

# Nos Ku Nos\*: A Transnational Cape Verdean Community

RAYMOND A. ALMEIDA

**C**ape Verdean culture on both sides of the Atlantic has developed in a context of transnationalism, almost a commonplace in today's world in which immense corporations and ordinary people alike seek economic survival and benefit by crossing borders. Members of migrant communities preserve and reinvent their culture in places separated perhaps by an airline journey of a day or two, yet they remain linked to one another by ties of kinship, shared resources, and cultural exchange.

The kinds of social life people create in a transnational context have received growing attention in recent years, with studies of diasporas, borders, and other de-territorialized settings in which people practice culture. It might seem that our modern technology and economic system give rise to the conditions for transnationalism. But for Cape Verdeans, transnationalism has been a way of life since the 15th century. Opportunities for migration arose from Cape Verde's strategic position in the geography of trade and empire; the necessity for migration was created by Cape Verde's lack of rich natural resources and sufficient agricultural base.

Unlike the green place its name suggests, Cape Verde is most often brown, windy, and dry. In the past three centuries, famine has been recorded in one out of every eight years. Between 1774 and 1975, over 120,000 Cape Verdeans perished from the effects of drought and famine. The country in a good year is able to produce only about 20 percent of its food. One cannot understand the development of

Cape Verdean culture without taking these environmental factors into account.

## CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND ATLANTIC COMMERCE

Cape Verdean culture also developed within an Atlantic economic system. The foundations for this system were laid in the 15th century in a commerce of slaves who supplied unpaid labor for an interlocking set of businesses. The first recorded American contact with Cape Verde appears in the 1643 journal entry of Jonathan Winthrop, the Massachusetts colonist (Bailyn 1955:84). He noted a shipment of boat staves sent from Boston to England to finance the purchase of "Africoes in the island of Mayo," who were then sold in Barbados to buy molasses, which was taken to Boston for rum production. This is an early record of the infamous triangular trade that linked Europe, Africa, and the Americas and built Atlantic commerce.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the majority of Cape Verdeans were involved in the slave trade in some way. Landowners and slave merchants trafficked in slaves. Other Cape Verdeans outfitted ships sailing eastward for the African coast or westward on the middle passage to Brazil or the Spanish West Indies laden with human cargo. The islands became a transshipment point for enslaved Africans being transported to the New World (Duncan 1971:198-210). There were many Cape Verdean slaves as well. At the beginning of the 17th century only 12 percent of the population of Fogo and Santiago were free persons (Carreira 1966:44).

These slaves produced cotton and woven body cloths or *panos*. "Europeans found they had to acquire Cabo Verdean *panos* in order to

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\* The expression *nos ku nos* is colloquially used to convey the attitude that Cape Verdeans are a people who make sense to each other, whether or not their cultural identity makes sense to others outside of the group.

meet African traders' demands that some be included in their assortment of trade goods.... Panos were virtually the only commodity they [Cape Verdeans] could sell advantageously in competition with European traders" (Brooks 1993:166).

