

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Entangled Ruralities: Remaking a Portuguese Mountain Hamlet Through Craft and Translocalism

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Keywords: rural revitalization, rural space, cultural creativity, relational geography

<https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.143258>

Folk, Knowledge, Place

Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2025

This paper explores the revitalization process of the once-depopulated mountain hamlet of Cerdeira in central Portugal through embeddedness in place and entanglement with broader networks of relations. Drawing on the field of relational geography and multi-sited ethnography, it examines how Cerdeira's transformation is co-created by (trans)local actors, creative in-migrants, policy frameworks, and global craft networks, particularly those engaging with Japanese-style ceramics wood-firing. The case illustrates how rural places are not static or bounded, but dynamically constituted through embodied practices, utopian reimaginings, and transnational flows of people, materials, and ideas. Emphasis is placed on the role of craft not only as a marker of local identity and ecological engagement but also as a means of cultural improvisation and knowledge exchange that allows for hybrid and cosmopolitan forms of place-making. The analysis highlights the tensions and possibilities within revitalization processes, including the risks of commodification, the politics of memory-making, and uneven access. As a site of both cultural reinvention and experimentation, Cerdeira's case contributes to broader understandings of how rural futures are being imagined, negotiated, and enacted through embedded and open networks of exchange, care, collaboration, and creative adaptation.

Introduction

This paper examines the translocal relations taking place in Cerdeira, a mountain hamlet in central Portugal, as part of a process of creative place-making and crafts-based rural revitalization. It presents a case study of rural transformation and resignification through both embeddedness in place and entanglement with broader networks of relations—networks in which I am implicated as a researcher and transnational migrant moving between peripheral places across the globe that are linked through the shared use of Japanese craft technologies. It shows how translocal connections can be driven by flows of people and knowledge that operate outside, and often independently of, centralized structures, thus exemplifying the bottom-up forms of globalization that are both bounded in and transcend place.

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My approach is broadly interdisciplinary while drawing on the framework of relational geography, which understands place not as bound or static, but as an ever-evolving process shaped by a multiplicity of interrelations across space and time (Massey, 1991). While rural space has historically been associated with peripheral regions marked by agricultural production and economic and cultural marginalization, especially through the politics of the center in modernization, the intensification of global interconnections in recent decades has opened new possibilities for negotiating the meanings, values, and roles of rural places within the contemporary knowledge and service economy. In this context, rural areas around the world have turned to transnational and translocal networks, and endogenous and exogenous resources, to solve the challenges posed by globalization's centrifugal forces and emerge as centers of creativity and hybrid cultural forms (Woods, 2007, 2010, 2012).

The case study presented here appears as a site of renegotiation and reinvention (of culture, history, and tradition) through an assemblage of artistic and ecological imaginaries and ways of being in place. Such imaginaries are closely tied to the concept of cultural creativity, understood here not as the production of novelty but as improvisation: a situated, social process through which actors continuously respond and adapt to the ever-changing flow of life (Hallam & Ingold, 2007). This understanding of creativity as improvisation allows us to move beyond the binary of tradition versus innovation, past versus present, and instead focus on creativity as an ongoing process rather than a commodified product. This emphasis departs from the instrumental view of creativity that aligns with capitalist reproduction, especially under neoliberalism (Mould, 2018), reaffirming creativity as intrinsic to culture itself and embedded in collective social life.

The concept of creativity as innovation has gained significant traction in the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society, where it is increasingly positioned as a driver of progress, economic growth, and sustainable development. Although this discourse emerged from urban centers grappling with deindustrialization and its consequences on the social and built environment, often associated with an emergent "creative class" (Florida, 2002), interest in the role of creativity in rural revitalization has expanded within academia, public policy, and civil society (Luckmann, 2012; Prince, 2017; Sasaki et al., 2014; Woods, 2012). Examples of the role of creativity in place-making include both institutional-framed approaches, such as those belonging to the UNESCO Creative City Network, not restricted to large metropolises, and civil society-led approaches, of which the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in the Japanese rural region of Niigata is a pioneering example. Drawing on arts, culture, and local heritage, and emphasizing community involvement, these initiatives have emerged as a response to the challenges faced by peripheral areas, which have been heightened by neoliberal policies that put the onus of survival and sustainability onto local communities themselves (Love, 2013).

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in August 2022 and September 2024 in the Cerdeira hamlet and the surrounding region of Lousã municipality in central Portugal. I conducted interviews, participated in a Japanese ceramics workshop, and engaged in informal conversations over meals, walks, and a 38-hour kiln firing. A central interlocutor was woodworker and ceramicist Kerstin Thomas, Cerdeira's first in-migrant, co-founder of Cerdeira – Home for Creativity, and its artistic director. This positions her as a key translocal actor whose life and vision have been instrumental in the hamlet's transformation. Except for Thomas, all other interlocutors interviewed have been anonymized.

