

Narrating São Tomé: Cape Verdean memories of contract labour in the Portuguese empire

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In Cape Verdean collective memory, the channelling by Portuguese colonial authorities of contract labourers to São Tomé is associated with slavery and suffering. This article juxtaposes the collective memory with the narrative of a former contract labourer, senhor Fernando, who paints a relatively positive picture of his distant years in São Tomé. Through a theoretical discussion of collective and individual memory, the article argues that the contrast between these narratives has to do with the differences between the identities they reproduce. The collective narrative of subjection and victimhood is historically rooted in the fight for Cape Verdean independence and the moral right to a separate national identity. Senhor Fernando's story about how he took ownership of his situation, despite all the hardships, draws on a number of different social identities, a repertoire that enables him to establish himself as agent rather than as victim.

KEYWORDS: memory, narrative, contract labour, Cape Verde, Portuguese colonialism, São Tomé.

Narrativas sobre São Tomé: memórias cabo-verdianas do trabalho contratado no império português ♦ Na memória coletiva cabo-verdiana, a expedição de mão-de-obra contratada para São Tomé pelas autoridades coloniais portuguesas é associada à escravatura e ao sofrimento. O artigo justapõe a memória coletiva com a narrativa de um antigo trabalhador contratado, o senhor Fernando, que apresenta um retrato relativamente positivo dos anos passados em São Tomé. Por meio de uma discussão teórica sobre a memória individual e a memória coletiva, argumenta-se que o contraste entre essas narrativas se deve às diferenças entre as identidades por elas produzidas. A narrativa coletiva da sujeição e vitimização está historicamente enraizada na luta pela independência cabo-verdiana e no direito moral a uma identidade nacional autónoma. A história do senhor Fernando sobre o modo como se apropriou da sua situação, apesar de todas as dificuldades, convoca várias identidades sociais distintas, formando um repertório que lhe permite afirmar-se como agente em vez de vítima.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: memória, narrativa, trabalho contratado, Cabo Verde, colonialismo português, São Tomé.

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INTRODUCTION

The best-known song performed by Cape Verdean Cesária Évora, the world's "queen of *morna*," begins with the line "*Kem mostra bo es kaminj long, es kaminj pa San Tomé?*" (Who showed you this long way, this way to São Tomé?). This lyric is a tribute to all the Cape Verdean migrants who throughout history have endured various hardships, and the reference to São Tomé is not accidental.¹ In Cape Verde, "the long way" to São Tomé refers to the suffering and longing associated with migration to that place. In popular collective memory, migration as a contract labourer to the plantations of São Tomé e Príncipe was the last, dreaded resort when recurring droughts in the archipelago resulted in famine and death. Between 1900 and 1970, approximately 80,000 men and women were more or less forced to leave Cape Verde for the islands to the south (Carreira 1983: 245). Even now, São Tomé is symbolically linked to slavery and suffering, and the Cape Verdean authorities have recently taken initiatives to support migrants of Cape Verdean ancestry still living on São Tomé.

In the Cape Verdean media, those who survived plantation work are called "the last living slaves,"² and the Portuguese recourse to contract labour is viewed as a means of circumventing the abolition of slavery. Cape Verdean scholars also paint a dark picture and underscore the slave-like conditions on plantations. Historians such as António Carreira (1983) and Elisa Silva Andrade (1996) have described these conditions as dreadful, have reported the abuse and shown that wages amounted to practically nothing. Another prominent theme is the tense relationship between the Cape Verdeans and other plantation workers who originated from mainland African Portuguese colonies. Arguably, these tensions had to do with the ambiguous status of Cape Verdeans in the racialised colonial hierarchy.

This article compares this collective national memory with the story of an elderly Cape Verdean man, senhor Fernando, who took "the long way" to the São Tomé plantations in 1952 and worked there as a contract labourer for seven years, until 1960. Unlike the Cape Verdean national discourse on oppression and suffering, senhor Fernando paints a relatively positive picture of his distant years in São Tomé e Príncipe. When he talks of his experiences, São Tomé appears as a place of adventure and achievement. This contrast is explored in the article. By juxtaposing (Nyiri 2013) the national discourse and senhor Fernando's story, the article analyses the relationship between collective memory and individual narrative, and argues that the contrast between

1 I use the names São Tomé and São Tomé e Príncipe interchangeably. In the literature, the official name São Tomé e Príncipe is often adopted, but in everyday conversation São Tomé is more common.

2 See "Cabo-verdianos nas roças de São Tomé e Príncipe: Margarida Monteiro, a velhota do 'tempo do castigo'," in *Expresso das Ilhas*, January 19th, 2014 (<www.expressodasilhas.sapo.cv/sociedade/item/41266>).

the two is related to their reproduction of different identities. The collective national narrative of subjection and victimhood stretches back to the beginning of the 20th century and was further stimulated by the fight for independence and the moral right to a separate national identity. Senhor Fernando's story of how he took ownership of his situation as a contract labourer in the face of manifold hardships draws on several social identities. This repertoire enables him to represent himself as agent rather than as victim. The aim of the article is not to downplay the sufferings of those who toiled in the plantations. Rather it is a tribute to the human ability – particularly of senhor Fernando himself – to create meaning and dignity in narratives about harsh conditions.