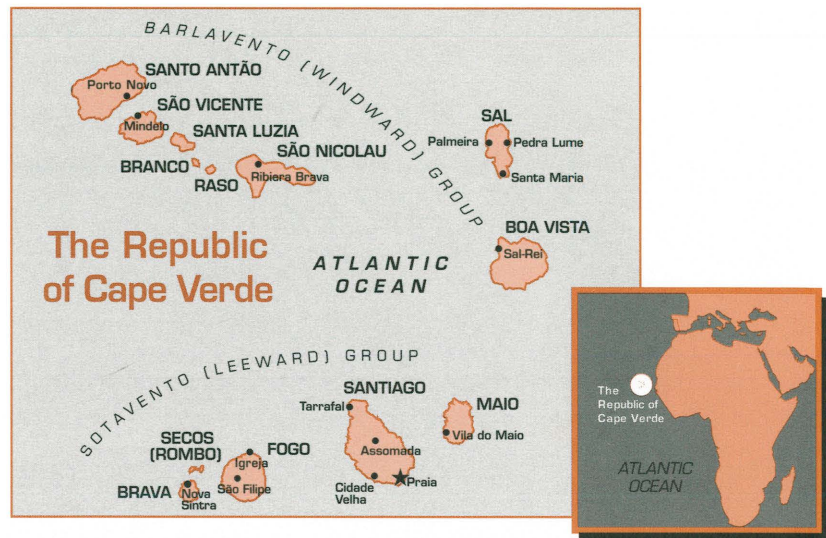
## MIGRATION

Even before the slave trade ended, whaling, commercial shipping, and Portuguese colonialism provided the means of survival for many Cape Verdeans. As early as the 1750s, Yankee whaling ships regularly called at Cape Verde (Sanderson 1956:261), and by the 1840s over 40 percent of Nantucket whalers were Cape Verdeans (Hohman 1928:128).

Foreign ships in Cape Verdean ports offered opportunities for young men from poor families, who saw little hope for their future in the Islands. They often boarded the vessels with only their skills, their determination, and their dream of leaving the islands, making a new life for themselves regardless of sacrifice, and sending money and supplies home to the families they had to leave behind. Ex-slaves or their descendants often became property owners via this route.

The path open to the elite, better educated, town-dwelling Cape Verdeans to improve their fortune was the Portuguese civil service. A successful administrative career in Cape Verde allowed many to assume similar posts throughout the Portuguese empire. Ironically, in the mid-20th century some of these Cape Verdean civil servants played key leadership roles in an anticolonial movement that brought the overthrow of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974 and independence for Cape Verde in 1975.

Cape Verdean migration to the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries was composed of the islands' poorer classes. In 1922, the U.S. government restricted the immigration of peoples of color, greatly reducing Cape Verdean immigration. The new regulations also prevented Cape Verdean Americans from visiting the islands for fear of being denied reentry to the United States. The two communities thus were relatively isolated



from each other for approximately 40 years. With doors to America closed, Cape Verdeans began to immigrate in larger numbers to Europe, South America, and West Africa along routes charted by commercial shipping and the Portuguese colonial empire. During the same period some Cape Verdean Americans migrated from the long-established East Coast communities to the steel towns of Ohio and Pennsylvania and to California.

In 1966 the U.S. government relaxed its regulations, and a new wave of Cape Verdean immigration began. The new arrivals in Boston, Brockton, and Scituate, Massachusetts; Pawtucket, Rhode Island; Waterbury, Connecticut; Brooklyn and Yonkers, New York; and other communities on the East Coast met a Cape Verdean-American ethnic group whose members looked like them, but differed culturally. Separated for so long, the groups knew little of each other's recent history or treasured memories.

Today Cape Verdean immigrant communities can be found in Senegal and in other African countries, in Argentina and Brazil, and in Portugal, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, France, and elsewhere in Europe — in 18 countries on four continents. My own community in southern New England is the oldest and largest in the Cape Verdean diaspora.

In 1990 Cape Verdean Americans estimated their numbers at about 400,000, over 60,000 of whom arrived after 1966. The resident population of the Cape Verde Islands is about

*N ka ten di agraba di  
mar pamodi tudu ki  
ten e mar ki dau.*

*I cannot hold a grudge  
against the sea,  
because all that I have  
the sea has given me.*  
— Cape Verdean proverb



