

Traditional Festivities in Cape Verde

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Local traditional culture is often usefully viewed in rural areas and small villages, where one can perceive an integrated whole as well as its particular parts. Traditional celebrations are parts of this small world that speak richly and eloquently of the social whole.

Cape Verde is comprised of nine populated islands, some separated by wide and windswept stretches of sea, so it should not be surprising that each island shows us a cultural face as beautiful and varied as the geography of the archipelago itself.

The Portuguese found Cape Verde uninhabited during the latter half of the 15th century, and they immediately set about populating it and evangelizing the people they brought there by force. Within two years the islands had become laboratories for future Portuguese “discoveries” (that is, colonizations, such as Brazil). In an isolation like that enforced by prisons emerged local ways of thinking and of psychologically resisting the hawk of colonialism, which not only devoured the harvest of local labor but also sought to impose its own spiritual values.

Many cultural strata can be seen in the islands, beginning with elements brought from Portugal and West Africa during the very first years of colonization. Some contemporary cultural expressions seem to be of Portuguese origin, while many are clearly blends of gestures and attitudes with an Afro-Cape Verdean flavor.

A result of the colonization of the islands, which we must take into account in any analysis of Cape Verdean social phenomena, is the fact that most people are Catholics. Nevertheless, we must not exclude from consideration traditional beliefs in witches, regu-

lar visits to traditional healers, and common superstitious beliefs. These reveal, as the example of Nuno Miranda makes clear, a vital heritage of animism. [Editor’s note: Nuno Miranda was a widely respected traditional healer and spiritualist in the 20th century who was consulted by all social classes in Cape Verde.] Traditional festivities are generally religious, and they follow the Catholic liturgical calendar. Catholic saints’ days predominate, and the form their celebration takes is fairly constant; most have church services, processions, drumming, and special foods associated with them. Most take place during the months of May, June, and July, with some in November. Many were adapted by the Church in whole or in part from pagan festivals, and particular communities have further adapted them so that they have become traditional, localized mixtures of sacred and secular elements. Common to all the islands are the feasts of Christmas, Saint John, and Carnival.

The oldest continuously celebrated festivities take place on the islands of Santiago and Fogo. In June Santiago celebrates *tabanka*, a feast of African origin. (The word *tabanka* means an association of mutual help or a brotherhood. Its original meaning, a small village, can still be found in Guinea-Bissau and other countries on the west coast of Africa, but was lost in Cape Verde because Africans



Photo by Gunga Tolentino

On the occasion of the Feast of São João, a crowd surrounds the *mastro*, or mast, hoisted on this main street on Brava. The mast is decorated with specially baked breads as well as fruits, tree branches, and flowers.

This ceremonial boat
for the Feast of São
João is paraded
through the streets of
Mindelo, S. Vicente.



Photo by Ray Almeida

brought here were not allowed to live with members of their own ethnic groups.)

Tabanka festivities begin in May, perhaps because this was the time, according to Cape Verdean ethnographer Félix Monteiro, when slave owners would concede certain liberties to their slaves. Today celebrants dress in costumes that envision a royal court society and play drums and the conch-shell horns characteristic of this event. During the period in which *tabanka* is celebrated, husbands and wives abstain from intimacy. Those who fail to obey any of the local rules of *tabanka* are punished.

People's speech is also full of humor. The imperative of mirth is so strong that if someone dies during *tabanka* there is a special, strict funeral ritual; once they leave the cemetery, everyone must forget sadness, mourning, and death. Monteiro has observed that this religious ritual mixes Catholic and West African practices and beliefs.

Of the many festivities in Cape Verde the *batuku* (*batuque*) deserves special mention. Usually composed of solo dancing and call-and-response singing by a women's chorus with a leader, the *batuku* tradition is today strongest on Santiago Island. But there are hints of its presence on almost every other island. Themes characteristic of the *batuku* appear in wedding songs, especially those of mockery, and songs of advice to the bride and groom to bid their single days farewell are also

common in the islands, especially on S. Nicolau and S. Antão. On S. Nicolau until recently, a traditional wedding included a *batuku* performance, as we learn from a novelist's account: "Uncle Juca arrived the day before [the wedding] so he could participate in the *batuku*..." (from the famous Cape Verdean novel *Chiquinho* published in 1947 by Baltasar Lopes).

