SUB-SAHARAN EARLY MIGRATIONS AS A MEANS OF AFRICAN PEOPLES' INITIATIVE AGAINST COLONIAL OPPRESSION: THE CAPE VERDEAN CASE

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Abstract

Even before the beginning of liberation struggle, spontaneous migrations outside Sub-Saharan African lands can be described as an early initiative of resistance against material and ideological colonial oppression.

The extended dispersion around the world of people of African roots has been usually associated to the European slave trade of pre-colonial times and to the renewed displacements that developed during the independent period -especially since the last decades of 20th century- in order to evade economic crisis, wars and authoritarian governments. Nevertheless, we can also speak about an overseas dispersion as a result of spontaneous migrations that took place in colonial times as a deliberate initiative of Sub-Saharan Africans. These population movements transcended the simple action of escaping from oppressing conditions of foreign domination; they have been conscious strategies of labour and ideological insertion.

There is no doubt: economic constraints and political limitations drove to the decision of migrating that led to decades of population displacements from the main departure point of Cape Verde archipelago, located in a privileged Atlantic position. Anyway, it also implied the construction of early collective identity definitions inside and beyond colonial boundaries, with the purpose of inserting in an occidental world where sophisticated laws had begun to classify people as "desirable" and "undesirable" appealing to the racialized principles that supported imperialist expansion. Our objective is to recover these initiatives and to analyse them as means of colonial resistance and as a main frame of the liberation struggle.

Keywords: Migrations, Africa, colonialism, Cape Verde

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A mythical history has been constructed around the antique population of Cape Verde, the archipelago located five hundred kilometers from Mauritania and Senegal coasts. Some local writers suggested that it belonged to the islands known as Hesperides in Ancient Greece (Silva Andrade, 1997) and that, consequently, it would be a rising rest of submerged Atlantis continent, populated by a civilization of divine origins that conquered a big part of North Africa and South West Europe twelve thousand years ago. Although we can think about this myth as a quaint story, it also involves *"the distressing search of roots for a country without history before Portuguese domination"* (Barbe, 2002: 16).

Contrary to continental Africa, with their political units, cultures and languages before European arrival, it's difficult to find similar facts in Cape Verde Islands. Although there are accounts about Arabian and Berber visitors before the 15th century, as well as of continental Wolof that used this place as a refuge after a local uprising or a Felup invasion (Carreira, 1983), the truth is that current Cape Verdean population profile is related to Portuguese colonization and forced migration of enslaved people from Senegambia region that began in 1462.

The papal bull of 1455 had granted to Portuguese King Alfonso V and his successors the privilege of populating, tax collecting and trading in Africa, from Cape Bojador and Cape Noun to Guinea. Anyway, as continental coast was not really safe due to the intrusion of ships flying foreign flags, Cape Verde islands arose as a more secure option and their new settlers were allowed to practice trade, especially slave trade, between Senegal River and Sierra Leona, with the exception of Arguim gulf, where the Crown reserved for itself the monopoly.

This authorization implied the islands transformation in a human beings' warehouse and a main stopover for slave trade to America. Anyway, this continent was not the final destination for every African that has been captured; many of them remained in the archipelago as enslaved

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workers for Portuguese cotton and other cash crops plantations (Contarino Sparta, 2007). That is why it is right to assess that these forced African migrations and the small number of Europeans that settled down from the second half of 15th century gave birth to present Cape Verdean population. However, these population movements became only the first step in a long series of human displacements that marked the whole history of the archipelago.

Before 17th century, the only inhabited islands were *Santiago* and *Fogo*, that belonged to the archipelago southern group -named *Sotavento*-, besides *Brava* and *Maio*. From then on, people began to settle down in *Brava* and the northern sector of the archipelago or *Barlovento* Islands (*São Vicente, São Nicolau, Santa Luzia, Santo Antão, Sal* and *Boa Vista*). This relocation did not only implied an environmental change, but also a different labour engagement for many Cape Verdean natives who abandoned agriculture and employed themselves as sailors on board the ships that anchored in local harbours and especially at the *Porto Grande* of Mindelo, in *São Vicente* island, where also remained as urban workers.