In the article, I first elaborate on collective memories and individual narratives. This is followed by a methodological discussion of reflexivity and long-term ethnography. Thereafter I provide an historical background to Cape Verdean contract labour in São Tomé and discuss the national collective memory of this period. The subsequent parts represent senhor Fernando's narrative and his fashioning of an identity as a skilled survivor. In the final section I draw together the conclusions.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVE

One of the earliest scholars to discuss the relationship between collective and individual memory was the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992 [1950]), a follower of Durkheim. He viewed memory as intrinsically collective, and thus as shared and transmitted by social groups rather than by individuals. For Halbwachs, memories are not unique to individuals, but are learned from their social group. It is the social role of individuals that guides their memories. This means that we remember as members of groups based on gender, age, class and nation. His standpoint has been challenged by, among others, the anthropologist Elizabeth Tonkin, who argues that individual memories are not solely a reproduction of social identity. According to her (Tonkin 1992: 105 ff.), we internalise the external world through creative processes, and in this way collective memories become individualised. Another reason for the individualisation of memories is that individuals do not belong to a single undifferentiated social group, but to many groups simultaneously. Moreover, over the course of their lives they may shift between social groups. This means that no two persons will ever have the same social life, and accordingly never will be influenced by the same collective memories. Yet this does not rule out the importance of the collective. On the contrary, individual acts of recalling are always mediated by social identities. Tonkin argues that there is a dialectic relation between collective and individual memory because “nobody's ability to recall is independent of social milieu... [and] the social milieu is not independent of the cognitive operations of the persons in it” (1992: 105).

As I will show below, senhor Fernando's narrative is clearly influenced by different historical social identities.

Anthropological explorations of people's memories are often based on narrative representations. As many scholars have pointed out, when working with narratives it is crucial to distinguish between life as experienced and life as told (e.g. Bruner 1986). Naturally, we can only know something about the experiences that our interlocutors talk about. Some experiences are forgotten, temporarily or permanently, and are therefore omitted. In Marc Augé's (2004) work on the necessity of knowing how to forget, he reminds us that people who have experienced violence and oppression often try to cope with this by leaving the past behind. It is possible that such an act of oblivion is at play in senhor Fernando's story. Another possibility is that he chooses not to tell me about some of the hardships, although he remembers them. Anthropologist Katy Gardner (2002) has stressed that narratives are characterised by the fact that people often decide to relate only some of their memories.

Another feature of narrative representation is that it tends to focus on the creation of identities, especially when the narrative addresses essential life experiences (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004). Such narratives deal with questions of how we understand and explain what happens to us and how we act, and they bring up how this relates to our sense of self. This is evident in senhor Fernando's story, when he portrays himself as an active and resourceful person who is strong and skilful enough to handle the difficult conditions on the plantations. This kind of positive autobiographical representation is common in life stories, in which narrators often depict themselves as capable agents by introducing and underlining certain elements and passing over others (Bertaux 2010). In addition to such autobiographical concerns related to his personal identity, senhor Fernando's national identity plays an important role in his story. Throughout his narrative runs the question of how he handled the racialised relations among different categories of African plantation workers as well as with Portuguese overseers. Thus, not only his personal identity but also the ambiguous status of Cape Verdean national identity in colonial times (cf. Anjos 2003; Fernandes 2006; Mariano 1991) can be explored through his story. In turn, this exemplifies how oral history can be used to examine subjectivities and identities on multiple levels (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004). Senhor Fernando's story also demonstrates that narratives are performative in the sense that they construct identities by framing and establishing experiences. The acts and strategies described in narratives are a way of presenting who we want to be and, to an extent, the life we would have liked to live.

Furthermore, narratives are mediated by cultural frameworks that influence both what should be told and how (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004). In terms of story-telling genres, senhor Fernando's narrative coexists uneasily with the prescribed migration story usually told in Cape Verde. This narrative

describes in transformative terms the long and challenging trajectory from a life in poverty in Cape Verde to the ultimate return as a successful migrant who has “made” his/her life (Åkesson 2004). Although senhor Fernando represents himself as the adventurous, resourceful and hard-working migrant often depicted in such narratives, his story does not conform to the expected ending: life after return as free of financial worry and onerous work. Unlike other Cape Verdean migration destinations in Europe and the US, São Tomé was not place of economic and social mobility, thus ruling out the culturally prescribed happy ending to senhor Fernando’s migration narrative.

LONG-TERM ETHNOGRAPHY AND REFLEXIVITY

Memories represented in the form of ethnographic narratives are thus produced out of the interplay between collective social identities, cultural forms of storytelling and the narrator’s personal history, but they are also shaped by the specific relationship between narrator and ethnographer. In representations of an individual’s memory, a reflexive approach is quite natural, as the story so clearly is co-authored, and I will therefore position myself in relation to senhor Fernando. A certain degree of humility is also necessary. As Davies (1999: 23) remarks, it is unclear whether “we can know individual persons in other cultures any more readily than we can know the cultures themselves without projecting on to them our own selves and cultural understandings.” Yet, the question of “knowing” other people is related not only to epistemological concerns, but also to the intensity and longevity of the relationship between narrator and researcher. In the present case, senhor Fernando’s story has been created out of a long-term relationship between him and me that is characterised by both personal closeness and cultural distance.