My encounter with Cerdeira is shaped by a long-standing involvement in creative rural craft initiatives in Brazil and Japan, two countries where I have lived as a migrant at different moments in my life, and, more recently, in Portugal, my country of origin. The communities I study all share a focus on communal Japanese-style ceramics wood-firing as a strategy to enliven their regions by attracting people from around the world to participate in the processes of co-creation of craft. As a tangible and intangible resource tied to local identity, materials, and culture, craft has always been an important part of rural creativity but is now being reinvented for the goals of rural revitalization through tourism (Torell & Palmsköld, 2000; Yamasaki, 2020). As an artistic process rooted in traditional craft practices, contemporary Japanese-style ceramics wood-firing can be understood as a subculture informed by postmodern aesthetic and ecological sensibilities that draws on DIY (do-it-yourself) and DIT (do-it-together) ethos to facilitate intercultural and intergenerational knowledge exchange. As such, it has the potential to foster cosmopolitan communities characterized by openness and fluidity (a result of mobile processes) in rural areas (Delanty, 2003). This background and focus are essential to understanding how I encountered Cerdeira, how I was received there, and how I interpreted what I saw and experienced.

Acknowledging fieldwork as a personal, embodied, relational, and collaborative practice, though potentially marked by friction, I follow England's (1994) framing of the method as "a dialogical process in which the research situation is structured by both the researcher and the person being researched" (p. 84). As such, the data presented here is inevitably a result of my own idiosyncrasies, including biography, research trajectory, and the connections created across field sites. Rather than seeing them as distinct, I conceptualize my field sites as interrelated spaces within a broader arena of craft-based rural and post-growth imaginaries, which have been shaped by flows of people and knowledge from and to Japan. Although multi-sited, my research is grounded in an epistemological approach that recognizes knowledge as relational, situated, and context-dependent (Candea, 2007; Haraway, 1988).

In what follows, I trace Cerdeira's creative reconstitution through translocal actors and policy frameworks, but also through the global networks in which I am embedded. I aim to show how rural revitalization is co-produced by creative migrants and institutions, former residents and newcomers, and by researchers like myself, through a process that involves the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of already hybrid cultural forms. Ultimately, I seek to understand how meaning, place, and creativity are made together through this multiplicity of relations that involve reinventions of history, culture, and tradition (Glassie, 1995). By tracing the evolving roles and meanings of the Cerdeira mountain helmet, I aim to highlight the "intrinsic creativity of rural societies" and contribute to a view of rural spaces not as fixed and bounded, but as dynamic, relational, and creatively reconfigured through manifold social connections across space and time (Massey, 1991, 2005).

Cerdeira: geography and recent history

Cerdeira is a hamlet located in the Lousã mountain range in central Portugal, 700 meters above sea level. Designated as a National Ecological Reserve and integrated into the European Natura 2000 network for biodiversity conservation (Câmara Municipal Lousã, n.d.), Cerdeira's landscape has been shaped by shifting economic, political, and ecological regimes. In recent decades, the Lousã mountain region has undergone a significant transformation from a productive space associated with agriculture and forestry to a site of leisure and experiences, with a focus on ecotourism and heritage consumption, with visitors now trailing the paths once walked by shepherds to take their livestock to the mountains in the spring.

Cerdeira and other hamlets in the Lousã mountain originated as seasonal accommodations for these activities, with permanent occupation thought to go back to the sixteenth century. Industrialization led to the development of the surrounding towns from the late nineteenth century, contributing to the first wave of exit from the mountains. In the 1930s, during the National Dictatorship, the mountain went through a process of internal colonization through a state-led program of reforestation that encompassed appropriation of the common land for intensive farming (Estevão, 1983; Tomás, 2005). This disrupted the mountain ecosystem, its fragile agro-pastoral economy, and, consequently, communal life. As one former resident recounted, the new mono-cultured forest "took the land, leaving only the settlements. [...] Little land was left for the goats and that's how the village became uninhabited" (Almeida, 2007, pp. 01, 59 Translated from Portuguese). Depopulation followed, with many inhabitants moving to the nearby Lousã town while others migrated to Lisbon, Brazil, and the United States, culminating in the near abandonment of most of Lousã's hamlets by the 1980s (Tomás, 2005).

Yet this decline was neither linear nor final. The 1980s saw a rediscovery of rurality, with emigrants returning to build vacation houses in the hamlets (Cravidão, 1989), which led to the loss of some of the vernacular architecture made in schist, a geological feature of the region, then seen as a "sign of

poverty” (K. Thomas, personal communication, August 28, 2022). This period also witnessed another movement of in-migration by so-called lifestyle migrants or countercultural dropouts, many from other European countries, who settled in the abandoned isolated hamlets of Lousã to escape societal norms and lead alternative lives (Sardinha, 2018). Another category of actors that shaped the transition to new uses and meanings of Lousã’s hamlets were domestic urban dwellers with no relationship to the mountain who started acquiring and recuperating mountain properties for short-term stays (Carvalho, 2003, p. 9).

