

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF CAPEVERDEAN NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT: In this article the author tries to show the presence of the Portuguese colonialism in the Capeverdean literature produced between 1930 and 1974.

This study is based on the considerations of Manuel Lopes on *Os meios pequenos e a cultura*, and proposes a discussion of three literary works: *Famintos* (Luis Romano Chiquinho (Baltasar Lopes) and *Hora di Bai* (Manuel Ferreira).

Key-words: Cabo-Verde. Literature. Portuguese colonialism.

Until 1974 Cape Verde island were under the rule of Portuguese forces, suffering all types of disadvantages imposed by the colonization. The literature of this period was anti-colonialist in nature without openly denouncing the colonialist government. Political oppression on the islands was so strong that writers had to be constantly wary of censorship.

My intention is to examine some aspects of Portuguese colonialism as they were reflected in the Capeverdean Literature from the 1930's to 1974. I will base my argument on Manuel Lopes' *Os meios pequenos e a cultura*¹ (Small Places and Culture). In this book, Manuel Lopes speaks about two groups of people who reacted differently to colonialism. To the first group belong those fearless people who tried to face the troubles with courage and without hesitation. They were very active and tried to avoid becoming apathetic and resigning themselves to the role of the victim of the oppressor; these people demonstrate real courage in the face of hard reality. In the other group, Manuel Lopes places people who feared the consequence of retaliation, they accepted their fate without question. In both groups, they kept searching for a better way of life, or a better place to go, first by migration from island to island within the archipelago, then by leaving for other countries.

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(1) It was published in Horta, s.ed. 1931.

Another kind of curious migration takes place in the confines of the very same island, but never to another island or another country; this is the case in *Migração*, a short-story by Pedro Duarte, where the people are constantly trying to get to a pleasant place but never finding it². This movement of people as depicted in the fiction and the poetry of Cape Verde is called "evasionism"³.

Socio-political oppression was strongest during some crucial moments when the drought persisted and the poor people had to sell their belongings in order to get money to buy food, because the lack of rain made planting impossible. For many islanders there was no more work, and they had to leave their homes in search of another way to survive.

It is important to point out the "sahelian" climate of this country where most of the islands are semi desert or savanna and one must keep in mind how vulnerable the archipelago is to drought. Michel L. McNulty in "The Contemporary Map of Africa" says that:

Man contributed significantly by overgrazing and by agricultural practices which destroyed the natural vegetation and increased erosion. Thus, the impact of the drought was much severe than might otherwise have been the case. Here is evidence of the way in which climate can interact with social and economic institutions to create severe problems which contribute to the underdevelopment of a region (...). Presently, the countries of the Sahel are among the poorest of the poor in Africa⁴.

The emigration of the Capeverdean people started at the beginning of the XIX century on American whaling ships. The islanders were hired to work on these ships, and little by little the Capeverdean settled in the United States. But as this kind of immigration grew, the American government established laws

(2) In *Antologia da ficção caboverdeana contemporânea*. Cabo Verde: Edições Henriquinas, 1960, pp. 305-400.

(3) For additional commentary on this point see Manuel Ferreira, *No reino de Caliban: Antologia panorâmica da poesia africana de expressão portuguesa*. Vol. I. Lisboa: Seara Nova, 1975; and Mário de Andrade, *Antologia temática da poesia africana*. Vol. I, Praia, Cabo Verde: Instituto caboverdeano do Livro, 1980.

(4) In Phyllis M. Martin & Patrick O'Meara (eds.) *AFRICA*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977, pp. 41-42.

limiting the numbers of visas available to enter the country. From then on the Capeverdean people had to forego America for Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé e Príncipe, Senegal and Holland (where the Capeverdean women went to work as domestic servants) in order to look for a better economic life.

António Carreira in his book *Cabo Verde. Classes Sociais. Estrutura Familiar. Migrações* (Cape Verde: Social Classes, Family Structure and Migrations), published in Lisbon in 1977, shows the number of inhabitants decreasing in some periods instead of increasing as the normal trend of populations. For instance, between 1900 and 1905, the population of the island dropped by 10%; and between 1939 and 1949 it dropped again 15%. Carreira deduces that some of these losses are a consequence of emigration to other countries, but he says that "these losses (...) foreshadow to a large degree the increasing mortality provoked by hunger"⁵.

I refer to this fact in order to demonstrate how the drought and wretched living conditions had such a devastating effect on the population of the islands. This motivated some fiction writers and poets to depict in their work the social realities of a country which needed more attention from its government in order to provide better living conditions for its people. I do not ignore however that especially during war years the Capeverdean migrant laborers replaced Portugueses serving in the armed forces.

