

The nation-state and regional integration in West Africa The case of Cape Verde

I. Introduction

The archipelago of Cape Verde was first recorded in 1460 as being on the very edge of the Atlantic Ocean, linking the Iberian Peninsula with the coast of Africa, which did not go beyond the edge of Sierra Leone.

In under 40 years, these previously uninhabited islands became the port of call for ships sailing round the continent of Africa, going as far as India; there were also regular voyages to Central America.

Thus, from when it first began to be populated, the archipelago played an important role in shaping the Atlantic World, since these islands helped link the two overseas Iberian empires (Portuguese and Spanish), map the scale of Africa's Atlantic coast, and even when there was no longer the Portuguese-Spanish monopoly, its harbours remained essential ports of call for international navigation, particularly for the English and Dutch sailing ships, in an ocean which was becoming more and more international.

In Cape Verde, the first inhabitants were all foreigners (Europeans and Africans). It was a laboratory for experimenting new kinds of colonization, new social terms, new cultural behaviour and, by degrees, a new identity was forged from converging heterogeneities.

It was in the Cape Verde archipelago that a slave society was established for the first time in the modern era, a society where the permanent exploitation of African slave labour was the cornerstone of the islands' whole economic and social structure.

It was here that slaves were turned into merchandise for export. The whole economy of the population, the administrative and religious control of the islands, was dependent on the profits from the slave trade.

These were the islands where the Portuguese experimented with ways and means of cultivating and controlling a faraway land (for the first time in the tropics) with a recently arrived population, an intercontinental trading port, duly equipped and functional, and single-crop farming – the only export – undertaken by slave labour.

These experiments were to serve later on in other parts of the world, when other European powers established the modern colonial system.

The first urban colonial centre in the tropics was in these Atlantic islands – the small town of Ribeira Grande. The town was under the rule of people from a kingdom, the Town Hall was the seat of power, and it gradually came to be managed jointly by those of mixed race, called “local people”.

And finally, it was here that the two worlds of Europe and Africa made contact and a new society from all points of view was born: Creole society, the most important element in the construction of the Atlantic World.

We can claim that the participation of Africans in the construction of the Atlantic World had its testing ground in the Cape Verde islands far earlier than in the West Indies or Brazil.

Cape Verde’s geographical position, its tropical climate and its contrast with the Azores, Madeira and the Canaries, meant it was unaware of the kinds of colonization that were being tried out in those other Atlantic islands, and the restrictions encountered were heavy.

In this “small New World”, everything had to be started from scratch. Historiography has for years studied the notion of “the invention of archipelagos”.

Indeed, the whole population here was foreign (Europeans and Africans) having been transplanted to these islands, and in order to shape society everything had to be reinvented with only experiences from elsewhere, often totally unsuitable: first, the dichotomy and then integration.

Here, the model of colonial slavery was ready in just a few decades, since at the end of the fifteenth century there was: land worked by slaves; slave labour; single-crop farming; and raw material destined for export.

This model, which began to function for cotton in Santiago and Fogo in the sixteenth century, proved to be equally effective for sugar in the West Indies and Brazil, for cotton and sugar in Angola, cocoa in Sao Tomé and even cotton in the southern states of North America.

The two elements making up the population of the islands determined the way society was structured: the Europeans imposed the model of society, with the requisite adaptations; while the Africans, who were shaped into their condition of slaves, toned down the social and cultural differences of their former society, and had no option but to integrate into this new society.

Although the social model was imposed by the Europeans, it was soon adapted by the larger section of this new society, since as the slaves became integrated as the main workforce, they inevitably shaped society and influenced the way society developed.

The financial gains made from the steady transformation of people into profitable merchandise and “beasts of burden” gave the islands of Cape Verde its first elite which was to dominate island society for a hundred and fifty years.

It was the need to obtain merchandise “made” on the islands for the slave trade with the Guinea coast that rapidly increased the African population of Santiago and Fogo.

The small town of Ribeira Grande was a slave depot where a group of inhabitants, although not belonging to the majority group on the island, devoted themselves to the slave trade and its various ramifications. The liberated African was first able to integrate into this intermediate group who lived off slave trade activities.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the strong position of Cape Verde as a slave depot declined with traffic being diverted to Cacheu. This new development had as immediate consequence the disappearance of the European elite, and the decline of the activity in urban trade. Thus the islands became a peripheral base, where local agents merely carried out the orders of powerful merchants.

