

*Collective Awareness and Lyrical Poetry:  
The Emergence of Creole Literary Culture in  
the Archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe*

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**Abstract.** The problem discussed in the article is the emergence of the autonomous literary system on the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, a former Portuguese slave emporium, as well as coffee and cocoa producing colony. Several concurrent narrations concerning the emergence of the Santomense literary system are presented. One of them accentuates the groundbreaking role of a particular institution, *Casa dos Estudantes do Império*; other narrations inscribe the literature of the tiny archipelago in a larger system of Portuguese-speaking literature (Lusophony). The author of the present article postulates a radical enlargement of the chronological and cultural perspective, including the legacy of the Angolars (rebellious slaves) and their collective awareness in the genesis of the local literary tradition, in parity with such elements as the legacy of the Portuguese colonizers and free Creole social groups (Forros). It could be a way of overcoming the Eurocentric “chronopolitics” that remained valid also in the postcolonial studies, associating the decolonial processes, on the one hand, with the metropolis as a place where the decolonial thought took shape, and on the other, with the chronology, rhythms, and trends of its literary evolution.

**Keywords:** Lusophone literature; Creole literature; São Tomé and Príncipe; island culture; orality vs. literacy

Arguably, São Tomé and Príncipe is an ultra-minor literary system inside a larger compound of Lusophone post-colonial literatures. The archipelago, located in the Gulf of Guinea near the western coast of Central Africa is one of the smallest states of the continent. It is also the smallest member of the community of the Portuguese-speaking countries (PALOP). Apparently, such a tiny literature should be easy to conceptualise and to present. Nonetheless, several concurrent narrations about its origins, emergence and “true” identity has been formulated. This is why it can be treated as an interesting example contributing to the general discussion concerning the importance of the lyrical factor in the formation of literary cultures in varied global contexts.

In spite of the tiny size in terms of geographical extension and population, the archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe is a complex anthropological, linguistic and social reality. At the time of the discovery of the archipelago by the Portuguese sailors João de Santarém and Pedro Escobar at the turn of the year 1470/1471, it consisted of uninhabited islands. The first settlement attempts were made in 1486, when João de Paiva received a privilege from the Portuguese king John II allowing the creation of a colony. Due to the relative closeness of the slave markets of the present-day Ghana and Nigeria, the establishment of sugar cane plantations became possible already at an early stage. Álvaro de Caminha, who took over the captaincy in 1493, brought experienced settlers from Madeira (that already at the time was a sugar-producing centre), as well as convicts and children removed from the persecuted Jewish families from Portugal. Even if most of the children participating in that peculiar deculturation experiment of the inquisitorial era perished, a Creole free population was soon to emerge as a result of the intermarriage of Portuguese men and African women. Since the climate was extremely deadly for Europeans, John II ordered that each of the settlers took a black slave, and the children of these unions were granted freedom by his successor, Manuel I, in 1515. The blacks who accompanied the first settlers were also freed from slavery; in turn, they often became masters acquiring their own slaves. Thus, already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, dark-skinned owners of the sugar mills in São Tomé were not uncommon. Forro, the modern term for the dominant Creole group, is derived from the term *alforria*, meaning the act of freeing a slave.

Another, nineteenth-century wave of settlement was associated with the introduction of new crops: coffee, introduced into the archipelago in 1787, and cocoa, for the first time planted in São Tomé in 1822. In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, São Tomé was to become one of the world's most important exporters of those colonial crops. New economic opportunities provoked the influx of Portuguese masses and the ousting of the Forros from the lands they previously owned. A new type of plantation, called *roça*, was created. It was no longer the scenery of slave labour: former slaves were replaced by the so-called *serviçais*. The supposedly modern enterprise was based on the employment of the so-called "contracted workers" (*contratados*). It was a reality hiding a new type of oppression as the "contracts" of perpetual indenture were essentially an equivalent of forced labour resembling very closely the actual slavery, even if the workers were paid small wages and had certain legal rights. The contracts were theoretically valid for several years, but were automatically renewed on expiry and the labourers were never repatriated. Also their children used to inherit the same status (cf. W. G. Clarence-Smith 2008). The *serviçais* were displaced from other parts of the Portuguese colonial empire, most notably Angola and Cabo Verde, as well as northern Mozambique. The most celebrated literary

