

PERFORMING ARTS OF SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

São Tomé and Príncipe, located in the Gulf of Guinea, is a twin-island republic with a total area of 372 square miles, making it the second smallest independent state in Africa. The islands have a total population of 170,000 (2002), of which about 5,000 live on the smaller island of Príncipe. Portuguese navigators discovered the two uninhabited islands around 1471. In the late fifteenth century, Portuguese settlers and convicts, deported Jewish children, and African slaves from the mainland settled the islands. The Portuguese introduced sugar cane, making the islands the first plantation economy in the tropics. Since the late nineteenth century, cocoa has dominated the local plantation economy. The African slaves were taken to the islands as individuals and not as social groups so they did not retain their various cultures and languages intact.

The Culture and Language

The five-hundred-year-long blending of elements of the dominant Catholic Portuguese culture and the African cultures resulted in the development of a distinctive Creole society with its own culture and languages. The majority of Creoles are descendants of the early settlers and slaves and are called Forros, a term derived from the Portuguese word for “letter of manumission.” In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, runaway slaves formed a small maroon community in the south of São Tomé, and their descendants are known as Angolares. They are now primarily fishermen. Both Forros and Angolares have always refused to do manual field labor on the Portuguese *roças* (plantations), as they historically considered it demeaning and beneath their status as free blacks. Because their number was insufficient to supply the necessary labor, between 1875 and the 1950s the Portuguese recruited thousands of contract workers from Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde. These indentured laborers, called *serviçais*, constituted a new sociocultural category on the islands and outnumbered the native Forros up until the 1940s. The contract workers were considered second-class citizens under colonial law, which discriminated between natives (indigenous) and citizens until it was abolished in 1961. Their descendants born on the archipelago, known as Tongas, still live predominantly on the plantations, whereas the Forros live in the capital and in the few small towns and dispersed communities, locally called *lucháns*. Since the country’s independence in 1975, the Tongas have been assimilated by the Forro community through migration, acculturation, and marriage, and the sociocultural differences between the groups have been blurred. Consequently, some realignments have occurred among the sociocultural categories entailing the development of new cultural forms and changing modes of participation in social life.

Besides the official language of Portuguese, three distinct Afro-Portuguese Creole languages are spoken: Ling’lé on Príncipe, Lunga Santomé, or Forro, on São Tomé, and the Lunga Ngola of the Angolares. The first two are mutually intelligible; however, due to the isolation of the former maroons, Lunga Ngola is unintelligible for Ling’lé and Forro speakers, although the three languages are closely related in terms of phonology, lexicon, and syntax. The local creole languages have no generally accepted and written orthographies, and instead rely on oral literature. During the colonial period, the Portuguese considered the local Creoles as inferior and primitive. After independence, however, the government promoted the Lunga Santomé to *língua nacional* (national language). In daily life at home the Creole is used and spoken by the majority of the people. Only the upper class speak Portuguese in their private lives. Portuguese remains the official language, however, as well as the language of education. Except for a few lyrics, literature on the islands is in Portuguese. Due to its

physical, historic, economic, and sociocultural characteristics, São Tomé and Príncipe is more akin to the Afro-Creole societies in the Caribbean than to the nearby African societies.

Oral Literature

There are four distinct forms of local oral literature in the archipelago. A riddle (*aguede* in creole), such as “I have gone and come, but have not left the place” (door) or “House without door or window” (egg) often serves for entertainment at night. A *vessu* is a proverb or proverbial saying derived from historic or fabulous facts, traditional stories, and theater plays. These are used in conversation and songs. A *contagi* (tale that is well known) is a sad or happy narrative and can be told on any occasion. Such popular folktales feature figures familiar from both African and European folktales, such as royalty, giants, and witches, and frequently deal with encounters of men and animals. The turtle often plays a prominent role as a sympathetic, intelligent, and bright animal, comparable to the fox in European stories. The tales reflect important aspects of social life in the archipelago, such as the natural environment, the plantation, hunting, traditional medicine, and beliefs. *Soia* are fictional stories exclusively narrated by storytellers at night during the Nozado, the memorial ceremony for the dead. According to local belief, angry spirits are likely to cause the death of a family member if a *soia* is told outside the Nozado.

