

# HEALING AND SPIRIT POSSESSION IN SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

## Introduction

After five hundred years of Portuguese colonial rule, São Tomé and Príncipe gained independence in 1975. A flourishing local Creole society and culture is the outcome of the encounter of the dominant Catholic Portuguese culture and African cultures. The majority of the population belongs to the group known as the Forros—native Creoles who are descended from the early white colonists and African slaves. The descendants of a small, marooned community formed in the sixteenth century in the south of São Tomé island are known as Angolares. The offspring of contract workers from Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde, recruited for the local plantation economy from 1875 to 1960, who were born in the archipelago are locally called Tongas.

African beliefs in witchcraft (*feitico*) and divination are common among Forros, Angolares, and Tongas, existing side by side with Christian beliefs; the two are frequently fused into new syncretic forms. Old women are frequently beaten after they are accused of being a *feiticeira* (witch). The belief in *uê bluku*, or the Evil Eye, which is associated with envy and functions psychosocially as a leveler of socioeconomic differences, is of European origin. In São Tomé, protection against the Evil Eye includes use of the *ulua*, the fruit of a palm tree (*Borassus aethiopum*), a pulpy plant called *babosa* (*Aloés humilis*), a wooden cross, a horseshoe, an old chamberpot, rotten eggs, or a bottle filled with stale urine, placed close to the entrance of the house. Traditional healers and ritual specialists, known as *curandeiros*, oversee the local spirit-possession cult, *djambí*. The term stems from the word *nzambí* or *njambí*, meaning “the Almighty” and “God” in *kimbundu* and *kikongo*, respectively. The term *chinguilar* (to invoke the spirits of the dead) has the same linguistic origin. The *curandeiro* is initiated and trained by an elder master of the cult in the wisdom and the practices of the *djambí*. He enacts the cult either to treat a particular case or to commemorate the annual feast day of his own principal spirit. In the latter case, preceding the *djambí*, he may lead a procession accompanied by drums from a nearby Catholic church to his own compound.

During the ceremony, which lasts from sunset to sunrise, a fire illuminates the scene, while the drummers summon the spirits of the ancestors who have returned to afflict the living. One *puíta* (large drum), three drums, and three *sucalos* (rattles) provide for the *batuque* (drumming). The sound of the drums varies according to the ethnic origin of the spirit called. Women stamp cassava leaves in a big mortar to the rhythms of the drums. Tables with dishes and drinks are laid out for the spirits and decorated with leaves and flowers collected in the graveyard. The *curandeiro* presiding over the ceremony is the spirit medium determining the identity of the spirits who have caused the disease or misfortune of an individual, a family, or a whole community. Besides the family and friends of the patient, hundreds of outsiders attend the events. The spectators eat and drink, and they may come and go during the ceremony. Attendants are often suddenly possessed by a spirit, thereafter falling into a trance and dancing to the rhythms of the drums.

The possessed speak in tongues of the spirit that only the *curandeiro* can understand. The language varies, for the spirits belong to Forros, Angolares, Angolans, Cape Verdians, Mozambicans, and Tongas who died on the island. The possessed may walk over the red-hot wood without being burnt. The afflicted person and his or her relatives provide for the food, drinks, and the chicken, goats, or pigs that are ritually killed during the nightly drama.

The Christian cross and human bones belong to the essential paraphernalia of the cult. Together with wooden figures, candles, palm oil lamps, eggs, and other food put on an altar, they are also present in the chapel in the *curandeiro*'s compound. Here he receives the patients for individual treatment by other methods. To fight the devil and misfortunes, *curandeiros* also use formulas, charms, spells, and devotions from old magic books like *Breviário de Rezas e Mandingas*, *Confortadora Cruz de Caravaca*, and the book of *São Cipriano*. (The latter's author is not the famous bishop of Carthago with the same name, but a powerful sorcerer from ancient Phoenicia.)

When a child or adolescent suffers from illness or problems such as nightmares or bed-wetting, the blame is often ascribed to a double who has remained in the extraterrestrial realm, causing these misfortunes by constantly calling to the child on earth. The double claims his or her presence, considering the flight to earth as treason. To cure the child, the parents ask a *curandeiro* to perform a sacrifice called *pagá-dêvê*, literally meaning "to pay the debt." The ritual is done at night, preferably on a Thursday or Saturday, in the presence of the patient, either along a stream, at a waterfall, at the beach, or on a crossroads. Neither father nor mother may be present during the *pagá-dêvê*. To reconcile the double, a wooden dish with a variety of food, sweets, flowers, and small flags is usually put on the ground to pay the unsettled debt of a former life. In addition, two small, simply carved human figures of both sexes made from the wood of the *ocá* (silk-cotton tree, *Ceiba petandra*) may also be used. The patient is cured if the double's spirit accepts the offering.

Unlike the *curandeiro*, other traditional healers and specialists can be either man or woman, usually an elderly person within the local community. A local healer who diagnoses diseases by the examination of urine is called *pia-dô-záua*. According to his diagnosis, he prescribes infusions that the patient must drink and then monitors the effect of the treatment through further examination of the patient's urine. The herbalist, known as *stijon mátu*, uses natural products to grind mixtures that the patient takes according to his prescriptions. The herbalists' knowledge of the properties of local medical plants is remarkable, and they are even sought after in neighboring countries and in Lisbon. They treat all types of diseases, including venereal and intestinal diseases, fevers, parasite infections, and tuberculosis. Another type of local therapist, the *tchiladô ventoso*, makes small cuts with a sharp knife in the swollen or painful parts of the skin to let out the bad blood that has caused the pain. He also uses an ox horn, cut through the middle and equipped with a small opening at the conic end to suck with his mouth. Since he takes into account the dominating lunar constellations, he cures only on certain days.

## References

- Espírito Santo, Calos. 1998. *A Coroa do Mar*. Lisbon: Editorial Caminho.
- Eyzaguirre, Pablo B. 1986. *Small Farmers and Estates in São Tomé, West Africa*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Yale University.
- Valverde, Paulo. 2000. *Máscara, Matro e Morte em São Tomé*. Oeiras: Celta Editora.

GERHARD SEIBERT

See also [Diaspora](#); [Medicine](#); [Spirit Possession](#)