With the significant decrease in the number of people from the kingdom, as permanent inhabitants, there were opportunities for the “local people”, mainly people of mixed race, to take up high positions in the local economy and administration.

With links to the kingdom becoming more tenuous, the town abandoned, the weakening of institutional structures both civil and religious, the absence of wealthy people from the kingdom – all this contributed to the dismantling of difference and strengthened both the

physical and cultural mix, thereby building a more homogeneous, really new society with specific characteristics: the Cape Verde society.

In 1731, Cape Verde had 30,850 inhabitants of whom 2.5% were white, 29% of mixed race, 51.5% liberated slaves and 17% slaves.

An analysis of these statistics tells us that:

1. In Cape Verde, because there were no new transfers of slaves, and several consecutive seasons of drought, an early, endogenous process of the society's emancipation took place smoothly.
2. The majority of the population at that time were liberated slaves who were also to a large extent "local people".
3. Although there was a high percentage of mixed race people, the majority of the inhabitants of the islands were Blacks (68.5%).
4. The white population was in the minority and represented the elite – landed Whites – who owned not only all the arable land but also the few remaining slaves. It should be underlined here that the word "white" in Cape Verde refers neither to the European nor to a white person.

II. Cape Verde and regional integration – the socio-historical context

As mentioned earlier, it was the inhabitants of the islands of Cape Verde who were the driving force for change together with its geographical proximity to some countries that today are members of ECOWAS. Cape Verde's economy was built on its relations with the African continent. Cape Verde's elites always benefited from the economic and administrative links between the islands and the nearby African coast. With the effective occupation by the colonial power, members of the Cape Verde elite were used on the continent as agents of colonization.

We should not ignore the fact that despite most of the Cape Verde population being descendants of slaves from Africa, the influence of the Catholic religion and the encouragement of the local clergy was the most direct way towards Creolization. That encouragement, although the best way forward for social advancement for "local people", was primarily the best route to a gentle lack of culture, a recent concept

(1994) put forward at the synod of African priests; it encompasses the undeniable reality of Cape Verde since the sixteenth century.

It is no coincidence that our first great intellectuals, “sons of local whites” were trained at the Seminary of São Nicolau. It was they who, thanks to their literary studies, introduced reflection on the identity of the Cape Verdean people, leading later on to the education of a group of young people aware of being African and bearers of the ideals of independence for their country.

That is how we can state that Cape Verde came into being with the first globalization process, and its people were among the first to start building the Atlantic World. Its strategic position has always meant progress for the Cape Verdean economy – from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries with the slave trade, and from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth centuries, when São Vicente became a vital port and steam took over from sail.

With today’s globalization, Cape Verde has a new opportunity to benefit from its greatest strategic resource – its geographical situation: African islands, at the maritime frontier with Europe where thousands of Cape Verdeans are seeking a better life; islands that are culturally close to America (where the Cape Verde diaspora is most widely spread and influential) and by air, just a matter of hours from the largest country in Latin America, Brazil, which is part of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries.

If our political and economic elite manages – while accepting that it belongs to the African continent – to use everything that our strategic position and our long history of *metisage* of different peoples offers us, Cape Verde could benefit from the globalization that has only just begun.

III. Regional integration – the dilemmas and vicissitudes of a process

Cape Verde belongs to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and has integrated into its juridical legislation a collection of Conventions, particularly on the free movement of people and goods. Indeed, as can be noted, in recent years a large number of people have been transforming the country into an immigration centre, for the first time in its history.

Similarly, and within the framework of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), Cape Verde is committed not only to supporting this initiative politically, but is also keen to become involved in NEPAD activities.

Indeed, one of the important elements of Cape Verde's integration strategy into the global economy rests on its relations with the continental market, thus transforming the country into a gateway for Africa.

However, a number of obstacles persist, particularly with regard to transport, bank facilities and contacts with financial operators who restrict the development of a closer economic partnership. This could be construed as being an ambivalent position of a cultural nature.

In fact at the moment, more than two-thirds of Cape Verde's commerce is with the European Union, particularly with Portugal.

At a time when the issue of economic partnerships strategic for the country, particularly with the European Union and the United States of America, is being looked into, it seems to us important to look at the issue of Cape Verde's relations with West Africa and the prospects in that direction, not only from economic and commercial points of view, but particularly from the political, cultural and historical angles.

Iva Cabral and Cláudio Furtado
Coordinators of UNESCO's MOST Programme in Cape Verde
March 2006