figure representing the misery of the resettled worker in São Tomé is the *monangamba* (porter) from the poem of António Jacinto, an Angolan author belonging to the circle of the *Casa dos Estudantes do Império* (cf. Jacinto 1961). Yet curiously, a recent study explores also a relatively positive memory of the years spent in São Tomé, related by a former contracted worker (cf. Åkesson 2016). As much as the individual experiences might vary, as a consequence of the mass resettlement, a new category of the population of the archipelago emerged: the so-called *tongas* – descendants of the displaced workers. They preserved their memory and cultural distinctiveness inside the archipelago up to the present day (cf. Cidra 2015).

This complex colonial past makes of São Tomé a kind of crossroad close to the western shores of Africa. It explains why the archipelago of only about 160,000 inhabitants has become a microcosm in which as many as five languages coexist: firstly, Portuguese, then a Creole language of the island of São Tomé designed as Forro, then yet another variation from Príncipe designed as Lunguyè, then a Creole language from Cabo Verde introduced by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century immigrant population. Angolar, the language of the descendants of the castaways from Angola, which is a Creole language that developed on the basis of Kimbundu and Umbundu languages (as opposed to the first three Creole languages, where Portuguese elements predominate) may be regarded as the oldest substrate. The cultural influences of Brazil and other African countries, including former British colonial possessions located only several hundred nautical miles away, are also present.

One of the most tragic episodes in the colonial history of São Tomé was the Batepá Massacre in February and March 1953. Terrified by the possibility of further revolts, the colonial administration murdered, for no apparent reason, over a thousand people belonging mainly to the Creole Forro group. Undoubtedly, it was the part of the population in which the decolonial awareness took the deepest root. The Forros often had sufficient economic resources to study in Portugal; they constituted the nucleus of the local intelligentsia and joined the ranks of activists. They were also aware of current events in other parts of Africa, such as the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya that started in 1952. It could eventually set a precedent for similar uprisings in the Portuguese colonial empire. On the other hand, these were also the days of the great Salazar's dream about ideal colonies, the times of intense colonial propaganda. As an expression of the fascination of the Salazarian regime with aviation, airports were built both on the island of São Tomé and the island of Príncipe. Many other investments were also undertaken. This striving for progress, however, increased the burdens for the local population.

In this climate of frantic modernization, there appeared pamphlets produced by unspecified perpetrators (it might even be a provocation fabricated by the governor, Carlos de Sousa Gorgulho, an overzealous civil servant desiring

to distinguish himself in the defence of the empire). The appearance of the pamphlets was interpreted as a sign of a communist conspiracy wishing to overthrow the government, perhaps even to murder all the whites on the island. The plot was allegedly centred in Trindade, a city that was the traditional centre of Forro community life. The murder of a member of this group by the police provoked a protest march from the nearby town of Batepá. The forces of the regime opened fire on the gathered people and started a veritable manhunt for those who tried to find a refuge in the jungle. The unleashed spectacle of violence led to lingering pacification activities. Houses were burned, sometimes together with the residents locked inside them. About 3,000 Forros were imprisoned and tortured. Another macabre episode was the crowding of several dozens of prisoners in an overheated, waterless cell, where twenty-eight people died of thirst. The perpetrators demanded “confessions” to expose the alleged anti-government plot. On the other hand, as suggested by Gerhard Seibert (2002: 60-61), the course of events was the result of the conflict between the Forro community, who considered themselves true Santomense, and the people displaced under the system of “contracts”, who became employed in the special order forces (*Corpo de Polícia Indígena*).

The visit of the human rights defender Manuel João da Palma Carlos, a reputed lawyer from Lisbon, became the turning point in the escalating repression. Together with the then young, future poet Alda Espírito Santo, he began to write down the testimonies of the prisoners, an action which the local authorities perceived as a threat to their own impunity. Be that as it may, the trauma caused by those bloody events durably shaped the memoryscape of São Tomé (cf. Rodrigues 2016).