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Although the ships were initially only a work location, they became the means of transport that allowed Cape Verdeans to migrate and take distance from frequent droughts and famines and from the impositions and absence of opportunities under colonial government. As local historian António Carreira (1977:63) emphasized, *"among the colonies of the old overseas Portuguese Empire, Cape Verde archipelago was the pioneer of free migration"* as it was also among all other African colonies. Similar collective actions will not be put into practice until postcolonial times.

Periods and types of migration

Along five hundred years, this territory received an immigration that combined colonization -in this case as a means of political domination and economic exploitation- and slaves from African continent, migration among islands that involved colonization of new rural lands and rural-urban movements, forced labour migration to other territories that belonged to the same empire and a massive process of emigration to Africa and other continents that began with sailors' displacements. We can divide these population movements into three different periods: 1) From European and African continents to Cape Verde islands (15th and 16th century) 2) Among the islands of the archipelago (17th and 18th centuries). 3) To other countries of America, Africa and Europe from 19th century.

1)   From European and African continents to the islands (15th and 16th centuries). Colonization and forced migration.

When Lusitanian Crown encouraged the settlement of European people in 1466, the isolation of islands and hard weather conditions restricted the number of those who were

interested in joining the first colonizers. On the contrary, we can speak about thousands of continental Africans who were introduced as enslaved workers for the new agricultural economy that was organized in *Fogo* and *Santiago*. Diversity characterized the origins of this forced migration that involved men and women who belonged to *wolof, bijago, beafada, felup, balanta, banhun* and *mandinga* peoples, among others (Carreira, 1983). That's why Ilídio Cabral described the population of the islands as *"a Babel of languages, religions, habits, customs and beliefs"* (Cabral Baleno, 2001: 174).

Anyway, the process did not only connect different communities beyond their land of origins and their language boundaries; it also allowed the formation of a new society, as a result of a combination of forced and free population movements from Africa and Europe. By the end of 16th century, one of the first census estimated a population of 13.700 enslaved Africans who coexisted with 1.508 free inhabitants. The last were described as *white*, but also as *pardos*. Although their number was still reduced, these records show already the existence of *métissage*, that wil be considered a peculiarity of this society, where the absence of European women was almost complete.

Although people of African origins were the majority, their cultural contributions remained hidden and despised under the hegemonic presence of Portuguese as colonizers. As Dulce Almada Duarte observed, in the archipelago *"colonization has, as a departure point, an anomalous characteristic*: *neither European occupation forces nor submitted Africans were natives"* and, unlike other colonies, political domination included *"a high degree of deculturation"* (Almada Duarte, 1994: 62).

Portuguese writer Alfredo Margarido shares this opinion:

"Cape Verdean people, no matter their African origins, found themselves in an unusual situation, detached from any direct contact with their land of birth. Explained in other words,

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they suffered a real cultural breakup: dispossessed of their traditional authorities, compelled to resign their ritual ceremonies (male initiation, circumcision) and losing the use of masks and statues that accomplish an important function inside the religious system, these populations must respond to brutality of slavery cataclysm. This situation became worse with the upheaval of familiar structures; the lineage and clan ties were broken by pressure of colonial authorities. Besides, they were deprived of their languages and compelled to learn Portuguese, unless to answer to masters' orders"

(Margarido, 1994:104). This description take us to Edouard Glissant's (1981) *naked migrant* concept, the enslaved Africans who have been taken to the Caribbean dispossessed of everything, opposite to the free European migrants.

