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Postcolonial literature and Cape Verde: poetry of a 'creole' world

Abstract

My article is about the creole languages and the literature of the archipelago of Cape Verde. In the first section I explain the literature of Cape Verde and the concept of creolisation. Whilst in the second part I have included an anthology of the most renowned Cape Verdean poems. The culture of Cape Verde is a new one that is trying to emerge right before our eyes. I believe that understanding the literature of Cape Verde is the only way to create a productive interchange between marginal literatures and those already widely deliberated: both of these will be extensively studied thanks to a new possibility of focus.

Keywords: *creolisation, Glissant, Cape Verde, marginal literature, pidgin, hybridisation.*

1. Poetics of difference in the archipelago of Cape Verde

According to Édouard Glissant the world is creolising itself¹. Creolisation demands that the heterogeneous elements of each culture 'emphasize' themselves and therefore there is no degradation or diminution in a mutual and continuous union. The cultural elements that are compared must be of an

¹ É. Glissant, *Poetica del diverso*, Roma, Meltemi, 1998, p. 14.

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equivalent value; otherwise this phenomenon could not be defined as creolisation, but instead as 'miscegenation'. Hence, creolisation and hybridisation are two entirely different processes; the first being unpredictable and the second predictable.

The creole language of Cape Verde is a composite language, born from the contact between diverse linguistic elements. It is likely that linguistic creolisation occurs best in small and clearly defined territories, such as that of Cape Verde. Creolisation emphasizes the fact that there are no universal thoughts. Taking this into consideration each value is particular by nature and subsequently must be compared to yet another in its own way unique². Accordingly, there is no way in which any one of these can legitimately be considered, presented or imposed as universal³.

Glissant proposes a clear distinction between what he defines as «continental thoughts» and «archipelagic thoughts»⁴. The first corresponds to atavic cultures (for example, in Europe, where creolisation occurred long ago) and is currently no longer able to take into account the non-generalized system of the world's cultures. The second corresponds to composite cultures, (for example, in South America and Africa, where creolisation takes place before our eyes). It is not systematic, but intuitive and able to explore the unpredictable nature of the world. This cultural phenomenon is connected with the notion of identity as a single root and to the principle of identity as a rhizome. The first of these elements is related to the nature of atavic cultures commencing with its origins in order to seek legitimacy in the

² *Ivi*, pp. 41-42.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 36.

land and from that moment on, the land becomes a territory (proposing the equation: Selected land = territory). The second element is inseparably connected with the existence of composite cultures, in which a form of creolisation often opposed to atavic cultures takes place.

In this context, the population of Cape Verde is the result of a particular process of racial and cultural 'hybridisation' produced over the centuries. Cape Verde was not only an important crossing point of the slave trade, but also home to the Portuguese people who remained there to work in agriculture and the rearing of livestock. This soon led to a phenomenon of deep racial fusion.

From a cultural point of view, the main outcome of this phenomenon was certainly the birth and development of a Cape Verdean creole language⁵. But creolisation is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also one of social and cultural dimensions.

The creole language originated from an extreme case of diatopic and problematic variation which occurred in the commercial emporiums. Such emporiums were created as exploration sites outside of Europe, and then later in the colonies based on slave labour. In the first case, small groups of Europeans, mostly Portuguese and later Spanish and French, almost exclusively male, founded commercial stations on the coasts of Africa and Asia.

The Europeans had little need to communicate with the natives and did not learn their language. They used the

⁵ See: C. A. Delgado, *Crioulo de Cabo Verde – Situação Linguística da Zona do Barlavento*, Praia, Instituto da Biblioteca Nacional e do Livro, 2008, *passim*; Grupo para a Padronização do alfabeto, *Proposta de bases do alfabeto unificado para a escrita do Cabo-verdiano*, Praia, IIPC, 2006, *passim*.

mediation of local servants as customers were struggling to make themselves understood. These customers created simplified languages called pidgins. A pidgin is characterized by a reduced grammar and by an essential vocabulary with the practical function of aiding business relationships and other simple but vital forms of communication. At this stage, a pidgin cannot be deemed the speakers' mother tongue, as they will always possess their own native language (Romance for the European merchant or landlord and an indigenous language for the local partners). The stability of a pidgin is limited; it is born and then dies in relation to the need for communication.