What is more, the events started to produce not only a metropolitan, but also an international resonance. When a New York Times journalist arrived on the island, the Salazar's government had to change its strategy. The governor was recalled to Lisbon, where he “voluntarily” resigned from his office in exchange of state honours. The prisoners were released and the entire episode was silenced. Over the years, however, it gained great visibility, both in the works of historians and in literature. It was interpreted as an attempt to remove the local, racially mixed intellectual elite and to replace it with white Portuguese coming directly from the metropolis. Thus, the Salazarian empire, which proclaimed the inalienability of the “overseas provinces” as part of the Portuguese motherland, contradicted its own Lusotropicalist ideology, borrowed from the Brazilian sociologist Gilbert Freyre, praising the unhindered confluence of races and cultures that was supposed to be a peculiar Portuguese achievement and a contribution to human history. The massacre of Batepá created one of the many fissures in the image of the Portuguese empire as a space of commonwealth, alleged racial harmony, justice, tolerance and work for progress.

During the colonial period, a peculiar kind of Santomense literature was created. It celebrated the local reality, often with a propagandistic intent. The tiny archipelago is particularly picturesque, covered with a luxurious vegetation. No wonder that in the heyday of the Portuguese colonialism it was considered as an authentic pearl among the African possessions and a sort of model colony. *Viagem maravilhosa por terras de S. Tomé e Príncipe*, by Costa Garcês, a little book published in the 1950s that may nowadays be seen as little more than a yellowed, dusty, and forgotten pamphlet, is a good example of that early strand of local writing. This publication, illustrated with maps, lithographs and photographs of well-kept churches and houses for indigenous workers, used to serve the official propaganda, bringing the inhabitants of the metropolis closer to those almost completely unknown corners of the empire. São Tomé, Príncipe, as well as a small island located almost on the equator, Ilhéu das Rolas, are compared to a gigantic rosary stretched across the waters of the Gulf of Guinea. Although discovered by the Portuguese, not all parts of this “rosary” archipelago belonged to this country in the middle of the 20th century; Fernando Pó, Ilhas Tinhosas and Ano Bom came under Spanish rule. However, the description of the trip to São Tomé exudes a lyrical vision of the natural vitality, order and prosperity of imperial territories. There is no mention of the grave problems of the colony, such as the malaria that was decimating the population:

Before our eyes the undulating shape of the bay, climbing towards the interior of the island with a series of hills reaching, at a height of over a thousand meters, Pico de Ana de Chaves, half sheltered at the top by clouds that slowly crawl away through the dark green of the vegetation, scorched by the breeze that blows alternately from the Atlantic and from the African deserts. On the southern edge is Fort St. Sebastian, with battlements behind which old barrels still peek out, from which bullets used to fly, defending the city. Further on, in the deeper part of the bay, on the shores covered with trees, the town of S. Tomé lounged lazily. Buildings in light colours contrast with the dark hue of the vegetation. The spacious, sunny houses line the merry streets with gardens full of flowers, which are like a multicoloured cry against the background of evergreen foliage (Costa Garcês 1956: 13).

The same enthusiasm of the colonizers treating, in consonance with the official ideology of the regime, the islands as a part of Portugal and finding patriotic reasons to celebrate their beauty was abundantly expressed also in lyrical poetry, such as that of Hugo Rocha, the author of *Rapsódia Negra* (1933). Although some of those verses might be occasionally remembered to illustrate the splendour of Santomense nature, very little of this poetic legacy conserves any value for the contemporary critical reading.