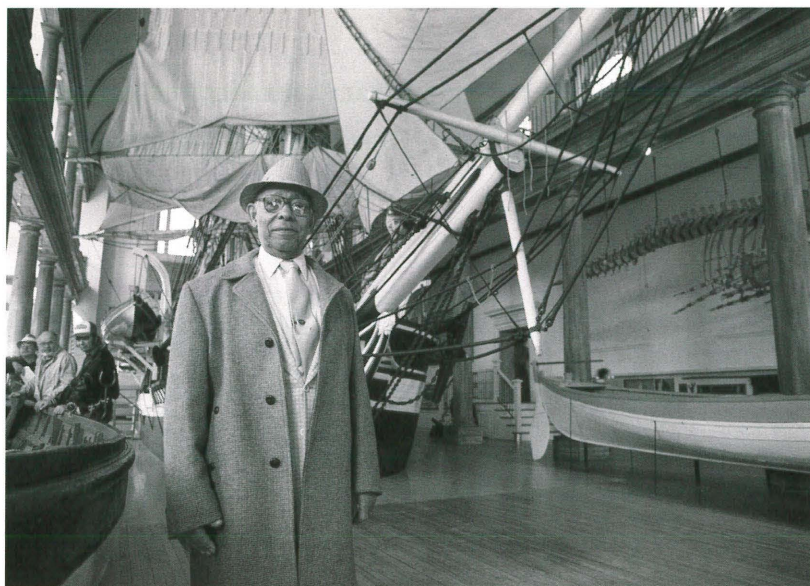


Photo by Ron Barboza

**Left: José "Zezinho" Ramos immigrated from S. Nicolau and worked as a whaler for many years out of New Bedford before retiring to Bridgeport, Connecticut. This photo was taken on one of Zezinho's many sentimental visits to the New Bedford Whaling Museum.**

**Right: By the 1920s the booming New Bedford textile industry offered steady but low-paying jobs for many Cape Verdeans.**

360,000, and some 185,000 others live in diaspora communities in Europe, South America, and Africa.

### REMITTANCES AND TRANSNATIONAL ETHICS

Migrants sending money and goods to families they leave behind is one form of linkage between Cape Verdeans on both sides of the Atlantic. Although the amount of cash remittances fluctuates with economic conditions, on average it constitutes 25-30 percent of the annual gross national product of Cape Verde, a resource that is important to the islands' economy as a whole. On Brava the ethos and the uncertainty of remittances combine in a proverbial contrast between a *carta de amor*, or "love letter," in which a migrant family member includes a few dollars in addition to welcome news and photos, and a *carta sec*, or "dry letter," which contains no money.

By sacrifice, hard work, and a willingness to take risks, some Cape Verdeans gained ownership of institutions that support their transnational existence. In the late 19th century, for example, Cape Verdeans bought old, technologically outmoded ocean-going sailing ships and began what came to be called the Brava Packet Trade, making up to ten crossings a year between Cape Verde and Providence and New Bedford carrying freight, mail, visitors, immigrants, and famine relief.

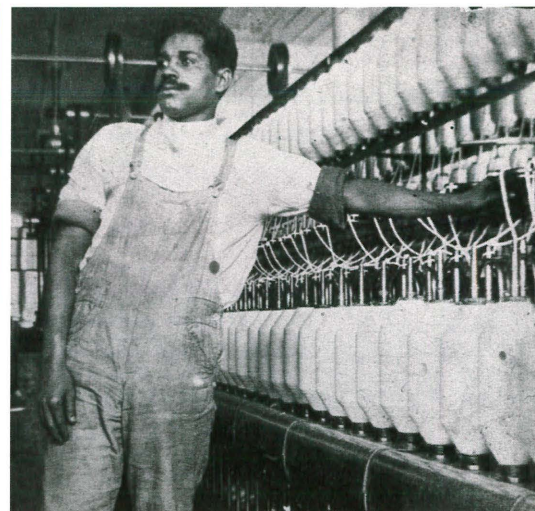


Photo courtesy Ron Barboza

These fragile vessels nurtured the Cape Verdean connection.

### CAPE VERDEAN CLUBS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Clubs and associations also helped bridge dispersed populations. In the islands, mutual aid societies like the *tabanka* on Santiago and Maio were built on kin, church, and community ties. During five centuries of colonial rule, individuals could expect little help from the government, so the sharing of scarce resources usually took place at the neighborhood and family level. In America, Cape Verdeans incorporated the Associação Beneficiente Caboverdiana in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1917 as the first of many fraternal associations, religious organizations, mutual aid societies, student groups, workers unions, and other voluntary associations. These small clubs and associations provided a place to be together in celebration or in need, to feel at home outside the confines of work or an immigrant's cramped quarters.

The organizations also became tools for community action. In 1934 a fatal wreck of the *Nantucket Lightship* killed most of its Cape Verdean crew. In response, the New Bedford Cape Verdean community rallied behind attorney Alfred J. Gomes to establish the Seamen's Memorial Scholarship Fund, which provided scholarship assistance to young Cape Verdean Americans, coordinated many drought relief drives, and mobilized other



## A Note on Kriolu Orthography

There are several ways to write spoken Kriolu. Most Cape Verdeans in the United States are familiar with spellings that use the standard Portuguese system of representing sounds.

