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THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LUSO-AFRICAN IDENTITY: A LOOK AT THE 7TH SÃO TOMÉ BIENNIAL (NOVEMBER 30, 2013 - FEBRUARY 28, 2014)

INTRODUCTION

At the core of the São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) Biennial there lies an identity crisis, and this article will attempt to read the most recent edition of the festival of arts and culture as a response to that crisis in a way that draws attention to the difficulties and realities of biennial making for African nations. In essence, what is at stake pertains not solely to the question of nationhood that such events purport to define and celebrate, but how this in turn is coupled with the problem of sustainability. In the main, I will focus on the issue of development, questioning what effects it has on curatorial and artistic narratives of national culture. Drawing on a two-week visit I made to the archipelago in May 2014 involving participant observation and structured interviews with artists at the cultural centre CACAU (Casa das Artes, Criação, Ambiente e Utopias), located in the capital of São Tomé, the study can be conceived as a response to J.P. Singh's (2012) call for the theorization of "cultural policies and resources as they become increasingly important in the way that societies and nations view economic and political power at home and abroad" (p. 3). For this purpose, I use "isolation" as a conceptual device for working through various experiences of segregation, marginalization and vulnerability in this African island nation.

This experiential approach stems from an understanding of the organizational role of narrative in cultural politics, in other words, that culture resides simultaneously inside action and in the telling of that action at the individual and collective levels, thereby producing not only the material but also the discursive conditions of a given society. In this sense, narrative is interwoven into lived reality. As social psychologist,

Phillip L. Hammack (2011) has explained, "... narrative links individual psychology to *society* and to *group* psychology, for personal narratives do not develop in the absence of an index or a matrix of *possible* stories" (p. 22). In our case study of the STP Biennial, by considering isolation as a hermeneutic key, we gain access to a more penetrating understanding of the possibilities and limitations that shape the ability to develop sustainable international strategies for growth.

A background in linguistics urges me to highlight, from the outset, how the etymological root of isolation, *isola* (the Latin word for "island") integrates notions of resilience and vulnerability not simply as metaphors but "as realities faced in the consumption of resources from a bounded space" (Hall, 2012, p. 180). From this perspective, the broader lessons to be taken from the 2014 Biennial illustrate the potential for convergence between social and ecological theories.¹ This type of multi-layered or "thick" description of the Santomean reality can be considered therefore as a way of contextualizing the patterns of social relationships that puts them in dialogue with both cultural legacies and the external environment.²

São Tomé's geographical and perceptual remoteness, tied in with its peripheral position in the world economy, make it a privileged site for exploring the interplay between the politics of identity and the politics of development in the context of the contemporary art world. Furthermore, with the latest biennial taking place in the UN's International Year of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the story of São Tomé's efforts towards sustainability and greater visibility through the arts becomes even more compelling. Finally, the country's membership in the CPLP (Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa/Community of Portuguese-Speaking Nations), an international organization made up of Portugal and its former colonial overseas possessions, provides

interesting and rich terrain for exploring the power dynamics, potentialities and limitations within postcolonial cultural alliances.

I had arrived in São Tomé following the trail of an investigation on the role of the visual arts in the construction of national identity in the former Portuguese colony of Angola. The Luanda Triennial offered a useful frame for investigating a complex and complicated topic tied to issues of race, ethnicity, class, exclusion/inclusion, post-conflict, economics, globalization, culture, and space. So, it was during a research visit to Angola in the late spring of 2013 that my accidental encounter with João Carlos Silva, the principal force behind the Biennial project, took place, as I had spontaneously – and as it turned out fortuitously – chosen to arrive at the home of the Triennial coordinator, Fernando Alvim Faria, in search of an interview at the same moment that the Santomean had arrived for a planning meeting on the STP Biennial.

By that time, my wider research on the black experience in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries had detected the reoccurrence of isolation as the principal thematic upon which I had started to construct a conceptual framework that could be used as an alternative to Paul Gilroy's Anglophone 'black Atlantic' paradigm. Isolation can be grasped not only as an aspect of the human condition to which each of us can relate on a personal level, but, more abstractly, it serves as a concept that positions human beings at the centre of theories to do with the culture-space dynamic, by which I mean, in this case, notions of culture as exile, and space as exile. What I couldn't possibly realize at the time, however, was the extent to which, a year later, these preliminary findings on race in the Iberian Atlantic would gain new relevance on the distant island of São Tomé.