Theater

The best-known manifestations of local folklore are popular theater performances that include colorful costumes and anachronistic properties. Forros on the island of São Tomé perform the most famous play: *The Tragic Story of the Marquis of Mântua and Emperor Charlemagne*, locally known as *tchiloli* and based on text written around 1540 by Baltasar Dias of Madeira, a blind playwright. He based his drama on six Castilian novels, which were in turn derived from the eleventh-century Charlemagne cycle. Most probably, the Dias drama was introduced from Portugal and first performed in the mid-nineteenth century. Around that time such texts reappeared and circulated in Portugal as *literatura de cordel*, a form of cheap literary produc-

Anto de Floripes theater (the troops of the Moors), Santo António, Príncipe.

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tion. It has also been suggested that the play was introduced by sugar planters from Madeira as early as in the sixteenth century; however, its existence on São Tomé is not mentioned in the literature prior to the twentieth century. The drama has also been taken to the Sertão, Brazil’s northeast interior. The medieval play tells the story of Dom Carloto, the son and heir of Charlemagne, who kills his best friend Valdevinos, the Marquis’ nephew, during a hunting party because he has fallen in love with Valdevinos’s wife, Sibila. The two families and their representatives debate questions of law, justice, and good government. The key subjects are treason and equality before the law. The emperor is confronted with the classical dilemma to choose between the *raison d’état* (reason of state) and his paternal love. Finally, his son Dom Carloto is sentenced to death and executed in the imperial fortress.

Presently there are more than ten *tchiloli* groups, known as *tragédias*, with about thirty amateur actors, each coming from a particular Forro locality. Within certain dramaturgic limits, each troupe performs its particular version of the play. According to the medieval tradition, men exclusively play and dance both male and female roles. The same actor always performs the same parts. The roles, costumes, and texts are passed down within families. It is not uncommon for actors to be addressed by their *tchiloli* names in daily life. Usually the performances last about six hours and take place in the open air during the dry season, called *gravana*, predominantly on the occasion of religious feast days and other festivals. The African influence, in terms of the notion of time, has extended the few pages of the original to what is often a very long performance. However, during official inaugurations, expositions, or guest performances abroad, the drama can be condensed to a few scenes (about ninety minutes). The open stage, some 15 to 20 yards long and 5 to 10 yards wide, can be watched from all sides. The spectators participate actively in the performance by making comments during the various scenes of the play, which many islanders know well. On one side of the open space rises the *corte alta* (high court) on wooden stakes and roofed with palm-tree branches, representing the imperial palace. On the opposite side is a cabin on the ground made of green branches representing the *corte baixa* (low court) of the mourning Mântua family. During the entire play a small coffin placed on a stool in the midst of the stage symbolizes the dead Valdevinos.

Most of Dias's sixteenth-century seven-syllable verses are used in their original version, but additional modern Portuguese prose texts have been integrated into the performance. The latter dominate the parts concerning the criminal investigation and the legal procedures. Contrary to the original text, these modern additions are constantly adapted and extemporized by the actors. Three drummers, three bamboo flute players, and four men shaking *sucalos* (wicker-rattles filled with seeds) provide the music that accompanies the actors when they dance across the stage. The music is rather monotonous, for the same melody is repeated constantly. The dance, dumb-show, and music dominate the performance, rather than the verse and prose texts. Charlemagne's family members are dressed up in splendid, colorfully decorated costumes, and his ministers are in Napoleonstyle hats and uniforms. The Mântua family members wear black mourning dresses, while the two lawyers, Anderson and Bertrand, appear in three-piece suits and carry briefcases. The actors use wire-screen masks until after sunset. The masks, commonly painted in a white-face style, can be understood as manifestations of the spiritual world, for in Africa white is the color of the dead. Certain characters wear long colorful ribbons, a symbol of wealth. Particularly during the 1950s, additional figures, such as the two lawyers, derived from the twentieth-century colonial administration, have been integrated alongside the medieval royal personages. In addition, some actors wear sunglasses and fashionable rucksacks, and the imperial court is equipped with a telephone and a typewriter.