A major turning point came in 2001 with the launch of the Schist Villages program (PAX), supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Unlike earlier top-down heritage initiatives, this program sought to create a new territorial identity based on schist as a common material-symbolic resource through a participatory framework and public-private collaborations. By reevaluating and reinventing the region’s natural and cultural resources and ways of life, it aimed to encourage infrastructural and economic development through tourism and the sales of local products to attract temporary visitors and, eventually, new residents. Drawing on bottom-up approaches such as territorial mapping and community engagement, the program has contributed to reposition these villages, now a total of 27 (12 of which located in the Lousã mountain range), within national and transnational tourism circuits that emphasize small-scale, experiential, and sustainable modalities, which have appeared as a reaction to tourist massification.

A trip to the Lousã Mountain

In August 2022, I traveled from Coimbra to Lousã, a municipality where the shifting economic patterns and histories of displacement have been inscribed in both the landscape and the memories of its people. While Lousã town has seen modest population growth - 25% since 1981 (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021) - and increased reliance on the service sector - 71% of the population as of 2021 - , the region remains tightly interconnected with the mountainous rural hamlets that surround it through kinship, labor, and memory. This is particularly visible in the town’s recently renovated ethnographic museum, which highlights the ways by which the landscape, its natural resources, and people’s lifestyles in Lousã Mountain have shaped one another (Tomás, 2005). On the first floor, objects such as ploughs and other agricultural tools emphasize the transformation of the land. The second floor is divided into areas representing the four seasons, introducing objects related to activities such as pottery, flax spinning, and grazing to explore the significance of the land through seasonality. A temporary exhibition on the second floor was dedicated to the reinterpretation of ethnographic objects from the museum by contemporary artisans, designers, and collaborations with universities, created as a part of a project of the Schist Villages network to represent Portugal at the Eunique - International Fair for Applied Arts and Design, held in Karlsruhe, Germany in 2015.

As I moved up the mountain towards Cerdeira, I stopped by several hamlets where diverse rural landscapes reflect the various degrees of engagement with policy programs, lifestyle aspirations, and utopian imaginaries. The three hamlets integrated into the Schist Village program, Casal Novo, Talasnal, and Candal, display clear signs of curated rurality: at the entry, signs with the program's logo accompany a map with the hamlet's relevant attractions (for visitors) and evocative descriptions in both Portuguese and English. The one from Talasnal reads: "Explore this village deep in the magical world of Serra da Lousã, hidden among the lush vegetation where deer, roebuck, wild boar, and many other species lurk." The title reads: "Here nature reins."

Yet the idyllic scene is quickly shattered by the line of parked cars at the village entrance. Inside, visitors stroll among the charming shops and accommodations that now occupy the once modest schist houses, their façades carefully restored. One of these is a bar owned by a businessman from a nearby city, who bought a house abandoned for thirty years, as a "playful experiment" (personal communication, August 26, 2022). In 2011, when he started rebuilding it using traditional building techniques, many no longer practiced, there were only two original inhabitants left in the hamlet and an "international couple" who eventually left as the area became increasingly touristic, a process intensified after 2013 with the construction of an asphalt road (personal communication, August 26, 2022). From the terrace of the bar, I can see a small garden with a pool below: "Where is the quality of life?" he asked rhetorically. "It is in the province! I live in paradise," he continued. "There is no more capital and province," he restates, highlighting that now it takes less than two hours to go from the once isolated hamlet to the capital of Lisbon, 200 km away (field notes, August 26, 2022). His statement echoes broader transformations that have brought increasing permeability between urban and rural areas through developments in transport and communications.

Still, this renewal also comes with its own set of contradictions. Despite the success of the Schist Villages revitalization effort, Talasnal had only two permanent residents as of my visit. Most homeowners are like the bar owner: "reverse commuters" who visit on weekends or on a seasonal basis to work or leisure in their second residences. One informant lamented how Talasnal had turned from a quaint, remote village in the mountains to an "open-air shopping mall" without real, lived-in community life (field notes, September 2024). This points to the tensions between revitalization, commodification, and gentrification that are often concealed behind aestheticized representations of rurality, particularly those promoted through the Schist Village program through their marketing and branding.

I can only conjecture that fears of such transformations were behind the decision by the countercultural residents of Vaqueirinho and Catarredor not to join the program. This is because, when I visited, the inhabitants of these hamlets were nowhere to be found. Although postboxes had labels with

residents' names, most of them foreign, and their houses, albeit deteriorated, showed signs of habitation, such as colorful curtains and decorative objects with peace signs, there were no restaurants or lodgings except for one bar, appropriately named The Bar at the End of the World, which was closed. These hamlets show an alternative model of rural revitalization, one shaped by retreat and withdrawal, thus revealing how not all translocal connections are readily aestheticized or commodified.