FROM UTOPIA TO NOSTALGIA

The 7th São Tomé and Príncipe Biennial was the first of its kind: a test, of sorts. Having received financial support from the European Union to help run the previous edition in 2011, the partnership with Angola promised to realize a long-held wish by the festival organizers for an inter-African collaboration. But in order to understand the meaning of the experiment, and its ultimate failure, it makes sense to begin with a definition of the crisis mentioned at the top of our discussion, which in the cultural and political sphere of the global arts festival circuit is intertwined with the double isolation of being an African island nation. And because the art world cannot be neatly divided from the context of the international order, this duality is likewise reflected at the level of economics. What this means for São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) is that it has been deeply implicated in the financial crises that sub-Saharan African nations underwent in the 1990s, and consequently still bears the scars upon its social landscape that researchers have characterized as “ruins” (Lachenal & Mbodj-Pouye, 2014, p. 10). Additionally, the country shares in a certain discourse of decline that has run in tandem with the growth of development as the much-touted remedy to the ills that have accompanied the failure of so many post-colonial political projects. This idea that nations have become degraded is often used to explain the social, moral and ecological crises that are considered to be the result of the transformations to neoliberalism, which in turn has led to the emergence of counterbalancing, coexisting and at times competing narratives related to nostalgia and utopia.

In the case of São Tomé and Príncipe, the widespread, endemic and structural corruption of the 1990’s that social scientist Gerhard Seibert attributed partly to the proliferation of foreign interests that had set up operations in the country (chiefly aid organizations)³ and partly to the judicial system’s almost complete failure to prosecute

and/or apply legal sanctions against the fraud, embezzlement and other illegal activities to which the banking industry was especially prone, coincided with a utopian sense of *communitas* that appeared to imbue the spirit of the very first STP Biennial held in 1995. Its principal aim was to harness the energy of a burgeoning local art scene to spearhead a regional festival to include artists from the country's closest neighbours, such as the Comoros and Gabon.

A similarly euphoric communitarianism became enshrined in the following year within the statutes and objectives of the CPLP. This forum of nations, established in Lisbon in 1996, counted among its founding members, in addition to São Tomé and Príncipe, Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and former colonial power, Portugal.⁴ Its stated ambition was to integrate the 'lusophone territories' into an economic and cultural whole, drawing upon the ties of language and a shared culture—all horrible histories, with the exception of the linguistic, being set adrift on an amnesiac sea. Thus we find that, much like the British Commonwealth, the CPLP pays scant reference to the brutality and exploitation of the Portuguese imperial past, choosing instead to emphasize such themes as diversity, equality and free association.

The CPLP constitutes a new political project whose foundation is the Portuguese language, the historical connection and shared heritage of the nine, forming a space that is geographically discontinuous but identified by a common language. This unifying factor has established, globally, a base for increasingly significant and influential activity. The overall objectives of the CPLP are political cooperation and cooperation in social, cultural and economic areas.⁵

Buoyed by Angola's new 'petrodollar' economy, market liberalization in Brazil, and Portugal's European Union-fuelled resurgence, the project followed a neoliberal development logic that allied the concept of global market rule to social processes of change and convergence. Neoliberalism here conceived as an ideological phenomenon "jointly constituted with prevailing forms of financialized capitalism . . . that variously frames, legitimates, and necessitates a paradigmatic package of policies," (Peck, 2013, p. 134) that are targeted at reducing protectionist barriers to trade and communication, in this case for the purpose of socio-economic betterment and transformation. This political-economic-cultural process of opening up to the world economy stimulated Portuguese-speaking nations (previously overshadowed by the more dominant Spanish- and above all English-speaking players) to forge links with international bodies, including the Biennial Foundation.

