

# Cape Verde: Dimensions in Nation-Building

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## **Abstract**

This article seeks to analyze, in a socio-historical perspective, the formation of the Nation in Cape Verde. It argues that the archipelago took a singular path in Nation-building in Africa, through a combination of different dimensions: social, geographical, political and religious, educational, administrative and literary. It is particularly important to understand these dimensions, since the Cape Verdean Nation precedes in centuries the creation of the independent State. This route was accompanied by the social mobilization of the mestizo, who, since the end of the 16th century, has been the main subject in the history of the archipelago.

**Keywords:** Africa, Cape Verde, Nation, Identity, Uniqueness.

## **Cabo Verde: Dimensiones en la construcción de la nación**

### **Resumen**

El presente artículo busca analizar, en una perspectiva socio-histórica, la formación de la nación en Cabo Verde. Se afirma que el archipiélago asumió un recorrido singular en la construcción de la nación en África, por la conjugación de diferentes dimensiones: geográfica, social, política y religiosa, educativa, administrativa y literaria. Se revela particularmente importante comprender estas dimensiones, dado que la nación cabo-verdeana precede por siglos la creación del Estado independiente. Este recorrido fue acompañado por la movilización social del mestizo, quien a partir de los finales del siglo XVI se asume como el principal sujeto de la historia del archipiélago.

**Palabras clave:** África, Cabo Verde, Nación, Identidad, Singularidad.

## 1. Introduction

A West African country bordering the Atlantic Ocean, Cape Verde was discovered after the Portuguese maritime expansion in the 15th century, specifically between 1460 and 1462. The archipelago is located in a privileged geographic position between the North Atlantic and the South Atlantic Ocean, about 500 kilometers from the West African coast, on the route of the great navigation lines and maritime trade. Consisting of a set of ten islands, Cape Verde is divided into two groups: the Leeward side in the south, covering the islands of Brava, Fogo, Maio and Santiago, and the Northern Windward group, which includes Santo Antão, São Vicente, Santa Luzia, São Nicolau, Sal and Boavista.

The settlement of the archipelago, after 1461, put in contact different population quotas from Africa and Europe, with distinct cultures that allowed shaping the Cape Verdean Nation in a very peculiar way. Being the communication node between different continents (Africa, Europe and America), and a society remade from initially uninhabited islands, Cape Verde received and assimilated cultural influences, which ended up by offering rich and diverse aspects, imposed by history, geography and economics (Amaral, 2004). These influences have shaped a unique identity in which the standards and shared cultural values contributed to the Cape Verdean Nation to become a particular community to be recognized and distinguished in the context of the countries colonized by the former Portuguese Empire (Lopes Filho, 2003).

The debate about the Cape Verdean Nation emerges after the end of the 19th century, in a social and political context in which the Cape Verdean cultural elite sought to identify the background and historical vestiges that would have required the existence of a national consciousness that would be shaped from a particular historical experience that began with the settlement of the archipelago, thanks to the 1466 Royal Charter and the 1472 Charter of Privilege Limitation.

In this sense, we can put the following preliminary question: taking into account both the geographical, and the social, political, religious, educational, administrative and literary dimensions which contributed to the formation of the Cape Verdean society, can we consider Cape Verde as a Nation, which diverges in the African context?

To answer this question, we have made a review of literature that is complemented by an interpretative analysis, which allows considering a set of theoretical perspectives, with the main objective to contribute to the

deepening of a systematic study on the Cape Verde nation-building. In fact, it is an analysis that seeks, in particular, to understand the details regarding nation-building, in the light of the historical and sociological paradigms.

## **2. From the settlement to the dawn of nation-building in Cape Verde**

It was intended that the settlement of the Cape Verde Islands, between the mid-15th century and late 19th century, would follow the same pattern that occurred in the archipelago of the Azores and Madeira. The financial problems that the Portuguese Crown was facing at the time, the distance between Cape Verde and Portugal, the dry and arid climate of the archipelago and the scarcity of natural resources prevented the settlement model, which was intended to be followed by those donors, from materializing (Baleno, 2001). These “circumstances would later impose the paths that turned the islands into the main among the first examples of multiracial settlement” (Barata, 1966: 925).

