace with a magnificent park, full of exotic plant species, mixed with local species, and he reforested the Sintra mountain.

With a combination of both landscape and architectural richness, Sintra was classified by UNESCO in 1995 as a World Heritage Site. It achieved this award because it represents a model of Romantic landscaping, together with architecture that portrays different historical periods, revealing also who lived there throughout the centuries, and how.

## The past and the sacred

The magical aura of the “Moon Hill”<sup>1</sup> Sintra which caused such a strong impression on the prince of the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha dynasty, has a long reputation for its religious uses. There are testimonies of settlements and religious uses of the Sintra region since Neolithic times. Mysticism envelops this mountain and area, positioned right in front of the westernmost point of Europe, the Roca Cape. This magical aura is present in testimonials, from megalithic monuments to Celtic, Roman and Islamic ones, which attest to the various religious traditions that have praised, used and somehow transformed that space. The archaeological site of Alto da Vigia, overlooking the Atlantic, records occupations in Roman, Islamic and modern times, and was a Roman temple dedicated to the Eternal Sun, the Moon and the Ocean<sup>2</sup>. Other megalithic pre-historic monuments, as the Adrenunes dolmen (amongst others), the Tholos dos Monges, a burial site from 4,500 years ago, and monasteries in this region, dating from the Middle Ages on, smaller chapels and hermitages co-exist. The Penha Longa convent, built in 1355 and donated to the Hieronymite order in 1390; the 12th century chapel of São Saturnino, besides the seventeenth century Peninha sanctuary, both overlooking the ocean and the Roca Cape; the Hieronymite monastery, on the top of the hill, built on the site of a former hermitage dedicated to Our Lady of Penha, are some examples of this.

The serra has been known as a place of retreat, esoteric experiences, but also of popular religiosity related to its magical properties. The holy waters cult in Santa Eufémia is placed in a spot supposedly inhabited since 4000 BC<sup>3</sup>. São Mamede de Janas, a protector of cattle, had a chapel built in the 16th century, presumably to substitute a temple dedicated to Diana, a roman goddess also known for her relationship with animals and cattle (Rodil 2018). The feasts in honour of the Holy Spirit, in Penedo, Sintra, instituted in Portugal in the 14th century by Queen Leonor, the Holy Queen, known for her charitable deeds and sanctified in the 16th century<sup>4</sup>, almost disappeared in continental Portugal after the 16th century. This

<sup>1</sup> As the Sintra mountain is called: *Monte da Lua*, in Portuguese.

<sup>2</sup> See Cardim Ribeiro (1998); Cardim Ribeiro (1999); Gonçalves & Santos (2020). The archeological research that confirms this data has been carried out under the supervision of the Archeological Museum of Odrinhas; further information can be found at <http://museuarqueologiccodeodrinhas.cm-sintra.pt/escavacoes/1/alto-da-vigia.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Cardim Ribeiro (1998); see also the official site of the Heritage Division of the Ministry of Culture. [http://www.monumentos.gov.pt/Site/APP\\_PagesUser/SIPA.aspx?id=3859](http://www.monumentos.gov.pt/Site/APP_PagesUser/SIPA.aspx?id=3859).

<sup>4</sup> But still fully alive in the Azores Islands and regions of Azorean diaspora, namely the eastern coast of the United States, California and parts of Canada.

is one of the few places where they were kept alive (and still exist nowadays), and included the payment of promises with the offer of large meals to the poor, made from the meat of an animal slaughtered on the site as a sacrifice for the divinities<sup>5</sup>. One of the most famous convents is the Capuchos Convent of the Holy Cross, also known as the Cork Convent, founded in 1560 and handed over to Franciscan friars. The life of these monks followed the ideals of the Order of St. Francis of Assisi: search for spiritual perfection, alienation of the world, renunciation of pleasures associated with earthly life, the perfect antagonism to the glamour of the royal and noble palaces. The rusticity and austerity of the construction (using the natural boulders as part of the walls,) and its relationship with nature, dialogued with the life of suffering and atonement followed by the monks. As part of the World Heritage sites, in the midst of the green Sintra valley, one of the unique spots where one can find the remains of the ancient original vegetation (oak and cork trees), it is nowadays an obligatory site to visit.