It is true that new mixed cultural expressions emerged from the contact among different African peoples and between Africans and Europeans. A main example was the language, called *créole*, a confluence of Portuguese and African speeches (Fonseca,1998), initially used by enslaved people of different origins to be not understood by masters but also because they needed to understand each other (Ferreira, 1985). Anyway, the increasing population of *mestizos* was split into the culture represented by the European father and the one represented by the African mother inside a colonial order where hierarchy was related to racist conceptions, causing increasing identitary tensions.

As Basil Davidson (1989:12) observed, "skin colour categories became in all instrumental ways the guide and monitor of power and possession: with comparatively much of both at the top of the ladder and less and less of either as the rungs descended until, at the bottom, there was no power and no possession" . In this context, during 16th century *mestizos* were allowed to rise in the social scale if they could achieve legal father recognition to delete *"birth defects"*, that is, African roots. Anyway, this was not a free grace: they must undertake the duty of chasing fugitive slaves (Fernandes, 2002).

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2) **Among the islands of the archipelago (17th to 19th centuries). Colonization of new lands and rural-urban displacements.**

In the beginning of 17th century, migration from Europe was limited to colonial officers. The exception has been represented by some white European women that Portuguese government sent to the islands in order to *whiten* population, facing the increasing number of *mulatos*. Nevertheless, this action had no effect because *métissage* had become a main characteristic of society and spread to other islands of the archipelago. Displacements took place in order to survive to drought and famine that battered the only two populated islands, but also had to do with economic crisis that began when *Santiago* inhabitants lost their privileges in slave trade and its main harbour, Ribeira Grande, ceased to be a compulsory stopover in the transportation of human beings to America. Portuguese Crown began to grant trading rights to contractors outside *Santiago* and, besides, Spanish, French, British and Dutch competition increased, as well as pirates' raids (Ferraz Torrão, María Manuel, 1995). We can differentiate three kinds of displacements among islands:

a) The first destinations to escape from drought have been the higher and humid lands of *Brava*, *São Nicolau* and *Santo Antão*, where impoverished peasants settled down during 17th century. They became main agricultural islands, but the exploitation of land differed from the *fazendas* system that predominated in *Santiago* and *Fogo* because peasants worked as tenants in lands that had been granted by Portuguese Crown to *señores* who were mostly absents. The majority of tenants were freed slaves. Besides, slaves enjoyed a great level of autonomy because the absence of *señores* allowed them to organize crops and trade by themselves (Correia e Silva, 2002:4-16).

b) During the 18th century, displacements to *Boa Vista* and *Maio* began. The attraction of these islands was related to whales and ichtyological wealth. We will have to wait till next century to find the first settlers in *Sal* Island who wanted to take profit of salt resources. Inhabitants of *Brava*, *São Nicolau* and *Santo Antão* began to visit the sea that

surrounded *Santa Luzia* and *São Vicente* Islands in times of drought to fish and find *urzela*, a lichen used to dye fabrics. Nevertheless, the first remained uninhabited and the population of the last will be related to a later process of urbanization. New opportunities of employment emerged due to the presence of ships that belonged to whalers' companies, especially from the United States. That's why many Cape Verdean engaged in the production of whale oil that was processed above all in *Brava* Island, while other became sailors.

c) The last displacements among islands, towards *São Vicente*, can be described as a real process of rural-urban migration. Previously, the first colonial intentions of populating this island were related to agriculture and cattle farming. In the last years of 18th century, government tried to avoid the settlement of people proceeding from *Sotavento* in order to stop the spread of *mulatos* and allowed the settlement of a European community (Correia e Silva, 2005). Nevertheless, the dry weather of the island and the absence of water only permitted to relocate in its soil peasants without land and marginalized from other points of the archipelago, many of whom left the island after the big drought of 1823.

