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Dancing at the Crossroads

BATUKO, COMMUNITY, AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN CAPE VERDE WEST AFRICA



Nearby forest outside of Zazinha's home in Chao de Tanque, located in the center of Santiago Island

On Santiago Island, at approximately 7 pm, Zazinha returns to her house after working in her maize field all day. Except for the distant ring from a goat's bell or chirps from the nearby forest, the sounds of Chão de Tanque are quiet, contrasting with the bustling capital city one hour away by bus. The quiet lasts until about 8 pm, when, one by one, girls between the ages of 8 and 14 start running from down street and appear at Zazinha's front patio. A slow crescendo of giggles and greetings increases as the girls say hello and form a circle of chairs. Soon Zazinha's quiet farmhouse ignites with a booming performance of batuko; girls begin to drum on plastic lap-pouches called tchabetas, singing about family abroad and Cape Verdean quotidien life.

ZAZINHA lives in the lush rural center of Santiago Island, one of nine islands in the archipelago of Cape Verde, West Africa. While Zazinha's agricultural community is located in relative isolation from the capital city, she and her neighbors are part of a greater tight-knit international community. The islands are located 450 miles west of Senegal, at the geographic and cultural crossroads between West Africa, Europe and the Americas. Cape Verdeans that live in diaspora communities abroad outnumber those living on the islands, adding to this crossroads identity by creating a constant flow of cultural exchange as they return home and financially support the islands throughout the year. From influenced performance styles to incorporated languages to foreign products, cultural fragments from all over the world saturate Cape Verdean life and exemplify the crossroads culture that is readily identified with Cape Verde. For example, at a nearby general store called a "Chinese Loja," a man wearing a green and yellow "Brazil" t-shirt purchases Portuguese "Superboc" beer. His wife, clothed in the bright patterns of a Senegalese dress, waits for him outside as she sips French coffee from her

Boston College mug and sways to American hip-hop music playing from the store. Cape Verdeans are in tune with the pulse of worldwide happenings while they take pride in generating their local Krioulo culture. Batuko, an interdisciplinary performance of drum, dance, and song is one of many creole forms of expression. Not only does batuko show how Cape Verdeans are a part of a local-global paradox, where lines that separate the local from the global are hard to define, batuko also serves as a community-building mechanism for women who have endured especially difficult hardships living at the crossroads. “Zazinha down the street,” Delta Cultura, and Raiz di Polon are some of the local performance groups using batuko to empower women on the island of Santiago. For my dissertation research on batuko variations, community outreach, and international exchange on the island of Santiago, I am working with these three groups to find out more about how batuko plays a role in the lives of women today.

After interviewing women in several dance communities on Santiago during a summer pilot study in 2010, I learned that challenges Cape Verdean women face today relate to the archipelago’s history of gender imbalance. For several centuries, Cape Verdeans have suffered from agricultural drought and financial instability, which has forced residents to emigrate abroad to find work. As residents leave, return, stay, and watch family members leave, the notion of “home” in Cape Verde has produced what Jason Deparle calls a “world on the move” (2007). Tensions form between those that stay and those who leave as well as between people who remain in the islands.

In particular, large-scale emigration that took place surrounding Cape Verde’s independence from Portugal in the early 1970s primarily included men, which made the population outnumbered by women. Women were forced to raise families on their own and were often expected to remain faithful to their partners even when men established new families overseas. Although researchers like Deidre Meintel (2002) argue that these imbalances have equalized in the last ten years, power struggles between men and women remain within the islands. For example, according to many women that I interviewed on Santiago and São Vicente islands, there remains a stigma that Cape Verdean women are victims to male infidelity and machismo (Carter-Aulette 2009, personal conversations). Batuko, which has traditionally been performed by groups of women, has played a strong role for women on Santiago Island throughout these tensions and transitions. Batuko allows women to vent their frustrations about gender imbalance and social norms, giving them a strong collective voice within a male-dominated society.