I first met senhor Fernando in 1998, and have since stayed many times in his house in Lombo de João, a small rural village in the mountains of Santo Antão island, where he lives with his youngest daughter and her four children. Moreover, I have met all his eight children and more than 20 grandchildren, who are dispersed across Asia, Europe and North America. Thus, my contact with senhor Fernando’s family has been not only long term but also multi-sited. For 17 years, I have followed key events and processes in senhor Fernando’s family network as well as in the community of Lombo de João. This long-term relationship has provided me with insights into how other family members view his years in São Tomé, and how his experiences have been incorporated into their continuously recreated family history of migration and life-making.

In one sense, then, I know senhor Fernando well. In another sense, I sometimes feel we inhabit different worlds. As a child and young man, senhor Fernando experienced destitution and physical hardship of a sort hard for

anyone who grew up in Sweden's welfare society to comprehend. He was born in 1936 in Lombo de João, into a very poor family. Famine was a constant threat, and, in the years when rain failed, a terrible reality. Moreover, senhor Fernando's worldview is clearly different from the secular and rational outlook evident in Swedish society. In the absence of schools for poor children during his childhood, he never learnt to read and write, although he clearly has a sharp mind. Senhor Fernando is a devout Catholic with a strong and warm belief in an almighty God, but his Cape Verdean Catholicism differs from the doctrines of Rome. This version of Catholicism is syncretistic and incorporates ancient folk traditions from southern Europe as well as a few elements from West Africa. Senhor Fernando's life-world has also been inhabited by non-Christian creatures, such as witches.

Consequently, when senhor Fernando relates his memories to me, the conversation takes place between two persons acquainted for many years, but also meeting across a considerable social and cultural distance. This distance relates to our different cosmological frames of reference, but also to my ties with what senhor Fernando perceives to be rich and powerful social and geographical spaces. This "geography of power" (Gardner 1993) was evident at the beginning of our conversations about São Tomé, when senhor Fernando's narrative was formal in content and style, as if he were talking with a representative of an official authority. Then gradually his style became more informal and his narrative began to be filled with references to people, places and conditions that were at times foreign to me. At this stage in the conversation, senhor Fernando sometimes grew slightly frustrated at my inability to follow his thoughts.

Senhor Fernando is a very talkative person, but persistent discussion of his personal memories is not part of his everyday conversation. As a result, his tales about his years on São Tomé are mainly derived from three conversations I had with him in 2000, 2007 and 2012. On these occasions, I invited him to sit down with me and discuss his memories, while I recorded our conversation. To a great extent, senhor Fernando's priorities guided the content of our discussions. His talkativeness, combined with his position as an elderly male, limited my scope for asking questions.

In analysing senhor Fernando's story, I juxtapose it with the collective Cape Verdean memory of São Tomé. As Pal Nyiri (2013) points out, anthropology has a strong tradition of juxtaposing seemingly disparate cases, or elements, in order to prompt a change of perspective. The placing side by side of the collective memory and senhor Fernando's story enables examination of the contrast between these two versions of migration to São Tomé. I was intrigued by the differences between them, but the juxtaposition revealed both that they shared important elements, and that the contrast related to the construction of identities at multiple levels.

CAPE VERDEAN MEMORIES OF MIGRATION TO SÃO TOMÉ

In Cape Verde, migration to São Tomé in colonial times is a collective memory in the sense proposed by Bohlin (2007: 21), namely as a “stock of experiences and events most adult individuals in a society are expected to be familiar with.” Here I focus on how this collective memory is represented, but first I provide historical context.

Background

The Portuguese colonial authorities began funnelling contract labourers to São Tomé e Príncipe after 1869, when the slaves who had worked on the plantations were formally freed. The abolition of slavery resulted in an acute shortage of labour on the coffee and cocoa plantations, mostly owned by Portuguese (Meintel 1984: 64, 87; Seibert 2006). The plantation owners’ solution was to import contract labour. Initially, most of these workers came from Angola, where they were recruited by former slave dealers (Newitt 1981: 207), but after the Second World War an increasing number came from Cape Verde.

For Cape Verdeans, migration has for centuries been the most important means of escape from hunger, poverty and stagnation. Over the years, islanders have left for many places on both sides of the Atlantic, and today migrants and their descendants probably outnumber those that have stayed behind. Between 1945 and the early 1960s, however, it was difficult to leave Cape Verde both because of immigration restrictions in Europe and the US and because the colonial authorities sought to prevent Cape Verdean migration to places other than São Tomé (Meintel 1984: 65). Signing a labour contract for São Tomé e Príncipe was thus for many the only alternative. Until the 1950s, the majority of those leaving for São Tomé were from the island of Santiago (Carreira 1983: 300 ff.), seen in Cape Verdean social geography as the “most African” of the islands.³ In the 1950s, migration from Santo Antão (senhor Fernando’s home island) became more common, and also from the other so-called Windward Islands in the northern part of the Cape Verdean archipelago (Nascimento 2008b: 48). The Windwards have traditionally been imagined as “more European,” and this distinction was reproduced in relations among Cape Verdeans working on the plantations of São Tomé.

