

# The guitar of Baixo Alentejo (Portugal) - a journey into botanical traditions

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# **Notes on Ethnobotany**

#### **Abstract**

In Baixo Alentejo, a historic province in southern Portugal, musical traditions are deeply intertwined with nature, particularly through a local chordophone known as the *campaniça* guitar, crafted from both exotic and native Portuguese woods. This distinctive guitar, commonly played at rural festivals to provide harmony and rhythm to improvised songs, represents a centuries-old tradition that connects Portuguese culture with plant resources. Although the *campaniça* faced a decline in popularity towards the end of the 20th century, a revivalist movement played a crucial role in ensuring its survival. More recently, cultural centers in Castro Verde and Odemira have been established to safeguard this unique musical heritage, inspiring future generations to preserve and innovate within the tradition.

Keywords: campaniça guitar, Baixo Alentejo, traditional music, ethnomusicology, ethnobotanical memory.

#### **Musical Traditions of Baixo Alentejo**

Baixo Alentejo, a historic Portuguese province in the south of the country (Figure 1), is characterized by its gentle topography and vast plains, where cereals—particularly wheat, barley, and oats—were once extensively cultivated. As a result, during the 20th century, Baixo Alentejo earned the epithet 'the barn of Portugal' (Figures 2–3). Due to water scarcity, human settlements have historically been scattered across the region. This geographic isolation played a crucial role in preserving traditions that date back to pre-Christian or even pre-Roman times (Ribeiro 2021). The most iconic cultural expression of Baixo Alentejo is cante, a form of slow, repetitive choral singing traditionally performed by men, in which references to plants are a recurring theme in the lyrics (Rita 2023). Another deeply rooted musical tradition, closely linked to plant-based raw materials, is the crafting and playing of the campaniça guitar.



Figure 1. Map of Portugal highlighting the location of Baixo Alentejo. ©Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 2. Field workers harvesting cereals [1943-1945]. Artur Pastor (1922-1999). ©Lisbon Municipal Archive PT/AMLSB/ART/009/015268.

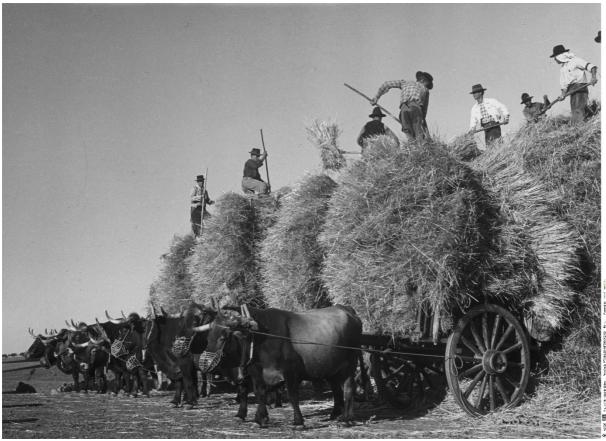


Figure 3. Loading wheat [1940-1960]. Artur Pastor (1922-1999). ©Lisbon Municipal Archive PT/AMLSB/ART/009/020121

In the Iberian Peninsula, historical records indicate that since the 13th century, guitar players have been associated with dancers and singers of Galician-Portuguese poetry. However, the widespread popular use of the Portuguese guitar—a variation of the baroque guitar—only emerged in the 16th century. Over time, the instrument evolved in both shape and tuning, particularly with the transition from animal-derived strings, traditionally made from pig intestines and other materials to metal wire strings (Rodrigues 2017).

In Portugal, there are various types of traditional guitars, whose names are associated with the regions they originate from, such as: braguesa (from Braga and Minho), amarantina (from Amarante and Douro Litoral), beiroa (from Beira Baixa), toeira (from Coimbra and Beira Litoral), madeirense (from Madeira Island), da terra (from São Miguel and Terceira islands in the Azores) (Oliveira 2000). In the Alentejo, the traditional guitar is called campaniça and it is associated with the folk music of the Beja, Serpa and Campo Branco areas. The etymology of campaniça is linked to Campo Branco, a vast region that today encompasses Aljustrel, Ourique, Castro Verde, Almodôvar, and Odemira. This name alludes to the vegetation that once covered this area, primarily wheat fields and pastures.