These examples attest to popular and collective devotions in Sintra. Beyond Catholic hermitages, chapels and monasteries, there is also evidence of other types of religiosity, from a more diffuse idea of the supernatural to specific personal and intimate connections that legends and stories account for. Famous writers and anonymous travellers all account for the energy felt upon approaching Sintra, either coming from the side of the Atlantic, with the magic Cape at one's back, or coming out of Lisbon, and entering the sacred woods of the mountain. The imagery of this encapsulated site that one penetrates thus incorporates the notion of the space as a site of the sacred and the awesomely fearful and entrancingly captivating aspects of "The Holy", elaborated by Eliade (1959) on the basis of Rudolf Otto's influential book *Das Heilige*, one of the founding works in the phenomenological study of religion (Saraiva & de Luca, 2021).

The notion of Sintra as a sacred place interacts with concepts of heritage, legitimating (secular or sacred) identities by establishing an ownership of the past (Hafstein, 2012; Hafstein & Skrydstrup, 2020). The various actors at stake value heritage in different ways, highlighting the ways in which the multiple religious groups occupy the space (both symbolically and in reality). There is also an important connection to the history of the relations between the Portuguese State and religion over the past century, in ways that allow for a better understanding of what constitutes the politics and poetics of Sintra's heritage regimes nowadays. The politics of religion are in tune with the overall situation in Portugal, marked by a clear hegemony of the Catholic Church and an acceptance of this supremacy by the State. This is relevant not only if we analyse the religious uses of Sintra in the past, but, above all, when we look at what happens nowadays.

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://riodasmacas.blogspot.com/2017/08/a-aldeia-do-penedo-e-sua-historia.html>.

## Old heritage, new religiosities

If Sintra was an elected place for the Romantic bourgeoisie and nobility, it became more popular as times changed, the country abolished the monarchy and embraced Republicanism (1910). More people, beyond the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries elites, came to visit the sites, the palaces, for walks in the parks and monasteries. With the 1995 UNESCO classification, the fame of Sintra exploded, in a world already globalized and where travelling and tourism are no longer an elite privilege.

Every day, and even more during the spring/summer high season, tourists queue in front of the Pena gate, to buy their tickets to visit the famous palace and its renown park. If they have not bought it on-line, they may risk a deception, as queues are long, and they might not make in time, as there are quotas to get in, so that it does not get overcrowded. While waiting, they take selfies and look up at the Moorish castle on the either side of the hill, their desired next tour destination. After these two monuments, they will surely take a bus, a horse ridden carriage or a tuk-tuk to return to the village centre, where they will buy the famous Sintra pastries and check out when they will be able to visit the National Palace, situated in the village centre.

With this continuous inflow of thousands of tourists every day, Sintra and its surroundings became impossible for locals. There are long traffic lines to enter the area, as buses queue to reach a spot closer to the centre where they may drop off everyone. Traffic rules and senses were modified, obliging residents to make a long detour to reach their houses or working places, or just for simple recurrent errands (Saraiva & de Luca, 2021; Cardeira da Silva & Saraiva, 2022).

Local associations fight for the resident's rights, namely the municipalities' decisions (as the traffic constrictions) and try to also counteract the decisions of the enterprise that, since 2001, manages the Sintra World Heritage Site, the Parques de Sintra-Monte da Lua (PSML). But resistance and contestation to that management and the way things are decided is also strong, coming from other civic associations, which are religious groups or movements.

In the last 30 years, several new religious movements have been using the serra for the implantation of their temples, and for rituals and ceremonies, from neo-druids, neo-shamans, neo-pagans, to Afro-Brazilian religions or masonic movements. Many of them fall into Fuller's (2017) classification of secular spirituality. They may also be regarded as "alternative spirituality" (Huss, 2014), within a wider setting of post-secularism (Parmaksiz, 2018) and "re-enchantment" (Isnart & Testa, 2020). These multiple constituencies imply different ways of conceptualizing religion and the relation of these religions with the Sintra space, but also the conflict between what we can call multiple

heritage regimes (Bendix *et al.*, 2012) related to what each considers religious, sacred or profane, and different views of the use that should be given to the various heritagized spaces of Sintra (Saraiva & de Luca, 2021). Processes of “heritage-making” are often interwoven with those of “re-enchantment” and “ritualization”, and Sintra is surely a good case-study to observe such relations, where issues of collective memory, religious forms and practices (Isnart & Testa 2020, p. 2; Testa, 2020, p. 20) come together, and where a symbolic capital coming from the past is used in diverse ways, connecting the realms of politics and religion (Isnart & Testa, 2020, p. 6).