Some of these emporiums have been active for centuries (from the 15th to the 19th century) and have created relatively stable societies. Indigenous women gave birth to the children of Europeans and the offspring born from these unions were called mestizos. Families stabilized over time and in this context, the pidgin became the mother tongue of a small social group. At this point, the best definition of this phenomenon is not pidgin, but creole. Indeed, it no longer has functional limitations in connection to commerce and it is precisely the mother tongue of its people. The word creole derives from the Spanish *criollo*, originally meaning mixed blood or who was born of European parents in the colonies.

In trading colonies there were a number of slaves, but the situation changed after the 16th century when the new American colonies required an increasingly large workforce and thereby the slave trade developed. The mass populations were raided on the coasts and brought to inland coastal emporiums in Africa, to then be subsequently embarked for the ocean crossing. In this phase the black slaves were separated and mixed with other groups from different backgrounds. Groups of the same origin

and a similar language were considered dangerous, as they favored solidarity and rebellion. This prompted the slaves to adopt a new language in order to be able to communicate amongst themselves and with their masters. This language was usually creole by nature.

The creole languages form part of a clearly identified linguistic category. All creole languages have a very simple morphology and each word corresponds to one morpheme. Their main characteristic is almost certainly their verbal morphology. The verbal tenses are not expressed by endings, but by particles preceding the lexical morpheme of the verbs. In different types of creole language the particles change, but the system remains similar. The lexicon is formed for the most part by European words, even if modified in form. Thus, it differs from one creole to the next, but the forms maintain similarities, or surprising analogies, which do not appear to share obvious parallels with the basic European languages. As a rule, the creole language is not necessarily limited to simple communication.

In some cases, the creole language can be valued for its original and official purpose. The island of Haiti in the western Caribbean is an example of this. Haiti was a French colony until shortly after the Revolution of 1789 and the entire population, which comprised of a white minority, a number of mixed races and a black majority all spoke creole. Only the white population and some mestizos resorted to French in certain situations and it quickly became a language spoken by few individuals. Creole was introduced into schools in 1979, recognized in 1983 as the national language and officialised in 1987. A similar situation occurred in the Seychelles, where creole was proclaimed the islands' official language in 1981.

Creole languages generally originated from groups who consorted together in Europe, Africa and Asia. In this light, it is not possible to consider the creole languages as a spawn of the Romance languages of which they bear the name (for example, calling the creole of Cape Verde neo-Portuguese in the same way that Portuguese may be considered as neo-Latin). The two formation processes are quite different. On the other hand, it would be inadequate to consider the creole languages as the result of a simple language combination as the contribution of non-European languages is very modest. The creole languages require a reassessment of the fundamental principles of linguistics.

We can say that a limited and essential code (pidgin) has developed into a genuine new language (creole), complex and structured and varied in different dialects⁶. The creole of Cape Verde has developed the structure of an independent language, inspiring the production of its own literary tradition which was originally expressed with musical accompaniment (such as *morna*, traditional music form of the islands). This has led to a debate on how to establish creole as the official language of any given territory. Cape Verdeans begin to produce a literature exclusively in creole, also expanding its use to non-fiction, scientific communication and translating into this new language all the major works of world literature⁷.

⁶ M. Veiga, *Literatures du Cap-Vert, de Guinée-Bissao, de São Tomé et Príncipe*, Paris, Notre Librairie, 1993, pp. 65-74; S. Celani, *L'Africa di lingua portoghese: letteratura, storia, cultura*, Viterbo, Sette Città, 2003, p. 35; C.A. Delgado, *Crioulo de Cabo Verde – Situação Linguística da Zona do Barlavento*, Praia, Instituto da Biblioteca Nacional e do Livro, 2008, *passim*.

⁷ S. Celani, *L'Africa di lingua portoghese: letteratura, storia, cultura*, Viterbo, Sette Città, 2003, p. 35.