The last village before reaching Cerdeira, Candal, further illustrates how the fate of peripheral regions is often tied to infrastructural development, their disintegration, or lack thereof. Once served by a now-defunct bus line, the hamlet reached a peak of 201 inhabitants in 1940. By 2001, at the launch of the Schist Villages program, that number had dwindled to just two (Carvalho, 2003).

My journey up the mountain made visible the uneven geographies of revitalization in Lousã, reflecting the divergent pasts, ecologies, and imaginaries embedded in each place, despite their geographical proximity and shared socio-economic and historical conditions. As I approached Cerdeira in the late afternoon, the physical remoteness of the hamlet prompted me to reflect on what kinds of connections and reconfigurations are possible in remote peripheral places shaped by the exploitation brought by modernity, and on the limitations of rural imaginaries within capitalism's overriding tendency towards commodification. Gentrification, as a result of spatial commodification, is made tangible in the road that leads to Cerdeira. Like the other Schist Villages, it is accessible only by car or taxi. But unlike those that can accommodate large tour buses, the steep and narrow road acts as a natural deterrent, preserving the hamlet's "quiet and exclusive," as one interlocutor pointed out.

After 1.5 kilometers of winding ascent, the asphalt road ends at a parking area equipped with an electric vehicle charging station, located beside a small chapel. From here, I catch my first and most scenic view of the hamlet: a cluster of brown schist houses perched almost vertically along a steep slope ([Figure 1](#)). To reach the village, I descend into a small valley on foot, crossing a wooden bridge over a gentle stream. Next to it, a tiny fountain provides drinking water, and a small natural stone pool offers relief from the summer heat. A sloping path leads to the village square, where the reception of Cerdeira – Home for Creativity is located. From there, I am guided to Casa da Janela, or House of the Window, one of seventeen restored buildings in the hamlet, ten of which now serve as guest accommodations within a total of 28 structures.

Cerdeira: from depopulated hamlet to a hub of creativity

Cerdeira is one of the villages that joined the Schist Village program in 2001. After reaching close to 80 inhabitants in the 1940s, it became depopulated by 1981, a process accelerated by one particularly grim event:



Figure 1. Ruralscape of the Cerdeira hamlet from across the small valley. Photo by the author, August 2022.

an argument between neighbors about the sharing of water that ended in manslaughter, immortalized in fictional form in a 1993 film by Portuguese director João Mário Grilo, titled *O Fim do Mundo* (*The End of the World*).

The hamlet underwent a lengthy process of revitalization after German artist and woodworker Kerstin Thomas settled there with her family in 1988, just thirteen years after the democratic revolution. Thomas had come to Portugal to study at the university and was looking for a place to set up her studio: “The goal was to live here because I wanted to have my workshop in a quiet place that I could pay for because I was 24 years old” (K. Thomas, personal communication, August 28, 2022, translated from Portuguese).

Despite not having electricity or sewerage services at the time, and the only access to Lousã town being through a winding dirt road, Thomas decided to settle in the hamlet and started using local woods to create her works, which she sold in craft fairs around the country. She also felt the need to dissociate herself from the image of countercultural dropouts that tarnished other European migrants who settled in the region. She actively fostered relationships with the former inhabitants of the mountain hamlets. Many were now elders who had moved to the nearby Lousã town and held traumatic memories of the mountains, or their children, who would sometimes return from the city or abroad to vacation in the hamlet. By learning about the complex (hi)stories of the place, including those of hardship, scarcity, and marginalization, and by actively engaging with its people and landscape, Thomas rooted herself and her family in the locality.

Little by little, she started buying Cerdeira’s abandoned schist houses from their previous owners and working on their recuperation. In 2000, a couple of friends from Coimbra began coming to Cerdeira on weekends and joined



Figure 2. Native flora of Lousã mountain, Cerdeira. Photo by the author, August 2022.

the recuperation efforts. In 2002, she helped a new farmer find land in the hamlet to set up his organic plants business. Later, he started a project to restore the native flora that had been replaced by invasive species under the reforestation plan by the National Dictatorship government ([Figure 2](#)).