Sintra embodies the idea of sacred landscape in various ways, which were constructed over time and yet simultaneously transmit a sense of timelessness still felt today. Besides the specific rituals, there are also day and night walks, organised by guides wishing to show the natural beauty of the site, or developing on local stories and legends, with episodes involving “holy individuals”, as historical or invented characters, but also many of them with specific spiritual tendencies and approaches. By emphasizing the serra’s sacred natural elements the religious groups expand on the magical nature of the place (Saraiva & de Luca, 2001, pp. 155-156).

## Nation and Religion

Drawing on all the elements listed above—sacred spaces from pre-historic times, medieval cults of sacred waters, enchanted romantic palaces, chapels and humble monasteries dedicated to atonement—we can form a picture of what constitutes Sintra today. It is this UNESCO classified landscape that is nowadays used both by crowds of tourists, and by small groups of New Agers that roam the mountain at night, embracing the trees and meditating as they follow the dark forest paths, or Afro-Brazilian religions placing their offerings to Oxum (one of the *orixás*, gods) in a waterfall?

How did this scenario come to existence, from Middle Age and Renaissance Catholic chapels and monasteries to Afro-Brazilian offerings? Let us take a voyage in time, going back to the connections between the religious history of Portugal.

Portugal has been seen as a traditional Catholic country, together with Spain and Italy, which allowed for many comparative studies within this “Mediterranean enclave” (Peristiany, 1966). But much has changed in Portugal, mainly since the 80s of the 20th century, following the 1974 revolution, and the opening of the country to political and religious freedom, after 50 years of harsh Salazar dictatorship. Portugal is known as an emigration country, but in the last decades it has also become a country of immigration. The democratic transition,

European integration and implementation of Schengen agreements changed the position of Portugal regarding global flows of migration (see Castles & Miller, 1998; King *et al.*, 2000). These include not only the arrival of populations with historical/colonial connections with Portugal – such as Cape Verdeans, Guineans, Mozambicans, and Angolans, to mention just a few – but also other and quite “unexpected” population flows. Chinese, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Senegalese and populations from Central and Eastern Europe – Romania, Ukraine – are now part and parcel of the country’s socio-cultural scenarios.

From the late 1980s onwards, Portugal became the locus of a multicultural and multiethnic society. We now have a diverse religiouscape where Brazilian charismatic Catholicism coexists with Punjabi Sikh or Hindu temples, Jewish congregations (Pignatelli, 2020), Islamic groups (Mapril, Soares & Carvalheira, 2019), Evangelical, Neo-Pentecostal (Mafra, 2002), and African churches (Sarró, 2009; Blanes, 2009), Afro-Brazilian religions (Pordeus Jr., 2009; Saraiva, 2008, 2013, 2016, 2020), Orthodox (Vilaça, 2016), Buddhists (Vilaça & Oliveira, 2019), as well as neo-pagan, neo-shaman and neo-druid groups (Fedele, 2013; Roussou, 2015).

One of the important variables in such dynamics is the history of the church-state relations, and more broadly the secular and the religious, from the second half of the 19th century onward. Portuguese monarchy was Catholic, from the founding of the nation in 1147 with the so-called conquest of Lisbon from the Moors led by the first king of Portugal, Afonso Henriques; throughout the glorious centuries of Portuguese overseas voyages and missionization, and the various convents erected to celebrate such accomplishments, such as the grandiose 16th-century Hieronymites convent in the Lisbon Belém neighbourhood. A Catholic monarchy prevailed, and the long-established relations between the monarchy and the Church, in spite of periods of tensions and ambiguities, showed that Catholicism was in fact the religion of the kingdom.