The *batuku* from Santiago is the most typically African in style. It is composed essentially of two parts, the *txabeta* (*tchabeta*) and the *finacon*. During the *batuku* the lead singer, usually a person of some respect in the group, takes command. First she dances slowly, setting the pace for the strong, rhythmic beat the *batukaderas* (*batucaderas*) keep by striking their palms on a bundled-up *pano* (sash cloth) held between their thighs. A dancer awaits in the middle of the circle formed by the *batukaderas* and at a certain moment after the beat is fully established and internalized by her, it's time for *txabeta*: the rhythm suddenly accelerates and the dancer keeps time with her hips.

The *finacon* consists of the singer's improvising verses about events and ideas of importance to the community: for example, the recent famine in Cape Verde that killed more than 50,000 people out of a population of about 200,000; and the recent labor contracts for work in the equatorial plantations of São Tomé that were the equivalent of slavery; or perhaps individual stories of mothers and daughters raped by slavemasters during bygone times of even greater difficulties. In the singing, the *batukaderas* answer the leader as a choir, which on S. Antão is called a *baxon*.

In its content and context the *batuku* evokes initiation and wedding rituals. The elder leader can be understood as a matron, the most experienced woman, who executes the hip movements that suggest the sexual act and provoke the libido. Young girls, the *badjudas*, dance afterward, and their agile, sensual bodies awaken feelings in the old men around that remind them of their own love and marriage. For the young who watch, the dancer represents the desire for love. As she dances,

the young girl closes her eyes and holds her hands in front her face in a gesture of wanting to be seen and appreciated while still intending to preserve her chastity and bashfulness.

In the past only women danced this *batuku*. For many years it was forbidden to men — or if they danced they were considered sexually weak or perverted. In recent times the *batuku* has been elaborated by some artists into a form of social entertainment in which men perform as partners to the *batukaderas* (singer, choir, and dancers), not dancing with the hips but appealing to the female dancers with provocative words and gestures, beating a drum covered with fabric, and playing the 10-string guitar recently introduced to the tradition by Antonino Denti D'Oro.

The largest festivity on Fogo occurs on May 1st, the saint's day of Saint Philip (Nho São Filipe), who is the patron saint of that island. To São Filipe, Fogo's largest city, on that day, the feast — one of the most elaborate in the entire archipelago — draws observers and participants from all over the country and the United States and Europe as well.

As Monteiro observes, the cultural dimensions of these religious and secular celebrations, which are called *bandeiras* or "flags" on Fogo because banners are one of their important ritual symbols, show aspects of how people think about the contact between Europeans and Africans in Cape Verde. In separate sections of the city, celebrants attain equal enthusiasm. Families of higher status watch these celebrations from a balcony, a physical separation that gives material form to the barriers that formerly separated whites and blacks, and today separate the richer from the poorer classes. The Feast of São Filipe includes the ritual pounding of corn in a single large, ceremonial mortar by three pestle-wielding women accompanied by drumming and singing. It also includes the ritual slaughter of a lamb or goat for the supper of the *kanizadi* (*kanizade*) troupe of masqueraders as well as the erection of a *mastro*, a replica of a ship's mast that is dressed with branches of the wild olive tree or the coconut palm. Imbued with a magical aura, the *mastro* is



Photo by Beverly Conley

placed close by the entrance of a church, to the rhythms of drums, chants, and clapping. Many aspects of the ritual have African origins. The *mastro* can also be seen in the feasts of Santo António, Santo Andre, São Pedro, and São João on the islands of S. Antão and Brava.