The name *campaniça* was first published by Bento de Oliveira Guedes de Carvalho Lobo (1877-1935), Viscount of Vila Moura, in the journal A Águia (August 1916, page 67): 'The people of the Alentejo are unlike any other in Portugal; they have a deeprooted reverence for improvisation. In every step of their sadness and tranquil reminiscence, they uncover the spirituality of new songs. There is also a wire-strung guitar there, the campaniça, as they call it, which I heard at the door of a tavern, played by a blind man. You cannot imagine the enthusiasm of the circle of farmers who listened to him, taking turns – all fixated on his indifferent, almost granite-like expression, with opaque eyes and lips unveiling poetic 'décimas', crying and laughing about the shared mysteries of life' (Lobo 1916).

The *campaniça* guitar is a wooden chordophone that played an important social role in the past due to its rustic sound, which was highly appreciated (Figure 4). It was used to support the melody and rhythm of improvised songs performed by competitive singers at traditional festivities, such as fairs, annual pilgrimages, and, more commonly, in rural taverns. These singers were always accompanied by a *campaniça* guitar player, responsible for providing harmonic support. Traditional taverns, present in every village, were meeting places where men would come together to eat and drink wine after a long

day's work. These spaces, albeit with different social functions, still exist today but are now open to the entire population (Figure 5) (Barriga 2006, Rodrigues 2017). Occasionally, the *campaniça* guitar also accompanied *cante alentejano*, a type of polyphonic choir typical of Baixo Alentejo, which has been inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2014 (Figure 6).



Figure 4. António Jacinto, a guitar performer, at Monte das Figueirinhas (Odemira), in the mid-20th century. ©Private collection.



Figure 5. Tasca da Ti Judite [Tavern of Aunt Judith], Castelão, Odemira. ©Luís Guerreiro, Câmara Municipal de Odemira.



Figure 6. Os Ganhões, a cante singing group from Castro Verde © Associação de Cante Alentejano Os Ganhões.

Internal migration and the socio-cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s led to the disappearance of many forms of popular culture in Baixo Alentejo, including traditional music, which was gradually replaced by dominant mainstream genres. During this period, interest in the *campaniça* guitar declined significantly, bringing it to the brink of cultural extinction. However, its disappearance was averted in the 1980s with the rise of a revivalist movement that originated in Castro Verde and later

expanded to Odemira. This cultural revival played a crucial role in preserving the tradition and was supported by local radio stations, such as *Rádio Castrense* and *Cooperativa Cortiçol*, as well as by the municipalities of Castro Verde and Odemira, particularly in the areas of Amoreiras-Gare and São Martinho das Amoreiras.

By the late 1980s, the most renowned *campaniça* guitar players were Manuel Bento (1925–2015) and his uncle Francisco António (1927–2009), both from Aldeia Nova (Ourique). The movement to revitalize the *campaniça* guitar led to the formation of the 'Campaniça Guitar Group' [*Grupo de Viola Campaniça*] which included these last two known players alongside singer Perpétua Maria (1927–1997), Manuel Bento's wife.

Within this revivalist context, ethnomusicologist José Alberto Sardinha (1945–) began studying the *campaniça* guitar, aiming to document and preserve its traditions. In 2001, he identified Pedro Mestre (born in 1983) as the key figure for the tradition's future. Having learned directly from the last masters, Mestre quickly distinguished himself as a virtuoso—both as luthier and as a performer. He pioneered the introduction of *campaniça* guitar playing into public schools, ensuring its transmission to younger generations. Today, he is widely regarded as the foremost interpreter of this instrument (Figure 7) (Sardinha 2001, Figueira 2023).



Figure 7. Pedro Mestre playing the campaniça (2004). ©Lia Marchi.

### **Plant-Based Materials for Guitar Making**

The *campaniça* guitar is handcrafted in small workshops using both exotic and native Portuguese woods (Figures 8–9). It is a chordophone with metal strings (wire), composed of five main parts. Typically, the soundboard is crafted from spruce (*Picea abies* (L.) H.Karst.) or Baltic pine (*Pinus sylvestris* L.), and is adorned with an inlay frieze, usually made from ebony wood (*Diospyros crassiflora* Hiern and other species of the *Diospyros* genus). The ribs (side parts) are commonly made from walnut (*Juglans regia* L.) or cherry wood [*Prunus avium* (L.)]. The guitar's fingerboard (neck) is typically constructed from Baltic pine or alder [*Alnus glutinosa* (L.) Gaertn.], with a flat ruler made from ebony or rosewood [*Dalbergia nigra* (Vell.) Allemão ex Benth. and other species of the *Dalbergia* genus] glued on top, into which ten metal frets are embedded. The scroll (or headstock) is either carved from the same piece of wood as the neck or attached separately, featuring holes for 10 or 12 wooden tuning pegs. The bridge is usually made of pear wood (*Pyrus* spp.), walnut, or rosewood. The guitar's inlaid decorations vary according to the player's taste, adding a personalized touch to each instrument (Sardinha 2001).