The 19th century was marked by a larger context of liberalism and constitutionalism that led to a civil war; anticlerical movements and sentiments had grown, based on enlightenment ideals of free consciousness, free will, laïcité and the separation of powers. This climate and the political situation led to the extinction of the religious orders in 1834 and the confiscation of their properties. Nevertheless, during the second half of the 19th century several concordats were celebrated with the Vatican (Vilaça, 2006). The establishment of the republic in 1910 enacted a significant change in the relation between church and state, based on a clearer and broader separation between the religious and the political and a concerted effort to develop a secular, non-religious, society. A 1911 law separated the state from the Church, with the Republicans attempting to implement the project of a truly secular society. Still, at the level of the so-

called popular religion, people kept their traditional rituals and practices and the common religious popular feasts (including the ones in honour of the patron saints) escaped the control of the ecclesiastic authorities (Silva, 1994), or were even implemented by the clergy, as a way to give continuity to that popular religion. Later, though, with the military regime (1926) and the implementation of the Estado Novo-Salazar dictatorship (1933), the Catholic Church gained a new centrality in the political spectrum. The ideology of the Estado Novo reinforced a “Christian Reconquest” (Dix, 2010, p. 12), marked by a strong nationalist spirit. In 1940 a new concordat with the Vatican was signed, and the Portuguese state became financially responsible for the presence of the Catholic Church in several state institutions, such as schools, the army, and hospitals. This agreement implied a regime of privilege awarded to the Catholic Church and a hierarchy of religions, which resulted in the creation of categories according to their religious belonging and persecution of minority religious groups (Protestant churches were by then considered the enemies of the church and the state, which had implications in colonial spaces).

Even in the face of several changes, including the second Vatican Council, with its reformist and ecumenical concerns, and a law (1971) that pretended to safeguard religious freedom, the Catholic Church kept its regime of privilege, and religious minorities were often persecuted. This scenario changed with the 1974 revolution and the 1976 new constitution, which reiterated the freedom of consciousness and religion, condemned all religious persecutions and separated the state from the church. But the former law of 1971 still prevailed. In the decades following and due to the pressure from several sectors of Portuguese society in the late 1990s, including minority religious communities, debates were promoted in the parliament, and a new religious law was finally drafted and eventually approved in 2001. This new legal regime applied to all religious groups present in Portugal for at least 30 years, and to all those religions internationally recognized for at least 60 years, attributing to everyone the same rights and duties (Vilaça, 2006). But this time frame excluded several religious groups that were seen as the main competitors in the religious field. In the same process and despite the contestation from several sectors of Portuguese society that argued for a complete secularization of the state, the Catholic Church renegotiated the concordat in 2002 due to, so the argument goes, the sociological importance of Catholicism in Portugal, and thus maintained a regime of privilege when compared to other religious groups.

In 2004, the Commission for Religious Freedom was finally created (it had been proposed in the new religious law of 2001), the objective of which was to denounce the violations to religious freedom, the production of recommendations in relation to the settlement of specific religious communities in the country, and

the dissemination of issues and events pertaining to religious liberty – and which lasts until the present day. Its composition includes representatives of the state, two members of the Catholic Church, several minority religious institutions (namely representatives of Sunni and Ismaili Muslims, the Israeli congregation, the evangelical alliance, the Hindu community) and two academics (Côrrea, 2022; Cardeira da Silva & Saraiva, 2022).

The minority religious groups referred to above – most of them religions that escape the categorization of “religions of the book” – try to organize themselves as NGOs in order to achieve some empowerment. To acquire the official status of religious associations they must go through a long and complicated process to prove that they have been in the country for a long time, the number of followers, in addition to requiring approval from the Commission for Religious Freedom. If they obtain such a status they are exempt from taxes; however, beyond the legal and economic advantages, what matters the most to them is their official recognition as religious groups (Saraiva, 2009). Nevertheless, most minority religious groups defend they are treated differently from the larger traditions, as the “religions of the book”; they feel discriminated against for not being represented, and for struggling for years to achieve recognition as religious groups with a legal status (Côrrea, 2022)<sup>6</sup>.

Sintra is a UNESCO classified site where religion undoubtedly has played an important role, with its religious uses since Neolithic times one component of its mystic aura, highlighted in the UNESCO proposal; and yet, the minority religious groups that seek to use the space exactly for its mystic atmosphere find it nowadays quite difficult to access, since many sites have been fenced off following the UNESCO classification, there are regular PSML security patrols and they do not feel at ease as they used to.

