

The Portuguese and Cod Fishing in the Northwest Atlantic: A Legendary Heritage*

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Abstract

Since the sixteenth century, dried salted cod had become an essential good in Portugal: a staple food of high importance for a diet with medieval roots that was poor in animal protein and for a territory where fresh fish had hardly ever arrived. A simple exercise of geo-economics allows us to identify the main countries and regions of the world that have historically depended on Atlantic cod fishing and to understand Portugal's place in these global subsets. The legendary “white fleet” and the fishermen's saga aboard the small dories have been the central topics of the national and international imaginary built around Portuguese cod fishing in the Northwest Atlantic. This mythical imagery includes some epic aspects that *Estado Novo* propaganda spread across borders.

Keywords

Cod, Fishing, Estado Novo, Atlantic Ocean, National identity

Resumo

Desde o século XVI, o bacalhau salgado seco tornou-se um bem essencial em Portugal: um alimento básico de elevada importância para uma dieta de raízes medievais e pobre em proteína animal e para um território onde o peixe fresco quase nunca chegava. Um simples exercício de geoeconomia permite-nos identificar os principais países e regiões do mundo que historicamente dependeram da pesca do bacalhau no Atlântico e compreender o lugar de Portugal nestes subconjuntos globais. A lendária “frota branca” e a saga dos pescadores a bordo dos pequenos dórís têm sido os temas centrais do imaginário nacional e internacional construído em torno da pesca portuguesa do bacalhau no Atlântico. Este imaginário mítico inclui alguns aspetos épicos que a propaganda do Estado Novo espalhou no mundo.

Palavras-chave

Bacalhau, Pesca, Estado Novo, Oceano Atlântico, Identidade nacional

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The legendary “white fleet” and the fishermen’s saga aboard the small dories have been the central topics of the national and international imaginary built around Portuguese cod fishing in the Northwest Atlantic. This mythical imagery includes some epic aspects that *Estado Novo* propaganda spread across borders.

Atlantic cod (*gadus morhua*) is not only a marine resource. For the Portuguese, it is also a social construction, a maritime industry, and a legendary heritage. The fishing and the consumption of Atlantic cod in Southern European countries are a mercantile invention of modernity. Since the grand banks of Newfoundland started being regularly exploited by Portuguese, Basque, French, and British navigators and merchants at the end of the fifteenth century, large fleets of ships have headed year after year from European ports to the Northwest Atlantic, 1800 nautical miles away, to fish for Atlantic cod. For these countries, it was a migratory and transatlantic fishery.

In early modern times, the alleged evidence of an infinite fishery—obviously allegoric—, the rise of fish conservation methods, and the development of business networks led to a “food revolution.” The Catholic prescriptions of fasting and abstinence of protein poverty took on the adoption of Atlantic cod as a common foodstuff in Mediterranean and Catholic Europe. Since the sixteenth century, dried salted cod had become an essential good in Portugal: a staple food of high importance for a diet with medieval roots that was poor in animal protein and for a territory where fresh fish had hardly ever arrived. More than a biological resource by itself, dry salted cod is a concentrate of animal protein with high performance and productivity.

The semantic diversity of expressions that evoke this heritage in different languages tells us much more about the way codfish is processed and preserved than it tells us about the natural history of the fish. *Cod* (U.K. English), *codfish* (U.S. English), *bacalhan* (Portuguese), *morue* (French), *baccalà* or *stoccafisso* (Italian), *kabeljau* or *stockfisch* (German), and *bakailaoa* (Basque) are injunctive expressions that evoke fishing techniques and the type of curing. In either case, words also reflect the processes of commercial mediation, the social patterns of consumption and the people’s taste for food.

Portuguese cod fishing in the northwest Atlantic, particularly in offshore Newfoundland and along the coast of the Labrador Peninsula, has experienced irregular cycles. Historically, we estimate that, on an annual average, codfish caught by Portuguese vessels never exceeded ten percent of the whole consumption of the Portuguese domestic market. In the Portuguese African colonies, even among the white colonial population, the consumption of codfish was never exceptionally high.

Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, the business of codfish has never ceased to be as a long-term global economic activity. A simple exercise of geo-economics allows us to identify the main countries and regions of the world that have historically depended on Atlantic cod fishing and to understand Portugal’s place in these global subsets.

Firstly: Portugal, Spain, England, and France were pioneers in transoceanic cod fishing and, from modern times, had migratory fleets shielded by naval powers allowing them to dispute the hegemony of the product’s commercial routes between the early sixteenth century and the end of the eighteenth century.

Secondly: Countries that led the primary production and the business of global dry salt codfish as direct exporters or brokers towards the large European markets of Southern and Mediterranean Europe, such as Lisbon, Porto, Alicante, Bilbao, Le Havre, Marseille, Genoa, Naples, and Piraeus (Athens). The commercial agents of this short group of countries were overwhelmingly English and, for a time, French.

Finally, the colonial peripheries involved in the “codfish world economy” through the mercantile action of the European empires and their slave trade oligarchies. For the Central American territories (Antilles), codfish was a source of animal protein that supported the “plantation economy.” It was part of the triangular trade between the Americas, Europe, and Africa.

Transatlantic cod fishing was behind the creation of international economic relations and navigation careers. For hundreds of years, migratory fleets from southern European countries left their ports in April or May and headed to the Newfoundland banks to load the holds and bring codfish to European urban markets.

Caught by lonely dory men using only hand lines and baits, cod was then taken from the small dories to the “mother ship,” commonly schooners. Then, it was salted in the ships’ holds (wet salted) and, once landed, dehydrated under the wind at moderate temperatures (dry salted), or re-salted and only then dried.

Supported by the power of their fleets, the French and English relied on the coastal colonies in North America to export codfish, already salted and dried, to Europe and the Caribbean, where the “heavy salted” from *Terranova* was a slave food. All the disputes to colonize Newfoundland and Nova Scotia related to the practical need to create export depots and drying spots in order to secure “comparative advantages” on trade flows.

The use of trolleys and the technique of the dories (small boats lowered from sailboats and crewed by one or two fishermen) came from New England. These techniques started with Portuguese ship-owners in 1835, with the *Companhia de Pescarias Lisbonense*. The experience of Azorean fishermen on Gloucester schooners, later evoked by Victor Fleming’s film, *Captains Courageous* (1937), and the role of Bensaúde ship-owner family in the revival of fishing campaigns from Portuguese ports, spread these methods and made the Portuguese dory fishermen an international legend.

Historically, Lisbon was always the world’s largest consumer market for codfish, closely followed by Porto. In the second half of the eighteenth century, both cities were part of a global cod trade network, mediated by British brokers based in London. In the era of the Marquis of Pombal, the visionary Prime Minister of King D. José I, Hawes & Company became the first multinational in codfish trade whose main market was Lisbon. Newfoundland salted cod was the Hawes’s “core business.”

Although the myth of codfish and the socialization of the popular parable of the “loyal friend” (*o fiel amigo*) were nineteenth-century “inventions,” the tendency continued during the Portuguese First Republic (1910–26) and especially in the First World War. Portuguese writers such as Eça de Queirós, Ramalho Ortigão, and the intellectual Oliveira Martins posed the “cod question” in literary and cultural terms, whilst the politicians Basílio Teles, Afonso Costa, and the dictator Oliveira Salazar himself posed the cod question at the level of political economy. The relations between the State and society, between “public” and “private” spheres, were the ground on which the “cod question” became a national issue, connected with the broader problem of State authority.

During the twentieth century, the Portuguese cod fishing industry went through three distinct stages. The first was the State reorganization of supply and national production, imposed by the *Estado Novo* in 1934: in that year, a heavy corporatist administration of the authoritarian state took form in a way that allowed to control the sector and to expand the fleet under an autarkic logic. It was the age of the Cod Campaign.