The situation changed with the construction of *Porto Grande* in *São Vicente* Mindelo bay. Portugal government allowed British to establish coal warehouses, main fuel for the ships that began to use a new type of energy in 19th century: steam. The *Royal Mail Steam Packet, Mac Leod & Martin, St. Vincent de Cabo Verde, Wilson & Sons Ltd.* and *Cory's Brothers* were some of the English firms that operated in Mindelo. With its privileged position in the middle of the oceanic route to Africa, America and Europe, from 1850 *Porto Grande* emerged as the main point of fuel supply for British shipping companies and for ships that sailed under different flags.

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These activities attracted poor peasants from *Santo Antão* and *São Nicolau* and from southern islands, while elites from the old agricultural islands began to invest in *São Vicente*, as well as European companies. Carlos Alberto de Carvalho (2000:638) observed that whole archipelago's economic life began to be link to *Porto Grande* and local products found *"markets in three continents"*. The population of Mindelo city increased from 183 inhabitants in 1827 to 4.267 in 1882 and included a foreign migration of one hundred persons, mostly from England. Although main British influence was related to economic issues, it implied also the introduction of new words, an architectural style, the Protestant faith and sports like cricket and tennis, besides drinking and clothing habits. Added this to the permanent flux of sailors of different origins, Mindelo became Cape Verde cosmopolitan center.

3) **From the archipelago to different countries of America, Africa and Europe (since 19th century)**

Drought battered the archipelago repeated times. As a result, half of its population died between 1747 and 1900. Nevertheless, the problem was not only weather, but the slackness of colonial government that never put into practice any kind of measures to alleviate people's hunger by means of importing food. Amílcar Cabral, the independence movement leader, considered that *"having exploited people and soil of Cape Verde unrestrainedly, Portuguese colonizers take advantage of hunger to reinforce domination and getting cheap labour"* (Cabral, 1971). Increasing incomes of the times of Porto Grande only benefited a minority.

Compared to other Portuguese colonies, Cape Verde archipelago had a more extended education system, with 73 primary schools for 60.000 inhabitants by the middle of nineteenth

century. High schools were created in the second half of that century for the instruction of natives who would work in colonial administration. Besides, in 1843 the status of citizenship was granted to free people born in the archipelago. However, they could not reach high public positions, were second-class citizens with limited rights and forced labour institution was not eliminated. They were subject to another kind of forced migration, being compelled to travel to *São Tomé* and *Príncipe* plantations under painful conditions or to other Portuguese colonies as colonial employees (Palminha Silva, 1985).

In order to escape to these conditions, the surrounding sea appeared to be the exit door. Cape Verdeans took advantage of the ships that anchored in the islands to find the way outside the archipelago and escape from permanent economic crisis, impositions of colonial government and absence of opportunities.

Due to the lack of records, the beginning of displacements outside the archipelago cannot be precisely dated. Carreira considers that native Cape Verdeans first left the islands between the last years of 17th century and the first half of the 18th when ships belonging to whalers' companies from the United States began to develop their activities in the archipelago, especially in *Brava* and *São Nicolau* Islands (Carreira, 1977: 68-69). As part of the crew of these ships, an unknown number of Cape Verdeans emigrated and settled down in New Bedford and Providence –important whalers' harbours-, located in New England, where the first migrant community was formed when the 19th century started.

With the opening of *Porto Grande*, during the second half of that century, the opportunities of becoming part of the crews of foreign ships increased. The United States continued to be the main destination for those who used this job as a means to emigrate outside

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the archipelago, because they found in this country the social capital that implied the existence of previous Cape Verdean communities.

Migration became not only an economic exit. These displacements allowed Cape Verdeans to face a different reality and to reflect about colonial oppression in the archipelago. This experience was related to the emergence of a group of intellectuals called *nativistas*, who began to demand better conditions of life to Portuguese government. One of main writers and journalists of this movement, Eugénio Tavares (1917) stated in the journal *A Voz de Cabo Verde*:

> "Cape Verdeans don't leave for the United States only in search of food (…); thanks to the influence of the contact with American people, Cape Verdeans learn to face life with a higher perspective (…). Besides, they inserts themselves in American civilization, not adapting anymore to the narrow world where they have been confined in Cape Verde and ceasing to bear the tyrannical requirements of the humiliating and badly paid job of Santo Tomé and Príncipe plantations (…) Cape Verdeans, whose aspirations are more than eating, find themselve*s"*

Besides, although internal slavery was abolished in 1878, the archipelago did not escape to new ways of utilization of *main d'ouvre*. A new form of exploitation, forced labour, was introduced.