As part of an effort to increase the usefulness of Kriolu as a medium of communication, the Government of Cape Verde commissioned a group of widely respected scholars to develop a standard orthography. They have issued their recommendations, which many believe will be formally accepted at an upcoming scholarly conference in Praia on the Kriolu language.

Because we hope our written materials on Cape Verde will continue to be referred to in years to come, we have opted to use the proposed standard orthography in this program book, while retaining the Portuguese-influenced orthography so well known by Cape Verdean Americans on Festival signs.

forms of assistance to Cape Verde. Many other Cape Verdean American organizations also supported education and drought relief.

### MEDIA IN A TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Communication is crucial for mobilizing support and for sharing information that bears on community interests. Cape Verdean Americans have run community newspapers since 1926, when João Christiano DaRosa founded *A Voz da Colonia* (Voice of the colony), the first Portuguese-language newspaper in Rhode Island. In 1969, Manuel T. Neves, son of Fogo and Brava immigrants, began publishing an English-language monthly, *The Cape Verdean*, in Lynn, Massachusetts. For 25 years Neves has published and distributed the paper almost single-handedly, providing a vital communications link within the



Photo by Peduka Almeida



Photo by Ray Almeida

**Top: Cape Verdeans in New Bedford and Providence still work on the waterfront, and they are still predominant in the International Longshoremen's Association local in Providence — organized by Manuel "Chief" Lido in 1933 — and its brother local in New Bedford.**

**Bottom: Joaquim Miguel Almeida, affectionately known to his friends as "Pork Chop," came from S. Nicolau to America at the turn of the century. A lover of the many forms of Cape Verdean folk culture, he himself has handcrafted many model ships.**

community and always urging Cape Verdean Americans to become more active advocates for Cape Verde.

Increased immigration and the escalating anticolonial struggle prompted the appearance of several publications in the 1970s. *Labanta* (Arise!), published by Alcides Vicente, strove to connect the new immigrants in Pawtucket and elsewhere with the larger, long-established communities of Cape Verdean Americans.

From 1975 through 1978 I published the *Tchuba Newsletter* with the American Committee for Cape Verde, Inc., in Boston. *Tchuba* means "rain" in the Kriolu of Santiago and is a powerful metaphor for hope, a time for planting new seed. The announced intention of the paper was to build a better-informed U.S. constituency in solidarity with the newly independent Republic of Cape





The newspapers published under these mastheads have kept Cape Verdeans on both sides of the Atlantic informed about significant events.

described himself as the "first Black DJ in Rhode Island," hosted a long-running jazz program which often addressed the special concerns of the Cape Verdean community as well. In the 1970s, Alberto Torres Pereira, who got into radio with help from Jim Mendes, began a weekly talk show co-hosted by Rhode Island State Representative George Lima.

Verde. The *Tchuba Newsletter* regularly included poetry, prose, riddles, jokes, and crossword puzzles in Kriolu as well as reportage and commentary. Before the organization ceased its publication for financial reasons in 1978, the bimonthly tabloid had a circulation of 10,000, a length of 36 pages, and regular contributions from writers in Cape Verdean communities on four continents.

Established in 1978 by Alcides Vicente and Thomas D. Lopes, the CVN (Cape Verdean News) appears every two weeks from its offices in New Bedford. Several new Portuguese- and Kriolu-language journals are published by recent immigrants: *Mundo Caboverdiano*, from Cambridge, and the *New Cape Verdean Times*, from Pawtucket; in Boston, *Aquipelago* and *Farol* regularly feature religious news, poetry, and opinion.

As early as the 1940s Cape Verdean broadcast media also helped maintain a body of shared information, values, and historical experience to nurture the development of Cape Verdean culture. They also reached out to wider audiences, affirming commonly held aesthetic and ethical values and exploring political alliances. Jim Mendes, a Cape Verdean American who

"Let's Talk About Now!" is sponsored by the National Urban League and explores a range of issues that confront minority communities in Rhode Island.