Rather than positioning herself as an outsider or escapee, Thomas adopted a position of “deep-rooted utopianism,” engaging not only with the landscape but also with the “community life, aiming to become engaged with local networks of relationships” (Sardinha, 2018, p. 129). This reflects a mode of both geographical and social emplacement that Eckenwiler (2013) sees as crucial to the process of “ethical placemaking” (p. 20-21) which is shaped by care, attention, and socio-political responsibility. Thomas’s active and long-term engagement with the past and future of the region is expressed in the following quotes about her initial reaction to the Schist village program and her role in its implementation:

[When] they started talking to everyone and (...) surveying the territory, (...) for me, it was a relief because I was always thinking: “I am here investing my whole life and I don’t know if what I am doing is going to survive. (...) [At that time] there was a problem of vandalism in these villages (...), because there was nobody [here], nobody valued this (...) And I asserted myself a lot. But I think it was good anyway. I always had doubts whether I had the right to or not, but I thought I was defending the heritage. (...) When they came to do the mapping,

I was so happy that I started to clean the hamlet so that they could take the measurements [laughs] (K. Thomas, personal communication, August 28, 2022, translated from Portuguese).

I was very proactive. I was always going to the program's office to see what they would want, I gave ideas, some that were respected and others that we couldn't implement. (...) But it was very good because it was a collaboration (...) and it was very good to meet people from the other hamlets who were doing similar things, with a similar struggle (...). And that was very sweet, because suddenly, despite the distance, there was something in common, a history, a struggle, and a search for solutions. (K. Thomas, personal communication, August 28, 2022, translated from Portuguese).

The above quotes reflect both Thomas's uncertainty about her right to imagine and later influence the future of the hamlet as a foreign in-migrant, as well as the relational, experimental, and bottom-up process of collaboration and solidarity involved in the shared reinvention and co-creation of the region's identity. In this context, the transformation of each hamlet reflects the idiosyncrasies of the actors involved in their reimagining. This is because, as Ingold (2000) states, "the forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagements with their surroundings" (p. 186). As a mobile craftsperson looking for "another way to exhibit, another way to sell" (K. Thomas, personal communication, August 8, 2022, translated from Portuguese), Thomas's drew on her translocal connections to establish a contemporary arts and crafts festival that set the hamlet's ruins as its stage. Since 2006, when electricity finally arrived in the village, *Elementos à Solta - Art Meets Nature* festival happens biannually in July to feature open-air exhibitions of works by invited artists, demonstrations of various craft techniques, concerts, workshops, and other activities.

In 2012, the first iteration of the Cerdeira - Home for Creativity project, then called Cerdeira Village Art & Craft, was born as a space for rural accommodation co-founded by Thomas and her friends. Drawing from both vernacular traditions and contemporary sustainability discourses, the project involved the recuperation of the pre-existing buildings using ecological and regional materials, as well as local architectural techniques combined with innovative ones (such as the use of cork for thermal insulation). One example of this is Casa das Artes, the largest building in Cerdeira, rebuilt in the context of the international project EcoArq – Ecological Architecture, using only schist stone, clay, and chestnut wood, now repurposed for meetings, lunches, and business retreats. In addition to guaranteeing the transmission of endangered traditional knowledge through the training of local craftspeople,

the project contributed to reevaluating the local schist architecture, once seen as a sign of poverty, as something that has the potential to be both aesthetic, comfortable, and sustainable (field notes, August 28, 2022).

The creative side of the project, directed by Thomas, started in 2013 with the foundation of the Cerdeira Village Art & Craft Association (CVAC) and began with an artist-in-residence program first implemented in 2014. Since then, the hamlet has received more than 60 artists-in-residence, mainly from other European countries (about 60%) but also from Japan, South Korea, Nepal, Israel, Brazil, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. While the project accepts artists working on various media, from painting, sculpture, and illustration, to photography, music, and dance, since 2022, half of the resident artists in Cerdeira have worked with ceramics. However, the desire to create an experience that would foster conditions to support and sustain the project's continuity inspired the building of a Japanese-style wood-firing kiln for ceramics, the only of its kind in Portugal.

The Sasukenei kiln: local-to-local connections and relational creativity

I first became interested in the activities happening in Cerdeira when I learned about their crowdfunding project to invite Japanese potter Masakazu Kusakabe (1946-2023) to build an innovative wood-firing ceramics kiln in the hamlet, named Sasukenei (meaning “all is well” or “that’s alright” in the Fukushima dialect). A hybrid technological artifact, Sasukenei is an adaptation of the Bourry box kiln designed by French potter Émile Bourry that allows for the rich ash effects typical of the Japanese *anagama* (hole kiln), which dates to the sixth century. Answering contemporary concerns with sustainability, it does so in a much shorter firing (*anagama* firings typically last from five to ten days) and with little release of smoke, which has become a concern as the urban perimeter engulfs rural areas, and, in Cerdeira’s case, due to the frequency of wildfires in the Lousã mountain.

During his lifetime, Kusakabe built many such kilns around the world, including Japan, China, Germany, the United States, Australia, and the rural Brazilian town where I have been doing research since 2010. In the post-war period, high-temperature wood-firing became popular worldwide due to the activities of Japanese potters and Westerners who had learnt ceramics in Japan. Besides the aesthetic allure resulting from the unusual patterns and colors that emerge from the actions of the fire and ashes on the surface of the clay, the somewhat unpredictable firing process, by which practitioners entrust the finishing of the work to natural forces, has also contributed to the popularity of this practice.