In the case of Cape Verde, human displacements implied an exceptional dynamic because it was the only one population that appealed to spontaneous migrations as an extended strategy to colonial conditions. And we talk about the extended character of the movements because it led to more than a half of its population to live abroad. Only ten years after the independence, in 1985, the number of Cape Verdeans that lived in other countries were 400.000, in contrast to the 315.000 that lived in the archipelago.

Migrations from Cape Verde have been often related to a desire of adventures related to the facilities of maritime context. Anyway, as Palminha Silva remarked, migrations have to do with bad conditions of life, and that's why we always have to consider them as "forced" in some way. In accordance with António Carreira, *"of all African territories of ancient*

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Portuguese empire, the Cape Verde archipelago was pioneer of free migration". And we coincide with this opinion if we consider these migrations "free" because they have to do with the initiative of population, with a collective strategy.

Besides, migratory experience made Cape Verdean aware of the possibility of living in a different reality, not as colonial subjects. Intellectuals forged a thought that considered Cape Verdean more than an administrative colonial union that were ten dispersed islands.

The relevance of this migratory experience has been also remarked by poet Luiz Silva Andrade (1995:316), who considers that it meant *"the birth of Cape Verdean nation and nationality"*. In the United States, Cape Verdeans of different islands began to imagine themselves as a unified community. Anyway, it is important to remark that this consolidation did not imply an open demand of independence or an approach to African culture. On the contrary, they travelled with a Portuguese passport and constructed an image of themselves that reinforced the predominance of European influence in Cape Verdean culture and distanced themselves from other African people (Gomes dos Anjos, 2003).

Nativistas reacted to the lack of opportunities in their country, but at the same time emphasized their particularity of being *mestizos* and educated as European face to other Africans (Dos Anjos, 2003). A new intellectual generation that was born in 1930 decade, called *claridosos* because they founded *Claridade* journal, reinforced this image. They considered *créole* as a language based on Portuguese morphologie, with minor traces of African languages grammar and vocabulary (Lopes, B., 1936). Besides, they described the culture of *Sotavento* Islands as traditional and static, while true Cape Verdean culture was the one of dynamic *São Vicente* and *Barlovento* Islands.

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According to these intellectuals, archipelago dynamism was related to migration and Cape Verdean was a subject involved in positivist ideology, who, when migrates, "follows the rhythm of progress and adapts himself to the new civilization" (Lopes, 1936:5). Porto Grande, the harbour that received ships of every nationality, appeared to be *"Cape Verdeans' catapult"* (Lopes, M., 1937:9)

Since the last years of 19th century up to the second post-war, Cape Verdeans migrants diversified their destinations. The importance of *São Vicente* diminished because coal prices became too high compared to those of Las Palmas and Tenerife due to heavy taxes demanded by Portuguese government to British companies. As a consequence, many ships proceeding from northern harbours avoided anchoring for supplies in *Porto Grande*. However, for reasons of geographical proximity, it continued to be an important port of call for ships that continued their journey in the South Atlantic, to Africa or America.

The indiscriminate exploitation of whales in the archipelago caused the disappearance of this cetacean. That is why many whalers' companies searched other locations, especially South Georgia and Shetland Islands, in the Antarctica. Cape Verdeans, with a large experience in this activity, were hired as sailors for the ships that travelled to these islands and visited ports like Buenos Aires or Montevideo and others on Brazilian coast. We can find the origin of the communities of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina in this route, because Cape Verdeans, after the end of their contracts, preferred to stay in these countries rather than to return to hard conditions of life in the archipelago.