## Old heritage, new religiosities

In spite of the heavy tourism, Sintra has continued its tradition as a magic and sacred space, and is used by various religious groups – neo-druids, neo-shamans, neo-pagans, Masonic movements, neo-Pentecostals, Hindus, Buddhists, Afro-Brazilians, satanic groups, as well as many other New Age practitioners – in the most diverse ways. Some establish their temples in the area, others use its innumerable spaces to perform contemplation, ceremonies and rituals, or for their sacred offerings. Others relate certain architectural traits of some of the monuments to specific philosophical and religious orientations. Some organize

<sup>6</sup> This is the case, for instance, of many of the religious associations of Afro-Brazilian religions in the country.



night walks to experience the magic of Sintra, where people follow unknown trails and hidden paths. The increase of such events in the last thirty years is in line with the rise in religious diversity in the country. They all praise the mystical aura of Sintra, all make use of this heritage site and claim the right to enjoy it. They support their claims by invoking the Portuguese Law of Religious Freedom (2001), their identities as religious groups and the way their religious essences tie in with the “magic of Sintra” and how, as citizens, they are therefore entitled to benefit from a space that they postulate was used by their ancestors, practicing cults in the area for centuries. Many of these new religions in Portugal may be categorized as falling into the realm of New Age philosophies and spiritualities, and many of their followers were brought up as Catholics, but have withdrawn from the religion, having turned to alternative spirituality in search of a meaning for life. It is in this search for personal growth that the connection with Sintra comes in. They feel Sintra is indeed a special place, with a unique energy, that does not relate to the Catholic historical hegemony, and that the excess of tourism and commodification are superficial aspects that do not reveal the real essence of Sintra. They therefore criticize the way PSML has fenced out many of the spaces previously used for rituals, as well as the way the enterprise has security guards patrolling the area throughout the night, thus constraining their practices. As Astor *et al.* (2017, p. 129) state for the Spanish case, what minority religious groups do when they try to acquire the status of official religions is that they use their counterhegemonic discourses on freedom of religion rights and combine it with heritage discourses in order to challenge existing power relations (Cardeira da Silva & Saraiva, 2022, pp. 167-168).

As elsewhere in Europe, Portugal has been the stage for increasing public discussions on the proliferation of religious diversity as problematic and as an obstacle to modernization, democracy, individual liberty and civic rights, in parallel with discourses that frame religion as cultural heritage (Astor *et al.*, 2017, p. 127). On the one hand, several articles in the constitution proclaim religious freedom; on the other, some individuals feel that their rights are under attack if they go for a walk in the Sintra park and find a *despacho*, an offering made by members of an Afro-Brazilian congregation. Such *despachos* often include unpleasant items, such as bones, blood, or daggers, which cause panic and discomfort, especially to individuals with a mainstream Catholic affiliation (Saraiva, 2013), which, in fact, is still the great majority. To reinforce this displeasure, the use of candles or fires in the rituals presents a real fire hazard. The question of whether the expansion of official heritage discourses to include minority heritages necessarily generates an expansion of minority rights (Astor *et al.*, 2017, p. 130) is suitable in this case, as is the acceptance of religious heritage as a basis for collective recognition and group rights (Astor *et*

*al.*, 2017, p. 132). Even if minority religious movements and groups (as the ones relating to a mystical-esoteric nebula, not following any of the religions of the book) have grown immensely in the past thirty years, they are still minorities.

Sintra is a space engendered by a plurality of competing discourses and practices, where categories as secular and spiritual clash, coexist and often blur in its multiple ontologies and power relations. For UNESCO, the managing enterprise (PSML) and other local stakeholders, Sintra is an accurately charted heritage site that needs to be protected; therefore, heritage sites have been fenced off, the forest is controlled and regimented, and some passages are prohibited. But in the perception of local people and of various religious groups, Sintra emerges as a space in continuous transformation, bounded to histories and personal wanderings. For some religious groups in particular, the heritage regime collides with the right to use the forest and sites for ritual purposes. The serra has developed, over time, as a space of domestication where different forms of spirituality take place. While all these groups have various religious views, they share the belief that there is in Sintra a special sacred atmosphere, one that goes beyond the Catholic chapels and monasteries.