Those neat and joyful pictures contrast with quite different awareness of the islands and the circumstances of the collective presence on the shores of São Tomé, preserved among the Angolar community. One of their narrations, quoted by Donald Burness (2007: 27), is the story of the *Misericórdia*, a ship that departed in 1532 from southern Angola with a shipment of slaves originating from the Umbundu peoples. As a consequence of their revolt, the Portuguese traders were put into a pinnace, while the main ship, adrift with sea currents, crushed against *Sete Pedras*, dangerous rocky islets at the distance of 4.6 km off the south-east end of the island of São Tomé. Other legends mention different names of the ships and vary on the exact circumstances of the disaster on the shores of the island. The site, *Sete Pedras*, is likely to remain unchanged due to the geographic and hydrological conditions leading to increased danger of shipwrecking in this area. Anyway, the body of these 16<sup>th</sup>-century maritime histories mark the symbolic beginning of the Angolar community, which today, according to various estimates, ranges from 12,000 up to 30,000 people. Such divergent estimates are due to the fact that it is still a marginalized population, subdued by the Forros, Creoles who are at least partly the genetic descendants of the Portuguese and who inherited their dominant position and the rule over the archipelago. Angolar settlements and cities, such as Santa Cruz in the southern part of São Tomé (that is, *Anguéné* in the Angolar poetry and collective memory), with their own “kings”, remained independent until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when they were utterly pacified and submitted to the colonial administration – namely, due to the military action undertaken in 1878 by the governor Estanislau Xavier d’Assumpção e Almeida (cf. Caldeira 2018).

Almost from the very beginning of human presence on the formerly uninhabited archipelago, the slave community was extremely restless. For several centuries, there existed a population independent of the main centres of power, consisting of fugitives taking refuge in the lush rainforests covering the islands. The first slave revolt took place as early as 1517 on a plantation belonging to João Lobato. The chronicles also recorded the revolt of 1595, led by the “king” Amador, who, by freeing slaves from successive plantations, managed to gather an army of about 5,000 followers, occupy almost the entire island and lay siege to Fort St. Sebastian. Although he was eventually killed and the revolt was suppressed, King Amador made a lasting impression on the local memory, becoming a symbolic patron of subsequent rebellions in 1673 and 1675. They coincided with a relative downfall of the colony’s sugar-based economy, which was also struggling against other European powers: the Netherlands and France whose ambition was to extend their own colonial dominions. Therefore, it was only in 1693 that the Portuguese managed to control the Angolars, granting them a relative autonomy and the right to the occupied lands. The status quo

was respected till 1878. Later on, removed from the occupied territories, the population settled on the coast and took up a way of life based mainly on fishing activities, in the margin of the main colonial order with its economy based on the lucrative cultures of coffee and cocoa.

In the first attempts at formulating a postcolonial literary history of São Tomé, such factors as the marginalised Angolar presence were simply neglected. Even if the most diffused scholarly vision defines the literature of the archipelago as one based on an “oral matrix” (“literatura com uma matriz oral”, cf. Levi 2004: 15), such a hypothesis presupposes just a Portuguese popular expression conjugated with its Creole Forro derivatives, in due time leading to an essentially Lusophone literacy. The existence of Angolar collective awareness expressed in oral poetry developing in parallel to the dominant Portuguese as well as Creole Forro literacy has rarely been contemplated. This is why the literature of São Tomé seemed very easy to conceptualise. Apparently, it was simply a paragraph in a larger history of the Portuguese-speaking literature, developing basically in consonance to the aesthetic and ideological patterns born in the metropolis. The postcolonial Lusophone chronopolitics assumed a total invisibility of the multilingual, marginalised expression. Neglecting the oral literature of the community of survivors that might be seen as a continuation of ancestral forms of culture brought from the African mainland, the postcolonial vision of Santomense literature, without any deeper roots, was also extremely short in terms of chronology.

Already as a student at the University of Lisbon in the 1990s, I got familiar with a simplified, yet supposedly consistent narration concerning the birth of the literature of São Tomé. It was presented with a great confidence by early postcolonial scholars who usually shared leftist political persuasions that had been popular since the fall of the Salazarian regime. At the time, the discipline dedicated to the study of the reality designated as *literaturas de expressão portuguesa* (“the literatures of Portuguese expression”, cf. Ferreira, 1986), based on a specific reception of postcolonial studies in Portugal, was still a novelty. I speak of a specific reception, because the Portuguese culture was still immersed in a deep identity crisis after the loss of its colonial empire in 1975 and its recent reorientation and re-inscription in the European framework. In 1986 Portugal entered the European Economic Community not as a significant power, but as one of smaller and weaker nations, “reproducing, in new terms, the semiperipheral condition” (Santos 2002: 10); this is why there was quite a pungent sensation of loss of status. The country was no longer a great colonial empire, and this fact had an impact on the vision of emergent Lusophone literatures as they were conceptualised in Lisbon. This scholarly tendency still cultivated a specific vision of the Portuguese language that acquired almost a sacral status as the only remaining receptacle of the past imperial glories.

