LUSOPHONE AFRICAN POETRY: 
AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORA

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When the subject in question is the Lusophone African Literature, one has to bear in mind that there are expatriate people who have moved from their countries and settled in other African countries or even beyond, like Europe and the Americas. For the purpose of illustration one may remember that here in the United States there are colonies of Capeverdeans scattered around the country. The same fact is true of people from other African territories. The consequence is that this dispersion from the homeland provokes unity among them when they are in foreign lands where they start a new life. Considering that nobody forgets his people and country when he is lonely, far from home, it is obvious that homesickness takes place and a way to exteriorize their feelings is through poetry (and Literature in general, of course). On the other hand, there is another aspect which is very important and ought to be focused on: the ideas the person expatriated may espouse through his work.

Based on this statement I am going to point out some aspects of the exiled African writers as they are reflected in their Literature. Some are praised and some are denounced in this Literature written by/for African people from the Portuguese speaking countries.

First of all, there are those writers who denounce the problems and sufferings of their people as created by the power politics. All these and more are reflected in their poetry. One may say they seek spiritual contentment through exile in their own work; in their written word as a form of escapism. In Marxist parlance it is what is called alienation.

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Sometimes they look for refuge in things that bring only good memories, as Alda do Espírito Santo (from São Tomé e Príncipe), for instance in her poem "Descendo o bairro" she remembers her childhood, saying:

Eu vou trazer para o palco da vida
pêdaços da minha gente.¹

"Avó Mariana" is another representative example of the image of the past, her past. Alda do Espírito Santo—who was imprisoned by the P.I.D.E. for political activities—denounces the wretched life of her fellowwomen as in "No mesmo lado da canoa":

E assim que eu falo,
Meu irmão contratado numa roça de cafè.²

The "contratado" motif is as important element in the Lusophone African Literature because of it affected thousands of people, disrupting their lives, separating husband from wife, parent from children. The poetry of Mozambique reflects similar concerns as it lyrically records the effect of migratory labour in South African mines.

The contract system appears in other works, like in Francisco José Tenreiro, from São Tomé and Príncipe:

Na beira do caminho
Sinhá Carlota
está pitando no seu cachimbo.
Veio do Sul
numa leva de contratados.
Teve filhos negros
Teve filhos mestiços.³

Also in "Canção do Ilhéu" by Tomaz Medeiros one sees the person exiled in his own poetry:

Aquela criança que trago comigo,
Pulsando comigo na dança das veias,
Pulsando comigo nos aí que se apagam,

These writers had used their literary vein to sink in the feelings of their people and denounce their sufferings or talk about the good things they felt in their islands. That is the case, for example, of Jorge Barbosa⁴ in his book Ambiente (1941); he brings the image of the sea in the poem "Irmão" where he exalts the Capeverdeans who used to go in the whaling ships trying to find a better way of life in America through migration.⁵

Pedro Corsino Azevedo, also from Cape Verde, left in his poem "Terra-Longo" the profound feelings of one exiled in a hospital in Portugal in the last days of his life, dying of tuberculosis:

Aquí, perdido, distante
das realidades que apenas sonhei,
cansado pela febre do mais-além,
suponho
minha mãe a embalar-me,
eu, pequenino, zangado pelo sono que não vinha.

Terra-longo tem gente-gentio,
gente-gentio come gente.⁶

² Ferreira, Caliban II, p. 457.  
⁴ After he studied in Lisbon, Tomaz Medeiros went to study in USSR and he had prepared one essay about the evolution of the poetry in S. Tomé. But until now I have not heard anything about its publication.  
⁵ Ferreira, Caliban II, pp. 478-79.  
⁶ Jorge Barbosa had already broken with the traditional models of the poetry in Archipelago (1935), starting, then, the Modern Capeverdean poetry.  
⁷ There is a very relevant movement of migration shown in poetry as well as in novels and short-stories written by many authors, as Manuel Lopes, Baltasar Lopes, Manuel Ferreira, Gabriel Mariano, José Aurélio Gonçalves, Luís Romano and many others. This theme is a recurrent in all Capeverdean Literature.  
Especially in the years before the Independence of the ex-portuguese colonies, many African had tried to free themselves from Portugal and the result was a political work of fiction and poetry in which this group of people acted through their written word; they used the writings as a weapon against their ideological opponents. Some of them wrote during the process to reach Independence. In this group I would like to mention the names of Pepetela, Uanhenga Xitu, Mário António, Luandino Vieira, Agostinho Neto — in Angola.