Multiracial, to the extent that the settlement did not occur in an unilateral way, i.e. exclusively with white men and slaves from the African coast, but also with free men, including *cassangas* and *brâmanes*, who freely accompanied merchants, mercenaries and captains of ships and Europeans from the Metropolis (from the Algarve, Alentejo, Minho and Jews, etc.) and, later, from the Archipelago of Madeira. The Spanish, the French (Normans and Bretons), the English, and the Dutch, fewer in number, also contributed to this process (Barros, 1939; Almeida, 1966).

The Santiago Island, as the first to be populated, received, in the early days of its occupation, the first political-administrative division of the archipelago, with a captaincy that lies to the South, based in Ribeira Grande, which was attributed to Antonio da Noli, and another in the North based on the current Cidade da Praia, attributed to Diogo Afonso. In the same period of the Santiago Island settlement, the Fogo Island was also inhabited (1461). After, it's Maio Island (1490) and Brava (1545) and later Santo Antão (1548). In the 17th century the islands of Boa Vista (1620) and São Nicolau (1623) were populated and, finally, the islands of São Vicente (1795) and Sal (1893).

Given the scarcity of natural resources, the predominance of volcanic islands, the climate aridity and almost non-existent rainfall, the different population quotas that were present in the settlement of the islands get closer, conditioned by the historical process and, in a relationship of forces and

dissonances between rulers and ruled, sharing their resources and cultural values, thus giving rise to the blooming of a unique culture and identity of crossing and synthesis.

Cape Verdeanity would break out from that coexistence (Peixeira, 2003), and it is characterized by the appearance of the mestizo who started having a way of being, of living and of expressing himself different from the settlers and the slaves. It was found that the various human elements that came to Cape Verde slowly entered a process of integration, losing their previous ethnic, racial and ancestry references, living only on what was remade from those legacies, which personalize and gain awareness of themselves in the imaginary of the former Portuguese Empire.

Downstream of the process of Cape Verde historical evolution, we have to point out social and cultural heterogeneity from the most varied, geographical and ethnic latitudes which marked its first inhabitants: Portuguese new Christians, donors and banished, Jews chased out by the Inquisition, African slaves of various and diverse ethnic groups. To each group corresponded distinctive ways of life, an exogenous signature of identity, that time, slowly, but surely and irreversibly, eventually merged in a reality of endogenous, Cape Verdean nature. (Silveira, 2005: 47-48)

The mestizo, because he historically interlinks African and European civilizations, starts in due time, and in particular, after the late 16th century, to claim administrative positions in an insular society, deeply marked by the systematic abandonment of the white layer economically well positioned of the European settlers. The mestizo starts to contribute, in fact, to the affirmation of a culture and a unique identity shaped in a fusion process that fits in the perspective of hybrid cultures presented by Canclini (2011). In this hybridization process, during the fusion, there are contradictions and conflicts generated by inter-culturalism, which in fact, contributes and generates, in a positive way, new structures and new practices vital to the formation of a society, in this case the Cape Verdean society.

With the gradual rise of the “children of the land” mestizos either in the political, or in the economic and social situation, those acquire relevant positions within the literary and cultural contexts. Facing several limitations, in fact, the Cape Verdeans knew how to overcome the vicissitudes such as droughts and famines, eventually becoming, with their determination, a singular Nation.

### **3. Dimensions in nation-building: the uniqueness of Cape Verde**

Nation-building in Cape Verde is a rare phenomenon in Africa, since the nation preceded the State, and it was even the pre-existence of that nation that eventually claimed the creation of the State itself (Pereira, 2011). Long before the struggle for national independence (1975) there was already a Cape Verdean Nation, more or less solid, with particular identity criteria, including the language, the way of being and living, traditions and culture (Fonseca, 2012).

Over time, it begins to develop in Cape Verde, in an evolutionary way, what could be called of national or nationalist feeling, with escapes of slaves, peasants' riots, and protests by native merchants and by the local administration itself, considering the abandonment of the metropolis, with the outbreak of the awareness of a unique cultural specificity (Graça, 2007). This national feeling, in the colonial period, was decisive in the building of the State, where miscegenation is perceived by part of the Cape Verdean intelligentsia as positive, in the sense that it would have been a national unity that has contributed to the construction of a unique Nation (Anjos, 2003). It is unique in the African context, because of the combination of four main dimensions:

#### **3.1. Geographical dimension**

Like São Tomé and Príncipe, the Cape Verde Islands were found, without the discovery of any traces that could confirm the human presence before the arrival, in 1460, of the sailors in the service of the Portuguese Crown.