The second was the heyday of the 1950s and 1960s, based on labor’s State control and price fixing, banking credit, and other protectionist tools managed by the Government through the corporatist institutions. Free access to marine resources and the *mare liberum* regime—very soon changed—were key factors of this “Olympic cycle.”

Finally, there was a decline of the industry in the last quarter of the twentieth century, linked to the end of the authoritarian corporatist oligarchy, in 1974, and to the changes in maritime law. This second issue resulted in several coastal states unilaterally adopting the concept of an exclusive economic zone.

This last historical cycle, still in force, was marked by the double influence of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the multilateral management of marine resources defined by

the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy. These frameworks led Portugal to acknowledge its position as a "coastal state" and drastically reduce the distant-water fisheries given the change of property rights and access rules.

Currently, Portugal owns only eight long-distance fishing vessels that have fishing quotas for cod and other fish species allocated by the European Union. This "national production" amounts to less than two percent of the Portuguese domestic market's annual consumption of codfish. The import business of raw materials is more significant and global today than ever before. Imported codfish, salted and frozen, is very significant in the value chain of the Portuguese fishing industry. Dozens of companies and thousands of jobs depend on it, whose competitiveness lies on the quality of the "Portuguese traditional cure."

Cod fishing in the modern and contemporary era was a human saga, a cultural heritage shared across the entire Portuguese territory. "Faina Maior" (*la Grande Pêche*, a great tradition at Bretagne, the western French coast) is especially strong in the imaginary of maritime and emigrant communities, as well as in Portuguese-speaking countries that, today, are important markets for the export of cod processed by Portuguese companies.

In the mid-twentieth century, in the golden age of the national cod fishing industry, a cod campaign lasted an average of six months. Upon arrival to the Newfoundland and to the west coast of Greenland fishing grounds—very close to the local villages in the big isle of the Arctic—everything was organized to catch as much as possible. The priority was to load the ship and create profits for the ship-owner.

On fishing days, when weather conditions allowed, dories were dropped from the mother ship, which could be simple sailboats or provided with an auxiliary engine. The dory would be lowered from the ship with a single man on board. The means of propulsion were merely composed by a pair of oars and a handcrafted sail, equipped according to the experience and the tradition of where the fishermen came from. Fishermen rowed two or three miles and, accepting all risks, were left to themselves in the hope of loading the whole boat. Fog and icebergs were the biggest dangers to face. The dories were small, flat-bottomed boats, lightweight and fast, probably of North American origin. Stacked on the deck of the sailboat, the dory was the "micro ship" that each fisherman in the crew was lucky to have.

The more they caught, the more they would earn. It was a vicious circle, based on relation between the primitive method of angling, and the intensive work system between the deck, the ships, and the small boats. After a long day at sea, which could be ten or twelve hours straight, the fishermen set to work gutting the fish on deck and then, in the hold, salting it. These high-precision tasks only ended when the cod was properly stored in the hold, a fundamental requirement for the cargo not to be spoiled. Living conditions on board were very harsh and the work rhythm was intense, almost inhumane.

The most awaited moments were the arrival at the safe harbor of St. John's, on the Canadian island of Newfoundland, where the ships would take on fresh supplies, and then the return home. Even if it was never an official Portuguese colony, *São João da Terra Nova* (as the Portuguese fishermen called it), was one of the most heartfelt places for the Portuguese maritime imaginary. It was a provincial city, a port city, but seemed to offer the world to those rough men, thirsty for pleasure. Many, especially officials, had parallel lives there.

Looking back in time, a cod-fishing schooner can be described as a maritime dormitory for its crews, a storehouse for the small boats, and a large hold designed to accommodate hundreds of tons of codfish, the harvest of the campaign. It was, furthermore, an operations post from where the fishing was conducted.