In Cape Verde, among others, is the wellknown poet Ovídio Martins who became totally deaf in consequence of the miserable sufferings undergone as a political prisoner; the author of *Caminhada* accurately pointed out, in 1962, in Lisbon, in the poem “O único impossível”:

*Mordaças*

A um Poeta?
Nâo me façam rir!...
Experimentem primeiro
Deixar de respirar
Ou riram... mordaças
Com Liberdade. 10

or like he emphasized in 1973, close to Independence; when Ovídio was in Amesterdan:

Nosso amor de liberdade
e de justiça
Será contemplado
e o nosso povo terá direito ao pão 11

Also in Mozambique the writers claim for Independence, as Rui Knopfl who in a strong way declares himself one African when he “expresses his bipolarity of European and African” as Manuel Ferreira very accurately penned down12. Knopfl writes:

Europeu, me dizem.

mas africano sou.

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In another poem he lyricises the child as his father was taken away by the oppressor:

Dispus que é leval
ku tehir di minino
aim ninguim
Dispus que é leval
Canara panti pa tudo alma
Minino mininos
Bo para tehora18

And in São Tomé, Carlos Espírito Santo was born in 1952; he had political activity after the April 25 as a member of the MLSTP. He worked in the Ministry of Information and Popular Culture in São Tomé where he had the opportunity of spreading his ideological point of view. After this, he moved to Portugal to study at the University of Lisbon. His poems were published in a book form with the title Poesia do Colonialismo19. The poems are a testimony of one period in the Literature of São Tomé e Príncipe when the voice of the poets was silenced by the forces of the Colonialism. They make part of its History as the publishers of his book say in the introduction of it.

In his poems one sees since the picture and memories of when he was a boy of seven years old emphasizing that he knew also the work of his ancestors and his own, because even as a child he had to work hard as if he were slave:

Sou moleque
há sete anos nascido
não conheço senão o trabalho
dos meus avós
herdei tamanha riqueza
de madrugada me levanto
para entregar meu corpo à escrava labuta
quando o patrão
descê à sua bonita cidade
eu moleque
caminho correndo20

The fast pace of his life—a kind of running—is reflected by absence of punctuation along the whole poem, which ends with an advertisement:

"Mas cuidado Patrão", because the poet is ready to fight against that repression.

The exile is shown at different levels in Carlos Espírito Santo’s poetry. One was this mentioned above where he looks behind him, he goes back to his childhood, as well as in the poem he remembers the battle which took place in Batepá, in 1953, one year before he was born. He says in “Criminosos de Batepá”:

Criminosos de Batepá
Verdugos de 53
Enlutastes a minha terra
Vós sanguinhentos de 3 de fevereiro
Massacrantes o meu povo
A História sedenta de vingança ébrula pela fúria dos séculos
Assanhaste em desafio contra vós infames
Pela Paz e Justiça do Povo de S. Tomé e Príncipe.21

Another level occurs when Carlos Espírito Santo talks about people coming from other Portuguese speaking African countries in search of better life, and finding disillusion only. One may point out especially two of them. The first one is that encountered in “Filho de contrato” symbolizing the Cape Verdean who goes to S. Tomé e Príncipe in search of job as ‘contratado’:

São Tomé é degredo!
degredo de servíçal!

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ele sonha
Com S. Vicente de Cabo-Verde
berço terra natal!
terra de contrato
terra de trabalho duro

S. Tomé é degredo!
degredo de servíçal!22

In similar fashion he describes the Mozambican who receives strokes of the whip from the foreman because he had to rest a little in order to recover the strength to continue the hard work. One more time, Carlos Espírito Santo ends the poem with one advertisement, but in this case it is a question: “Até quando Patrão?”23.

