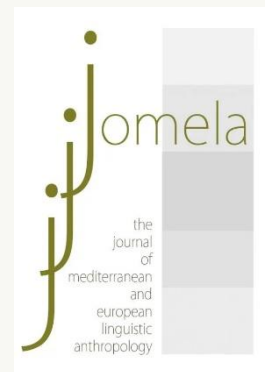


# Singing Fado in Contemporary Lisbon: Questions of Boundedness

Olga Kakosimou  
Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, Greece

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## Abstract

Understanding the oral tradition of fado, requires a profound engagement with the power of its narrativity and its lyrics (Castelo-Branco 1997; Abu-Lughod 1986). Fado constitutes a poetical world of stories being told through song, and shared in everyday life between those who understand and mainly possess the fado languagem. It is a broad corpus of words and utterances, pre-existing melodies and repertoires, meanings, and performances, which creates the aesthetic vocabulary of fado and a strong sense of traditionality and boundedness, often disregarded by the global music scene and industry (Gray 2018). This sense also derives from fado's close interaction with the historical past of Portugal, and the collective memory of the community, both performatively and lyrically.

However, now that the portuguese urban song of longing has turned its gaze to globality, particularly since 2011 at which time it was recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, significant questions have emerged regarding the ways in which the traditional language of fado could form a dialogue with contemporary musical trends, and at what price. How might the *fadistas* negotiate (or not) their musical and cultural identity vis-a-vis new, global audiences?

In this paper, I will attempt to sculpt the boundedness of the fado universe. AS such, fado lyrics

will be my point of departure, and hence with which to develop the storytellings and a set of sign types, which will mainly comprise symbols and metaphors. These objects will assist in the understanding of the fadistas' linguagem and their way of being-in-the-world (Turino 2008). Following this, by employing original ethnographic material, I will examine the dialogue between fado and the modern music industry.

## Introduction

Castelo-Branco, a renowned Portuguese ethnomusicologist, once emphasized that words are the 'quintessence' of fado (Castelo-Branco 1997). Similarly, Finnegan suggested the same notion several years later, noting that:

There is something special about sung words. They are removed somehow from the ordinary, somehow distanced from and transcending the present, standing out as art and performance. And even the apparently simplest of songs is wonderfully complex, with words, music and performance somehow remarkably coming together.

(2015, pp. 85-86)

Fado is Portugal's urban music genre. To sing a fado means to tell a story. As such, understanding the oral tradition of fado requires a profound engagement with the power of its narrativity and its lyrics, as well as its everyday reality.

In 2011, fado was recognized internationally as having intangible cultural heritage in the category of humanity, by UNESCO. This event marked a new era for Lisbon's urban song genre in the global music arena, but divided the local fadista community. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a long period of development of foreign policy that aimed to promote this genre of music around the world, not least by *Amalia Rodrigues's* group.

In my paper I will first analyze the fado linguagem through the characteristic case of an emblematic fadista and poet. This case study will assist in the unraveling of the oral tradition of fado as well as its strongly binding character. For this, I ask and respond to the following questions: What is the position of this fadista at the present time and how do populations see the future of the fado? How do young fadistas choose to manage their musical identity? More so, can the fado exist in dialogue with the contemporary music industry and if so, in what ways?

## Literature Review

The recognition by UNESCO came approximately ten years after Rodrigues's death (1999). During these ten years, the Portugal struggled to find a successor to the throne of the queen of

fado, and hence someone worthy of becoming the representative of the country's national identity. The perplexity of not being able to find such a person was reflected in the covers of the press at the time and in the advertising campaigns of the record companies, which rushed to 'baptize' every rising fadista as the 'new Amalia' (nova Amalia). As part of this search, the term 'new Fado' (Novo Fado) was widely employed as an attempt to redefine or renew the fado's identity. This effort and a term, however, were initially rejected by the local community.

This rejection was evaluated and justified by those who knew and lived the fado in everyday life. This everyday life that was unaffected by all the above facts, continuing the oral tradition of fado from generation to generation. Recognition by UNESCO during the country's major economic crisis, however, came to disrupt this everyday quality, as it placed fado in a completely different context by sowing aesthetic temptations within the community. Since then, the reins have been taken by various politics of culture and tourism, where the fado has been strongly transformed from a dialogical sound of the city to a monological revival of the sound of the city, that is, from tradition to folklore. Today, these two formalisms coexist in the city, respectively classifying the venues and the circumstances under which the fado is being sung. However, this classification seems to be perceived only from the side of the *oficionados* (initiated fadistas). At the same time, tourists perceive every fado venue they visit as a museum, waiting to experience a mesmerizing representation of what they consider as a fado.

Lisbon's strong tourism development in recent years as Europe's 'cheapest destination' has contributed to this, leading to the phenomenon of a 'soft culture' of low-cost listening. In a recent article, Gray (2018) aptly states her concerns about the world of fado and the dangers of mass tourism, noting the impact it can have on both everyday life and on activities of music making and listening.

## Methodical Framework

The study seeks to respond to the following questions:

How can a performer tell a fado story?

What story can the narrator tell in the context of a traditional musical performance?

In which context would the narrator tell the story?

How does the story interact with the sung storytelling?

How does fado's binding ritual and the closed community of the fadistas respond to the modern demands of the global music industry?

Can the fadistas continue to tell or sing their stories as they used to?

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