As soon as the ship has left its port of origin, after the blessing ceremony of the fleet that took place every year in Belém (the monumental zone of Lisbon), the journey towards the fishing grounds

was taken up with work. The deck was busy with men as there was work waiting to be done. In the mess deck, where fishermen had their bunks, in addition to local affinities, men and boys (*moços*) sought to be close to brothers, parents, and children. In a single crew, it was very common to find parents and children, several brothers, as well as cousins, brothers-in-law, sons-in-law, and other relatives. Cod fishing was carried on from generation to generation.

Like the famous Wheat Campaign—*Bataglia del Grano* in Mussolini Italy—the Cod Campaign launched by the Salazar's authoritarian regime in the 1930s was the most emblematic program of the Portuguese autarky policy. The Cod Campaign expressed the political power commitment to a “new maritime Nation” and involved the State's intervention in economic interests—ship-owners, on the one hand, and import traders, on the other. The Cod Campaign matched the adoption of official market protectionist mechanisms: import and distribution quotas, administrative prices for the domestic market, and controlled labor conditions, especially wages. Politically, it was a success, insofar as the substitution of imports was lasting evidence.

Between 1935 and 1974, more than 20,000 Portuguese fishermen were registered in cod fishing vessels. The fleet included all types of vessels, from the old sloops without an auxiliary engine to the stern trawlers, which appeared just in 1964. Most of the ships were schooners like Creoula and Santa Maria Manuela (the last one worldwide known through the 1966 Canadian film *The White Ship*) or the famous Argus, whose legend spread with Allan Villiers's 1951 book *The Quest of the Schooner Argus*. Fishermen and other crew members were recruited from the north to the south of the country. Although this was more concentrated in piscatorial villages along the Portuguese coast and on the islands of the Azores, it extended to several inland places and the African colonies. On mainland Portugal, the recruitment of men for codfish was constant in maritime communities such as Ílhavo (Gafanhas), Murtosa, Figueira da Foz, Vila do Conde (Caxinas), Póvoa de Varzim, Viana do Castelo, Caminha, Setúbal, Olhão (Fuzeta), and Nazaré, where numerous families had parents and children in cod fishing.

Year after year, for six months of long-distance work, the fishermen left their families to exchange the uncertainty of the local fishery income for the higher salary of the “grand banks fishery.” The misery of small-scale fisheries and their low income made cod fishing highly attractive. In order to safeguard the usual problems faced by ship-owners in gathering crews and leaving their ports in time, a decree from 1927 regulated the salary system, as well as the terms for registration. According to the famous decree, young men could postpone their military enlistment up to the age of twenty-six. Those who could prove they had completed, at least, six fishing campaigns in the Newfoundland seas would be immediately released from military service and transferred to the “naval reserve.” This rule became very important in the 1960s when the colonial wars in Africa and the increase of emigration of Portuguese people to France made recruiting for cod ships more and more difficult.

In 1937, before ships left for *Terranova*, a tremendous cod fishermen's strike broke out in protest against the new working conditions imposed by the “corporatist State.” The Portuguese government answered with repression. Nonetheless, the State still decided to support some social assistance initiatives addressed especially to the cod fishermen. A few weeks after this famous strike, the “Fishermen Houses” (*Casas dos Pescadores*) were created along the Portuguese coast. Putting the Cod Campaign in motion implied stopping the uncertainty of recruitment, repressing the crews, and preventing wage differences between ships—old problems that disturbed the income of the industry.

Although cod's cultural status in Portuguese society is largely based on the social practice of consumption, there is also the legendary, often epic, memory of the contemporary codfish campaigns. It means an obvious paradox: historically, the Portuguese have never been a fishing power, but the social memory of cod's heritage is mainly focused on the national fleet activity and on the fishermen's saga.

We will never know, for sure, what cod fishing was like.