Batuko is a tradition that emerged on Santiago island, the Southern-most island of the archipelago and the island that was first colonized with West African slaves by the Portuguese in the early 1500s. Within the performance traditions that have emerged on each Cape Verdean island, batuko sways towards the polyrhythmic call-and-response structures of African performance forms, contrasting with the more Portuguese couple-dances and waltzes at the other end of the African-European spectrum (Hurley-Glowa

1997; Lobban 1995). *Batucaderas* (performers of batuko) sing call-and-response songs while slapping polyrhythmic percussive beats on plastic pouches as a solo dancer interacts with them by gyrating her hips.¹ The “torno” dance, which alternates circle directions, is improvised and can vary in intensity, momentum, and distance from the ground. Knowledge of batuko’s early history varies, and is based on diverging accounts of oral histories; many people have said that women performed batuko to revolt against the sexual advances of their slave owners, as a display of charm for slave owners’ selection processes, a coping mechanism for women to deal with men who had emigrated and left them behind, or a general purging ritual to free oneself from a number of related grievances (Lobban 1995, 31-32; Hurley-Glowa 1997, 89; Carter & Aulette 2009, 21; personal conversations). Today, shifting from the traditional backyard setting, batuko is also performed on stages in nightclubs and festivals and is also incorporated rhythmically and choreographically into popular Cape Verdean music and contemporary dance. Some batuko performers, like Zazinha’s group, gather informally as a way to build community without a focus on performing for an audience. Other groups, like Delta Cultura, are part of an international nonprofit outreach organization and perform all over Santiago island for festivals and education events. Raiz di Polon, as a third example, incorporates batuko in some of their contemporary dance works which are performed by the professional company for

1. Traditionally, these plastic pouches called “tchabetas” were made from balls of fabric. Over time, using fabric was replaced by these more inexpensive and louder versions of the instrument.

world-wide tours. Each of these three groups are empowering women in their communities in different ways, and creating new batuko styles as a result of their crossroads identity.

Zazinha Down the Street: BATUKO AS SUSTAINABILITY

Zazinha leads an informal group of twenty girls through batuko and other dances that she calls “hip-hop” and “music video.” I met Zazinha at a cultural center in the capital of Praia where she was performing with a popular *funana* music group. After her performance, she told me that she works with a small group of children in her town and invited me to visit and participate. When I visited, I was surprised to learn how she had built a tight-knit community in only five years—a community in which she is the second “mother” to all the children “down the street.” Zazinha lives without a partner, has three children, and moved to Chão de Tanque five years ago to start a new life. As she built her new home, she began a batuko group gradually to cope with heartbreaking infidelity and financial theft when her partner emigrated, leaving her for a woman abroad. He had stolen all of her earnings by secretly placing them in a separate bank account. He has never returned to visit Zazinha and their children. Zazinha’s grief is common among the women of Cape Verde, but her forceful recovery is exemplary. She attributes her “starting over” in part to a “return to batuko history.” “Here in Cape Verde we are used to coming and going, of sadness, of sodad, and being far away from one



Zazinha’s outdoor patio becomes a space for batuko as children from down her street arrive to practice

another.² But we forget that we can sustain ourselves here. We work on the land and come home and our children dance with me and help me feel strong so that I can rebuild my home. We can create a system that keeps us supported. This is what batuko has always been about—a way to tell each

2. “Sodad” in creole or “saudade” in Portuguese means nostalgia or longing. Sodad is often the topic of many song lyrics and is used to describe the emotional difficulties of having loved ones far away.

other stories about working with one another, laughing and overcoming hardships, and teaching girls to be strong. In my life I lost sight of that, and as a result, I was not surrounded by a trustworthy partner.” Zazinha also told me that her previous partner would not allow her to sing in her music group, which was one of her passions. When she started her new life in Chão de Tanque she wanted to make sure that community girls

knew that they should be proud to make music together and that they should never feel pressured to stifle their creativity. Playing batuko with community girls in her backyard reinvigorates her own love for making music and prevents the girls from experiencing similar misfortunes. In my dissertation research I will be returning to Chão de Tanque to work more closely with Zazinha and her group. I hope to learn more about how batuko's movements and songs reflect Zazinha's return to history as a sustainable contemporary community-building process. Zazinha's girls may not attract a "global audience" in their remote village like many other batuko groups that are performing at the geographic and cultural crossroads, but Zazinha's intentions are directly related to globalization and changing definitions of local outreach.