However, the question remains open. One of the main objections towards this project concerns the risk of a possible cultural isolation of Cape Verde. That being said, it is only natural that the geographical location of Cape Verde is profoundly connected to matters concerning its linguistic isolation. Cape Verde finds itself isolated for two principal reasons:

- its location is distant from the rest of Africa and even further from other continents which face the same ocean;
- the use of a basic language (Portuguese), which has never been culturally or politically dominant in the western hemisphere, produces an exclusion from the most important cultural trends.

From a cultural point of view, the cohesion of two separate cultures, Western and African, has given birth to an oral literature and created folk songs and legends composed in creole language. This interesting phase of literary origins has been collected by Eugenio Tavares⁸ and Pedro Cardoso⁹. These authors present a literature written in creole which follows distinct European patterns.

The first testimony of Cape Verde's literature can be found in the novel *O Escravo*, written by Evaristo José de Almeida and published in Lisbon in 1856. It contains a detailed and direct description of society and human relations in Cape Verde during the 19th century. A position of equal prominence can also be given to Guilherme Dantas (1849-1888), author of poems and stories published on *Almanach da Lembranças*. Between the late 19th and early 20th century several interesting literary figures emerged: Antonio Januario Leite, José Lopes, Pedro Cardoso,

⁸ E. Tavares, *Mornas, Cantigas Crioulas*, Lisbon, J. Rodrigues, 1932.

⁹ P. Cardoso, *Folklore capoverdiano*, Lisbon, J. Rodrigues, 1933.

Eugenio Tavares and Pedro Corsino de Azevedo¹⁰. I will now proceed to offer some basic bibliographical comments on these writers as a useful overview of this literary phenomenon.

Antonio Januario Leite (1867-1930), a late-Romantic poet of melancholic and sentimental nature. He presented his poems on various contemporary newspapers and a collection of his poems was published posthumously under the title of *Poemas* (1952).

José Lopes (1872-1962), professor and poet, published several collections of poetry: he represents the prototype of the laureate poet connected to European culture, pompous and erudite.

Pedro Cardoso (1890-1942), professor, journalist, poet and editor of *Manduco* (1923-1924). He wrote numerous poetry books and is often remembered for his *Ode a Africa*, composed for the occasion of the Pan-African Congress held in London in 1921. The text was judged very Africanist, but still does not elude numerous contradictions, «especially when he exalts the glories of ancient Africa, Egypt and Carthage, and emphasizes the importance of the Christianization of the continent»¹¹.

Eugenio Tavares (1861-1930) is the most influential and prevalent figure of Cape Verdean literature. He was a narrator, journalist and poet, and is remembered particularly for his poetry (*mornas*). The most famous being *Morna de Despedida*, commonly known as *Hora de Bai*, taken from the posthumous collection *Mornas, Crioulas Cantigas* (1932). This text focuses on the theme of migration and departure, a topic close to the heart of many poets of later generations.

¹⁰ S. Celani, *L'Africa di lingua portoghese: letteratura, storia, cultura*, Viterbo, Sette Città, 2003, p. 36.

¹¹ *Ibidem*; M. Ferreira, *A aventura Crioula*, Lisbon, Platano Editora, 1985, pp. 238-241.

Corsino Pedro de Azevedo (1905-1942), public official and poet, is considered among the forerunners of *Claridade*. He published some of his poems in this magazine; the most famous is certainly *Terra-longe*.

Professor Pires Laranjeira stresses¹² some literary elements of the supposed 'second period' of Cape Verdean literature, which he calls *esperitano* (the definition of this term is linked to the alleged myth 'esperitano' or 'arsinario': this myth refers to Atlantis, as if Cape Verde could be regarded as a surviving part of the legendary lost continent). Manuel Ferreira defines it instead as '*caboverdianismo*', since it immediately precedes the *caboverdianidade* proposed by the literary magazine *Claridade*¹³. This is the first attempt to give the people of Cape Verde an independent identity through the establishment of the islands' cultural identity (according to the model advocated by the magazine). It is connected neither with European nor African culture¹⁴. *Claridade* was founded in Mindelo by Baltasar Lopes, Jorge Barbosa, Manuel Lopes and João Lopes. It boasts several very influential contributors such as Pedro Corsino de Azevedo and José Osório de Oliveira. This journal was invited to study the environmental conditions of Cape Verde (drought, poverty, hunger, water) and to focus on creole literature, publishing popular books and *mornas*.

