

GERMANO ALMEIDA – OLD FRONTS OF HIGH INTENSITY OF LABOR

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Summary: In his narrative career, Germano Almeida from Cape Verde concentrates on the cultural history of his homeland, which shows a high degree of migration to other countries. He demonstrates that, among these migrations, the memory of the experience with contract labor in São Tomé and Príncipe plays a special role.

Key Words: Cape Verde, gender relations, modern slavery, contract labor.

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Resumo: Em sua carreira narrativa, Germano Almeida, de Cabo Verde, concentra-se na história cultural de sua terra natal, o que mostra um alto grau de migração para outros países. Ele demonstra que, entre essas migrações, a memória da experiência com trabalho contratado em São Tomé e Príncipe desempenha um papel especial.

Palavras-chave: Cabo Verde, relações de gênero, escravidão moderna, contrato de trabalho

GERMANO ALMEIDA - VIEJOS FRENTE DE ALTA INTENSIDAD DE TRABAJO

Resumen: En su carrera narrativa, Germano Almeida, de Cabo Verde, se concentra en la historia cultural de su tierra natal, lo que muestra un alto grado de migración hacia otros países. Demuestra que, entre esas migraciones, la memoria de la experiencia con trabajo contratado en Santo Tomé y Príncipe desempeña un papel especial.

Palabras clave: Cabo Verde, relaciones de género, esclavitud moderna, contrato de trabajo

This essay aims to understand the strategic position of the expression “old fronts of high intensity of labor” in the recently published novel *O fiel difunto* (2018) by Germano Almeida, a most productive author of Cape Verde. He is the winner of the prestigious Camões Prize 2018 for his literary oeuvre and for his effort to reflect on

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Cape Verde in a global context that also relates to Africa. Almeida is the prototype of an ironic voyeur of the period of independence of his country. His characters represent everyday opinions, which – as everybody knows – might also change very quickly. Ana Cordeiro, who wrote a preface to one of Almeida’s narrative works, describes his point of departure as following: “It would be desirable to do the most serious things of the world as if it was like making fun” (O que seria desejável era fazer as coisas mais sérias do mundo como se fosse de brincadeira, Cordeiro 7).

Although Almeida is practicing the profession of being a lawyer, he seems to spend a lot of time with writing, with “contar estórias” as he calls it, or telling stories. Until now, he published at least eighteen books, an impressive output. His chronicles, short stories, monologues, dialogues, travel reports, historical research, articles in journals and novels are full of information about the history and the life of the inhabitants of those nine populated islands in the Atlantic Ocean at the West Coast of Africa: Santo Antão, São Vicente, São Nicolau, Sal, Boa Vista, Maio, Santiago, Fogo, and Brava. It is possible to denote Almeida as the “Balzac” from Cape Verde. Instead of focusing on a certain historical epoch in France, as his French colleague does,² Almeida concentrates on the period after July 5, 1975 (the day of independence), as the “translator of a new reality” (Tutikian 2006), whose *comédie humaine* is not yet finished at all.

Almeida started publishing at the beginning of the 1980s, writing chronicles about the fate of various prisoners from Santo Antão, who reacted against an Agricultural Reform Law, published in *O dia das calças roladas* (The day of the enrolled trousers, 1982). He co-founded the literary magazine *Ponto & Vírgula* (1983-1987) and also the publishing house Ilhéu Editora in 1989. At that time, the Marxist-Leninist Party PAICG (Independence Party of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau) constituted the first government with a one-party-system.³ Almeida was in favor of a more diversified government and participated in the foundation of the MpD (Movement for Democracy), a party that won the elections in 1991 and introduced the “second republic” with a multi-party-system. Almeida’s works are full of references to the

² Honoré de Balzac (1799-1859) coined the expression *La Comédie Humaine*, to characterize this restless portraying of France after the fall of Napoleon. He was a master of dialogue and possesses a sardonic humor.

³ Because of a coup d’état against President Luís Cabral, a half-brother of Amílcar Cabral in 1980, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde split up their union and Cape Verde’s party changed its name into PAICV.

political process of his home country.