The next night a Southwest storm assailed us with strong wind; (...) on the third day we sighted land, we all screaming land, land, and many were surprised because we did not know that there was land in those regions. We ordered two men to go aloft and they discovered two large islands; which, known of us, we thanked to our Lord God, who would take us to see new things, as we knew well that of these islands there was no news in Portugal (...) They went and fetched a lot, but they found neither roads nor traces that could make us think it was inhabited. (Cadamosto, 1944: 127-130)

In fact, it was the Portuguese who allowed the world to know the Cape Verde islands, probably in 1460 the eastern and southern islands, and in 1462 the remaining islands (Brito, 1966). Deserted, truly found by the Portuguese, everything in Cape Verde was created under the principle

of the synthesis of cultures (Moreira, 1962). The settlement of the islands, which was initially done with slaves and settlers, was achieved thanks to the 1466 Royal Charter and the 1472 Charter of Privilege Limitation. The 1466 Royal Charter was suggested by D. Fernando who recognized the impossibility of populating the archipelago of Cape Verde, particularly the island of Santiago, without incentives or necessary encouragements. Answering the call of his brother, D. Afonso V, he decrees the 1466 Charter, which granted to Infante D. Fernando full powers of jurisdiction in civil and criminal matters, with regard to the inhabitants of the archipelago.

Infante D. Fernando my dear and beloved brother sent us to tell how there will be four years since he started to populate his island of Santiago which is through Cape Verde and that for being so stretched from our realms we don't want to live there except with great freedom and honesty. (Carreira, 1983: 29)

The 1472 Charter of Privilege Limitation (which limited the benefits granted to the residents of Santiago through the 1466 Charter), in turn, caused, on the one hand, the inhabitants of the archipelago to start producing on their own islands the goods used in commercial transactions; but, on the other hand, they needed for production, in proportional amount, slave labour, which contributed significantly to the settlement of the Cape Verde archipelago. The slaves became, in a direct way, the inhabitants of the archipelago islands.

In the islands with later settlement, for example the islands of São Vicente (1795) and Sal (1893), the mestizos born in Cape Verde also participated in the settlement process, being the main agents of the Cape Verdean social transformation by the end of the 16th century. The process of miscegenation in São Tomé and Príncipe, initially similar to that of Cape Verde, suffered some changes, especially after the second decade of the 19th century, through the introduction of a Creole elite, called children of the land, which were replaced by Europeans on the exploitation of plantations (farmsteads) of cocoa and coffee.

### **3.2. Social, political and religious dimension**

The town of Ribeira Grande in the island of Santiago, today's Old Town (Cidade Velha), was the first Portuguese town in sub-Saharan Africa, which, after the discovery of the archipelago, worked as mandatory stop in transatlantic trips. This is a town that, because of the importance of its port,

represented the slave trade, which was initially made between the rivers of Guinea and the Iberian kingdoms and, later, with the American continent (Cabral, 2015). Since its founding, Ribeira Grande was a socio-economic, military, administrative and ecclesiastical centre, and in the middle of the 16th century it was already one of the most important trading posts in the Atlantic (Cabral, 2015).

In the process of the Portuguese expansion, the Old Town (Cidade Velha) became a mandatory stop in the slave trade, and this represented an opportunity for the enrichment of its residents. The creation of the port, the importance of the town in the economy of the Portuguese Crown and the strategic position of the island of Santiago in relation to the sea routes, allowed Ribeira Grande in 1533 to become a city, and that they founded there “the seat of the bishopric, covering not only Cape Verde, but also Guinea” (Cabral, 2015: 226). In 1495, the Church Our Lady of the Rosary (Nossa Senhora do Rosário), the first of Christian worship in Africa, was built in Ribeira Grande.

The Cape Verdean has always been a Christian and that had implications in the way he sees himself and the world around him. The Catholic Church is the first institution of importance in the Cape Verde archipelago, with a moral basis, under which Cape Verdean society is structured, since it was in the Church that the foundations of all moral and social order of the time were based (Lopes Filho, 1996).

In 1546 it was granted a Royal permission so that the matts and blacks could participate in the Constitution of the Town hall and, indirectly, in political life, and as far back as the 17th century the children of the land started occupying important positions in the Administration, which resulted in their rise and projection.