Although the smallest of the CPLP cohort (and indeed the second smallest African country),⁶ the equal standing that was at least nominally assigned to all member nations promised an important channel for STP to overcome its marginality. At the same time, by scheduling the first Biennial of Art and Culture to take place in the year preceding the official launch of the CPLP, the International Centre for Art and Culture (CIAC) aspired to demonstrate that the country already possessed global credentials, thereby sending a clear signal that this tiny teardrop of land adrift in the Atlantic Ocean was no backward outpost reliant upon the greater prestige and potency of its peers. The initiative carried equal weight as an opportunity to gain exposure for the young crop of artists that was in the process of developing an exciting body of work under the sensitive and inspiring tutelage of two teachers from overseas—Debra Miller, a visual arts teacher from California, and Senegalese artist, Seyni Gadiaga.

According to João Carlos Silva (personal communication, June 7, 2014), chair of CIAC since 1995 the first festival was utopian in character but then took on a new form for the second edition in 2002. In part, the change was linked to geography, in that initially the biennials were held in Silva's birthplace of São João dos Angolares, a small coastal town with mythical origins located in a stirring setting of luxuriant green vegetation. More recently the location has switched to the capital city, São Tomé, and more accurately CACAU, the cultural centre run by Silva and his partner, the Santomean historian, Isaura Carvalho. It could be said that plans for the 2014 Biennial drew upon a utopian idea that collaboration would lead to greater exposure and increased financial investment in the cultural life of the archipelago. Following the bruising experience of partnering with organizers of the Luanda Triennial, however, this has been replaced by a certain nostalgia, and Silva now speaks of returning the arts and culture celebration to its original home.

OF ANGOLANS AND ANGOLARES

I arrived in São Tomé three months after the 7th Biennial had come to a close. It ran from the end of November 2013 until the last day of February in the following year. Plans had been for me to attend the festival and actively participate in the proceedings; but a fusion of impediments –administrative, financial and logistical—had postponed my visit until late May. However, my delayed arrival turned out to be both timely and beneficial, as sufficient time had elapsed following the event for stock to be taken, lessons learned and conclusions drawn individually, in pairs and collectively. Thus, for around two weeks, I shuttled back and forth across the sandy rutted yard that separated my simple flat from CACAU, taking most of my meals in the centre's cafe, observing and taking part in the roster of cultural activities, and speaking with several of the local

artists who had taken part in the Biennial and whose work hung in the exhibition galleries as part of the permanent collection (Figure 1). A further few days were spent at the Roça São João dos Angolares, a converted colonial-era plantation property now offering eco-tourism, and the site of the first STP Biennial.

On my first day at CACAU, I was ushered into the vast and airy exhibition space, scene of the arts festival that had taken place just a short while before. Immediately, my mind reeled at being confronted by the huge installation by Angolan artist, Kiluanji Kia Henda, that bears the provocative title *O.R.G.A.S.M. Congress (As God wants and the Devil likes it)* which presided over the heart of the gallery (Figure 2). Consisting of a large-scaled wall painting of an invented NGO's flag – a bright yellow Africa against a background of cobalt blue. The satirical work makes an important critical statement on the twin issues of dependency and development that underpin the West's 'African project' by imagining a charitable organization (the Organization of African States for Mellowness) that provides aid and assistance to the so-called 'first world.' Taking into consideration the Biennial's theme – "(re)Design(in) STP*" – it is hard, on the one hand, to conceive of an artwork more sensitively attuned to the stated objective to start a conversation about the country's development agenda, particularly as it relates to culture and the arts:

“As part of the Biennale, the organizers will revisit and recreate the plastic and performing arts, redefine the role of colonial and popular architecture, (re)consider national culture, and rethink the economic and strategic plans of the country.”⁷

Nevertheless, the spatial dominance, both in terms of the work's physical measurements as well as its central location within the exhibition hall, foreshadowed the reports of invited country Angola's domination of the festival proceedings that emerged during the interviews I held with five members of São Tomé's artist movement – Olavo Amado, Catita Dias, Kwame Sousa, Adilson Castro, and Eduardo Malé.