It is debatable whether migration to São Tomé e Príncipe during colonial times was enforced or voluntary. The many Angolans and Mozambicans who worked on São Tomé had no choice but to sign up for labour there: they were

3 There are nine inhabited Cape Verdean islands, each with a specific history. Until quite recently, people from the other islands talked of Santiago, the largest island and the site of the capital Praia, as “African.” This suggested both “primitiveness” and “cultural authenticity.” Today such ideas are becoming obsolete, due to the economic dominance of Praia and extensive mobility among the islands.

clearly forced to do so by the Portuguese. Regarding the Cape Verdeans, however, certain scholars (e. g., Meintel 1984: 64; Nascimento 2007; Newitt 1981: 207) argue that the degree of coercion is less clear. Certainly, the Portuguese authorities had a vested interest in maintaining the migration, both because cheap labour was needed on São Tomé and because it was a convenient way of handling the social unrest resulting from the famines in Cape Verde. During the 1940s, two prolonged periods of drought devastated the islands, and more than one-third of the total population perished. Moreover, elements of fraud and coercion are described in the literature: recruiters were interested in sending as many as possible off the islands, since they were paid per contracted worker, which implies that they exaggerated the benefits to be gained. During certain periods, passports and travel permits to other destinations were not issued, in order to funnel migrants to São Tomé (Meintel 1984: 65). However, the frequency of drought implies that colonial authorities did not have to resort to much overt coercion in order to make people leave.

Another important issue in the literature on migration to São Tomé is the ambiguous position of the Cape Verdeans working in the plantations. From the beginning of the slave trade, Cape Verdeans were allowed to be middlemen in the Portuguese empire, and in comparison with mainland African populations were considered to be culturally closer to the Portuguese. “Culturally” in this case can be read as a euphemism for “racially,” and related to the mixed African-Portuguese ancestry of the Cape Verdean population. Cape Verdeans were (at least in theory) granted Portuguese citizenship, in stark contrast to the people in mainland colonies, who were categorised as *indígenas*. *Indígena* status implied, among other things, that those thus categorised were subject to vagrancy laws, which in turn made them more vulnerable to labour conscription (Bender 1978: 151; Meintel 1984: 128 ff.).

The racial hierarchy based on colonial ideology produced constant friction. Cape Verdeans were classified as citizens, but their living and working conditions were generally as miserable as those for other workers. According to several researchers, the Cape Verdeans’ ambiguous status resulted in strained relations with other plantation workers. Both Seibert (2006) and Nascimento (2008a) argue that Cape Verdeans maintained an attitude of superiority towards *indígenas*, namely the Angolans and Mozambicans. Moreover, they also report conflicts between plantation owners and Cape Verdeans, because the latter did not accept being treated in the same way as Angolans and Mozambicans. Seibert (2006: 51) notes that planters complained about Cape Verdeans claiming their rights while at the same time being less hard-working than continental Africans.

The national collective memory

Cape Verdean media frequently report on the situation of elderly migrants still living in São Tomé. These people are described as “lonely and forsaken,”⁴ and their living conditions are seen as unworthy and degrading. One newspaper reported recently on a woman who had migrated to São Tomé as a child 50 years ago, and who had now returned to her home island for the first time. The short resume of her life story captures Cape Verdean understanding of migration to São Tomé:

“Adelaide Pires was brought to São Tomé in 1962 by an aunt. As a result of the problems in this archipelago, which are well-known to everyone, she never went to school. When she was ten years old, her aunt died and she had to start working in order to survive.”⁵

The problems “which are well-known to everyone” have been transmitted in oral history, but also in school books. The official memory has been strongly influenced by the Cape Verdean historian António Carreira (1983, 1984), the first scholar to write about Cape Verdean migration from the perspective of an independent nation, and his work is an important point of reference whenever migration to São Tomé is discussed in Cape Verde. Carreira categorises the migration to São Tomé e Príncipe as “forced” and all other Cape Verdean migration as “voluntary.” He bases his conclusion on two elements: first, the Portuguese government’s decisive engagement in recruiting and transporting the workers; and, second, the fact that Cape Verdean labourers were treated in the same way as the Angolans and Mozambicans, who were conscripted by force.

“... the Cape Verdean engaged for São Tomé e Príncipe was, once he [*sic*] arrived at the estate, by that very fact equivalent to the worker of any other origin and any other culture. He received the same salary, was subjected to the same diet, to the same work, the same working hours, and the same punishments for misconduct (whips, blows, deprivation of certain benefits, etc.) as everyone else” (Carreira 1983: 153, my translation).

Carreira’s exposé of the inhumane plantation conditions for all workers, including Cape Verdeans, is linked to the anti-colonial creation of Cape Verde as an independent nation. When he underscores the forced nature of

4 See “Ministra das Comunidades promete mudar a vida aos cabo-verdianos em São Tomé,” in *A Semana*, July 7th, 2011 (<www.asemana.publ.cv/spip.php?article66111&var_recherche=S%E3o%20Tom%E9&ak=1#>).

5 See “Santo Antão: filha reencontra mãe após 50 anos em São Tomé,” in *A Semana*, November, 3rd, 2014 (<www.asemana.publ.cv/spip.php?article104410>), my translation.

submission to the Portuguese, he also highlights the moral right to national independence. In focusing on the lack of adequate food, the extremely hard work and the physical maltreatment, he is arguing for the need to separate from the colonisers.