As a devotional space, Sintra is continuously “generated and generative” (Tweed, 2011, p. 117). The mountain, the vegetation, the chapels, convents and quintas are evoked and dismantled, put together and distinguished, which make the place what Massey defines as “the coming together of the previously interrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing” (in Pink, 2011, p. 348). The serra elicits discourses of authenticity and legitimacy that appeal to historical and religious pasts and feed the production of narratives that often reveal conflicting lineages.

Sintra, with its special energy, is believed to be divine, falling into what many New Agers classify as a “centre of light” (Ivakhiv, 2007) when they adopt the hypothesis that the earth is akin to a living organism, with its own energy, consciousness and intelligence, but also a clear and strong sacredness (Rocha, 2017, p. 137). If we look at Sintra from Casanova’s perspectives on the concepts of the secular and religious (2009), we can easily state that in Sintra, nothing is secular; even a possible secular view is endowed with the enchantment that the notion of heritage as sacred brings to the light (Macdonald, 2013). The thesis of the decline and privatization of religion in the modern world – central components of the theory of secularization – falls apart once we look at what goes on in Sintra. The religious groups and individuals that praise Sintra blur the concept of modern secularism, in the sense that there is no clear cognitive difference between science, philosophy and theology (Casanova, 2009, p. 1051). This ties into the notion of secular spirituality, which refers to the potential for all experiences to assume a spiritual quality, not limited to any

one religious or transcendent realm. Fuller (2017) defends that many forms of contemporary religiosity – such as the ones we find in Sintra – often embrace most of secularism’s basic premises. This secular spirituality can be described as pertaining to eclecticism, self-growth, relevance to life, self-direction, openness to wonder, authenticity beyond official Churches, metaphysical explanations, and communal and ecological morality.

## Walks and retreats

Many of the religious groups that praise the magic of Sintra fall into the general classification of New Age spiritual culture. As Ivakhiv notes, since the beginning of the movement in the 1970s, New Agers are attracted to the “centres of light”, linked in a network providing the infrastructure for a “new planetary culture” (Ivakhiv, 2007, p. 264; in Rocha, 2017, p. 137). For New Age Spirituality, “the Earth is alive and divine, and sacred sites give access to the energy they harbour”. As Rocha mentions, such imaginaries of a pure and sacred land relate to what Said (1978) referred to as a discourse of “Romantic Orientalism”, the nostalgic yearning for a pure and pristine past (Rocha, 2017, p. 144). In the case of Sintra, a Romantic site per excellence, this pristine past discloses the idea of a connection with that very specific magic and original energy of the Moon Hill.

Neopagan and New Age groups claim a transcendent spirituality that interlaces Sintra to ancient traditions such as the Celts – once again, a process mostly based on re-appropriation, cultural bricolage, syncretism, and ritual inventiveness<sup>7</sup>. Neo-shaman groups organize night walks where the walk intercalates with moments of meditation, embracing trees and engaging with the spirit of the forest. In such cases the participants are asked not to use the lights and to get used to the darkness of the serra, in order to mingle with nature and its magic. For the leader of these walks, the serra is indeed a magic space, that belongs to everyone, and it does not matter if there are fences dividing properties, as “a person is not the owner of a space; he (or she) is simply a temporary occupant of that space”. Another organizer of the night walks uses various themes for these hikes – “Haunted Sintra”, “Extraterrestrial Sintra”, “Templar Sintra”. A sympathizer of the Theosophy and Eubiose movements, she acknowledges that she indirectly calls upon the esoteric and especial energies of the place, in which she firmly believes: “The Moon Hill has a very specific energy, it is entirely feminine, with a strong magnetism, so people come here to achieve their goals...”.

<sup>7</sup> Since otherwise we know very little about the actual ritual life of the Celts, or the Celtiberians.