¹² P. Laranjeira, *Literaturas Africanas de Expressão Portuguesa*, Coimbra, Universidade Alberta, 1995, p. 181.

¹³ M. Ferreira, *O mito hesperitano ou a nostalgia do paraíso perdido*, in Foundation Calouste Gulbenkian (ed), *Les Littératures africaines de Langue Portugaise*, Paris, Centre Culturel Portugais, 1985, pp. 241-250.

¹⁴ M. Ferreira, *A aventura Crioula*, Lisbon, Platano Editora, 1985, pp. 265-266.

With the publication of *Claridade* we enter a phase of particular interest in the cultural and literary heritage of Cape Verde and in this context Jorge Barbosa emerges. He is often considered as the 'father' of Cape Verdean poetry and the crucial element is the publication of his first work, *Arquipelago* (1935). It is a collection of poems in free metrics, describing concerns such as drought, famine, sea, loneliness, and nostalgia, all associated with the pain provoked by the Cape Verdeans' desire to escape from their homeland and their ties with it. Thus, the elements that help to define the individual identity of Cape Verde are also those which make life more problematic for the population of the islands. The sorrow for the departure of Eugénio Tavares becomes a desire to escape. This is the supposed *evasionismo*.

It seems appropriate to emphasize the value of Cape Verdean literature in creole language. It is a constant presence in the literature of the archipelago and develops alongside a literary movement in the Portuguese language. I have already mentioned one of the first and most important poets of Cape Verde: Eugénio Tavares. However, many other poets have combined their productions in Portuguese with one in a creole language: Pedro Cardoso, Sergio Frosoni, Ovidio Martins, Gabriel Mariano, Armenio Vieira, Luís Romano and Manuel Veiga have all published several studies devoted to the creole of Cape Verde.

2. Cape Verdean anthology: poems of a 'creole world'

I have already emphasized some of the characteristics of Cape Verde's literature and it now seems appropriate to deal with a selection of noteworthy Cape Verdean poems. I shall now proceed to discuss some of the work of the most brilliant

intellectuals of the archipelago, which I present in my translation.

This anthology gives a short account of an important cultural element: over time the birth of new movements or magazines altered the ways in which the poets expressed themselves, and to a certain degree even affected their subject matter. Nonetheless, a number of these themes remained a constant factor from the beginning of Cape Verde's poetry, these most prominently included: sea, drought, poverty, emigration and nostalgia for the homeland.

Terra Longe (P.C. de Azevedo)

The faraway Land

Aqui, perdido, distante

Here, lost, distant

Das realidades que apenas sonhei,

From the reality, that I have
only dreamed,

Cansado pela febre do mais-além,

Tired from the fever of the
beyond

Suponho

I think

Minha Mãe a embalar-me,

about my mother rocking me,

Eu, pequenino, zangado pelo sono

Me, a baby, angry for the
sleep

que não vinha.

that did not come

“Ai, não montes tal cavalinho,

“Oh, don't get on that little
horse,

Tal cavalinho vai terra longe,

that pony goes to the faraway
land,

Terra longe tem gente-gentio,

in the faraway land there are
foreign people,

Gente-gentio come gente”.

The foreign people eat
people”.

À doce toada

By the sweet lullaby

Meu sonho caía de manso

my sleep comes slowly

Da boca de minha Mãe:

from the mouth of my mother:

“Cala ,cala, meu menino,

“Sleep, sleep, my little one,

Terra longe tem gente-gentio,

in the faraway land there are
foreign people,

Gente-gentio come gente”.

The foreign people eat
people”.

Depois vieram os anos,

Then the years went by,

E, com êles, tantas saúdaes!...

and, with them, so much
nostalgia!...

Hoje, lá do fundo, gritam: Vai!

Today, from the back, they
shout: Go!