A View on History

The author lives in Mindelo, a small city that became a “Porto Grande” (Big Harbour) in the nineteenth century, when ships stopped there to provide for fuel and provisions on their routes across the Southern Ocean. Mindelo has a protected bay area and even was so important that Portugal considered to move the capital Praia from the island of Santiago to Mindelo. However, because of changing transportation conditions, the importance of Mindelo diminished and Praia remained the capital. Praia has a completely different background than Mindelo. It became the seat of the government in 1770, replacing the nearby Ribeira Grande, later called Cidade Velha, the first European city in Africa, founded in 1462 by the Portuguese. They almost immediately constructed a Pelourinho in the center, which documents its function as a slave trade post, a collecting point, from where the enslaved Africans were sold and embarked on the ships for their transatlantic journey. Almeida inquires the history of this Cidade Velha in his *A Morte do Ouvidor* (2010), a novel in which his contemporary characters, who live in Praia, reconstruct the history of Cidade Velha, now in ruins and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2009. Its local elite, active in all kind of trade with focus on the slave trade, lost its power in the second half of the eighteenth century and the two fictional characters reconstruct the events. This is Almeida’s only novel so far in which he explicitly quotes from historical sources, and his vision on history parallels Stephen Greenblatt’s definition on New Historicism, along which writing history is “always attuned to the contradictions of any historical moment”, in the sense of adhering to the cultural poetics of everyday practices (Felluga 2011). For Almeida, this means that history has to be measured along the lines of human rights in a democratic and postcolonial situation.

Cape Verde is the prototype of a country, from which the majority of the population joins the international labor force migrating to other regions, for a certain period or forever. A big community lives in the US since the nineteenth century, due to their participation in the whale hunt: Cape Verdeans were considered to be most skillful in the art of whaling. This migration –also to other countries– continues until today.

Migration was a necessity because of climate conditions, famine, and disease, and had and still has quite a significant impact on gender relations. Looking at the official German tourist website (Kap Verde 2017), we distinguish between a *união de facto*, living in one household together, a situation legally considered as a marriage after three years, a *pai de visita*, the father who visits and, eventually, pays for the expenses of his (illegitimate) child, a more or less official expression, and a *tio*, an older man who lives with or has a relationship with a much younger woman, also a relatively normal situation. Only 16% of the population is officially married and 3% divorced. Family relations in Cape Verde, apparently, are not comparable with the calculations in statistical information on families in Germany or in other European countries and, because of this so characteristic social dynamic for Cape Verde, we will inquire the references to this labor migration and gender relations in two of Almeida's books.

The Meaning of The Testaments

Almeida is a lawyer and, therefore, it is significant that for his first and also for his most recent novel he chooses the death of a protagonist who leaves a testament as his main theme. At the beginning of the first book, *O testamento do Sr. Napumoceno da Silva Araújo* (1989), Napumoceno just died. He was born as a poor boy in São Nicolau in 1898 and became an important business man in Mindelo. The plot takes place in 1984 and starts with the ceremony of reading the testament aloud, which takes about four hours in the afternoon. And in the second one, *O fiel difunto* (2018), the dead person is a famous author, the “grande escritor e Maestro Miguel Lopes Macieira” (28), murdered in the very first chapter because of two bullets shot right into his heart, a public execution, because it happens in front of the audience that came to assist the festivities of the publication of his last book. This crime lays at the basis of the creation of tension in the text. In the first case, the testament gradually reveals the truth about Napumoceno's life, whereas in the second case it is introduced in a plot that looks like a detective story, because the search for the motif of the murder determinates the main lines of action.

The sealed document of Napumoceno's testament is opened in the presence of four men: the notary, the nephew Carlos Araújo, a partner in Napumoceno's business,

and the witnesses América Fonseca and Armando Lima. The surprise of the day is that the main part of the heritage goes to somebody who is absent, to Maria da Graça, the illegitimate daughter, of whom nobody even guessed her existence. She is the living proof of the relationship between Napumoceno and his housekeeper and 25 years old, always supported by a monthly payment of her unknown father. The surprise is really immense because the city thought of this “very respected merchant of our Plaza and one of the most dynamic anchors of our city” (conceituado comerciante da nossa praça e um dos esteios mais vibrantes da nossa cidade, 13) that he had never had relationships with women. Now, in the course of reading the testament, another truth comes to light.

This truth is the moral of the narrative, appearance is different from reality, and well-to-do people also have their secrets in life just as anybody else. The testament was sealed on 30 November 1974, ten years before Napumoceno’s death and on the threshold to independence. The 379 machine-typed and eight hand-written sheets do not only reveal the smallest details of the business, but also go into the private sphere, because this explains Napumoceno’s last will and also his decision to spend the last years of his life with writing. It becomes clear that he had known some more women during his life but always hesitated to make the last step, to live together with one of them and, eventually, establish a family. In short: he conducted a life of not-lived love. There would not have been any problem because of economic constraints but, emotionally, he was not able to make this decision. Furthermore, social standards played a role. The housekeeper, who was in love with Napumoceno, did not plan to have a child but became pregnant unexpectedly being more than forty years old. Of course, Napumoceno never even thought of living together with such a woman of a lower social class.