In 1978 Alcides Vicente and Romana Ramos Silva of Pawtucket established the first all-Cape Verdean, all-Kriolu weekly radio program in the United States. The call-in portion of "*Musica de Cabo Verde*" is a forum for members of the immigrant community to express whatever is on their minds — usually politics and culture in Cape Verde and its diaspora.

There are many others as well. For many years, José "Djossinha" Duarte, a popular Cape Verdean singer, has been broadcasting "*Camin pa Cabo Verde*" (The road to Cape Verde), a music and news program which can be heard in New Bedford and Rhode Island. Jorge Fidalgo, a community businessman in Roxbury, Massachusetts, hosts a weekly interview and call-in program, "*Nha Terra*" (My land). Franciso "Chico" Fernandes hosts the weekly "*Tras Horizonte*" (Across the horizon) in Boston. Fernandes, the elected deputy to the National Assembly of Cape Verde, represents the Cape Verdean immigrant community in North America.

From the early 1970s, Cape Verdean Americans have regularly hosted TV programs. Raconteur and singer John "Joli" Gonsalves from New Bedford played a pioneering role in Cape Verdean-American television programming.

Since 1989, *CABOVIDEO* — a communications company jointly run by Ed Andrade, a Cape Verdean American, and João Rodrigues Pires, who lives in Praia — has produced a weekly, 90-minute prerecorded program for the Cape Verdean community. Combining video from Cape Verde with Cape Verdean-American discussion and reportage, the program appears in 50 cities and towns in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, where the largest segment of the community resides.

## TRANSNATIONAL NATIONALITY

There are many more Cape Verdeans residing outside of the islands than living there. Since independence there has been a growing recog-



nition by the Government of Cape Verde of the important role these emigrants play in the cultural life and economy of the nation. Cape Verdean law officially recognizes the status of emigrants residing in communities around the world, referring to them as the "international community" of Cape Verdeans, which complements the "resident population" in the islands. The government includes a Secretary of State for Immigration Affairs and Communities, and Ministries of Culture and of Education regularly hold symposia on Kriolu-language standardization and other issues of concern to emigrants. The Bank of Cape Verde has studied emigrant remittances from all major Cape Verdean communities and, with the National Assembly, has devised policies to stimulate remittances and long-term investments. Both the government and the national bank define a Cape Verdean as one born in the islands or having a parent or grandparent born there. Since 1991, emigrant communities have voted in Cape Verdean national elections and have had representation in the National Assembly. Former President Aristides Pereira's comments quoted in the Cape Verdean press after his first visit to the United States in 1983 reflect his understanding of the transnational nature of his constituency:

...[T]his visit left me immensely impressed, in particular, to see a community that is not only large but also very old...a people who feel sentimentally linked to Cape Verde, and who religiously transmit all our cultural ways to their children from generation to generation, from family to family.... [W]e must pay attention to this phenomenon. During the visit we had the opportunity to see that there already are a number of Cape Verdean-Americans integrated into American political and administrative life who have some influence.... This community is small but well regarded because our fellow countrymen have always shown themselves to be serious workers and citizens (translation) (*Journal Vozdipovo* 1983:2-3).



Photo courtesy Marilyn Lopes

### IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY POLITICS

Respect for cultural heritage and common historical experience is an important public virtue in the Cape Verdean community. People who enjoy the community's deepest respect are those who achieve economic success "in American terms AND who remember where we came from" (Lena Brito, Wareham, Massachusetts). "At weekend dances and whenever we had a special church occasion nobody had to tell us who our community elders or leaders were. The ones who kept in touch with the islands and who were proud of being Cape Verdeans, the ones who never forgot where they came from: those were the people we respected" (Mary Santos Barros, New Bedford).

Until the 1960s Cape Verdeans had not aggressively sought participation in the local political institutions of southern New England. People voted and paid taxes but seldom expressed their needs to City Hall. As in many of America's communities of color, politics began to change in the 1960s. Cape Verdean candidates for City Councilor and the School Board went to traditional Cape

Albert Lopes, son of S. Nicolau immigrants, was the first commercial producer and distributor of Cape Verdean musical recordings in America. One-time captain of the New Bedford High School basketball team and longshoremen's union activist, Lopes played a pivotal role from the 1920s to the 1960s in the struggle to keep the Cape Verdean-American string music tradition alive.