The emigration to Portugal as a quest for intellectual knowledge was a solution opened to a few. Most of the people had to remain in the islands, doing what they could to construct their own cultural life. For instance, in *Hora di Bai* the character Juca Florêncio is always talking about the splendid life in Lisbon, which he sees only at the end of the novel. Also in *Chiquinho*, there is a group of young Capeverdean teenagers fascinated by the idea of publishing a journal based on the model of a Portuguese literary magazine, *Presença*. In *Chiquinho*, the first step toward this goal is going to São Vicente, the island where the cultural movements first started, as one can see since the publication of the review *Clareza* (which lasted from 1936 until 1960), *Certeza, Cabo Verde*,

(5) In 1900 there were 147.424 people in the ten islands of Cape Verde, and in 1950 the population was only 134.193. The same phenomenon occurred between the years 1939 (with 174.403) and 1949 (with 139.171 inhabitants). Carreira pointed out 14.486 deaths between the years 1903-1904; 5.192 deaths between 1919-1929; 18.923 deaths in 1931 (...) 24.463 deaths during 1941-1943 (here one has to think about the war years, and 20.813 deaths in 1947-1948). Carreira's *Cabo Verde. Classes Sociais. Estrutura Familiar. Migrações*. Lisboa: Ulmeiro, 1977, p. 10.

Sêló, and others⁶. In the 1980's, only one was being published in Praia, on the island of Santiago, which is also the Capital of the Archipelago. It is called *Raizes* (Roots)⁷.

I have selected some fictional works to demonstrate Manuel Lopes division of the groups of people. In all books the people symbolize a collective character: the Capeverdean in general. I shall talk about the docile characters encountered in *Famintos*, by Luis Romano, in *Chiquinho*, by Baltasar Lopes, and in *Hora di Bai*, by Manuel Ferreira⁸. I shall also point out the ones who knew what they really wanted and who faced the troubles, urging their comrades not to accept their wretched life.

One thing must be emphasized. In all these stories one feels the powerful hand of the colonizers, who cared too little and who were the pernicious force behind the miserable life of the islanders. This phenomenon is showed clearly in another book I did not mention, *Roupa do Pipi*, by João Cleofas Martins, in a series of stories never published; it was originally presented from 1957 to 1960 on the Radio of Mindelo, the largest city of the island of São Vicente⁹. In this book, the author, known as Djunga, shows in a figurative way the political situation during the dictatorial regime of Salazar. It is truth an indirect way or representing the socio-economic strangulation exercised by the dictator of the Portuguese people. The author uses figures of metaphore to present the narrative, but I feel that his intention of dealing with the political situation is clear.

(6) When the first number of *Sêló* appeared in 1962 (there were only two in total), Oswaldo Osório explained that: "It is true that in the literary movements which precedes *Clairidade*, *Certeza*, and *Suplemento Cultural*, there is no ideological break from the even opposition to the preceding generation: the social structure of these islands continued to be the same; (the journal) *Sêló*, a work of a new kind of people, included in *Noticias de Cabo Verde*, will continue deal with the problems of the soul of the Capeverdean people, in relation to the time it concerns (...) by the cyclic problems of the Capeverdean man." These problems are obviously related to hunger, emigration, insularity, but they are faced by the way of protesting against the way of life, and the promised land is now Holland, and no more Angola, São Tomé e Príncipe, and America. A group of a high school called "Liceu Gil Eanes" has published in mimeographic types *Boletim dos alunos do Liceu Gil Eanes*. Manuel Ferreira, *No reino de Caliban*, Vol. 1, p. 246.

(7) Manuel Ferreira, *Literaturas africanas de expressão portuguesa*. Vol. I. Venda-a-Nova, Portugal: Instituto de Cultura Portuguesa, 1977, pp. 73-75.

(8) *Famintos*. Romance do povo caboverdeano sob o domínio colonialista (1940's). *Chiquinho* (1947). *Hora di Bai* (1962).

(9) Cf. Manuel Ferreira, *A aventura crioula ou Cabo Verde, uma síntese cultural e étnica*. Lisboa: Plátano, 1973, pp. 121-22.

The work which deals directly with the domination of the colonial period is the novel *Famintos*. In a stark, realistic manner, Luis Romano relates the terrible things that happened to the people of the Cape Verde Islands. This book denounces the system in such a strong and truthful way that it was prohibited by the censors and could not be published in Cape Verde or in Portugal when it was written. Although it was written around 1940, it was published in Brazil only in 1962, and it was finally published in Portugal in 1975, one year after the Independence of Cape Verde. The subtitle of *Famintos*: "Novel of the Capeverdean people under the colonial domination" speaks for itself, no commentary is needed. It was published in the United States by the members of the PAIGC (the African Party of the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde) under the title *The Famished*; it was translated in Italian, as *Affamati*; in French, as *Les Affamés*; and parts of it in Russian by Helena Riausova who has translated some Portuguese works related to "neo-realism" in the Portuguese literary movement¹⁰.