This is especially true if we want to understand its human side, far from the cold realities of the politics that manipulated it and closer to the daily lives of the men who did it. More than a great “story,” the cod campaigns that Portuguese seamen experienced until 1974—the year of the April Revolution, and also the moment when cod fishing by dories ended—have become legendary.

The voyages of the Portuguese schooners, and “line ships” in general, were so hard and full of dramatic adventures that, several decades later, they suggest an *excess of the real*. As Santos Graça (1952), an ethnographer from Póvoa de Varzim, wrote, cod fishing was a veritable “epic of the humble” (an *Épopéia dos Humildes*). In 1959, Bernardo Santareno, the talented dramatist who, as a doctor of the cod fleet, met fishermen and captains and wrote about their life on board and restlessness, defined cod fishing as an “epic drama.” Even today, Santareno’s expression is probably the most precise way of understanding this heritage.

At the same time as the dictatorship’s ideology exalted these men, making them symbols of a maritime nation that once again claimed to be strong, the corporatist oligarchy controlled the fishermen and shape their labor relations. From the authoritarian State’s perspective, the national cod fishing fleet required discipline and patriotic effort to “supply the Nation.” In the official discourse, cod fishermen were the heroes, the “obscure makers of the national economy,” as the *Jornal do Pescador* called them.

Besides labor and recruitment issues, the State conditioning of the cod fleet was permanent until 1974. In a protectionist-driven logic, the *Grémio dos Armadores* (shipowners guild) and the *Comissão Reguladora do Comércio de Bacalhau* (Cod Trade Regulatory Commission) defined the fleet renewal plans, establishing the types of ships, its dimensions, and capacities. Until 1966, the different types of line fishing vessels (sailboats, sailboats with an auxiliary engine, and motor ships) made up the majority of the fleet; although after 1961, the capacity of cod trawlers surpassed that of the “longline ships.”

The reduced average of trawlers in the Portuguese fleet and the persistence of line fishing with one-man boats until 1974 were the major technical problems of the industry. The lack of private capital to invest in trawler ships, the refusal of ship-owners to concentrate companies, and, above all, the cultural pattern of domestic demand—which preferred medium-sized and larger fish that fetched a better official price—explain these unusual characteristics.

After World War II, due to the disappearance of the traditional line fishing fleets, cod fishing by Portuguese dory men and schooners began to attract international curiosity. The 1951 publication of Alan Villiers’s *The Quest of the Schooner Argus*—which has also appeared in Portuguese and many other languages—placed the topic on the maritime reporters’ agenda all over the Atlantic world. The main figures in Villiers’s book are the ship itself and its men. However, the cruel face of the *Argus* fishermen’s daily work only earned marginal references. It was not by chance that the SNI (the Portuguese National Secretariat of Information) awarded Villiers the Camões Prize.

In the 1950s and the 1960s, the “freedom of the seas” became as uncertain as the plenty of fish on the banks of the Northwest Atlantic. Along with the threats of law and the marine environment, the Cod Campaign became an anachronistic project exalted by official narratives. Dory fishing made a nice postcard, but it was an obsolete activity, only possible as long as men could be recruited, providing ship-owners with cheap credit and containing the prices of imported cod to allow the national product to be sold. In brief, especially for external reasons, the protectionist model imposed by the *Estado Novo* to promote the cod fishing industry threatened to implode.

In 1957, Portugal became the world’s leading producer of dried salt cod. An impressive propaganda was built up by the Portuguese authoritarian regime concerning it. However, during the Cold War, especially from the 1960s onwards, the Cod Campaign was faced with the vicious circle of overfishing and the end of the classic rule of “freedom of the seas”: science and law combined with politics and international diplomacy. Fishermen and ship-owners were no longer able to fish where and as much as they wanted.

The increase in long-range fishing by trawlers and its environmental effects on codfish stocks encouraged the creation of some intergovernmental commissions designed to promote a multilateral management of the resources exploited by national fleets. The action of these international bodies motivated member states to develop scientific research, collect and organize data and compile statistics that could estimate the greater or lesser plenty of fish.