Maestro Macieira, the beloved author and “loyal dead” in *O fiel difunto*, also had a quite complicated private life. He shared his household with Mariza after having decided to dedicate himself to writing. His “companheira dos anos do escritor” (28) is teacher at the Lyceum and suddenly decides one day to visit her family in America. She does not come back for quite a while, because at home she feels neglected having a partner who only thinks of his publications. Mariza descends from a Catholic conservative family in Mindelo, studied in Lisbon and is a modern woman, a feminist, who marks her independence by paying her own bills, an unthinkable thing for old-

fashioned men like Macieira:

A modern woman, a feminist, marks her independence from men by way of paying her own bills. He invoked the national gentlemanlike behavior, which proscribed that it is always the man who has to pay, all the more because the fashionable ways of Porto were something that his generation did not practice, the one who invites also pays.⁴

Obviously, we see a difference in the gender relations in the two novels. Napumoceno's testament seems to mark the end of a specific type of gender relations in the old colonial society, now opening new legal perspectives. This explains that not the nephew Carlos is the most important heir, but the illegitimate daughter, who automatically becomes officially acknowledged at this occasion, causing a rupture with the former situation. We do not see a similar postcolonial shift in the second novel, published almost thirty years later. Mariza lives with the Maestro in a *união de facto*. After his death, she immediately returns from America to prepare the funeral and everybody considers her to be the legal widow. Although there exists a testament, it is not even opened in the book. It seems logical that she will be the only heir. The surprising aspect now consists in the fact, that the Maestro left the wishes for his funeral in a hand-written letter, which is discovered just before the official part of the ceremony. He does not want to be buried in a grave but to be cremated in an informal ceremony. This is unheard off!!! The state apparatus (President, Prime Minister, Minister of Culture, President of the Cape Verdean Writers Union, President of the Academy of Science and Humanities, etc.) traveled from Praia to Mindelo to assist a state burial, which means: the body publicly laid out in the Palácio do Povo, high representatives of the Catholic Church, a Mass celebrated by the bishop, and thousands of people as an escort walking behind the tomb toward the cemetery. It seems as if colonial times have come back and the author shows his protest mentioning the bad smell of the dead body, the burning sun, vulgar comments of the crowd, and the impossibility to find a mule, who traditionally should trek the car with the body to the cemetery. On the whole island of São Vicente, there is not one mule left. This rhetorical and ironic hyperbole echoes

⁴ a mulher moderna, feminista, marca a sua independência relativamente ao homem por vias como essa de pagar as suas próprias contas. Ele invocou o cavalheirismo nacional que obrigava a ser sempre o homem a desembolsar, tanto mais que contas à moda do Porto era coisa que a sua geração não praticava, quem convida, paga. (32).

the influence of Gabriel García Márquez' *Los funerales de la Mama Grande* (1962). Above that, the official part of the burial takes place in the Rua de Lisboa, the central place in Mindelo, which officially is called Street of the African Freedom Fighters (Rua dos Libertadores da Africa) since 1975, a name to which nobody pays attention.

Apparently, the preoccupation with “Black” Africa, the place of these freedom fighters, also plays a role in the interpretation of the motif of the murder. Almeida mentions that the famous author was shot by his best friend, an engineer, “as a legitimate defense of his psychological integrity” (em legítima defesa da sua integridade psicológica, 268), as a “legitimate defense of his honor” (legítima defesa da honor, 296). This is an explicit reference to the manifesto *Légitime Défense* (1932), composed by eight “mulatto” students from Martinique in Paris in the 1930s. They describe themselves as “both ‘emerging from the French mulatto bourgeoisie, one of the most depressing things on earth’ and as ‘traitors of this class’” (Cole 16), addressing their peers to express the urgent need to cultivate an audience that identifies with their opposition to certain values. Almeida connects this legitimate defense to the marriage *à trois*: Maestro Macieira and his best friend with his wife, all born in São Vicente, as is his absent partner Mariza. Almeida quotes here Baltasar Lopes' *Chiquinho* (1947), the classical novel about migration from the harbor of Mindelo to the United States, to prepare the closing and decisive scene, when the widow is very determinant not to go back to the Americas and to stay in Mindelo forever:

No, I do not go ... it is decided, I decided this just a while ago, during the Mess: from now on my place is here, with him and with you all, I am staying to take care of his estate, creating a foundation with his name, Foundation Lopes Macieira, trying to re-edit his works, gathering the huge amount of detached writings of which I know that he spread all over the world and which is real short story-telling, I am thinking of a complete edition of his books on thick distinguished paper and bound in leather with golden titles.⁵

By way of a joke, the author adds that this means that she will be a new edition of Pilar del Río, the widow of José Saramago, now even in Mindelo.