Photo courtesy Ray Almeida

On July 5, 1985, Cape Verdean Americans joined with delegations from Cape Verdean diaspora communities to march in solidarity and celebration of the 10th anniversary of Cape Verdean independence.

Verdean organizations for support. Initially these candidates encountered skepticism and some opposition along generational lines. Elderly immigrants distrusted politics and cautioned young politicians not to rock the boat. But by the 1970s Cape Verdeans had begun to enter into political coalitions with African-American and Latino groups. In Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, Cape Verdeans have been elected to the state legislatures. In Connecticut Francisco Borges, who was born in the poor rural village of Sedeguma in Santiago, was elected to serve as the State Treasurer with management oversight for a twenty-billion-dollar budget.

### POLITICS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

In the mid-1970s the approach of the American Bicentennial brought public attention to "cultural pluralism." Cape Verdean Americans began organizing to achieve greater public awareness of their distinct identity within their local communities in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. In New Bedford Manuel A. Lopes and others associated with the Cape Verdean-American Veterans Association formed the Cape Verdean Recognition Committee to publicize the community's accomplishments and culture and to lobby for changes which would permit Cape Verdean Americans to be enumerated, as a people, in the federal decennial census. The Committee organizes an annual Cape Verdean Recognition Parade.

In Rhode Island several Cape Verdean members of the Black Heritage Committee established the Cape Verdean-American Sub-Committee of the Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Commission in order to draw greater attention to the concerns of Cape Verdeans. Community activists Don Ramos and Oling Monteiro Jackson struggled to place the state's elected officials and civic leaders in direct dialogue with the Cape Verdean community. Each year the Sub-Committee sponsors a major outdoor Cape Verdean independence day festival at India Point Park, close to the very site where the Brava Packet Ships once docked.

Planning for local Bicentennial celebrations in 1976 often evoked intense discussions about Cape Verdean cultural identity. Were the Cape Verdes "Atlantic" islands or "African" islands? Should we call ourselves Cape Verdeans or Portuguese or both? The Smithsonian Institution invited a group of Cape Verdeans to participate in the *Africa Diaspora* program of the 1976 Festival of American Folklife, where they would perform in an area adjacent to visiting Senegalese dancers. At the pre-Festival orientation meeting, Smithsonian staff introduced the New Bedford group as being Cape Verdean Americans. "Now we didn't know anyone of the other people in the program so we were all very surprised when Buli, the leader of the Senegalese dancers, jumped up and began singing a Kriolu song to us.... They knew who Cape Verdeans were.... Buli said that Kriolu was still spoken in a lot of places in West Africa.... From then on our group was together with their group every night" (Lillian Ramos, Acushnet, Massachusetts). The Festival experience provided additional impetus to discussions of Cape Verdean cultural identity.

On New Bedford radio talk shows and in local newspapers some local Black American leaders voiced opposition to "Cape Verdean recognition" as a community organizing strategy. According to them, it was simply a way for Cape Verdeans to try to escape admitting that they were "just plain Black folks like the

*Continued on page 26*



# Cape Verdeans in the Cranberry Bogs

MARILYN HALTER

Adapted from *Between Race and Ethnicity: Cape Verdean American Immigrants, 1860-1965*.

(Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1993).

The people of Fogo are known as rugged farmers, and they brought this robustness and passion for the land to their work in the Massachusetts cranberry bogs. Yet, while the cranberry industry became dependent on Cape Verdean immigrants, very few became owners of bogs. For the most part, the bog workers remained seasonal laborers, residing off season in urban areas, primarily New Bedford and Providence.

There were exceptions to this pattern, however. A few of the Cape Verde Islanders were able to purchase wetlands and convert them into cranberry bogs. Those immigrants who did manage to become property owners in the cranberry region in many ways come closest to realizing the possibilities of the American Dream, while still maintaining the continuity of rural life that is their heritage.