Besides revealing the dreadful conditions on the plantations, the previous quote also implicitly touches on the racialised colonial relations on São Tomé. Carreira's statement indicates that it was not self-evident Cape Verdeans would be treated as "everyone else," specifically the other colonial subjects of the Portuguese African empire. For example, although he maintains that Cape Verdeans are Africans, elsewhere he argues that they have "a higher level of culture" than Angolans and Mozambicans (Carreira 1983: 241). This bespeaks influences from both the Portuguese colonial order and the Cape Verdean independence movement, which was influenced by visions of pan-African unity. In colonial Cape Verde, the authorities suppressed cultural expressions understood to contain African elements, and thereby fostered a sense of superiority in relation to Africa. This resulted in a backlash in the 1950s, when the emergent nationalist movement questioned the Portuguese-based politics of identity. The movement's legendary leader, Amílcar Cabral, celebrated African elements in the national identity and culture, and vigorously positioned the Cape Verdean cause alongside the independence movements of the African mainland. Consistent with these trends, a tension between superiority and brotherhood in relation to mainland Africans is evident in Carreira's description of conditions on the plantations. Other historians of Cape Verdean ancestry, such as Silva Andrade (1996) and Nascimento (2007, 2008a), have followed in the footsteps of Carreira, and have also been concerned about the degree of coercion and the ambiguous position of Cape Verdeans on São Tomé.

Yet another influence on the collective memory of migration to São Tomé is the contrast between the representations of this migration and of the migrations to other destinations. Large-scale migration from Cape Verde to the US started at the beginning of the 20th century, and by the end of the 1950s the Netherlands had also become a desirable destination, together with other countries in Western and Northern Europe. The national narrative about migration to these countries has become a ritualised and evocative "socially legitimate performance" (Connerton 1989: 35). The emphasis in this story is on the material improvements and the upward social mobility that supposedly flow from migration to these "lands of opportunities" (Åkesson 2004). In contrast, in everyday conversations, poems and popular music, the memory of São Tomé is consistently associated with suffering and longing, as in Cesária Évora's *Sodad*, mentioned above. Other popular Cape Verdean songs, such as *Fomi 47* (the hunger of 1947) and *Camin di San Tome* (The way to São Tomé), bring out hunger and the ensuing dreaded departure to São Tomé as the last resort. As we shall see, senhor Fernando paints a somewhat different picture.

SENHOR FERNANDO'S NARRATIVE

A recurring theme in senhor Fernando's narrative is his ability to overcome difficulties and succeed despite adverse conditions. In portraying the identity of somebody who knows how to adapt to new and difficult situations, senhor Fernando ties into ideals about Cape Verdeanity as they are discursively expressed in stories about migrants and their experiences. A special capability among Cape Verdeans for adaptation is often mentioned in these stories as a distinguishing feature (Åkesson 2004). His approach also links to ideals of masculinity, which in Cape Verde as in many other places are based on notions of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Besides drawing on discourses on Cape Verdeanity, migration and masculinity, senhor Fernando's narrative also relates to several other repertoires. As I will explain, his story can be analysed in light of religious doctrine and colonial understandings of racialised Luso-African hierarchies as well as of pan-African notions of brotherhood. The following sections address key themes in his narrative and relate them to different discursive identity constructions as well as to the collective Cape Verdean memory of São Tomé.

Enforced or voluntary migration?

The most striking difference between the collective memory and senhor Fernando's narrative is that he hardly talks about hardship in São Tomé, except in relation to eating food he regarded as unacceptable. This attitude was already evident at the beginning of our first conversation, when he describes his decision to leave for São Tomé. He decided to migrate, he says, because of the difficulties at home, but also because he saw migration as an adventure that offered the hope of a better future: "I went as a contract worker, there were hardships [at home], I was young, and that migration opportunity appeared. I was 18 years when I went. Life was hard and I went away as a contract worker. I felt pleased to adventure for my future."

Senhor Fernando mentions that he was contracted by the local Portuguese administrator, and that "everyone who wanted could go." He also refers to the "enormous crisis" brought about by drought, when many in Lombo de João died of hunger. Thus, although he depicts his departure as voluntary, it is clear that the desperate situation in Cape Verde was an important push-factor. Yet he also makes a link to the traditional Cape Verdean discourse on migration, in which adventuring abroad for a better future is part of an expected life trajectory (Åkesson 2004).

The enforced character of the migration to São Tomé was also associated with conditions on the plantations. Senhor Fernando describes his freedom relative to other groups by distinguishing Cape Verdean contract workers from those "obliged" to work (Angolans and Mozambicans), but also by differentiating

between contract workers and “free persons,” that is, the Portuguese and some of the local population. This difference becomes evident, for instance, when he mentions that “free persons could carry out small businesses, but contract workers were not allowed to ...” This prohibition made it difficult for senhor Fernando to supplement his extremely low salary, and he describes this as one of his major problems on São Tomé. Thus, he and other contract workers were tied by rules that regulated their scope for manoeuvre even beyond their working hours.

As noted earlier, scholars have seen corporal punishment as another indicator of the enforced character of migration to São Tomé. Both contract workers and forced labourers could be subjected to physical punishment, but senhor Fernando says he was never maltreated. Labourers from mainland Africa were at greater risk of this: “Back then the punishments were severe. We had to do as we were told. There were people who were really maltreated. They put them in the middle of us and beat them. If somebody showed toughness... he was beaten, but that happened less to Cape Verdeans.”