According to that clear and consistent narration formulated and reproduced in Lisbon, the first significant poet of São Tomé was Francisco José Tenreiro (1921–1966), and the foundational text of this new literary system was his volume of poetry *Ilha do Nome Santo* published in 1942. In his poetry, Tenreiro criticized the local Creole society that appreciated, in an exaggerated way, things, values, and ideas brought from Europe, symbolised by a German piano, an instrument that was useless in the local conditions, because it constantly got out of tune in the hot and humid climate of the tropical islands. Allegedly, from the beginning of the 1950s, the lyrical expression of Tenreiro became the fullest Portuguese-speaking expression of *négritude*. Nonetheless, the association between Tenreiro and such writers as Senghor and Césaire was not exactly a deliberate choice of the writer. It was conceptualised by the metropolitan critics such as Mário de Andrade, Alfredo Margarido and Salvato Trigo. Most probably, Tenreiro never read Césaire and the coincidence of his poetry with the global *négritude* movement had, at best, an intuitive character. Pires Laranjeira commented on this polemic in the essay “A negritude e a negritude entre os Africanos de língua portuguesa” [“The negritude and a negritude among the Portuguese-speaking Africans”] (Laranjeira 1992: 49–65). The ambivalent title of this essay suggested that there existed two different assertions of the term “negritude”: the “true” *négritude* and a sort of pseudo-negritude among the Portuguese-speaking poets who remained essentially in the margin of the international movement, alien to it or even unaware of it. Such an interpretation might be treated as a symptom of the patronizing habits still common among the metropolitan intelligentsia.

In parallel with the Portuguese debate on the *négritude*, there appeared also an assumption that all those local literary systems of various Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa emerged essentially in Lisbon. Allegedly, none of them arose locally, as a spontaneous expression of the peculiar reality of an African country or society; on the contrary, they were inscribed in a larger reality of the Portuguese colonial empire. The often repeated scholarly narration concerning the emergence of Lusophone African literatures accentuated the importance of a single institution, *Casa dos Estudantes do Império* in Lisbon (1944–1965). The essential aim of this institution created by the Salazarian regime, apparently just an academic residence, was to control the students coming from various parts of the Portuguese colonial empire. Yet contrary to the intentions of its creators, it contributed to the dissemination of decolonial ideas, i.e. the political and social ideas concerning the decolonizing process. The left-wing ideological orientation of the movement dictated certain paradigms of literary expression that, as it was believed, should accompany those processes – basically the neo-realism. This aesthetic formula was considered by its metropolitan propagators in the late 1930s and 1940s as a Portuguese version of social realism defined in

the Soviet Union; in fact, the literary reality born under the sign of Portuguese neorealism, be it by lack of direct communication with the communist countries or just by its own, autonomous evolution, became rather distinct from that of the Eastern Block. Be that as it may, both decolonial and aesthetic ideas were essentially shared between the leftist Portuguese, i.e. the opposition against the Salazar regime in the colonial metropolis, and the African intellectuals who were strongly under their influence, reduced, so to speak, to the role of catechumens of that metropolitan left-wing thought. This explains why the poetical volume of Tenreiro was published in Coimbra, in the famous series *Novo Cancioneiro* together with the poetry written by Portuguese metropolitan neorealists. The forms of postcolonial literary expression were presumably derived from the creative logic of Portuguese literature, and constituted a continuation of the peculiar forms of neorealism in Portuguese poetry and prose.

The same vision – as well as the peculiar self-assurance characteristic of the metropolitan scholars – was shared by the intellectuals representing the islands, but educated in the metropolis and deeply immersed in its ideological climate. Inocência Mata, probably the most significant literary scholar originating from São Tomé, wrote in 1993:

One historical truth seems thus incontestable to us: before the poets of the CEI [*Casa dos Estudantes do Império*] there was no original literature in São Tomé and Príncipe (Francisco José Tenreiro, who revealed himself in 1942 in the framework of the collection of *Novo Cancioneiro* was just an individual voice). That is, no literature that, in full awareness, would refuse its annexation by the Portuguese literature, no literature that would be more than formal and thematic imitation (picturesque African themes) or a source of information about the Santomense universe in terms of landscape and people, no writing of/in Santomense society, its history and culture, its aspirations and desires, its joys and pleasures, its victories and defeats, its humanness and its coming to awareness (Mata 1993: 222).