The path of Kusakabe’s kiln to Cerdeira epitomizes the translocal connections and processes of cultural improvisation unfolding in the hamlet, thus highlighting the “throwntogetherness” of place as the result of “an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories” that can come from chaos and disorder (Massey, 2005, p. 151). The kiln was suggested to Thomas by Ricardo Lopes, a Portuguese ceramic artist who had encountered the innovative technology during an artist residency in Jingdezhen, China’s renowned ceramic town.



Figure 3. Cerdeira's smokeless kiln. Photo by the author, August 2022.

This led to a crowdfunding project to invite Kusakabe to travel to Cerdeira to build the kiln in collaboration with eight Portuguese ceramicists, a project that took place in 2015 ([Figure 3](#)).

Firing ceramics in the Sasukenei kiln is a labor-intensive process that takes about 24 to 36 hours and requires coordinated collaboration to feed the kiln with wood at the right intervals until it reaches approximately 1260°C. During Cerdeira Arts and Crafts School's multi-day ceramic courses, participants from diverse nationalities, backgrounds, and experience with wood-firing work in 6-hour shifts at the kiln – a process that is both enjoyable and physically demanding. Given the kiln's exotic nature and the growing allure of Japanese-style wood-firing, these events often attract ceramicists from other areas of the country, who come to witness the process, offer handy help, and sometimes even slip a few ceramic pieces of their own into the kiln.

As a bodily and affective practice, craft activities such as ceramic wood-firing can connect past and present, allowing participants to engage sensorially with the materiality and cultural memory of the place (Torell & Palmsköld, 2000). Through this embodied relationship and process of co-creation, Kusakabe's kiln has become a catalyst for social connections, fostering a sense of community among the diverse participants, who stay in touch via social media and other digital platforms to share information about other ceramic courses, materials, and techniques. Besides adding to the creation of transient cosmopolitan communities, the Sasukenei kiln can also foster more resonant human and non-human relationships shaped by collaboration and different notions of time, adding to cultivating a new kind of aesthetic and sensorial attention that appears increasingly urgent in the context of the current climate crisis (Davis & Turpin, 2015). In this sense,

craftsmanship, as an engaged and relational practice grounded on the material process and its uncertainty, may hold the potential to carve out new spaces of possibility for rural places and beyond (Buchczyk, 2020).

After the construction of the Sasukenei kiln, Cerdeira Arts and Crafts School received funding from the national tourism authority to outfit the studio, enabling the offering of a range of workshops, including ceramics, woodworking, basketry, painting, and bookbinding, amongst others. These are taught by Portuguese and international instructors and frequented by both amateur hobbyists and professional artists, predominantly foreign visitors between the ages of thirty and fifty years old. Workshops typically last between two and ten days, with participants staying in the hamlet, either in one of the renovated schist houses or in a dormitory that accommodates up to twelve people.

In addition to these multi-day workshops, the school also provides shorter creative experiences that aim to encourage visitors to stay in the hamlet for more than one night, offer lodging guests easy access to the school, and connect them to the artistic process. Such content-driven activities stressing participation, immersion, and collaboration also have the goal of deepening visitors' appreciation of local heritage and landscape. This is achieved not only by drawing inspiration from the natural surroundings but also by incorporating local materials such as schist, wood, clay, and flowers—even in workshops featuring crafts not historically rooted in the region ([Figure 4](#)). The connection with place is heightened by the school's philosophy of prioritizing local and regional materials as much as possible. For example, the clay used for ceramics workshops comes from nearby Miranda do Corvo and Pombal, about 20 and 80 kilometers away, and wood is all locally sourced or salvaged.

In addition to the school activities and the contemporary art festival, since 2019 the hamlet also hosts a Masters and Chefs Festival, in which visitors can enjoy regional cuisine served on tableware fresh from Cerdeira's smokeless kiln, and is one of the stages of the XJazz – Jazz Encounters in the Schist Villages since 2012. These, together with the Elementos à Solta Art Festival, are all subsidized by the Schist Villages program and the municipality.

