
CAPE VERDE: SOCIETY, ISLAND IDENTITY AND WORLDVIEWS

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ABSTRACT

The archipelago of Cape Verde is unknown to many people. It is not their fault, especially when Cape Verde is located off the coast of West Africa and is not included in most commercial maps of the African continent. If we read a world map, our attention is seized by major countries, and the tiny nation pales into insignificance. We are missing out on the opportunity to learn about Cape Verde, which has the world's first creolised population.

KEYWORDS

Cape Verde; creole; island studies; Portuguese colonies; West Africa

BIO

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This photo-essay is the result of recent fieldwork in Cape Verde, which totalled five separate sessions and covered a majority of the nine inhabited islands.

According to official scripts, Cape Verde was discovered by Portuguese seafarers in the 15th century. Of the ten islands that make up the archipelago, nine would eventually have people living on them. Santiago was the first island to be settled, and São Vicente was the last. Given the Sahelian aridity and extremely unfavourable climate, food production was a perennial humanitarian and administrative challenge (Keese 2012; Bigman 1993; Patterson 1988; Carreira 1984). The most significant economic activity of Cape Verde was providing an entrepôt for transcontinental slave trade. The miscegenation between white Europeans and black Africans was at the basis of the formation of a creole population (Seibert 2014; Gibau 2005; Rodrigues 2003). A new creole language was also born out of these encounters. A unique biological, social and cultural experience took place in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

In the second half of the twentieth century, following forceful waves of African independence movements, Cape Verde likely declared severance from its former coloniser. By then, Cape Verde had already lived through many centuries of droughts and famines and witnessed the dispersal of an astoundingly high number of its *filhos de terra*, meaning sons and daughters of the land (Batalha and Carling 2008; Grassi and Évora 2007; Åkesson 2004). History explains why Cape Verdeans uphold a certain spirit of hard work and sacrifice. This is especially true in terms of agricultural labour. According to one perspective, the island nation of Cape Verde, which has the world's first creolised population and also the first African diaspora, "ought to be front and centre, at the cutting edge of contemporary scholarship of our globalised and diasporic world" (Gottlieb 2015: 2).

Cape Verde is made up of the *barlavento*/windward islands and the *sotavento*/leeward islands with some variations in skin colour and personal identification. *Sampadjudus* hail from the windward islands and *badius* from the leeward islands. "Cape Verdeans are chameleons," said a secondary school teacher in an interview. "They are like opportunists and change colour depending on the situation". He has *sampadjudu* (more European) parentage, but his ideas and values are *badiu* (more African). Even so, when there are football matches, for example between Guineans (from Guinea-Bissau) and Portuguese, *badius* will most certainly wear the Portuguese team's T-shirts and cheer for the Portuguese players. The teacher thought there is nothing contradictory in the allegiance. Elsewhere it has been observed that Cape Verdeans are people with a flexible culture and identity, who are situated between various worlds and between various civilizations (D. Santos 2017).

Under the given circumstances, the islanders have learned to be close to one another, to pool their resources together and maximise their advantages. This has had significance impact on relationships, family structures and community life (M. Santos, Torrão and Soares 2007; Silva 1996; Lesourd 1995). Basic words developed into a highly complex system of appellations and signals, and there are plenty of examples from fieldwork. For starters, *mãe* in Kabuverdianu (or Cape Verdean creole) means "mother" but may also refer to the "grandmother" who raised you up and cared for you in your childhood, depending on the context. Then, when a child calls *avó*, he or she may mean "grandmother", but it can also be a different relative who feeds him or her regularly. In one female informant's life – whom we shall call Lizzy – the "grandmother" is in reality a different wife of the grandfather, i.e., the stepmother of her mother (with all the negative connotations in the West and East), biologically unrelated but emotionally and physically the closest female family member to Lizzy. The woman combed Lizzy's hair, washed her, sang to her and told her stories, among other things. She was kind to a lot of children and *criou muitos netos*, meaning she raised many grandchildren from the local perspective. We should not be surprised by the fact that *avó* is sometimes great-grandmother; but considering the optimal relationship between the people involved, they prefer "grandmother" to "great-grandmother". *Tia*, which usually means aunt, causes even greater confusion for outsiders. If person A is much older than person B and cares for B as if B were his or her own child, A becomes B's "aunt". For *madrinha*, it is usually correct to translate to "godmother" based on the Catholic tradition. Despite this, a woman may be called "godmother" by many more children than her baptised godchildren in a community because she always kept her doors open so that others could come in for food, tea, coffee and snacks whenever they liked.