They arrived as sailors and the majority kept this job in the new adopted countries, as they did in the United States, as part of the crew of merchant-vessels and also in the navy. Ports were the chosen locations to settle down. With an established social capital in the first years of

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19th century, families, friends and relatives joined them following the first migration waves. In Argentina, they became the only organized community of African roots during almost the whole 20th century. Cape Verdeans migrated also to close territories of continental Africa, like Senegal, Gambia and Angola and migration to Europe began in 1960 decade. The biggest communities were formed in Portugal, the Netherlands, France, Spain and Italy and they are today main sources of remittances to the archipelago. Anyway, they also settled down in Germany, Luxemburg and Switzerland and formed smaller communities as far as in Australia and New Zealand (Tavares dos Anjos, 2008). Due to this dispersion, it is said that *"when the first man came to the moon he met a Cape Verdean"* (Akesson, 2004:47).
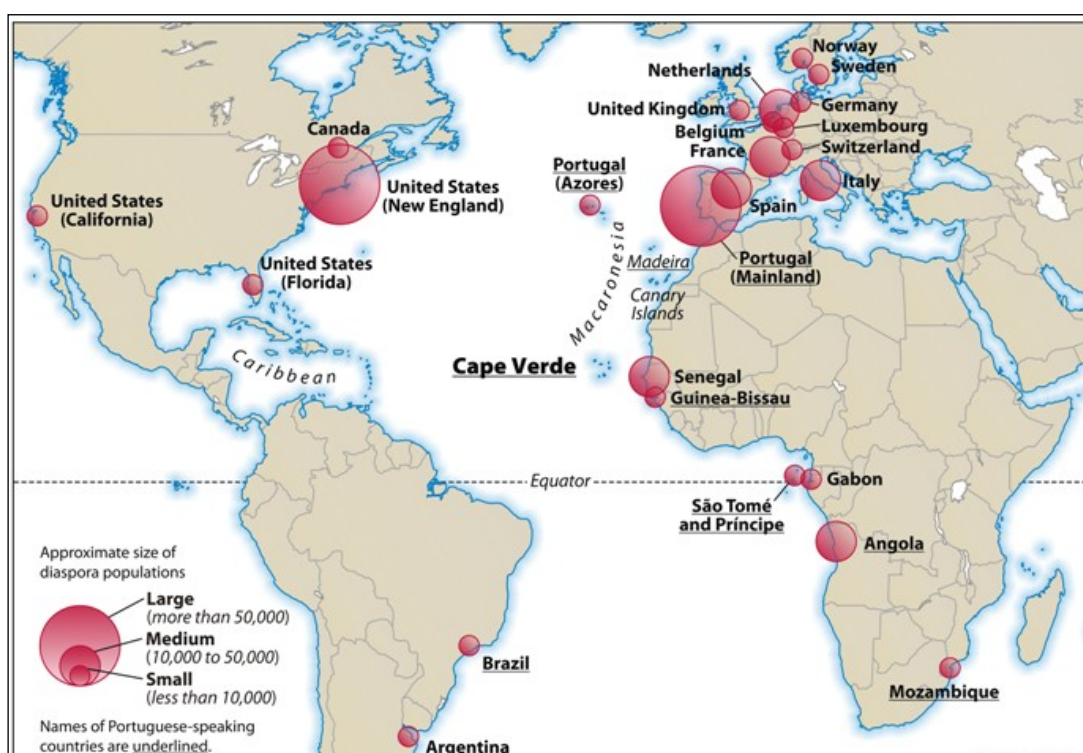
Distribution of Cape Verdean communities in the world (Jorgen Carling – 2008)

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Conclusions: The survival of a transnational experience