18 Andrade, Canto armado, p. 123.
21 Espírito Santo, Poesia do Colonialismo, p. 38.
22 Espírito Santo, Poesia do Colonialismo, pp. 63-68.
23 Espírito Santo, Poesia do Colonialismo, p. 21.
And in this way, with the last illustrations, one focus exile within Africa, but in another country such Cape-erd and Mozambique, both to S. Tomé e Príncipe in the two Santo’s poems mentioned above.

Migration is a common fact as, for example, the Capeverdeans going to Guiné-Bissau, as happened with the writers: Artur Augusto, Terencio Anahory and Fausto Duarte. Guiné-Bissau inspired some of them to produce their writings, such as the case especially of Fausto Duarte, who although he returned to Cape Verde, he continued to write about Guiné-Bissau.

Another peculiar exile in another African Portuguese-speaking country is the case of Angolans such as Agostinho Mendes de Carvalho, which native names is Unhenga Xitu — in the way he signs his books. He way put in the famous prison in Tarrafal (in the island of Santiago, Cape Verde) where he received a sentence of ten years. There he wrote his fiction based in his childhood in order to avoid what was happening at that moment. There he passed a bad time, in which besides short-stories and other novels, wrote three times Mestre Tamoda — and all these times he saw its destruction by the hands of the oppressor. I am going to quote some poems he wrote while he was there, but they were published only recently in his last book: Os sobreviventes da máquina colonial depêem…

Prendeste-me
Ai, prendeste-me
Porque gritas viva Angola
Quando um dia voltar
Terei na cabeça uma grinalda de musekenha
Na mão direita rabo de leão
Na mão esquerda rabo de onça
Nos pés alparcas de pele de elefante
E andarei pela rua gritando
Liberdade, Liberdade, Liberdade
E…
Com todo folego gritarei bem alto:
Viva Angola.

That is the poem that open the mentioned book; let us quote some parts of the poem that closes it:

Eu também queria dizer uma lágrima
no óbito da mamãnh XIKA
e, na hora de sair o caixão, dizer:
NDAI UÖÖÖÖ...
Mas, mas não posso

Eu também queria pôr Kismbe na mão,
Eu também queria vestir-me de Kahididi

com grinalda de musekenha na cabeça
com ervas de mulambuiji à tiracolo
cruzando o peito e as costas,
com as mãos em leque e em movimento
de mágoa, diablando a mamãnh XIKA.
Mas, mas não posso.

24 Published in Lisbon, by Edições 70, 1980, pp. 31 and 124-25. Besides these two poems, there are two more along the novel Os sobreviventes da máquina colonial depêem; one is on pages 48-49; the another one written in his native language, Bantu on page 50.


There are also the African who settle in other countries outside the African Continent. In the exile outside of Africa, I will go back a little further in the last century to point out Antonia Gertrudes Pusich with her book: Elegia à memória das infelizes vítimas assassinadas por Francisco de Mattos na rota de 25 de junho de 1844.

It is important to keep in mind some African writers — blacks and mulattoes — who went to Portugal and registered their own protest through poetry &/or fiction. Once there, they had the chance of spreading their ideas as they came in contact with other intellectuals. They discovered a common link: isolation, and consequently, the desire to escape.

This escapism, most of the times, is derived from their exile in another country where they felt homesickness. One may say that some poets tried to exile themselves in their own loneliness such as Onísimo Silveira who was born in Cape Verde, going later on to S. Tomé e Príncipe, and from there to Portugal, finally he returned to Cape Verde. Exiled and linked to the PAIGC he lived in France, China and Sweden. Whatever he is, he claims for freedom through flight:

Atrás dos ferros da prisão
E preciso levantar os braços almejados
Contra a prepotência!
Atrás dos ferros da prisão
E preciso afogar a noite em gritos de luz
Fala a voz, de todos os homens!