### **3.3. Educational and administrative dimension**

The Catholic Church had a leading role in the education process in Cape Verde, with the creation of seminaries and, also, later, the colonial State with the construction of primary schools and high schools. The primary education was established, in an initial moment, in 1817, with the creation of the Vila da Praia Primary School, and, later, the Main School in 1848 in the island of Brava. The creation of the first National High School occurred in 1860, in the city of Praia.

With education, the mestizos started playing important roles in local administration and in former colonies under the dominion of the

Portuguese Empire. Education constituted an instrument par excellence for the autonomy of the “children of the land”, either in political terms, with a glimpse of the full exercise of citizenship, or in economic terms, as the basis of the social rise of the residents” (Fernandes, 2006: 109). The Portuguese administration used the people from the islands in the colonial administration management, a phenomenon that dates back to the institutionalization “of the first political-administrative organizations imposed since the late 16th century. This membership increases as, on the islands, the kingdom’s men became scarce, scared off by the exhaustion of the slave society reproduction mechanisms” (Barros, 2013: 390).

The genesis of the modern elite emerges after the second half of the 19th century, when the natives began to occupy positions in the administration, as they had higher levels of education compared to other Portuguese-speaking African countries.

### **3.4. Literary dimension**

Mid-1800 is indicated as the beginning of the Cape Verdean literature, because it is from that date that the conditions for the publication of literary texts are created, in particular the National Press. From 1842 to 1843, the first periodical appears in Cape Verde, and it would characterize the press in Africa, known as the Official Gazette of the General Government of Cape Verde which, besides publishing administrative affairs of the Government, also divulged advertisements and literary texts.

Literature played an important resistance role to the colonial regime and in the construction of identity between different generations that characterize the cultural elite in Cape Verde (Nativists, Claridosos and Nationalists). Literature served as the basis of affirmation, combat instrument and implementation of Cape-Verdeanity, at different times in its history. Through it, the idea of a unique Nation emerges, with a cultural identity of its own, highlighting its privileged position of an interlacing of cultures (Semedo & Turano, 1997).

The Cape Verdean cultural elite have managed, through a secular literature, to portray the social and cultural realities of the archipelago throughout its history. Each context implied different readings, through literary and material means that each generation had at its disposal. Since very early, there was a cultured elite in Cape Verde, who saw in literature the most effective vehicle of social ascent, who constituted the embryo of the real intellectual elite, and that would be the engine of the Cape Verdean

nationalism. These elites asserted themselves in three different times: that of the nativists, from 1856 to 1932; that of the regionalist consciousness, from 1932 to 1958; and that of the nationalist assertion, from 1958 to 1975 (Brito-Semedo, 2006).

The main focus of the various generations of cultural elites were thus reported to a nativist sentiment, complaining on it a status of equality, which happened after the regionalist consciousness, claiming regional differentiation to finally reach the generation of the nationalist affirmation or Cabral generation, and requiring for that political autonomy.

#### **4. The contemporary debate on the Nation: Cape Verde between Africa and Europe**

The debate around the events and phenomena that delineated the building of Cape Verdean Nation endures since the thirties of the twentieth century, within the scientific academy, where researchers seek to understand this problem. The affirmation of the originality of the Cape Verdean culture, which does not vary from the concept of Creolity, which gives it at the same time its variety/diversification and differentiation from other peoples of the world and Africa, has led, internally, to the friction between the Cape Verdean academics who postulate the africanness of “Creolity”, and those who prioritize the connection to Europe.

From the first group there are authors such as José Luís Hoppfer Almada, Tomé Varela, Osvaldo Osório, Ovídio Martins and Corsino Fortes, opposed to writers such as João Vário, Arménio Vieira and José Luís Tavares (Laranjeira, 2011). If, on the one hand, the Cape Verdean elites of the thirties and fifties sought, in a process, to claim the independence of the Cape Verde archipelago in the international context, as they were intermediaries between civil society and the very structure of regional and international organizations, on the other hand, at present, the elites seek to reinforce the affirmation of identity and the nation in terms of the democratic structures.

These two realities intersect and complement each other, because the debate we witness nowadays in the scientific academy is the aftermath of the discussion witnessed a few decades ago, where the central concern was a position taken between two extremes (Africa and Europe) or a unique case among the Nations in the world. We wonder what is best for Cape Verde: Africa or Europe? (Tolentino, 2013).