Mas a voz da minha Mãe,

But the voice of my mother,

A gemer de mansinho

that moans gently

Cantigas da minha Infância,

Songs of my childhood,

Aconselha ao filho amado:

Advise the beloved son:

“Terra longe tem gente-gentio,

“In the faraway land there are
foreign people,

Gente-gentio come gente”.

The foreign people eat
people”.

Terra longe! terra longe!...

The faraway land! The
faraway land!...

O Mãe que me embalaste!

O Mother who cradled me!

O Meu querer bipartido!¹⁵

O my wish divided into
two!

The poet successfully expresses the dilemma which tears the Cape Verdean man apart. His soul is torn between a desire for the beyond and his connection with the land (see: O my wish divided into two!). On one hand there is the Metropolis, the distant land, with its promises of wealth, yet on the other, there is the fear of emigration, an anxiety which consumes force and energy. This in turn, becomes a wistful nostalgia for a distant land (see: The faraway land! The faraway land!... / O Mother who cradled me!). The mother figure is portrayed not only as an effective consigliere through the use of nursery rhymes (see: But the voice of my mother / that moans gently / Songs of my childhood / Advise the beloved son), but also as a Mother Earth figure, a personification of Cape Verde itself, who raises and tries to protect her sons (see: Oh, don't get on that little horse / pony goes to the faraway land / in the faraway land there are the foreign people"). This figure is opposed to the Metropolis, personified by the foreign people. The Metropolis takes man away from his roots, destroying his individuality (see: The foreign people eat people). In this poem we can observe plenty of anadiplosis, epanalexis, asyndetons and *enjambements*.

Poema do Mar (J. Barbosa)

Poem of the Sea

O drama do Mar,
O dosassosêgo do Mar,
Sempre
Sempre
Dentro de nós!

The drama of the Sea,
The trembling of the Sea,
Always
Always
is inside of us!

¹⁵ J. Osório de Oliveira, *Poesia de Cabo Verde*, Lisbon, Agência General das Colónias, 1944, pp. 29-30.

O Mar!
Cercando
Prendendo as nossas Ilhas,
Desgastando as rochas das
nossas Ilhas!
Deixando o esmalte do seu
salitre nas faces dos
pescadores,
Roncando nas areias das
nossas praias,
Batendo a sua voz de
encontro aos montes,
Baloçando os barquinhos de
pau que vão por estas
costas...

O Mar!
Pondo rezas nos lábios,
Deixando nos olhos dos que
ficaram
A nostalgia resignada de
países distantes
Que chegam até nós nas
estampas das ilustrações
Nas fitas de cinema
E nesse ar de outros climas
que trazem os passageiros
Quando desembarcam para
ver a pobreza da terra!

O Mar!
A esperança na carta de longe
Que talvez não chegue
mais!...

The Sea!
Circling
Grasping our islands,
Eroding the rocks of our
Islands!
Leaving his salty enamel on
the faces of fishermen,
Roaring on the sand of our
beaches,
Beating his voice against the
mountains,
Playing with the boats that go
to these things ...

The Sea!
Putting prayers on our lips,
leaving in the eyes of those
who remained
resigned nostalgia for distant
lands
Which come down to us from
the illustrated press
From cinematic films
And in this different air of
other climates that brings
passengers
When they disembark to see
the poverty of the land!

The Sea!
The hope in a letter from far
away
that perhaps will never come!

O Mar! Saudades dos velhos marinheiros contando histórias de tempos passados, Histórias da baleia que uma vez virou a canôa... De bebedeiras, de rixas, de mulheres, Nos portos estrangeiros...	The Sea! Nostalgia of old sailors telling stories of past times, Stories of the whale which capsized a canoe ... Stories of drunkenness, of quarrels, of women, In foreign ports...
O Mar! Dentro de nós todos, No corpo das raparigas morenas, Nas coxas ágeis das pretas, No desejo da viagem que fica em sonhos de muita gente!	The Sea! Inside all of us, In the body of the dark- skinned girls, In the agile thighs of the back women In the desire to travel that remains in the dreams of many people!
Este convite de tôda a hora Que o Mar nos faz para a evasão! Este desespêro de querer partir E ter que ficar! ¹⁶	This invite at all hours That the sea lets us escape! This desperation to want to leave And to have to stay!