Delta Cultura: BATUKO AS LOCAL-GLOBAL OUTREACH

In my pilot studies in 2008 and 2010, I was also able to interview a batuko group called the Delta Cultura Batucaderas, located in the coastal beach village of Tarrafal on the Western coast of Santiago Island. Delta Cultura is a nonprofit organization and community center that hosts soccer clubs, trade classes, English tutoring and rehearsals for the Delta Cultura batuko group. The organization's co-founder and batuko director Marisa is especially concerned about young Cape Verdean women today. In an interview she explained to me how she strives to help girls find value in staying home and living on the islands: "Women here always have a romanticized view of

The Delta Cultura batucaderas from Tarrafal walk to a nearby school where they were invited to perform as part of a celebration of Cape Verdean education programs.





Members from Delta Cultura practice on the back patio at the home of their director, Marisa.

living abroad. They want to move away to Portugal or to the U.S. for a 'better life,' and when they get there, they have nothing. I have seen it happen. We try to help them by giving them something that is *theirs*, here. They don't have to leave. They have the Delta Cultura family. And if they have to leave, then they go with a sense of strength, accomplishment, and skill." Through creating songs together with her batuko players, and with the support of financial connections to a sister-office in Austria, Marisa is trying to reinvigorate local pride in the younger generation. She works closely with her Austrian husband who is the co-founder of the organization and helps to secure funding for batuko uniforms, instruments, and other needs for the community center. Delta Cultura's own "style," which incorporates young performers and West African instrumentation (the jembe), has made the Delta Cultura Batucaderas the first young girl's group to produce a DVD recording of their work. Their DVD's success and appearances at festivals and educational conferences has enabled the group to distribute their work abroad. Like Zazinha's group, director Marisa seeks to give back to her community and is trying to give girls a chance to feel like they have power within Cape Verde's unpredictable economic hardships. Delta Cultura differs from Zazinha's group in that Marisa is working with her global ties more directly; she is creating a global stage for her group through the distribution of recorded performances and through her international counterpart while simultaneously supporting batuko's role as a community-based local practice. Furthermore, by situating batuko

among other popular forms of community outreach, like soccer clubs and English lessons, Marisa is also highlighting performance as a symbol of Santiago pride. In my dissertation fieldwork I will be returning to the Delta Cultura community to talk more closely to the girls in her group. I am interested in finding out more about how international exchange and creating a global stage for their work has affected their sense of female empowerment.

Raiz di Polon: BATUKO AS NEW LANGUAGE

Initially, batuko dances interested me because they seemed to explain movement similarities between Senegalese *sabar* and Brazilian *samba*, two forms of performance that I had studied as an undergraduate and Master's student. In my pilot studies for PhD research I attended several batuko performances, hoping that I could prepare for a dissertation related to "traditional batuko" as the "missing link" between these practices.³ This narrow objective restricted me to *only* seeing batuko's past—which I now know is one of *many* aspects of Cape Verde's crossroads identity.⁴ When choreographer Mano Preto from contemporary dance company Raiz di Polon asked me to teach my own voice/movement class for his contemporary

3. Scholars such as Varela (2000) and Hurley-Glowa (2009) have recently written about the musical connections between Brazil and Cape Verde, and these have influenced my ability to notice movement similarities.

4. In my training in Brazilian samba de roda and Senegalese sabar, I became accustomed to a structural setup that included a circular audience formation as well as physical coordination that required triple weight shifts to 6/8 metered polyrhythm. This training enabled me to learn batuko quickly and I noticed how these attributes were also within the batuko performance.