The *tchiloli* is an exciting example of cultural creolization and syncretic theatre. It comprises elements stemming from different cultures and times that seem to be incompatible at first sight. The play has always given the local people the opportunity to have debates on justice, the confrontation between the strong and the weak, a fair trial, and the stamina of those who are right and finally win. As this popular play developed in a plantation colony marked by

slavery and forced labor, the search for justice and truth has been an important aspect of its production. It has even been argued that the *tchiloli* originally represented a form of political resistance against colonial oppression, serving both playful and therapeutic functions.

The *Auto da Floripes*

Another medieval drama, the *Auto da Floripes*, is played every year on August 10, the feast day of Saint Lawrence on Príncipe. The play probably stems from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and its author is unknown. As this play has been performed annually for five centuries on August 5 in the village of Neves in the Portuguese Minho province, it is not unlikely that an emigrant from that region took it to Príncipe. Against the background of the battle between Christians and Muslim Turks, or Moors, the play tells the story of the revolt of a daughter against her father. Princess Floripes, the daughter of the Moor commander admiral Balão, has fallen in love with the Christian knight Gui de Borgonha. The action takes place in the small town of Santo António, and the thirty actors wear colorful, decorated costumes, with many wearing artificial moustaches and beards. The Christians are dressed in white and blue, and the Moors in red. A wooden platform in front of the parish church represents the castle of Charlemagne. On the opposite side of the street rises the castle of the Moor admiral Balão. The performance lasts a whole day, and the dramatic climax is a two-and-a-half-hour fight between the Christian nobleman Oliveiros and the Turk Ferrabrás, Floripes's brother and the son of admiral Balão. During a hand-to-hand duel with swords, both men try to convert each other to his own beliefs. Finally, Ferrabrás surrenders, becomes converted to Christianity, and joins the army of Charlemagne. In one of the many battles, Balão himself succeeds in capturing Gui de Borgonha and detains him in his castle. Floripes is torn between her love for Gui and her father. She asks her father to convert to Christianity like her brother, but Balão rejects her proposal. After the Christians defeat Balão in a final battle, a large pageant, accompanied by singing people, drums, horns, and hooters, moves through the streets of Santo António. The part of Floripes has to be played every year by a different girl, whereas the other roles are articulated by the same male actors and passed down from year to year. Formerly, the girl had to be a virgin, but this rule has become difficult to maintain. As there is no fixed version of the text, the actors

Danço Congo masquerade, São Tomé.

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extemporize and continuously develop new themes, motives, intrigues, and fragments. Music, dance, pantomime, and properties play important roles in the performance of the *Auto de Floripes*.

The Danço Congo

Other distinct cultural societies on São Tomé, comprising twenty to thirty members each, perform the Danço Congo, acted out in a dumb show with dances, acrobatics, whistles, and drumming. Typically, the characters are the Capitão (captain) of Congo and his soldiers playing Canzás (bamboo bows), the Logoso (plantation guard), the Anso Molê (the dying angel), two Anso Cantá (singing angels), two Pés-De-Pau (men walking on stilts and wearing

red trousers), four Bobos (buffoons), the Feiticeiro (sorcerer), the Zugozugo (assistant of the sorcerer), and the D'jabo (devil). The sorcerer, his assistant, and the devil are dressed in red, while the other actors wear colorful costumes, dominated by green. The costumes stem directly from African styles with high, large circular headdresses made of iron wire and decorated with colored paper strips.