Certainly, this is a very reductive opinion. What is more, this “centralised” vision of the birth of Lusophone literatures associated with a single metropolitan institution (*Casa dos Estudantes do Império*) necessarily presupposes their synchronisation with metropolitan time and global movements mediated through the metropolitan awareness. This synchronisation of the emergence of the literature in São Tomé with such movements as *négritude* and neorealism excludes the depth of the local time perspective, as well as the relevance of the marginalised memory preserving an uninterrupted legacy of trauma and resistance from the 16<sup>th</sup> century on. The early researchers in the African “literatures of Portuguese expression” (*literaturas de expressão portuguesa*) tried

to conceptualise them according to imported, presumably universal concepts, paying little attention to local idiosyncrasies and legacies. The background of this interpretative project is the anxious search for Portuguese identity after the breakdown of the colonial empire and the metropolitan striving for conclusions that would put in the limelight the unity of the literary system in spite of the fragmentation of the symbolic system underpinning that empire. Lusophone literature was to redeem the fiasco of the colonial project, providing a sort of *post hoc* justification to the colonial enterprise of the Portuguese.

According to the optics issued from the early postcolonial studies as they were understood in Portugal, the literature of São Tomé remained inscribed in a shallow, colonial-decolonial chronology in close connection with Lisbon. Its roots and sources were Portuguese even if the tropical location introduced a surplus of the picturesque and colour. Allegedly, this literature had very little or nothing to do with the African coast where the first slaves were brought from. This is why, in spite of all its revolutionary potential, the postcolonial studies created a scholarly legacy that still requires a re-evaluation. The assumption that the literature of São Tomé was born with the decolonisation is a lingering trace of Eurocentric perspective. There is a major methodological problem connected with the hypothesis of the shallow time scale, as well as the delocalised beginning of the process of formation of literary culture. It simply obliterates its deepest roots, introducing instead concepts and categories born far from São Tomé and inscribing its literature in a context that is global only in appearance. In reality, this inscription in Eurocentric literary geography perpetuates the contours of the former colonial empire.

The persistent tendency to ignore the local deep time in order to privilege the shallow time established not only by the colonization, but even more importantly, by the temporal perspective of the decolonial thought formulated in the metropolis constitutes an ever-present shadow of European symbolic dominance in global literary studies. To rectify such erroneous assertions is much greater challenge than just to prove that the formation of literary culture in São Tomé and Príncipe is not such a recent process as most of the scholars believe. The global literary chronology is still falsified by the presupposition of the crucial importance of the colonial/decolonial/postcolonial sequence: the arrival of the Europeans as the auroral moment, the seeds of new cultural becoming related to the adoption of the European concepts of literature and identity, then the decolonial emancipation as a logical result of the growth of the awareness that had been initialised by the introduction of those concepts, and finally, the postcolonial literary flourishing as the fulfilment of the whole cycle.

Nonetheless, as I suppose, the emergence of the literary culture in São Tomé (and analogically, in many similar cultural systems in global margins) may

be presented in a less Eurocentric, more pluralistic way. Delving deeper into the human reality of the archipelago and contemplating the relation between traumatic memory, collective awareness, and the emergence of literature as a response to trauma and marginalisation, it is possible to formulate a far more localised, idiosyncratic vision of literary becoming. The birth of the literary system in São Tomé may be seen as far more independent from the metropolis and its institutions such as *Casa dos Estudantes do Império*. Not only the ethnic, but also the cultural origins of the population inhabiting the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe are complex. This complexity is crucial for the formation of multiple cultural literacies that had only partially been acknowledged by the post-colonial scholarship. On the other hand, scholars exploiting an ethnographic inspiration, such as David Burness, bring into consideration new materials, such as the songs of the Angolars (cf. Burness 2007). Unfortunately, they still remain in the margin of the postcolonial mainstream.