Although all these narratives have a different way of approaching the problems of colonial domination, there is a common factor. The periods of migration or emigration were ridden with many deaths, caused either by lack of food or by drought which was sometimes catastrophic, as in 1943, as Manuel Ferreira relates in *Hora di Bai*. The author starts the second chapter in the Brazilian edition by saying: This happened in the green archipelago in the year of 1945 and nobody, who I knew, forgot it.

At the beginning of *Hora di Bai*, the people of São Nicolau in despair and nearly exhausted from starvation leave their island for São Vicente. There is no principal character in the description of their journey because they all symbolize "the islander", still hopeful in spite of his sufferings. Only those who have received permission from the government can make this trip, their names are listed. Other must travel clandestinely. But when they arrive at the other island more problems appear: the drought has touched everywhere and the suffering continues. Until this point in the novel, all the people are resigned to their destiny; from this point on, however, while continue acting in the same way, others react against this tragedy and demonstrate through their resistance that they are convinced they must find an end to their terrible lot. Some of them speak of going to another country, São Tomé. Now the emigration will begin. Even knowing that they would be treated as "slaves", they need to try something else.

(10) It was published in Moscow by Progresso Editions an anthology of the Modern Portuguese short-stories (*Conto Português Contemporâneo*) under the supervision and translation of Helena Riausova.

One may not understand why the characters of the narratives we are dealing with have a strong wish to leave their home to reach another place where they might have a better way of life, but at the same time they do not want to leave.

The phenomenon of people in migration or emigration, as fictionalized in *Hora di Bai*, is very well analysed by Maria Aparecida Santilli in her study of Manuel Ferreira's novel¹¹. Professor Santilli speaks of two ways of reacting to the oppressive living conditions: "renunciation," which characterizes those who choose to migrate within the islands, and "resistance," which she associates with the movement of emigration.

Also in *Chiquinho*, there are people leaving the country, like Chiquinho's father who left for the United States when his son was a child of five. His father comes to America in order to work in a factory and he sends money to his family to support them in Cape Verde, trying to give them a life better than that was possible for the majority of the poor people living on the same island of São Nicolau. The novel is divided into three parts. The first one, subtitled "Childhood" shows the life of Chiquinho in a traditional framework, listening to the old people tell stories about witches, dreams, and to the folklore that is such an integral part of the child's life. The second part, "São Vicente," shows the boy going to study on the other island (which gives the subtitle to this second part), considered more culturally advanced. And the last part ("The waters") brings him back to his home, after brilliantly finishing the high school; but he cannot feel comfortable anymore in his homeland because now he is an "assimilado" man.¹² Although still the same person, his friends do not see him in the same way. Finally, he decides to leave the country to follow in the same steps of his father who tells him to come to America and find work in a factory. In this same novel, there are two other relevant characters. One represents the erudite person, called Parafuso, who also tries to go to São Vicente to continue his studies, like Chiquinho. But he is not able to because he is very poor and cannot support himself on another island. The other character who tries to reach a better position is Toi Mulato, a man who is never content with accepting the "status quo", but in the end he finally gets a job, and better than this he buys a boat to go

(11) Manuel Ferreira, *Hora di Bai* (São Paulo: Ática, 1980), preface by Maria Aparecida Santilli: "Manuel Ferreira: a história de um novelista e suas histórias da Terra Trazida." pp. 5-15.

(12) The only person who could understand him was Euclides Varela, a bachelor interested in two things: to write a book to leave knowledge to mankind, and to have a son to whom he might leave his "heritage," that is, his book.

from one island to another. He wants to leave his land but, unlike Chiquinho he never goes for good. I think he is the figure most representative of the insularity and the evasionism I have referred to in all these works.

In both the novels, *Chiquinho* and *Hora di Bai*, we see migrant people but whereas Chiquinho moves from one island to another in the hope of increasing his understanding and assimilation of Portuguese culture, the people in *Hora di Bai* have to move from their homes in order to search for food and to find a better way of living. But, in the last part of both novels, there is the same move to another country. These novels present a different focus on poverty, but at the end both present the same anxiety: to go or to stay... to want to stay, but to have to leave; or to want to leave but to have to stay. GO or STAY, one always hopes for the opposite, and in the end is always dissatisfied, this tension is at the heart of evasionism.¹³ The same happens in *Famintos*.