Away from the motherland, these men might observe their people in two aspects: because they were out, and sensitively, because they belonged to the same group, and so they felt the same anxieties as their people.
Living far from home, sometimes they can act more effectively because they will be able to denounce the iniquities which they could not do before Independence. Now, even exiled, they work for benefit of the countries they love. They may feel proud in spreading their literature through their work published or only passed among them or even only heard from their mouths. They work in different places sharing their own lives. Considering that in very small countries like the islands of S. Tomé and Príncipe, they are too few to have any profound effect on their countries, or in the words of Preto-Rodas, about S. Tomé and Príncipe:

The present social structure is unmistakably colonial: the 60,000 inhabitants include a small number of Portuguese speaking whites and a mass of blacks and mulattos who speak either popular Creole dialect called Fofa or the native tongues of their African homelands. 27

There are exiled people since the beginning of the discovery of S. Tomé and Príncipe, whose first inhabitants were a motley group of exiles, traders, and recent, if unwilling, converts from Judaism. 28 After this, the slaves were many, and nowadays—besides those mentioned above—there are also black workers from the African Continent.

These facts reflect a contrast from the point of view in some poets as, for instance, Caetano Costa Alegre and Francisco José Tenreiro. The first one invokes the beauty of the black girls of his country, as in "A Negra":

Negra genial, carvão mimoso e lindo
Donde o diamante sai,
Filha do sol, estrela rejaneada,
Pelo calor do Pai. 29

While Costa Alegre claims his 'negrição' as in a poem where he discuss the question of color:

A minha cór é negra
Indica luto e pena;
A tua raga é branca
Tu és cheia de graça
Todo eu sou um defeito,
Sucumbo sem esperanças.

Francisco Tenreiro exalts the black color in a view of 'negritude', as in the long and very expressive poem "Mãos". Then, these two exiled poets in Portugal sang the isolation and their color in two different and opposite views. While Caetano Costa Alegre presents contrasts, 30 as he calls one of his poems: "Contraste", Francisco José Tenreiro shows that pigmentation is nothing in "Canoa do Mystico". But both poets — Caetano and Francisco — knew how painful is to stay far from home. For instance, it belongs to Caetano these marvelous verses, showing the sufferings of one exiled:

A! que diga o exilado, o forasteiro,
Se pode ser o riso companheiro
De quem vivo tão longe da família?

and Francisco wrote a poem full of synesthesias with a strong chromatism in its verses talking about homesickness:

Caminhos trilhados na Europa
de coração em África.
Saudades longas de palmeiras vermelhas verdes amarelas
tons fortes da paleta cubista
que o Sol sensual pintou na paisagem;
saudade sentida de coração em África
ao atravessar estes campos do trigo sem bocas
das ruas sem alegria com casas cariadas
pela metralha mfope da Europa e da América
da Europa trilhada por mim Negro de coração em África.

The action of these people as political activists allowed them to work in different levels, developing and spreading concepts about their fellowmen and making their countries better known to the world through their literary and political writings. Francisco Tenreiro, for example, as a deputy for his country in the Portuguese National Assembly has dedicated his poetry to the African man and his world, while he traveled through Europe and South America.

31 It is curious that the contrast in Caetano Costa Alegre starts in his own name—"Alegre", meaning "Happy", because in fact, he did not have anything connected with happiness in his life.
32 Ferreira, Caliban II, p. 433.
33 Ferreira, Caliban II, p. 443-44.
Also from S. Tomé e Príncipe there is the poetess Maria Manuela Margarido, living and working in France and so spreading the customs and culture of her motherland among her acquaintances. Maria Manuela Margarido is a committed poetess who also writes good poetry. She talks about her island in “Memória da Ilha do Príncipe”. About anxiety for liberty she expresses her feelings “Sôçôpê”. In the poem “Roça”, Margarido uses the dawn to express this anxiety:

A noite sangra
no mato,
ferida por uma aguda lança
de cólera.
A madrugada sangra
de outro modo:
e o sino da alvorada
que desperta o terreiro.
É o feitor que começa
a destinar as tarefas
para mais um dia de trabalho.