Senhor Fernando speaks calmly of these atrocities, maybe because he was never beaten himself, or because he prefers to forget such instances. In his narration, he is more concerned with his and other Cape Verdeans’ defence of their honour against overseers who patronise them or insult them in different ways.

Thus, senhor Fernando describes his departure as voluntary and stresses that Cape Verdeans were not obliged to work on the plantations of São Tomé. Yet signing a contract led to a condition of servitude. Senhor Fernando says that contract workers had to get up at four in the morning and were required to work for many hours. They were abused and controlled, even during their time off.

Acquiring agency through work

Despite these appalling conditions, senhor Fernando does not represent himself as a victim. A central theme in his narrative is how he acquired agency by being a good worker. He describes hard and skilful work as a way of gaining control. Senhor Fernando does not portray himself as a subservient labourer, but as someone who is good at working and takes pride in what he does. He underscores his capacity for hard and difficult work:

“I carried out many kinds of different jobs, I know how to work. Those boys from São Vicente [urban Cape Verde], they were no good at work. But I, my work was different. In Santo Antão [his home island] we work with ease. If they told me to chop down a palm tree, I knew how to do it, if they told me to plant cacao, I knew. If it was a coffee bush, I knew, we also plant coffee in Santo Antão.”

He also emphasises his aptitude for learning new skills. In his narrative, he appears as clever and cunning:

“And then they [the Portuguese] said I was ‘a smart lad’ and they moved me to work in the kitchen ... And then they moved me again, I worked with distributing mails and other things to the white supervisors. And then they moved me back to the kitchen, and I started to cook for the Portuguese employees. I cooked lamb, piglet, beef, soup, potatoes, I did everything.”

Senhor Fernando describes how this aptitude and his ability to work hard gave him the chance to perform tasks other than the arduous plantation work. He is proud of being recognised as a good worker, and links his hard work to a high moral standard. This view is underpinned by Christian doctrine, a strong influence on the worldviews of many elderly people in rural Cape Verde, including senhor Fernando. A great deal of Christian teaching has centred on self-discipline and docility in the workplace. The trials and tribulations of work are to be bravely borne as a means of moral advancement (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987). In line with this, senhor Fernando describes work as a way of making a righteous person of oneself, but also, importantly, a person with the right to be treated as an equal and not as a slave:

“In every place there are people who don’t want to work. They want to go through life without working. If you work a lot, these lazy persons will wait for you to come and give them something. When you are strong and hard-working, the one who gives you the courage is God. No one is someone else’s slave. Every person is equal.”

Senhor Fernando’s account of São Tomé revolves around how he coped with the “difficulties” not by rebelling or working as little as possible, but by living up to a moral standard of hard and skilful work. In his eyes, his work capacity also gave him the right to be treated as an equal. His description of his hard work also reveals that the Portuguese supervisors had a racially-based image of Cape Verdeans as less hard-working than continental Africans. Senhor Fernando’s aptitude obviously did not fit that image, and when he talks of his capacity for hard work he says with a certain pride that the Portuguese “did not believe I was Cape Verdean.” In other situations, however, it was important for him to distinguish himself from mainland Africans.

Walking a racialised tightrope

Cape Verdean contract workers in São Tomé were precariously balanced between an identity as African unfree workers and a position as proxy whites.

White, in that context, referred not only to skin colour, even if the importance of looks to racialised categorisations should not be understated. Depending on context, phenotype, nationality and social status played a role in categorisation. In terms of Portuguese racial ideology, a person with a dark complexion, such as senhor Fernando, could move up the racialised hierarchy if he or she were seen as possessing a certain social status. As already mentioned, all Cape Verdeans were regarded as culturally closer to the Portuguese, while the majority of Angolans and Mozambicans were classified as culturally (and racially) inferior *indígenas*. When senhor Fernando started to cook for the Portuguese supervisors, his status changed:

“I moved to the supervisors’ house. The Angolans then said to me: ‘You think you are white.’ They told me that. But they shouldn’t treat me as a white. Treat me as a citizen, not of one kind or another. If you treat me as a white, I will treat you as a European. I am a European, you are the second European.”

Senhor Fernando’s account of himself as European and the Angolans as second Europeans harks back to the Portuguese colonial designation of Cape Verdean as *segundos europeus*. Thus, here he reproduces the colonial stratification, but to his own advantage. Yet when I ask him more about the differences between Cape Verdeans and Angolans, he answers “we are all brothers, we are Africans, Cape Verde belongs to Africa.” Naturally, we cannot be sure how back in the 1950s senhor Fernando actually viewed the differences and similarities between Cape Verdeans and people from other parts of the Portuguese African empire. Probably, his narrative reflects both the racialised conditions on the plantations and later historical developments, such as the construction of the Cape Verdean nation in relation to mainland Africa. His statement about brotherhood resonates strongly with the national Cape Verdean understanding of self in the first decades after independence in 1975. Up until the first democratic elections in 1991, the country was ruled by the former independence movement, which had turned itself into a political party. This party (PAICG/PAICV) strongly sided with similar political movements in mainland African countries, and by extension with all African “brothers.” Positioning Cape Verde as an African country was an act of anti-colonialism and solidarity, and on this point senhor Fernando’s narrative overlaps with the collective memory as represented in the research and in popular music.