Rearing is far more important than blood in Cape Verde, where many biological fathers are distant from their offspring. Adjectives like "half" or "quarter" are rarely used to describe children from the same mother/raised in the same house. To take a real example, a man married a woman who already had a daughter from a previous relationship, out of wedlock. Later, another girl was born of the

marriage. Over two decades, however, the couple raised and educated the two girls like sisters, who call the man their “father”. As the man raised the first girl like his own, he is the socially and culturally legitimate father. No one in the community would question this father-daughter relationship. The older girl grew up into a young woman, married and had a baby son. This baby became the rightful “grandson” of the man who had raised his mother. The differences are elucidated here for analytical purposes, but in Cape Verde adoption and rearing are part of the normal course of events. In the old days, when Cape Verdeans had a lot of children, elder sisters acted as “mothers” of younger sisters. In one case, the eldest sister in a family grew up and started her own family, had a job and could not care for her children adequately. She invited her youngest sister, who was single, to join her in caring for the children. In this case, the aunt became a second “mother”, and there were two mothers who raised them up.

The above bears witness to the “anthropology of the everyday”. The confusing use of names in Kabuverdianu testifies to the constant structuring and restructuring of relationships in Cape Verde. Anthropologists consider relationships to be active, continuous processes in “a culture of relatedness”:

[...] biology does not everywhere have the kind of foundational function it has in the West, but that the boundaries between the biological and the social which [...] have been so crucial in the study of kinship are in many cases distinctly blurred, if they are visible at all.

[...] authors [...] use the term ‘relatedness’ in opposition to, or alongside, ‘kinship’ in order to signal an openness to indigenous idioms of being related rather than a reliance on pre-given definitions or previous versions. (Carsten 2000: pp. 3, 4)

Relatedness is processual. In Cape Verde, food is an important processual aspect of relatedness. This is not to say that food itself creates and maintains relationships and holds society together, but food helps to nurture and cultivate interpersonal relationships.

Cape Verde has preserved its creole language well. Not only do the islanders have their own oral traditions that teach the younger generation about the experiences of their ancestors and parents, but they also recycle old tales and create new ones with humour. Refer to the following Creole joke about a food episode:

Un mudjer sa ta preparaba pa poi katxupa na lumi pa janta. Nton e manda rapazinho kunpra sal. Mudjer dja poi katxupa riba ti ki dja sta prontu, rapazinho ka txiga nel ku sal. Di tantu xatiadu k’e staba pamodi rapazinho k asa ta txigaba kul sal, e fla:

- Diabu, nho! Nen pa karu da nel.

Rapazinho sai de tras di porta ki inda ka saiba di kasa, fla-l:

- Mama, bu kre, N k bai go... Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!

[A woman was getting ready to cook Cachupa for dinner. She then told her son to buy salt. She attended to her stew and saw that it was ready to be served, but her son had not yet come back with the salt. She was wondering why he took so long to fetch the salt and got irritated. She said:

*- To the Hell with it. As if a car ran over him. * Even that would not take so long.*

Her son appeared from behind the door; he has not yet left home. Before he sped ahead, he told her mother:

*- Mom, if this is what you want, I will go at once... Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! *Imitating the painful cries of being run over by a car.]*

(Cabral 2016: 46-47, “*Katxupa sen sal*”, my translation)

The above joke somehow reminisces about a simpler lifestyle in Cape Verde, wherein it is very common for older women in a household to send children to do *mandádu* (meaning to do something that is ordered or asked for). Cachupa is a typical, local stew that traces its origin to old times when food was scarce. The inhabitants had to harness available resources (e.g., rain, soil, mountains and oceans) and follow a frugal but ingenious diet. Cachupa is for the present the national dish, and any mention of it “will quietly ‘flag’ the nation” (Cusack 2000: 214).

We may understand this as a form of national pride, i.e., Cape Verdeans’ collective triumph over natural forces, western colonialism and deterministic forecasts. The country achieved key successes and managed to rein in famine because public bodies extended direct support to the population in times of crisis. The roles played by the government, local and national institutions, quick and responsive political

actions, and effective channelling of financial and material resources proved to be far more effective than economic growth, expansion of the agricultural sector or acceleration of food production in combating famine (Drèze 1991). Studying Cape Verde has allowed us to comprehend the practical challenges in Africa and apply possible solutions.



FIGURE 1: Brava at dawn, 2019.



FIGURE 2: Santo Antão in the afternoon, 2018.



FIGURE 3: Mural, Santiago, 2019.



FIGURE 4: Agriculture, Santo Antão, 2018.



FIGURE 5: House, Santo Antão, 2018.



FIGURE 6: Girl, Santiago, 2019.



FIGURE 7: Boy, São Vicente, 2018.



FIGURE 8: Grandmother, Santiago, 2018.



FIGURE 9: Kitchen, Santiago, 2018.



FIGURE 10: Kitchen, Brava, 2019.



Figure 11: Restaurant, Santiago, 2019.



FIGURE 12: Restaurant, Santo Antão, 2018.



FIGURE 13: Cow, Santiago, 2018.



FIGURE 14: Mural, São Vicente, 2018.



FIGURE 15: Boredom, Santiago, 2019.



FIGURE 16: Play, São Vicente, 2018.



FIGURE 17: Clothes, Santiago, 2019.



FIGURE 18: Spring cleaning, Brava, 2019.



FIGURE 19: Football match, Brava, 2019.



FIGURE 20: “*Apanha-bola*” is an expression to describe the children who go and fetch a football if it flies over the wall, Brava, 2019.

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