One must recall that the economy of these islands is based almost solely on agriculture. With the advent of drought there was not food enough to go around and, of course, the people could not look to the government for help. Exactly at this moment, one sees in *Famintos* the people selling all their belongings: their land, their house, and their furniture in order to get at least a bit of corn to make their typical dish: "catchupa". It is not hard to understand the behavior of one woman who has carried her big sack of corn to the government-controlled scales in exchange for some miserable coins. The official sees her hiding a few grains inside her dress, he beats her, and sends her away with nothing. In some passages of *Famintos*, the writer shows some people eating raw corn because they do not have anything in their stomachs. The reader must wince when he knows that many, many ears of corn were kept for some rich people who ignored the population dying from lack of food.

The situation is the same in *Hora di Bai* until the moment when the people react and attack the store of a rich man to steal anything they could to at least regain the forces lost from the lack of nourishment. In both novels, *Famintos* and *Hora di Bai*, the oppressors terrorize the people and provoke deaths. Especially in the novel by Luís Romano, the behavior of the rules is vividly drawn as a denunciation of the colonial government.

In *Hora di Bai*, one sees emerging the emotive force behind the phenomenon of "evasionism" when the owner of the ship transporting the migrants from one island to the other, leaves the country with his life. In his

(13) About evasionism and emigration originated by the necessity of leaving the islands, see note 96, page 110 of Manuel Ferreira's *Literaturas africanas de expressão portuguesa*. Vol. 1. Venda-a-Nova, Portugal: Instituto de Cultura Portuguesa, 1977.

boat, he smuggled out a man who has been jailed for daring to oppose the will of the power structure, by helping the poor. Other people, like this Captain, are in the group Manuel Lopes calls "the resisters." There is another character in *Hora di Bai* (Maninho) who tries to take revenge against the self-important official who dishonors his married sister. This same official demonstrates the abuse of authority when he late shoots and kills Maninho during a street disturbance, and no one says a word.

In *Famintos*, Campina is the character who is always urging the people to face up to the situation and to fight against the overpowering political system which denied them their humanity, humiliating them by making them wait for a ration of corn in payment for a day's work. The exploitive system is strongly characterized in the foremen, Mulato and Crioulo. After a full week of toil, the workers must wait for the good humor of those two men to be paid. Some work on the road crew for many days without food and die of weakness. This only means that the foremen can cross their names from the pay list: more corn in stock, less to the hungry family. At times, waiting in line to receive their corn, the men would complain that they were not paid legitimately, but would get only curses and blows from the foremen.

Luís Romano shows the islanders humiliated and powerless to oppose the absolute authority of the government. They can not even complain; Campina is like a recurring symbol who keeps the people awake, aware of the fact that they are human beings, and that they must fight against the system.

In the last pages of *Famintos*, the rains come back to the islands and there is once again food for everybody. It is this period of beauty and abundance which is perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the book; for now the islanders are happy, the system is the same but the suffering is less, and Campina and his companion ("Estudante") leave the island to travel south.

Is the reader to think that Luis Romano is Campina, who tried so hard to move his fellow islanders but was never heeded? Whatever the interpretation, Romano did write the novel using the written word to urge his people in the same manner as Campina uses the speech in the work of fiction.

I feel that *Famintos* is the strongest book denouncing the political and social oppression of colonialism in Cape Verde. The author, Luís Romano, deserves to receive congratulations for writing in the way he did.

Concluding, it seems appropriate to recall *Une Tempête d'après "La Tempête" de Shakespeare*: Adaptation pour un théâtre nègre, by Aimé Césaire, when almost at the end of the play he writes a passage where Caliban (symbolizing the colonized people) talks to Prospero (the colonizer):

Prospero, tu es un grand illusionniste:
le mensonge, ça te connaît.

Et tu m'as tellement menti,
menti sur le monde, menti sur moi-même,
que tu as fini par m'imposer
une image de moi-même:
Un sous-développé, comme tu dis,
un sous-capable.
Voilà comment tu m'as obligé à me voir,
et cette image, je la hais: Et elle est fausse!

(Prospero, you are a great illusionist:
you know to lie. The lies know you.
And you have lied so much to me
you lied to me about the world, about myself,
and, finally you forced upon me
one image of myself
as underdeveloped, as you say,
as incapable.
That is how you have forced me to see myself
and this image, I hate it. It is false.)

The power exercised in colonial domination is based on the illusion principle: the colonizer instills in the colonized an image of himself as a born inferior. It is this image which, like Césaire, we must decry as false.

RESUMO: Neste artigo a autora procura mostrar a presença do colonialismo português na literatura cabo-verdiana produzida entre 1930 e 1974. Este estudo baseia-se nas reflexões de Manuel Lopes em *Os "meios" pequenos e a cultura*, e propõe uma discussão de três obras literárias: *Famintos* (Luís Romano), *Chiquinho* (Baltasar Lopes) e *Hora di Bai* (Manuel Ferreira).