Relational population and the paradoxes of place-making

Frequenters of the Cerdeira hamlet are not restricted to accommodation guests and workshop participants. There are reportedly ten residents, or six families, living permanently in the hamlet, and others who come on weekends or vacations, both Portuguese and foreign-born (verbal information obtained during fieldwork). The Cerdeira – Home for Creativity project also employs 17 people full-time, most of whom are born in the region and between the ages of twenty and forty years old. Having once left the area (or the country) for work, they returned attracted by the low prices, high quality of life (particularly for those with children), and the support offered by being close to other family members. And while the majority commute to Cerdeira from nearby towns such as Lousã, others live in remote areas of



Figure 4. Participants collect local flowers and other plants for one of the course activities. Photo by the author.

the mountain, as is the case of a young couple who immigrated from Brazil. They can be described as “related population” (*kankei jinko*, in Japanese), a term coined by journalist Terumi Tanaka (2017, p. 55) to describe people who regularly visit rural areas, not as tourists or permanent residents, but as ‘reverse commuters’. The idea of attracting an outsider population to rural areas as frequent visitors to act as potential ambassadors and contribute to the economy has been embraced by Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism (Morais, 2022). These institutional frameworks are embedded within what Lippard (1997) describes as the “lure of the local” within a contemporary cultural life increasingly shaped by uprootedness, impermanence, and “the absence of value attached to specific place” (p. 5).

While the Cerdeira – Home for Creativity project represents a model of place-making in which the responsibility for survival and regeneration is partially shared between (trans)local actors and regional, national, and transnational governmental entities, this process of negotiation still involves tensions between the various stakeholders involved, raising questions about who benefits and what is at stake. Some interlocutors expressed concerns about the increasing saturation of tourist accommodations in some Schist villages, which they see as a poor substitute for the creation of real, lived-in communities and “authentic” community life (fieldwork notes, September 2024). In Cerdeira, this shift has already constrained earlier modes of social engagement, such as youth rehabilitation programs once hosted by Thomas. Another interlocutor also expressed frustration towards the profit-led and growth-focused direction of the project, which, borrowing anthropologist

Ulf Hannerz's words, involved a commodification of culture "hitherto available through the free flow within the form-of-life frame" (Hannerz, 1996, p. 74).

And while the regeneration of the hamlet for creative tourism was accompanied by the reevaluation of local resources, such as the traditional schist architecture and other forms of local knowledge and culture, this also meant losing a part of the hamlet's original appeal, such as pitch-dark nights or the mysterious atmosphere of having artworks "populate" the village's ruins during the festival (fieldwork notes, August 2022). This reveals the "allure of ruins" behind the general interest in and reevaluation of folk culture, which has tended to turn vestiges of abandonment into aestheticized and commodified objects for urban consumption, answering modern anxieties with modernity and with capitalism itself (Miller, 2004).

Another issue concerns the representational strategies of the Schist Village program, which romanticizes rurality through imagery of tranquility, authenticity, and ecological harmony. While such narratives attract visitors and investment, they can obscure the more difficult past that shaped the histories of these places. For example, some former residents refuse to return to the mountains due to associations with hardship, scarcity, marginalization, and loss, a legacy of the expropriations and ecological disruptions enacted under the National Dictatorship's reforestation programs. This shows how space is made not only through social, cultural, and material relations but also mediated by affective memories, embodied experiences, and the geographies of displacement and belonging, which art can help reimagine (Lippard, 1997). The absence of these aspects from the revitalization narratives of the Schist Villages program reveals, however, a selective memory-making that prioritizes contemporary urban desires for the rural idyll over historical complexity, transforming sites of struggle into curated consumer experiences detached from their political and emotional histories.

Moreover, the project's success hinges on a translocal elite being able to participate in and benefit from creative forms of tourism. While the project has contributed to the creation of jobs for local youths and the training of local craftspeople, fostering a larger societal reevaluation of local cultural forms, the main beneficiaries of the knowledge exchange, "co-creation," and aesthetic immersion taking place in Cerdeira are arguably workshop participants coming predominantly from the Global North. How can citizen-led initiatives like Cerdeira – Home for Creativity remain economically sustainable while giving back to their local communities? And who is, in fact, this "local community," given that Cerdeira was completely depopulated by the 1980s? One final question is: can cultural commodification for tourism coexist with plural and complex narratives that include the voices and histories of the marginalized? These are some issues I hope to explore in future research. In the meantime, I can say that, while translocal stakeholders may rely on the commodification of cultural forms rooted in local life in their attempts at regeneration and resignification of rural spaces, the case of

Cerdeira suggests that rural places may find survival in embracing cultural diversity and hybridity, rather than perpetuating an artificial and frozen image of purity and authenticity. As Anna Tsing (2012) states:

Instead of merely cataloguing diversity, we need to tell the histories in which diversity emerges—that is, acknowledge its lively and, thus, contaminated forms. Diversity is created in collaborative synergies; it is always becoming. Both indigenous people and migrants can participate in making slow disturbance patches. One useful direction in which to move “biocultural diversity” is to open it up to the contaminated diversity and slow disturbance regimes of people in many circumstances (p. 95).