The ceremonial banners used in this event are also objects of ritual attention. After they are dipped in the sea and then blessed at a special mass in church, they are carried around the town by riding parties. To a certain extent, the roots of the flag ceremonial can be found in medieval displays of horsemanship. Each year someone assumes responsibility for caring for the flag and therefore for organizing and financing next year's feast. In the days before independence, only men of the elite class could receive the flag. Today any man born on Fogo can take the flag as soon as he attains the financial means.

Carnival is another important festivity in Cape Verde, as are the pilgrimages of São João, Saint Antonio, and Santa Cruz that take place in various islands at about the same time. There is also Nha Santa Catarina in the town of Assomada and Nossa Senhora da Graça, in Praia, both on Santiago. Every island has a patron saint and saint's-day celebration.

Some pilgrimage festivities are also related to the rites of sowing and of harvest. These rural festivities are all from the northern islands and are gradually dying out because rain is so irregular in Cape Verde.

The *carta de amor* (love letter) float in Carnival on the island of Brava represents letters from relatives abroad that contain money. Immigrant remittances account for up to 30 percent of the gross national product.



Photo by Ray Almeida

"Deca" Brito organizes the *mastro* for the Feast of Santa Ana in the village of Nossa Senhora do Monte on Brava. U.S. immigrants send money to support this celebration.

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But many people still flock to many of these festivals, which are known as pilgrimages because people often walk long distances to attend them. One of these, the Feast of São João on Brava, combines elements from the Feast of São Filipe with those common to the northern or Barlavento (Windward) islands. During the high moments of these festivities, *kola* (*cola*) dancing breaks out — with movements and a pace similar to Portuguese folk dance, plus a gentle bump between two dancers' navel regions. This form of dancing has also been documented in Angola and Brazil and in Portugal as early as the 17th century.

These European-derived festivities had pagan influences in their own origins, dating from the first years of Christianity. The origins of these celebrations seem to lie in a combination of cult practices and agricultural rituals mixed with the ritual fulfillment of promises made to a saint. The chants contain traces of these extinct cults, such as orgiastic liturgies, allusions to sexual desire, and homage to the sun god.

The festivities of São João are still very much alive in Cape Verde and feature drinking, eating, bathing at the beach, love songs, riddling, and fortune telling with eggs in water or with playing cards. A bonfire is lit on the eve of the feast to drive away bad spirits and prevent their influence on the land, the source of all wealth for the peasant. Young

men and young women holding hands leap over these fires for good luck. Fortunes told speak of death, voyage, marriage, happiness, and love.

On the eve of the São João feast, exploding rockets announce the start of the event. The drums the Portuguese brought from Europe invite people to dance the *kola*, and from tents people sell traditional foods like *kanja* (*canja*) (thick chicken soup) and strings of popcorn or peanuts, which are very much appreciated by the elderly and children and are taken home as mementos of pilgrimage.

In these pilgrimages people offer the first fruits of harvest, which are sold to benefit the church. Such is the practice on S. Antão. On Brava the votive gifts are tied to the ceremonial mast and are eventually left for people to take as they please when the celebration ends.

During the São João celebrations model ships carried by hand or worn as a costume voyage symbolically through the streets, stopping to demand gifts. The ship, like the gift-bearing mast, is a complex symbol, a combination of remembered historical periods in the popular mind. Ships are festooned with brightly colored banners; the Portuguese flag that once flew has been replaced by the national flag. Ships' sails bear the Christian Cross of the Portuguese religious order that financed the expeditions of discovery. The ship's harassment of bystanders for gifts represents the assault on the islands by pirate ships, *carjenas*, which regularly stole and carried away their wealth. On S. Antão the Feast of São João Batista is celebrated most notably in the towns of Porto Novo, Pombas, and Paúl and in the villages of Coculi, Garça, and Cha de Pedra.

In their color, movement, and rich symbolic meaning Cape Verdean celebrations give material expression to important themes in local life, history, and popular thought. They are an evanescent yet cyclically revolving reflection of the forces that have shaped Cape Verdean life, and they are a time when we pause and celebrate and feel the human spirit that has been molded in these islands over centuries.