This is a poem with free metrics which does not touch on the more standard European subject matters, but linked all the same to issues concerning the reality of Cape Verde: the sea, drought, nostalgia, loneliness and the powerful contradiction between the bond with the land and the desire for departure. Grief for the Eugenio Tavares' *hora de bai* transforms into a genuine desire

¹⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 19-20.

for escape. The repetitive usage of the Sea, a key word in all of the verses, represents the ambiguous double dimension of the people of Cape Verde. That is to say, the sea appears as a circle which clasps and compresses whilst the water itself impedes¹⁷ (see: Circling / grasping our islands). At the same time, it is an element offering evasion, like a bridge between the islands and the Metropolis (see: leaving in the eyes of those who remained / resigned nostalgia for distant lands). Here the Sea is associated with feelings of anxiety and isolation, but also with hope for a better life (see: The desire to travel that remains in the dreams of many people!). Furthermore, it also represents the roots of Cape Verde and its cultural identity (see: The drama of the sea / ... / Always / Always / is inside of us!). Those who chose to abandon their homeland and those who are simply far away are plagued by a great sense of nostalgia (see: The hope in a letter from far away / That perhaps will never come!...). J. Barbosa also emphasizes that no man can live peacefully without his roots, considering that the strength of his past culture and customs will always remain with him and cannot simply be forgotten. (see: Inside all of us / In the body of the dark-skinned girls). It is precisely for these reasons that the soul of the Cape Verdean remains constantly divided and torn apart, regardless of the road he chooses (see: This desperation to want to leave / And to have to stay).

Poema de quem ficou
(M. Lopes)

Eu não te quero mal
Por êste orgulho que tu

Poem of those who remained

I do not want to hurt you
for this pride that you have;

¹⁷ M. R. Turano - R. Francavilla, *Isole di poesia. Antologia di poeti capoverdiani*, Lecce, Argo, 1999, p. 26.

trazes; Por êste ar de trionfo iluminado Com que voltas... ...O mundo não è maior Que a pupila dos teus olhos: Tem a grandeza Da tua inquietação e das tuas revoltas.	for this air of illuminated triumph with which you return... ... The world is no bigger than a pupil of your eye: It is the size of your worries and your revolts.
...Que teu irmão que ficou Sonhou coisas maiores ainda, Mais belas que aquelas que conheceste...	...Your brother who still remains dreamed even greater things, More beautiful than those that you have encountered...
Crispou as mãos à beira-do- mar E teve saudades estranhas, de terras estranhas, Com bosques, com rios, com outras montanhas, - Bosques de névoa, rios de prata, montanhas de oiro - Que nunca viram teus olhos No mundo que percorreste... ¹⁸	He ruffled his hands on the seashore And he felt strange nostalgias, for strange lands, With woods, with rivers and other mountains, - misty forests, rivers of silver, mountains of gold - that your eyes have ever seen In the world that you have walked...

Here the poet focuses on his preferred subject matter: emigration. This is also the question which torments the people who live in Cape Verde the most and it focuses on the *americanos* figure as the enriched emigrant. The author fiercely

¹⁸ J. Osório de Oliveira, *Poesia de Cabo Verde*, Lisbon, Agência General das Colónias, 1944, p. 21.

criticizes those who left and forget the beauty of their motherland. Perhaps, unlike him they were unable to appreciate and respect the sentiments generated by the beauty and the rich culture of Cape Verde (see: I do not want to hurt you / for this pride that you have, / for this air of illuminated triumph / with which to return...). The poet rebels against the concept of the Cape Verdean soul divided into two, a notion so dear to many other poets. For Oliveira the dilemma of whether to stay or leave made little sense and almost certainly did not provoke restlessness (see: ...The world is no bigger / than a pupil of your eye / It has the size / of your worries and your revolts). Only those who have chosen to stay have had the privilege to understand the true beauty of Cape Verde, and this consequently, is what truly improves their lives (see: ...Your brother who still remains / dreamed even greater things, / More beautiful than those that you have encountered... / ... / that your eyes have ever seen / In the world that you have walked...).

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