⁵ Não, não vou ... está decidido, decidi isso ainda há bocado, durante a missa: de agora em diante o meu lugar é aqui, com ele e convosco, fico para cuidar do seu espólio, criar uma fundação com o seu nome, Fundação Lopes Macieira, tratar da reedição das suas obras, recolher o imensos escritos avulsos que eu sei que ele tem espalhados pelo mundo, os emails que ele escrevia e que eram verdadeiros contos, pequenas histórias, estou a pensar numa edição completa dos seus livros em papel bíblia e encadernada em couro com títulos em dourado (317).

The Question of Honor

The question of the honor of the murderer, who suspected that he had to share his wife with the Maestro, directly relates to gender problems. The position of women has changed dramatically, at least if we believe Almeida's novels. Whereas in Napumoceno's testament an illegitimate daughter was the heir of the main part of his possessions and thereby recognized officially, in *O fiel difunto* the testament does not play a role at all. Now, different problems related for instance to sexuality are very detailed discussed and compared with the situation in the past: violence, anticonception, frigidity, impotence, etc. Almeida himself mentions in an interview that *O fiel difunto* is his first novel (Almeida 2017), an enigmatic remark when we look at his publishing list that contains numerous "romances". Obviously, he means that in this novel he is digging into the deeper meaning of an important point. In this case, this point has to do with the motif of the crime. Did the wife of the engineer commit adultery with the Maestro, or didn't she? Also, like in Almeida's first novel, a cousin of the dead plays a role and in a conversation with a female colleague he tries to find out how this triangular relationship should be interpreted. She gives her comments with the following response:

Do you remember what they said about the *old fronts of high intensity of labor*? That the people only went there carrying their body with them to be able to receive a salary, their spirit however was in some other place and this explains that their work was not profitable.⁶

This remark shows her familiarity with the migration to the "chocolate islands" São Tomé and Príncipe in the first half of the past century and it is not by accident that she comes from São Nicolau, the island that became exemplary for the fact that many Cape Verdeans left as contract workers to the cacao and coffee *roças* (plantations).

Almeida relates his inquiries about gender relations to the difference between corporal and/or spiritual love in memory of these "old fronts of high intensity of labor" and São Nicolau, the island central in the song "Sodade", composed by Armando

⁶ Lembra-te do que se dizia sobre as antigas frentes de alta intensidade de mão-d'obra? Que as pessoas iam lá apenas levar o corpo para poderem receber um salário, o espírito estava noutra lado qualquer e era por isso que o trabalho não rendia (296). My cursive.

Zeferino Soares in the 1950s. The song was made famous through the performance by Cesária Évora and is often characterized as the National Anthem of Cape Verde (Aoki 2016):

Who showed you this long road? /Who showed you this long road? / This road to São Tomé / Who showed you this long road? / Who showed you this long road? / Sodade sodade / Sodade for this land of mine, São Nicolau.⁷

The Portuguese attracted workers from their other colonies in Africa, from Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde. The situation on the plantations was described by the British journalist Henry Wood Nevinson, who coined it as *A Modern Slavery* (1906), after finding out about the working conditions of these laborers on his journeys through Africa. Nevinson is very conscient of the slave trade past and, consequently, reports that people were transported from the interior of Angola as “slaves”, then apparently “freed” at the coast, receiving a contract for the *roças* for five years, which was almost automatically renewed and did not leave a possibility to return to the home country. Nevinson was one of the first authors to use this term “modern slavery”, very common today, leaving no doubt about the fact that the official abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century did not mean the end of working in slavery conditions. The publication of Nevinson’s text caused a scandal and a boycott of the Cadbury chocolate.

Almeida certainly is familiar with Évora’s song performance and might have read the bestseller novel *Equador* (2006) by Miguel Sousa Tavares about this situation. As author, he is apparently struggling with this migration of Cape Verdeans to São Tomé, so different of the more successful labor migrations to other parts of the world. In his book, *Cabo Verde. Viagem pela história das ilhas* (2005), he reports about his trips to and research on each one of the nine islands mentioning the island of Santiago and especially Ribeira Grande as prototypical for the slave trade economy in the past. He only refers to the migration to São Tomé and Príncipe once in the chapter “The time of the intellectuals” (O tempo dos intelectuais), when he writes about the cruel reality of the everyday struggle of survival:

⁷ The lyrics of the text go as following: “Quem mostra’ bo esse caminho longe? / Quem mostra’ bo esse caminho longe? / Esse caminho pra São Tomé / Quem mostra’ bo esse caminho longe? / Quem mostra’ bo esse caminho longe? / Esse caminho pra São Tomé / Sodade sodade / Sodade dessa minha terra, São Nicolau.