The Danço Congo remind one of performances dedicated to the king of Congo in Brazil, Columbia, and Panama. Such performances, called *congós* or *congadas*, constitute an integral part of the festivals of religious brotherhoods in Brazil. Blacks performed a Congo festival in Lisbon as early as the sixteenth century. The theme probably stems from the coronation of the Mani-Congo in Angola. The dance may have come to São Tomé directly from Africa or indirectly from Bahia, where the local Creole clergy was educated from 1677–1845, when São Tomé belonged to the archdiocese of Bahia.

The Danço Congo is enacted in the open air by permanent associations domiciled both within Forro and Angolar communities. It symbolizes the story of four incompetent sons (the Bobos), who have to give the *roça* they inherited from their father to the captain of Congo. During a festivity on the plantation both the Bobos and the Captain invite the Sorcerer and his assistant, who then are captured and compelled to participate in the dance. The Captain, however, constantly fears that the two might kill the Anso Molê. Finally, the Sorcerer and his assistant succeed in escaping. In the meantime the Pés-de-Pau begin to dance, surrounded by all the characters. Thereupon, the Devil starts jumping and moving convulsively. The Sorcerer reappears and succeeds in killing the Anso Molê. The Captain is shocked and asks the Logoso why he allowed the flight of the sorcerer and the Devil. Meanwhile, the Bobos and the others, unmoved by the murder of the angel, continue to dance, for they see no reason to interrupt the party. The Danço Congo can last about six hours, and it is perhaps the most lively, colorful, and noisy manifestation of local folklore. Like other theater and dance, it is performed on religious feast days and official festivals.

Other Dances

While many of the older dance forms of the Forros have definitively disappeared, the *ússua* and the *sócopé* are still performed by community-based cultural groups. Their members pay fees, and the groups also function as associations of mutual assistance in the case of funerals, illness, and other misfortunes. The steps and the music of the *ússua* are similar to a slow waltz or a minuet. The musical instruments accompanying the dance are one accordion, two *canzás*, two *caixas* (drums), and a *bombo* (large drum). The *mestre-sala* (dancing master) conducts the dancers with his horn. The women dancers wear colorful robes, long skirts with laces, albs (full-length linen vestments), laced clerical collars, long and wide sleeves, and headscarves. The men are dressed in black trousers, black shoes, white blazers, a tie, and straw hats.

The *sócopé*, literally meaning “only with the foot,” developed from the *ússua* and first appeared on the island of São Tomé around 1900. Within the *sócopé*, dance troupes of both men and women have a complex hierarchy consisting of numerous functions ranging from president to singers. The groups carry their own standard and the country’s national flag during the performance. The men are dressed in showy uniforms with stripes and badges, or else in black trousers and white shirts; while the women wear uniform colorful skirts, white blouses, and scarves. The instruments are three *caixas*, *canzás*, one *pito* (bamboo flute), and two *bombos*. Currently the *sócopé* is still performed by only a few groups.

The *puita* (or *semba*) is a dance introduced by Angolan contract workers. It was once performed all night long by the African contract workers and the Tongas on the plantations during a party in honor of a deceased person. The guests eat and drink the deceased's health before they dance to the sound of the percussion music. *Puita* is also the name of the large drum used for the dance. The other instruments used are two small drums, one *micoló* (can be beaten with wooden sticks), three *sucalos*, an iron rod, and an ox horn. The songs are both in local Creole and African languages. Since independence, many plantation workers have migrated to the capital, and the *puita* can now be found in the neighborhoods of São Tomé city. The *bulauê*, which developed after independence among Tongas living in urban neighborhoods, has been adopted by the larger Forro community and can now be found in all corners of the island. However, the *bulauê* is more popular among low-status Forros, while the elite often disdain this dance. Its songs are in the Forro creole. Unlike the older Forro dance societies, the *bulauê* society does not offer mutual assistance to its members.

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