It is important to observe that a successful passage from orality to a printing-press type of literacy appears as a precondition of scholarly visibility of the literary phenomena. Yet it is well known that orality can grant transmission of cultural contents through time just as the printing press does. As it has been presented above, the archipelago is the space of coexistence not only of several groups, but also of several distinct memories, legacies and sources of collective identification: the descendants of West African slaves (Angolars), the so-called Forros, i.e. the descendants of the Portuguese and some privileged Africans, often acting as independent slave traders already in the early-modern history, and the Tongas whose early-modern and modern background is connected with other geographical locations, such as Cape Verde. Each of these groups stands out by their linguistic expression and collective memory, partially transmitted orally (not only in the case of Angolars), yet perfectly preserved and very much alive up to the present day. Already during the colonial period, the dominant group of Creole Forros, together with some Portuguese settlers, had the ambition of creating an autonomous literary culture expressing the character of the archipelago. They aspired to written literature as a source of social prestige that could only come with the use of the printing press, as well as a supply of imported ideas and aesthetic formulas. This is where Tenreiro's neorealist poetry could be included, with his criticism of the imported German piano epitomizing the ambitions of the Creole class and resuming its aspirations of civilisation and progress. Obviously, as a poet, he offered the mirror of satire to the class to which he himself belonged and whose aspirations he shared. But such a poetry was just one fragment of the puzzle.

The awareness of the multiplicity of origins singles out the contemporary poetry of São Tomé, namely through the depth of lyrical expression of

Conceição Lima achieved in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the beginning of the new millennium she gives a critical, yet deeply personal, eminently feminine voice reflecting the complexity of the African, not just Lusophone, identity of the islands: the *Afroinsularidade* of São Tomé, as she defined it in one of the poems from the volume *O útero da casa* (Lima 2004: 40). The background of the emergence of Santomense literature is formed by multiple chains of maritime events, interconnected lines of maritime history. Just to recapitulate, the colonial cycle of São Tomé and Príncipe started, as it has been mentioned, in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Following their exploration in the 1470s, the Portuguese decide that the islands in the Gulf of Guinea would be an excellent place for a slave emporium connected with African mainland. This connection never disappeared from the cultural landscape; it formed a line of memory. Later on, the colonial history of the islands, adapted for the intensive cultivation of coffee and cocoa, leads to the advent of a local Creole middle class that would inherit the archipelago after the collapse of the colonial empire in 1975. Portuguese-Forro literary ambitions gained greater visibility and resonance, but should not be treated as the only relevant reality of São Tomé and Príncipe. The dominant colonial history, to a large degree inherited by the present-day descendants of the Forros, should not silence the plurality of Santomense origins and foundational memories of navigation, that not always coincide with the Eurocentric perspective. The oldest literary patrimony of the islands, constituted by oral poems and narrations recording the origin of Angolars, the Africans who survived various catastrophes of slave trading ships, is still a living legacy. Angolars still celebrate the deeds of the hero of their resistance, Amador, as they live a modest life in the margin of the dominant Forro group. It is fully legitimate to speak, in the case of the Angolars, about a continuity of deep time awareness, expressed in oral poetry that survived to our times and that is independent in relation to the dominant, colonial and Creole one. It is a poetry that creates a wider time perspective, since it preserves the memory of an origin and points at the African mainland as the root of Angolar identity. Such poetry inscribes the marginalised community in a time horizon that is larger than the colonial history and the early-modern circumstances of their coming to the archipelago.

Therefore, even if São Tomé seems such a tiny reality, we should speak of a polycentric literary system in which various strands of tradition are interwoven. After the independence of the country, a progressive integration and harmonization of those diverse strands seems to take place. The tradition of sophisticated literacy is comparable to that of Cape Verde, another Atlantic Portuguese-speaking archipelago, also fostered by an ambitious Creole middle class. Yet at the same time, the “Afroinsular” peculiarity of this literary system

can be analysed neither as a derivation of the metropolitan aesthetics nor in the framework of decolonial chronology accentuating the ideological evolution of the elites synchronised with the metropolis. It is a wider, more complex whole that requires a careful examination.

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