And it was the shocking reality of this secular procession of miseries, which either brought the Cape Verdeans death or forced them to emigrate even when it only would be to the rampant exploration of the roças of São Tomé, that a group of national intellectuals denounced in the magazine *Claridade*, in view of the desperate claim of the hungry people during the famine of 1934.⁸

Almeida describes this socially critical approach by Cape Verdean intellectuals mentioning many names and also that of Baltasar Lopes, the author of the “Romanceiro de São Tomé”, published in *Claridade* in 1958.

The specific phenomenon of this migration to São Tomé also preoccupies Almeida in his fictional work. In *Do Monte Cara vê-se o mundo* (2014), he introduces a young woman with the name Yara, who came from São Tomé to Cape Verde being fifteen years old, taking advantage of a repatriation-program. She first landed on the island of Santiago and left from there to Mindelo. Almeida describes her as a mystery who has many sexual relationships, especially with the first person singular and Pepe, a friend. This novel seems a preparation for *O fiel difunto*, in which he makes a difference between corporal and spiritual love explaining the type of loyalty to a person. The Maestro, even dead, is loyal, as the title suggests, which might mean that he did not commit adultery in reality. But then, the question remains, is it adultery to be spiritually united with another person, like the wife of his friend, who knows all his books and with whom he can discuss any topic in relation to his profession?

The powerful representatives of the State and Church are always male in Almeida’s works, and this is also black humor because reality is not so homogeneous. He exaggerates the male composition of the state representatives, creating a social parody. For instance, Almeida is familiar with Vera Duarte, another author of Cape Verde, also a lawyer, who is an activist for human rights, president of the Academy of Letters, Member of the Academy of Science in Lisbon, and former Minister of Education and Higher schools. Her first novel, *A candidata* (2001) addresses the female candidate of a republic in Africa and her just published second book, *Matriarca - Uma história de Mesticagens* (2018) brings back a theme that Almeida also emphasizes, the

⁸ E foi a chocante realidade desse secular cortejo de misérias que ora empurrava o homem cabo verdiano para a morte ora o forçava à emigração, ainda que fosse apenas para a desenfreada exploração das roças de São Tomé, que um grupo de intelectuais nacionais tentou denunciar através da revista *Claridade*, na sequência dos desesperados demandos dos famintos de 1934 (67).

variety of the *mestiço* population of Cape Verde, influenced by many cultures in the course of the centuries.

For this *mestiço* aspect, it is important to provide for the São Tomé and Príncipe migration some additional information. After the abolition of slavery, the Portuguese, Spanish, Belgian and French regimes invented a racial hierarchy for the population in the colonies, distinguishing between indigenous (people without European culture and religion, the majority), *mestiço* (people acculturated to European culture and religion), and white people. The only Portuguese colonies, in which this system was not installed, were Cape Verde and São Tomé e Príncipe. In most cases, the “contract” workers on the *roças* were people classified as indigenous, who worked together with Cape Verdeans, who felt superior to them (Phaf-Rheinberger, 2017, 154-163). Although this hierarchy was not in place any more since the 1960s, the overcoming of this hierarchy played an important role after independence in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. Indigenous, therefore, has a completely different connotation than in Latin America, on which continent it is related to the Amerindian people.

Outlook

In short, neither the “first” republic with a one-party system nor the “second” republic with a more democratic organization of the government in Cape Verde were dictatorships, typical for certain African countries. The Cape Verdean shock of being in touch with an “African” situation on the *roças*, on which they worked in the same or even worse conditions as the “indigenous” from other Portuguese colonies, has the consequence that this experience stands out in Cape Verde’s history of migration. In this context, it has to be remembered that in *O fiel difunto*, only the letter with instructions for the funeral but not the testament is opened. In the light of Almeida’s prognosis that this novel will not be his last one and because of the legitimate role of a testament for a lawyer, it is possible to guess about what will happen. Will the Maestro’s testament be opened in the author’s next book and will he develop further on this issue of Africanization? Due to his permanent use of intertextualities (also Napumoceno is mentioned in *O fiel difunto*), Almeida forces his “loyal” readers to reread his work after every new publication and, in this way, he constructs a series of personalities, among

which the author himself, who repeatedly return. It is all part of his “brincadeira” to inquire the controversial interpretations of Cape Verdean everyday realities and its sensitive nerve, the identification with that “African” place experienced by those old fronts of high intensity of labor.

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