The new religions that praise Sintra and use its spaces all relate to the late-modern search for contact with spiritual dimensions outside of religious institutions, and the quest for radical experiences of the sacred. Nevertheless, no matter how personal such quests may be, the longing to find a “pure” feeling of the sacred nature of Sintra involves the pursuit of a sense of community which puts people in contact-physical, when they hold hands in a night walk in the darkness of the hills, and mental, when they sit together, feeling the wind and meditating. As Rocha (2017, p. 9) points out, following Appadurai (1996, p. 8) they form a “community of sentiment, a group that begins to imagine and feel things together”. Many of the individuals that take part in walks, rituals or spiritual and yoga retreats in Sintra search for spiritual healing, feeling at peace with the self and nature, a meaning in a fragmented world, trying to reconnect with the spiritual world, “finding community, and ultimately transforming the self” (Rocha, 2017, p. 12). It is a community of feeling, and the feeling that binds people together is Sintra’s magic, which they all adhere to.

Most of the individuals believe they will find in Sintra the path to personal growth, much in tune with New Age philosophies and world views. The actions they undertake in order to achieve this also relate to the concept of “spiritual tourism” (Norman, 2012, p. 20-33), if we reflect on what they are searching for in Sintra: alternative life styles, quests for personal discovery and knowledge, escape from everyday life, looking for ritual renewal, as well as collective shared experiences.

For the religious groups of our ethnographic research, the Serra de Sintra and its tangible heritage sites are primarily spiritual sites that the UNESCO classification has simply confirmed in secular terms. They maintain that it is the spiritual energy of Sintra that has made it a historically privileged place before and beyond the spatial boundaries drawn on UNESCO’s maps, and a spirituality much more ancient than Catholicism. In their discourses the heritage component collapses into the spiritual and is reinforced by it (Saraiva & de Luca, 2021).

The variety of new religions that use the serra for their ritualities mirrors the multiplicity of religious groups that are part of the present-day Portuguese religious scenario. If the Catholic Church still holds a position of power compared with all other religions despite the 2004 law and the creation of the Commission for Religious Freedom, the followers of the new religious traditions also feel that, in spite of the democratization of the country, the fencing off of the Sintra spaces reproduces the hegemony of the ancient days of monarchy,

## A magic place defending civic rights?

In 2019 Sintra was full of tourists<sup>8</sup>, crowding the palaces, monasteries, chapels. But behind this gaze of heritage there is also the perspective of the religious and mystical enchantment linked to the spirit of the place. Night walks in the woods, the varied ritual ceremonies of new religious groups, the persistent celebrations linked to popular religiosity and older cults, all enjoy the scenery that heritagization has made all the more fascinating.

The fame of Sintra's joins heritage with the rise of new religious movements making use of the serra. For UNESCO and its conventions is as systems of values, sets of practices, and formation of knowledge, that is, a structure of feeling and a moral code. As Hafstein (2012, p. 504) stresses, it is also true that in Sintra there has been a "democratization of heritage" (ibid., p. 505): individuals in general, and especially people who live there, the new religious groups that use the serra for their rituals feel that such spaces are "theirs" – and no longer a privilege of nobility or high clergy. Nowadays, tourists go to Sintra in search of the romantic aura that the UNESCO classification enhanced; and new religious groups go there looking for a special energy. They both value heritage, whether in the form of the monumental palaces of long-gone kings, or the nature and ritual spots used by our Neolithic ancestors or by medieval friars.

Heritage is indeed a mechanism of power and a transformative process. In this sense the new religions help preserve the "spirit of the place" that the institutions (such as PSML and UNESCO) defend. Each one creates its own stories around Sintra – various creative ways of re-inventing the past, going beyond the official Christian-centric narratives around kings and noblemen who erected chapels and monasteries. The past is used and manipulated in multiple ways, organized into diachronic stratified layers: the new spiritual groups prefer to use the "ancient" past, stretching back to the Celts (and even to the Neolithic) to legitimize their presence, relating their existence as religions to those ancient traditions. Catholics invest in a more "recent past", of the history of Portugal in the last centuries, when it became known as a nation of intrepid navigators and a colonizing power. New religious groups and local residents both claim for "free heritage", that they can enjoy without restrictions. Restrictions come both from the regulations imposed by the Catholic perspective (due to the fact that they have no representation or acknowledgement in the Commission for Religious Freedom), and from the PSML enterprise, with all the control and fencing out of the spots in Sintra. For them "free heritage", and free religious practice are interconnected and are legitimized claims.

<sup>8</sup> Before the start of the 2020/2021 Covid 19 worldwide pandemic that stopped the flow of tourists everywhere.

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