It was with the Revolution of April 1974 that we started “looking at” Africa more openly. The “cries for freedom” came in search of its roots, which

were reflected in forms of expression and daily socio-cultural practices of its inhabitants. A significant part of the population started identifying itself with costumes specifically African as the “balalaika”, skirts, accessories and hairstyles, the “beanie”, which resembled to the one Amílcar Cabral used, combined with the idea of reaffricanization, through the project of unity of Guinea and Cape Verde, that represented a new culture on the assumption of Pan African values, that lasted until the coup d’état in Guinea-Bissau on 14 November 1980.

Later, with the advent of the multiparty politics, the Government led by Carlos Veiga resumed the strategic approach in a more convincing way with Europe, and particularly, with the ancient metropolis, through the reaffirmation of a set of social, cultural and, particularly, symbolic ties. It is in this context that the national symbols are replaced, especially the flag and the anthem, symbols that, at the time, were considered by the then ruling party, as being associated with the ideology of the PAIGC, which, in its view, did not represent the national identity. However, although there was a rapprochement with Europe, the Cape Verdeans never ceased to assert themselves with their specificities. The experience of daily life provided elements in order to rethink their ideological convictions, certainties, questions and positions, in the context of the duality – Africa and/or Europe.

We must bear in mind that the placement of these personalities into categories cannot be considered rigid and that the debate is still in progress and subject to a constant “revisitation”, by those who question and redefine the Cape Verdean identity. Those who do not stand in any of the penchants prefer to consider Cape Verde, among the African countries, as a country that presents a set of historical, geographical, cultural and social particularities different from those that occur on the continent. From the point of view of the observer, the analysis of the debate on nation-building, leads to open conclusions which are themselves always subject to the debate, that is, at the same time, structuring of national identity itself.

In this sense, the tradition of the debate among intellectuals starts, according to Victor Barros, from a certain tendency to describe Cape Verde “as something special, unique, apart from a cultural and civilizational framework, absolutely African and, however, not completely European. Pure rhetorical artifice and construction of a cultural allegory romanticized, or better, metaphorized ostentation of a civilisation halfway between Africa and Europe” (Barros, 2013: 143). The author adds that we are facing clear resonances of speech reproduction of Eurocentric nature and colonial imaginaries about the idea of Africa and the idea of Europe (Barros, 2013).

However, it is possible to confirm in this debate that other authors recognize and characterize Cape Verde as being unique and/or exceptional in the African context, because it results from an ethnic and cultural synthesis of different population quotas from Africa and Europe, and that gave rise to the Cape Verdean man in these islands. They recognize themselves in the idea that Cape Verde, despite being geographically close to Africa, from the cultural and identity point of view is considered unique, whose results are specific factors including “a culture, a language, a religious pattern, an education system, an elite, a market and an administration that preceded the State” (Tolentino, 2007: 112).

## **5. Conclusions**

Since its settlement, Cape Verde shows a set of specific characteristics that distinguish it from most African countries, because they are geostrategically located islands and they have been found uninhabited at the time of their discovery. Contrary to what occurred in the islands of the Azores and Madeira, in Cape Verde, the settlement occurred with different population quotas, including Europeans and Africans, which resulted in a cultural-ethnic symbiosis, not forgetting the existence of a slave society, where, in a given time in its history, the mestizos started to ensure local public administration and even in other colonies of the ancient metropolis, having this occurred until the mid-70s (Canto, 2009).

We have answered to the initial question in so far as the process of nation-building in Cape Verde differs in the African context, because the archipelago was found unoccupied and it was possibly the first “centre of origin” of the Creole as a people and language. Cape Verde, compared to other African countries, especially those with Portuguese as official language, is *sui generis*, because, when it was discovered it was not inhabited, and the colonial power ventured to settle in the archipelago, to populate it and to create structures of permanence. However, Sao Tome and Principe was also uninhabited, but the main difference is due to the fact that, in Cape Verde, it was the mestizo, and not the white man, who settled as the main subject of the history of the Cape Verde archipelago still in the colonial period.

From the multidimensional process, which involves several factors, such as climatic and geographic characteristics, slavery, migration, the social knowledge generated from new cultural groupings, emerges a *sui generis* identity, where the idea of Nation in Cape Verde comes up, unlike most African Nations, centuries before the independent State. It is a process to which, in a particular way, several dimensions contributed.

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