Conclusion: Rural places are a-changin’

This paper explored how the Cerdeira – Home for Creativity project has contributed to the revitalization and reconfiguration of the once-depopulated hamlet of Cerdeira by leveraging and reinventing both local craft knowledge and translocal craft networks to implement creative experiences that emphasize active participation and engagement with place. While challenging common assumptions that rural areas are closed, isolated, and provincial, Cerdeira’s case exemplifies how they are constituted through relational processes across space, time, and social domains, rather than through fixed boundaries or essential identities.

Cerdeira’s case also illustrates the changing roles and meanings of rural places in the wake of modernization: from backward places in need of civilizing, to productive spaces tied to the primary sector, and, more recently, to sites of leisure, experience, and creativity within a post-productivist paradigm (Woods, 2012). This shift has involved a reevaluation of territory through an understanding of the interconnections between nature and culture, as evidenced in initiatives such as the region’s ethnographic museums.

In Cerdeira, this paradigm change involved two apparently contradictory movements: the revalorization of local resources and the engagement with global flows. The first includes a reappraisal of traditional activities such as organic farming, crafts, vernacular architecture, and the native landscape, now reframed and repurposed for alternative modalities of tourism and creative experimentation. For Thomas, this is one of the Schist Villages program’s greatest contributions: a broader societal reevaluation of traditional mountain lifeways, which helped foster pride and raise the self-esteem of locals and presented rural life as a viable and even desirable place for younger generations to visit, work, and live (K. Thomas, personal communication, August 28, 2022). This trend was reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when urban residents turned to rural areas as remote refuges made newly accessible by digital connectivity.

The second aspect relates to how Cerdeira's reconfiguration was shaped through dispersed and overlapping translocal assemblages of people, ideas, knowledge, and materials, which cross national borders while also bypassing the center. While these dynamics are not free from power asymmetries and global hierarchies, they can add to the creation of new hybrid forms (Woods, 2007). Technology, in particular, played a significant role in this shift, not only by enabling new forms of remote work and engagement with rural areas, from permanent residency to temporary visits, but also through the creative adaptation of new-old technologies, such as cork insulation in Cerdeira's schist houses and Kusakabe's smokeless kiln. This reveals craft's capacity to draw on local materials and traditions while circulating through global flows of people and knowledge, thus contributing to the process of hybridization.

Hybridization is, in Cerdeira's case, the result of a creative combination and reconfiguration of local and translocal resources into new cultural forms. In this context, "newness appears as a result of recontextualization, mixing and ongoing, always provisional mergers of formerly discrete symbolic realms" (Eriksen, 2003, p. 223), leading to cultural diversification rather than standardization. In Lousã mountain, hybridity has been a feature of the region since ancient times, visible for example, in the pagan symbols adorning the *cangas de festa* – decorated yokes placed on animals during Catholic processions – which show not only the farmers' economic prominence but also the enduring influence of the Castro culture in the region long after the introduction of Christianity (field notes, August 25, 2022).

As a feature of globalization and, arguably, of culture itself, hybridity involves agency, negotiation, and power asymmetries between the center and periphery (Burke, 2009; Kadry, 2005; Pieterse, 1994). The reconfiguration of the Cerdeira hamlet shows, however, how conflating globalization with modernization, westernization, and consequently, homogenization and cultural imperialism disregards the agency and creativity of translocal actors, who are taking an active role in the selection and reconfiguration of new and pre-existing cultural forms through the creation of networks of social relations (both human and non-human) and spatial-temporal interconnections that can bypass the center altogether. Creativity as improvisation is evident in the agency of local and translocal actors, whether they are formally regarded as creators or not, and appears as a means of adaptation and a way to express and redefine local identity amid rapid social and economic change (Woods, 2012).

This case study also shows how people use craft heritage for identity construction through social reflection and political engagement, thus underscoring the role of utopian imagination in bringing about socio-cultural change (Clammer, 2015; Torell & Palmsköld, 2000). In-migrants such as Thomas play a particularly prominent role in this process of cultural creativity, hybridization and reimagining by bridging existing practices with new resources and networks. Their embedded, long-term engagement, rooted

in both mobility and place, can contribute to sustaining existing social functions while introducing new ideas and practices through a reevaluation of local identity (Obikwelu et al., 2018).

Finally, this study contributes to a view of both rural revitalization and rural space not as linear or bounded but as processes in motion, reinvented, negotiated, and creatively reconfigured through social relations, material-symbolic resources, spatial interdependencies, technological innovations, and economic constraints. The case of Cerdeira suggests that even remote mountain villages can become cosmopolitan, not through mimicry of urban forms but through collaborative and situated yet open entanglements that are grounded in relationships of exchange, care, and creative adaptation. Hopefully, this will bring about more than preservation and commodification, but new and ever-evolving forms of social, cultural, and ecological life.

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Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) KAKENHI Grant Number 24K21000.

Submitted: November 25, 2024 CST. Accepted: July 15, 2025 CST. Published: August 25, 2025 CST.



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