Yet despite his stress on “brotherhood,” there are instances in the interviews when he makes clear that in São Tomean plantation society, his Cape Verdean identity was seen as superior to that of mainland Africans, and that he used this circumstance to defend himself:

“Once an overseer tried to harass me. I said I didn’t accept harassment because ‘I’m a Cape Verdean, I’m neither a Mozambican nor an Angolan. I’m a Cape Verdean and you are a European. If you do something to me I’m going to make a complaint.’ And I did. I walked 60 kilometres, I made a complaint and I was attended to. The overseer had to pay a fine.”

This story suggests that senhor Fernando used the hierarchies of the plantation system to improve his position, and demonstrates that the racialised colonial order was thoroughly institutionalised in plantation society. This is especially clear in relation to a specific phenomenon, food.

Food as mediator of colonial hierarchies

The first time ever senhor Fernando mentioned his stay on São Tomé to me was when he one day served me a thick and tasty omelette and described in detail how he had learnt to make it from a *mondrong* (“Portuguese” in Cape Verdean Creole). It was no coincidence that food played a key role in triggering this first mention of his memories of São Tomé. Moreover, when we sat down together with the explicit aim of talking about his experiences as a contract labourer, he always started by telling stories about the food he ate on São Tomé. For anybody who has survived famine and escaped death, food naturally plays an essential role, but in senhor Fernando’s narratives food also figures as a key mediator in the tense colonial power relations and identities that characterised plantation society. Thus, his story illustrates the time-honoured anthropological insight that food is both substance and symbol, physical nourishment and a central mode of social communication (Wilk 2013).

Food is significant in mediating relationships and constituting identities, and it is a particularly good boundary marker (Douglas 1966). In colonial societies, food has been used to produce colonial hierarchies and to reinforce the prestige of the colonisers (Robins 2010; Rosales 2012). In São Tomé food was also a fundamental way of expressing asymmetrical power relations and divisions based on race and nationality. In one of our conversations, senhor Fernando starts his story by describing how bad the food was on São Tomé. First, I interpreted this to be his way of talking about the suffering and deprivation he endured, but later it became clear that it was also a way of conveying how colonial hierarchies were reproduced on the plantations:

“We had to adjust. There were people from Angola, Mozambique, they were eating *fuba* [boiled maize flour], dry fish and palm oil. You had to eat it. In the morning there was boiled rice, the same thing, with dry fish. At noon we had *fuba* with beans and palm oil. Dinner was rice with that dry fish. The fish was not prepared, we ate it as it came in the sack.”

Later, senhor Fernando tells me that it was the fault of some of his Cape Verdean compatriots that they had to eat the same bad food as the forced labourers from Angola and Mozambique. His compatriots, in this case, were people from Santiago, the island traditionally imagined to be the “most African” in Cape Verdean social geography:

“Those from Santiago were the first to emigrate to São Tomé. They were eating together with those blacks, Angolans, Mozambicans, the food that was their habit, that *fuba*. There was hunger, and they were eating with their hands. They [the Portuguese] immediately took advantage of the situation and took away our ration. We had the same rights as the metropolitans. But we had to eat together with the blacks, that *fuba*.”

Accordingly, enforced consumption of *fuba* implied downward mobility from an uncertain intermediate position into the ranks of the African forced labourers. Dry fish and *fuba* not only tasted bad, it also deprived Cape Verdeans of their rights and their position. In addition, this quote demonstrates how the Cape Verdean population was itself shot through with racialised colonial hierarchies. For senhor Fernando, it was important to maintain a distance from workers from Santiago, as in colonial times they were considered less European and hence more primitive. It is possible his advancement from plantation worker to cook for white supervisors was facilitated by his origins on one of the Windward islands, imagined to be “more European.” This suggests that the divisions among Cape Verdeans were not only reproduced in social relations between contract workers, but also in the division of labour on the plantations (cf. Nascimento 2008b). In the light of all this, it is clear why senhor Fernando’s advancement was so important. His position as cook gave him access to tasty status foods and to improved social status. In one sense, food and status were the same thing: “When I worked with the supervisors, I had a good time. Their meals were good, and we had the right to the same meals. We were contract workers, but we had potatoes, rice, codfish, meat, beans, onions, garlic, olive oil, sugar, we had all the same rights.”

Thus, 60 years after, senhor Fernando can recall exactly what he ate on São Tomé. Not only in our interviews, but also in many of our informal conversations he talks of the food he cooked and ate there. His habit of treating guests, including me, to the tasty omelette he learned to prepare on the island can also be understood in relation to his social advancement in plantation society through the preparation and consumption of certain kinds of food. Naturally, his keen memories of food on São Tomé may have to do with his experience of periods of drought and hunger in Cape Verde, when access to food was all that mattered, but for senhor Fernando preparation and consumption of food was also about resisting subordination and acquiring

agency. In relation to money and “life-making” (Åkesson 2004), however, his struggle was less successful.