E sonhas na distância
uma vida mais livre,
cu o teu gesto
hás-de realizar.34

Her poetry is rich in images and in themes: migration also gets a place in Manuela Margarido’s poem “Serviçais”; as well as the protest against the invader in “Vós que ocupais a nossa terra”. In the latter poem, she condemns the white settlers who grabbed huge chunk of land, leaving the indigenous people landless:

Derrubam as árvores fruta-píao
para que passemos fome
e vigiam as estradas
receando a fuga do cacau.35

From Cape Verde the poet Corsino Fortes, as an ambassador in Europe, had the opportunity of spreading the feelings of his people, especially through his book of poems, Pão & Fonema. Let us illustrate with verses of the poem “Emigrante”:

Todas as tardes o poente dobra
o teu polegar sobre a ilha
E do poente ao polegar

Tê log tê log terra d’nhes gente
est’ mar de Crist’ qu’ abs camim
Mundo já cabé ne mi d’ar quente
pacience d’pôe já tch’gá na sim

Tê log tê log ‘cês tud’ tê log
Dês companhia tud’ fial cristôm
Q’ând tchua da ‘cês mandá tch’mam’
p’âm’ bem sem’nhá um p’lar de tchôm38

A curious fact about the African Continent is that it has not only given the world a host of exiles, but that it has also received some. An example of this is the Portuguese Tomás António Gonzaga who went to Brazil in the XVIII century as a judge. Later on he was involved in the “Inconfidência Mineira” and, consequently, he was sentenced to exile in Mozambique where he wrote the second part of his famous book of poems: Liras.

34 Margarido, Poetas de S. Tome, pp. 81-82.
31 Margarido, Poetas de S. Tome, p. 84.
37 The poem is on page 49 in Pão & Fonema.
38 Ferreira, Caliban I, p. 303.
I would like to finish my presentation by recalling one poet already focused: Francisco José Telleiro, who in the poem “Negro de todo o mundo” summarizes the experience of Lusophone black diaspora.

O som do gong
ficou gritando no ar
que o negro tinha perdido
Harlem! Harlem!
América!
nas ruas de Harlem
os negros trocam a vida por navalhast
América!
nas ruas de Harlem
o sangue de negros e de brancos
está formando xadrez.
Harlem!
Bairro negro!
Ring da vida!
Os poetas de Cabo Verde
estão cantando...
Cantando os homens
perdidos na pesca da baleia.
Cantando os homens
perdido em aventuras da vida
espalhados por todo o mundo!
Em Lisboa?
Na América?
No Rio?
Sabe-se lá!

Espera
E a morna...
Voz nostálgica do cabo verdeano
chamando por seus irmãos!
Nos terrenos do fumo
os negros estão cantando...
Nos arranha-céus de New-York
os brancos macaqueando...
Nos terrenos de Virgínia
os negros estão dançando...
No showboat do Mississipi

os brancos macaqueando.
Ah!
Nos estados do sul
os negros estão cantando
A tua voz escurinha
está cantando
nos palcos de Paris.
Folies-Bergère!
Londres-Paris-Madrid
na mala de viagem...
Só as canções longas
que está soluçando
dizem da nossa tristeza e melancolia!
Se fosses branco
terias a pele queimada
das caldeiras dos navios
que te levam a aventura!
Se fosses branco
terias os pulmões cheios
de carvão descarregado
no cais de Liverpool!
Se fosses branco
quando jogas a vida
por um copo de whisky
terias o seu retrato no jornal!
Negro!
Na cidade da Baía
os negros
estão sacudindo os músculos.
UH!
Na cidade da Baía
os negros
estão fazendo macumba.
Ora xlá! Ora xlá!
Cidade branca da Baía
Trezenta e tantas igrejas!
Baía...
Negra. Bem negra!
Cidade de Pai do Santo.
Ora xlá! Ora xlá!

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39 Representative points of view about Black Diaspora are presented by Elias Larkin Nascimento in her book Pan Africanism and South America (Buffalo: Afrodispora, 1980).

40 Margarido, Poetas de S. Tomé, pp. 13-54