Figure 8. Luthier José Abreu at the *Center for Arts and the Campaniça Guitar* [*Centro de Artes e da Viola Campaniça*], Castro Verde. ©Câmara Municipal de Castro Verde.



Figure 9. Luthier Amílcar Silva† in his workshop, Corte-Malhão, São Martinho das Amoreiras (Odemira). ©Luís Guerreiro, Junta de Freguesia de São Martinho das Amoreiras.

The first layer of varnish contains dragon's blood, a plant resin traditionally sourced from species of the *Dracaena* Vand. ex L. genus, particularly *Dracaena draco* (L.) L. and *Dracaena cinnabari* Balf.f.. However, it is now more commonly obtained from species of the genus *Daemonorops* Blume [= Calamus L.]. Other plant sources of dragon's blood include species from the genera *Croton* L. and *Pterocarpus* Jacq.. The second varnish layer consists of shellac, a natural resin secreted by the insect

*Kerria lacca* Kerr, 1782. Finally, a coating of sweet almond oil [*Prunus dulcis* (Mill.) D.A. Webb] is applied to complete the finishing process (Sardinha 2001, Langenheim 2003).

#### **Cultural Legacy and Future Prospects**

In Portugal, the municipalities of Castro Verde and Odemira have established two cultural centers to promote and preserve the traditions linked to the cultural heritage of the *campaniça* guitar. These are the Castro Verde Center for Arts and the *Campaniça* Guitar [*Centro de Artes e da Viola Campaniça*] and the Center for the Valorization of the *Campaniça* Guitar and Improvised Singing [*Centro de Valorização da Viola Campaniça e do Cante de Improviso*], located in São Martinho das Amoreiras, Odemira (Figure 10). Both play a crucial role in safeguarding these ancestral practices while fostering education and highlighting the socio-cultural significance of this deeply rooted musical tradition.

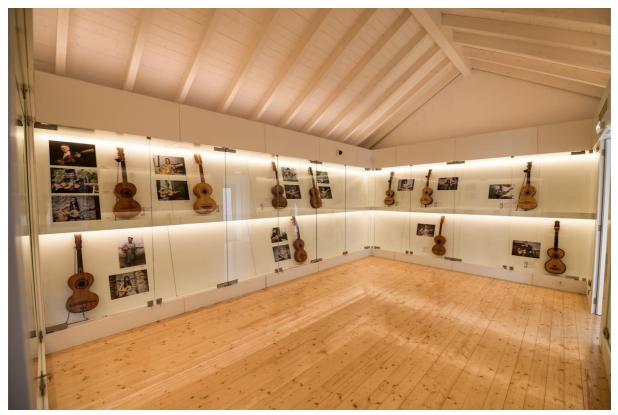


Figure 10. Center for the Valorization of the *Campaniça* Guitar and Improvised Singing [*Centro de Valorização da Viola Campaniça e do Cante de Improviso*]. ©Junta de Freguesia de São Martinho das Amoreiras.

The *campaniça* guitar remains a vibrant symbol of Portugal's rich cultural heritage, and its future looks promising as younger generations (Figures 11–13) show a growing interest in learning the techniques of both crafting and playing this unique musical instrument. Made from plant-based raw materials, the *campaniça* serves as a remarkable example of how plants are often at the core of humanity's most refined artistic expressions.

#### **Declarations**

List of abbreviations: Not applicable.

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Consent for publication: Not applicable.

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Figure 11. Pedro Mestre with fellow guitar players at the Castro Verde Center for Arts and the *Campaniça* Guitar [*Centro de Artes e da Viola Campaniça* de Castro Verde]. ©Câmara Municipal de Castro Verde.



Figure 12. Players at Center for the Valorization of *Campaniça* Guitar and Improvised Singing [*Centro de Valorização da Viola Campaniça e do Cante de Improviso*]. ©Junta de Freguesia de São Martinho das Amoreiras.



Figure 13. Young players at the Center for the Valorization of *Campaniça* Guitar and Improvised Singing [*Centro de Valorização da Viola Campaniça e do Cante de Improviso*]. ©Junta de Freguesia de São Martinho das Amoreiras.

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