For the rest, cranberry picking may bring up pleasant memories of bonfires and dewy mornings, or of storytelling and record-breaking scooping. But more likely, it is a reminder of backbreaking toil for low pay, of ruthless overseers, of poor health and inadequate housing that gave a minimum of reward to them and a maximum of profits to the bog owners.

All the hardships characteristic of migrant labor



**This Cape Verdean American harvests cranberries from a bog in Carver, Massachusetts.**

Photo by Ron Barboza

were experienced by the Cape Verdean bog workers. However, in comparison to factory work, to congested city life, to unemployment and discrimination in employment, the weeks of the cranberry harvest were a welcome change for many. Not only were these former peasants able to work the land again, but the wages they could accumulate during a good season would be sufficient to take them through the cold winter months, with some extra to send back to the old country or, perhaps, to make the return trip themselves. The money would also be used to bring other family members here to the United States. For those whose entry into this country came via the whaling industry, cranberry picking was an immediate

way to earn some hard cash. The former whaler Joseph Ramos recalled: "Whaling was dirty work, a nasty job. We didn't make any money whaling because they deducted [deducted] everything — food, clothing.... It was a form of passport. So three days after I got off the ship, I was picking cranberries. On the *Wanderer*, I made fourteen dollars for one year. Then, on the *Margarett*, with the same crew, I made sixteen dollars for six months. In the cranberry bogs, I made \$130 for six weeks. I paid \$30 for board and came to New Bedford with \$100."



Fishermen in S. Antão land a small boat filled with bait fish. More than 3,500 fishermen with about 1,300 small wooden boats provide over three-fourths of the protein consumed in Cape Verde. In spite of this strong occupational tradition, Cape Verdeans have not been part of the fisheries in America. "The banks wouldn't give us loans, and the people who controlled the industry just didn't want Cape Verdeans in the fishing business. It was okay for us to get jobs as lumpers unloading the boats or working in the fish processing houses, but they simply didn't want Cape Verdeans in ownership situations" (Buddy Andrade, New Bedford, Massachusetts).

**RAYMOND A. ALMEIDA**, a Cape Verdean American born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, coordinated the drafting of the community's proposal to the Smithsonian and fundraising activities for The Cape Verdean Connection. He is Senior Program Advisor to the project.



Photo by Ron Barboza

rest of us." Some prominent Cape Verdean community activists agreed that "Cape Verdean recognition" would threaten alliances among communities and dilute hard-won and fragile local minority political power. Other Cape Verdean Americans felt it was necessary to oppose the way race was constructed in America, which divided the community according to arbitrary social categories. Most Cape Verdean Americans agreed that being Cape Verdean in America would always be a difficult negotiation of culture, identity, and political alliance.

### VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY

Their lot cast by their islands' unfortunate ecology and fortunate location in a world crisscrossed by commerce and empire, Cape Verdeans ventured out to better their own lives and those of the kin they left behind. Drawn to America by opportunities for even hazardous and low-paying work, they became whalers, sailors, longshoremen, and cranberry bog and textile workers. By exporting themselves and their labor to the United States while sending some of their wages back home, Cape Verdeans became a transnational people, in continual cultural dialogue, participat-

ing in institutions that maintain the links between them — shipping companies, political parties, mutual aid societies and relief organizations, banking, investment, video, radio, newspapers — as well as through musical performances in clubs or on records distributed by companies often owned by Cape Verdeans themselves, and, of course, through monetary remittances.

Cape Verdeans participate in several national societies, living within their laws and participating in their civic institutions. Today in America, Cape Verdeans are represented in all professions. Many teachers, lawyers, librarians, and doctors whose ancestors came as textile or seasonal cranberry workers, whalers, or stevedores have actively engaged those laws and institutions, and, on behalf of Cape Verdean communities, even petitioned to change some of them, as other Americans have done, when fairness and justice demand. And this year, to celebrate Cape Verde's 20th anniversary of independence and to declare before the world the unity of our culture and historical experience, we have engaged the Smithsonian Institution, the most hallowed of American cultural institutions, in our voyage of discovery. We're happy to be here.