years. Using inspiration from dance exchanges available to him through world-wide tours, and from dancers who visit his company like myself, founder Mano Preto is redefining the language of traditional dance by using it within the context of contemporary dance. His students and company members include both men and women, but he features women in batuko-inspired choreography. For example, in his batuko piece, women dancers wear blindfolds around their faces as they travel across the floor, pounding long sticks rhythmically into the ground. As they move across the floor, which differs from the traditional solo dancer who stays in the center of a drum circle, Raiz di Polon dancers execute batuko's trademark *torno* hip-movements. This recreation of batuko reinterprets batuko history by evoking a sense of torture and rebellion, signifying the strength that women portrayed during the colonial period against their slave owners. By evoking batuko movements and combining them with his own theatrical movement style, Mano Preto believes that his approach is itself quintessential Cape Verde—like Cape Verdean creole language, this process creates new vocabulary within the context of established tradition. Misa, a Praia-based artist and founder of many youth and women's outreach groups, told me that she admires Mano Preto's work and the company Raiz di Polon. "They are doing something different. Men and women dance side-by-side, lifting one another through the air physically with equal forces of emotion. Mano Preto is creating a space where men and women can have their own voice and express themselves in ways that no one has ever seen, while using the traditional mu-



Members of the Raiz di Polon school performance company rehearse for a performance. This image was taken when they were rehearsing a piece related to tabanka, which is another performance tradition that is historically related to batuko.

sic and steps that we all know. Their work is Cape Verdean in this way and their work is incredibly important to the islands.”

Raiz di Polon has been well-received by the greater Cape Verdean community not only because of the company’s technical rigor, innovative styles, and new choreographic languages, but because Mano Preto is dedicated to community outreach. Raiz di Polon is also a free school for the community and company members teach a free class before their company rehearsal. It was an honor to be asked to teach this community class during my visits and the company values international artistic exchange. Furthermore, Raiz di Polon outreach is not limited to the small studio in the center of Praia. Company members travel to other parts of Santiago Island as well as to other Cape Verdean islands to teach contemporary dance classes in schools where exposure to contemporary dance is not readily available. Dedicated students in the Praia Raiz di Polon school are also given the opportunity to perform in a student company. After rehearsing in the contemporary batuko piece with the student company, I asked some of the girls how they perceived the dances that they performed. “We wanted to be a part of something new” they explained. “We have never been in a dance company, and never knew that it was possible, but here we are doing it and we love it. I love the batuko and funana pieces because they are physically powerful and not just something you learn on music videos or from being in a party. We are learning to be artists while we are learning to be a team.” While Raiz di Polon is not a batuko group like that of



Members of the Raiz di Polon school performance company rehearse their contemporary batuko piece

Zazinha or Delta Cultura, Mano Preto is using batuko and other traditional dances to make dance and performance available to all people in the community, regardless of gender, social class, or location. In my dissertation research I will be returning to teach and learn from the dancers of Raiz di Polon to find out more about how women are affected by the company's work and by the increased professionalization of dance within the islands. For example, as I was leaving Santiago in the summer of 2010, one of the company members had told me that she was pregnant. I am interested in returning to learn more about how gender roles may produce tensions with the rising professionalization of contemporary Cape Verdean dance, as established by Raiz di Polon.

Zazinha, Delta Cultura, and Raiz di Polon are only some of the performance groups on Santiago island that are using performance as a way of building community and social equality. Female empowerment is one component in my overall dissertation research. I am also interested in how local identity is generated by its range of past and present global interactions and how this global-to-local matrix is a paradox. Whether scholars label this phenomenon a matter of transculturation (Ortiz 1940, Taylor 1991), creolization (Hannerz 1996, Korom 2003), transnationalism (Meintel 2002, Hanchard 2002), double consciousness (Gilroy 1993; Du Bois 1996 [1906]) ethnoscapes (Appaduri 1996), or, as I termed it in my MA thesis on samba, "culture-swapping" (2009), what processes make it possible to shift from global to local? Utilizing performance studies and folklore studies, I hypothesize that Cape Verdeans resolve

their paradox by using the "global" to redefine and regenerate a local community so that local and global pulses are beating simultaneously. Batuko performance is one event that allows us to examine this global-to-local process. During eleven months of ethnographic research on Santiago Island, with trips to relevant festivals on neighboring islands, I will work with these three communities that perform batuko and seek to answer the following questions: How does batuko reveal or resolve local-global paradox today? In what ways are international exchange intrinsic to the formation of local communities? How do batuko variations as danced by these different groups embody both local and global Cape Verdean identities? How do women specifically benefit from these communities? I hope that my dissertation project will contribute to African Studies, women's studies, dance studies, and globalization studies, and add an under-researched subject to conversations within performance studies.

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