Five centuries of migration centered in Cape Verde archipelago combined a dynamics of colonization, forced displacements, rural-urban relocations and movements outside the islands that included sailors as part of the first waves. They have been followed by relatives, friends and other people attracted by settled social capital. To specify the number of migrants involved in this process is not an easy task. The first reason is that many of these displacements have been clandestine, with no records left. But the other is that a big number of Cape Verdeans emigrated with a Portuguese passport and they were registered as natives of Portugal. These difficulties have been partly solved by means of reconstructing migrants' routes taking into account the port of departure and resorting to communities' records when they exist. Anyway, while 2010 census showed that Cape Verdean population included almost 500.000 people[1] the number of Cape Verdeans living abroad continued to be similar or higher[2].

Beyond figures, Cape Verdean world dispersion has been described as a transnational space, where a desterritorialized nation emerged (Góis, 2005). This construction was related to the existence of extended Cape Verdean families that have members in almost every adoptive country and to a common identity that survived outside de islands. The europeanized Cape Verdeans' profile that was elaborated by local intellectuals during the first decades of 20th century became functional to the insertion of emigrants in occidental societies. Migrants invisibilized themselves as Africans, taking distance from other Africans as mestizos with a European education, whose citizenship was shared with Portuguese colonizers (Contarino Sparta, 2011). Anyway, this construction began to change in times of emancipation struggle –the

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[1] *Apresentacao dos resultados definitivos do Recenseamento Geral da Populacao e Habitacao 2010*, March 30, 2010, Instituto Nacional de Estatística de Cabo Verde

[2] In its report about Cape Verde economic structure (2009), the *Oficina Económica y Oficial* of Spain in Dakar suggested that Cape Verdean population abroad can be estimated between 500.000 and 700.000 persons.

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independence was achieved in 1975- and generations of descendants approached their African roots trying to recover a common history of slavery and colonization, while in countries with an ancient history of Cape Verdean immigration, like de United States, they continued to define themselves as *brown Portuguese* even during the last years of 20th century. Taking into account the ambiguity in the definition of their identity, Marilyn Halter described Cape Verdeans as *"in between people"*, a community that fluctuates between keeping themselves separated from non-white people and supporting them simultaneously or in different historical moments (Halter, 2008: 41). Identity tension, that approaches the concept of *double consciousness* defined by W.E. Burghardt Du Bois (1903), arose in times of colonization and never disappeared completely.

They could show a Portuguese citizenship, but they could not stop being colonial subjects and black or mestizos. That is why they imagined themselves as community based on this ambivalence. They projected abroad an identity that was functional to their insertion in a context where racial and cultural preferences were clearly defined. We can say that similar to their ancestors they tried to delete "birth defects". They were not Europeans, but they have been raised in their culture and insularity allowed them to take distance of the heavy burden that meant being African.

Even accepting that these fluctuations and ambiguity characterize Cape Verdean identity, the idea of a real union, of a nation that survived outside the archipelago has been put into question. During the first *Congresso dos Quadros Caboverdianos da Diáspora*, celebrated in 1994 in Lisboa, many among the twenty three delegates could not even speak *créole*. Besides, one of the main issues that have been discussed was the distance between the communities they represented and Cape Verdean culture, as well as the absence of interest of their members in politics and current issues of the archipelago. One of the assistants, the French historian Michel

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Cahen (1995:72) stated *"that what happens to Cape Verdean emigrants is the same that happens to others: there is a progressive integration in the country of destination, that even includes the loss of the identity of origin or unless the loss of the feeling of intimate adscription to that identity"*. He coincides with Portuguese sociologist Pedro Góis (2005:256), who described Cape Verdeans in the world as an *"imaginary nation"*.

As a conclusion, we can only assert for sure that what unifies Cape Verdean people is their ability of surviving through a common history of dispersion, insertion and adaptation to other cultures that marked their five hundred years of existence, after their birth inside a racialized and colonial background.

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