Money, migration and life-making

Senhor Fernando remembers the exact details of how much he earned in São Tomé and of how much he managed to save. He describes the 110 escudos he earned per month as a “bagatelle” (*bagatela*), but notes that he was never ill or absent from work, and therefore managed to return to Cape Verde after seven years with as much as 7,020 escudos. Senhor Fernando says this sum prompted the admiration of the Portuguese administrator, who in accordance with colonial logic handed out the contract workers’ savings when they returned. He quotes the administrator as saying, “Nobody usually returns from São Tomé with so much money.”

After coming home, senhor Fernando’s seven years of savings were rapidly spent in dealing with “*frakass*” (euphemism for “hunger” in Cape Verdean Creole) in his family. He managed to buy a small plot of land, enough for the construction of a house, but the rest of the cash went to cover his mother’s, girlfriend’s and siblings’ immediate needs. There had been renewed drought in the late 1950s, and his family was destitute.

The expenditure of nearly all his savings on immediate necessities is something senhor Fernando patiently accepts as a natural consequence of the extreme hardships that dominated life in Cape Verde 50 years ago. What concerns him more is that in later life he never left for other destinations in Europe or the US, as did many other Cape Verdeans who had managed to return alive from the unhealthy conditions on São Tomé. Among people of senhor Fernando’s generation, there are strong ideals about how a migrant trajectory should end and how it should enable people to make their lives (Åkesson 2004). In his home community of Lombo de João, all the most prestigious elderly men have gone to a European country, worked hard, sent home remittances and returned with savings, which they have used to buy land and construct houses.

Thus, a person’s social worth is strongly associated with a successful migratory trajectory, and although senhor Fernando has been a long-term migrant, he has not lived up to this ideal. Yet his years on São Tomé have afforded senhor Fernando experience of the outside world, an important asset in Cape Verde. The Cape Verdean historical orientation towards migration implies that the meanings associated with mobility address and sustain both a sense of self and the national identity. Most of senhor Fernando’s children and grandchildren have travelled abroad, and so have many of his neighbours and friends. In discussing São Tomé, senhor Fernando proves that he too has experience of travel. His memories of São Tomé add a cosmopolitan dimension to his life’s course, although he never became a successful returnee.

Senhor Fernando's adult children now and then raise their father's distant years on São Tomé, but they never refer to the conditions for labourers on the plantations or the hardship their father experienced. Instead, they may point out the new skills he learnt or his experience of things and practices foreign to Cape Verde. In this way, they equate his experience with novel phenomena as something akin to the prescribed Cape Verdean stories about migrations to high-status destinations in Europe or the US.

CONCLUSIONS

Senhor Fernando's story represents the contract workers' situation in ways that differ from the collective memory as represented in the media, research and music. Whereas the collective memory focuses on Cape Verdean labourers' hardships, senhor Fernando avoids this theme, at least in relation to his own experiences. This may in part be a consequence of an attempt to forget – deliberately or not – the violence and exploitation he faced (Augé 2004). Instead, he emphasises his agency. In his narrative, he takes ownership of his situation, despite the adverse conditions. He describes how he claimed a place for himself in the hierarchical plantation society, although he was a young illiterate man from a small rural village. In his narrative, he depicts how he invested himself and his resources in hard work, and managed to become both a producer and consumer of high status food, which increased his social standing. Senhor Fernando's story neither invalidates the collective description of the terrible working conditions on São Tomé, nor does it make Portuguese colonialism look any better. Rather, his story tells us that memories of hardship can be creatively turned into a meaningful narrative about one's life.

Senhor Fernando performs his identity by establishing and framing key experiences of work and of his position in a racialised social order. Identity is also a leading theme in the collective memory of migration to São Tomé, which has been strongly influenced by the anti-colonial struggle and the desire to establish an independent Cape Verdean history. This memory establishes an affectively charged and mobilising national identity in relation to important others, such as the Portuguese and the other postcolonial nations in the former empire. One part of that identity is an iconography of subjugation, which contains the moral imperative of righteous national liberation. The view of migration to São Tomé as forced illuminates both colonial exploitation and abuse, Cape Verdean victimhood and a history of shared suffering with other colonised African people. In so doing, the collective memory promotes Cape Verde's independence and the nation's historical relatedness to Africa. Thus, the collective discourse also performs identities.

In relation to the collective memory, senhor Fernando's life history stands out as more complex. It aptly illustrates Elizabeth Tonkin's (1992) argument

that individual memories are produced in a dialectical relationship with a number of distinct social identities. When talking of his co-workers from mainland Africa, he relies on colonial classifications, but also on notions of brotherhood that go back to the fight for decolonisation. In relation to his Portuguese overseers, he underlines his compliance, which is a moral standard inspired by his identity as a devout Christian, but he also talks of himself as a strongly independent person in a register that echoes ideals of Cape Verdean masculinity. He refers to his stay on São Tomé with pride, as it allows him to live up to the ideal of the adventurous Cape Verdean migrant, but he also laments the failure of his sojourn away to improve his economic and social standing in the long run and become a successful returnee. Thus, his story is structured by seemingly contrasting identities, which senhor Fernando uses in a creative way. What is most striking in his narrative is that he successfully protects his sense of self, even though he was bound for seven years by a contract that transformed him into an unfree labourer, almost a slave. Through his narrative performance, he acquires dignity in the present.

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