Despite the authoritarian nature of the Portuguese regime and its scientific backwardness in the field of marine sciences, Lisbon authorities followed international trends on the post-war “fishing multilateralism” and made a remarkable cooperation effort on maritime law. From 1946 onwards, Portugal took an active part in the dynamics of the intergovernmental management of the exploitation of the sea’s resources. Portugal was quick to join the new international organizations set up to study and manage fisheries and took part in most international conferences where questions of “fishing biology” and the law of the sea were discussed. Furthermore, it subscribed to and ratified all the conventions concerned with governing sovereignty over marine zones and the multilateral regulation of the resources exploited by Portuguese fleets—the cod fisheries in the Northwest Atlantic in the first place.

In spite of the benefits and the timid scientific openings that this international cooperation allowed, Portugal played mostly a reactive part in this international trend. Several specialized bodies and commissions were created in the offices of the Naval Ministry and the Corporatist Organization for Fishing. In 1950, the Institute of Marine Biology; in 1952, the Office for Fishing Studies, created with funds from the American Marshall Plan; and, in the same year, the National Advisory Committee of ICNAF (International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries, known today as NAFO). Only the last two bodies had a direct link to the problem of the “Atlantic cod” fishing access rights and rules. Their mission was to the study of the Atlantic cod stocks, as well as to the procedures for catching and processing the fish.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the activities of the public research bodies focused on the “classic” issues of detecting, prospecting, and mapping resources. As happened in other countries interested in developing their fishing industries, fishing biology became a “state science” in Portugal. Even so, these advisory bodies permitted a few openings to international cooperation, somewhat isolated in the panorama of scientific research in the Salazar period. The April 1974 Revolution and the creation of exclusive economic zones within the scope of the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1977 likewise contributed to the collapse of distant fisheries. The need to limit fisheries to the resources of the immense Portuguese Economic Exclusive Zone, the restrictions of the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Economic Community, to which Portugal adhered in 1986, and the closure of the “grand banks” in 1992, at the initiative of the Canadian government, kept the Portuguese fishermen away from Newfoundland.

The end of the Cod Campaign, and its coincidence with the fall of the dictatorial regime resembled a “return of the caravels.” It seemed like the maritime nation that had always been associated with the empire had just fallen too. It was a strategic change, but also a cultural change in the nation’s imaginary. It was only with the end of the Cod Campaign, that the memory built up until then about this activity began to reveal its multiple dimensions.

As part of a terrifying world, just as fascinating as strange, like all marine life, cod fishing has not yet well entered the domains of contemporary Portuguese fiction. Despite the narrative richness of the cod campaigns, the human saga of cod fishing has taken some time to station in the Portuguese collective memory.

Recently, in Portugal, several films have emerged—documentaries and fictional—about this tremendous cultural heritage. However, these cultural discourses tend to reproduce some cliché images and tend to feed an epic memory of cod fishing. Not so different from the version built by the *Estado Novo* propaganda.

There are several places of cod fishing memory in Portugal: the Ílhavo Maritime Museum, the Gil Eannes Museum Ship, located in Viana do Castelo, and the Cod Interpretation Centre, located in Lisbon, as a touristic product at Terreiro do Paço. The leading institution on this heritage construction, where is preserved the larger collection related to the twentieth-century cod fishing fleet is, undoubtedly, the Ílhavo Maritime Museum. The museum's project addresses the social memory of the northwest Atlantic fisheries, highlighting the local community's role, the collective memory of families and a seafarer's elite that has become legendary.

In a country where the sea is just a convenient identity, for which it functions as an epigraph, it is symptomatic that the sea experienced in the cod-fishing saga continues to intimidate fiction writers. Both in Portugal and abroad, especially in Southern Europe and in North America, the memory that persists of Portuguese men and ships' cod fishing campaigns is impressive and romantic. We might never know how cod fishing was really like.

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