“Só Angola! (Just Angola)” affirmed Dias (personal communication, June 5, 2014), sweeping his arm in a wide arc to indicate the entire centre of the exhibition hall, as we discussed the marginal position assigned to the majority of the Santomean artists. Considering that the festival motto was “Eu estou STP (I am STP),” they had expected that their work would feature prominently; however, only one local artist, the internationally renowned Rene Tavares, had work included in the main space when the festival began. Meanwhile, Sousa and Castro managed to be included among the Angolan artworks displayed in the peripheral zones.

The festival was divided into three phases – the first consisted of the principal art exhibition, the second showcased private collections held in São Tomé and Angola, and the final phase highlighted the work of six predominantly male artists (out of a pool of twenty) who are driving the nation's fledgling art scene. “Angola was represented in such a way that they killed STP,” declared Catita, clarifying that no blame was attributed to the Angolan artists themselves, who are well-regarded as comrades; but that the fault lay with the Sindika Dokolo Foundation that is responsible for running the Luanda Triennial, and which for the first time acted as co-organizer of the STP Biennial.⁹

It's impossible to deny the increasingly influential position of the Sindika Dokolo African Collection of Contemporary Art in the global landscape of the visual

arts. A Luanda-based cultural movement, it conceptualized and instituted the unprecedented first pavilion by an African nation at the fifty-second Venice Biennial, and organized the Angolan pavilion at the same festival in 2014 that exhibited the work of Lion d'Or winner, Edson Chagas. In addition, the foundation's reputation and standing have been reinforced by its steadily growing collection of works by emerging and established visual artists from the African diaspora and beyond, among them Chris Ofili, Lorna Simpson, Robin Rhode, Kara Walker, Sokari Douglas Camp, and Andy Warhol.

On arrival in São Tomé and Príncipe, one of the Angolan team's first acts was to summarily dismiss the local curator, Eduardo Malé, a highly respected and well-liked artist and teacher who had been planning the event for months. Relations continued to be strained between Malé and the STP-based organizers at the time of my visit, so that his was the only interview to be conducted outside the premises of CACAU. Prior to his sudden banishment, an important element of Malé's vision for the 7th Biennial was the creation of – for the first time in the festival's history – a nucleus on the island of Príncipe so as to achieve an inclusive platform for the promotion of cultural heritage. However, without consultation or explanation, this component was removed from the plans, dashing the hopes of the local artist who was supposed to run a series of workshops for the marginalized and impoverished inhabitants. It is important to add that a sizeable proportion of the inhabitants of Príncipe trace their ancestry to contracted workers from Cape Verde, who arrived in the early twentieth century to provide a much-needed labour force on the cocoa plantations. Cancelling the plan to include Príncipe in the Biennial, therefore, effectively erased this socio-ethnic element from the 'map' of national culture.¹⁰ Struggling against the dual challenge of being physically and economically peripheral within the context of a small remote island nation with few

resources, the islanders of Príncipe suffer similar barriers to national inclusion and impaired access to education and healthcare as the *angolares*, a community located on the south-eastern coast of São Tomé island, with its own language, cultural traits and customs that can be traced to Angola. As I have already indicated, the first few STP biennials took place in the community's administrative centre, São João dos Angolares, in the district of Caué, where João Carlos Silva was born and currently maintains an ecotourism business.

Since no scientific data exists to uphold one over the others, three versions of the story of how the *angolares* arrived on São Tomé Island circulate within the society. The first refers to a slave ship shipwrecked in the 1500s in a bay close to where the community currently resides. According to this account, most of the cargo of enslaved Africans – originating from the territory now known as Angola – managed to escape to the hills where they created a new society. In the second narrative, they are the descendants of maroons who fled from their respective enslavers and gathered together to create an independent settlement or *quilombo* in the dense forest landscape. Finally, the third narrative holds that fishermen living along the Gulf of Guinea sailed across to São Tomé Island in successive waves, eventually settling in the interior prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, who, unaware of their presence, believed that they had discovered an unpopulated land. What remains undisputed, however, is that the group is generally considered to be a distinctive ethnicity that is separate from the majority population of *forros*, whose descendants were Africans freed from their enslavement between 1515 and 1526 (Castro Henriques, 2000, pp. 46-47). As a recent investigation into the long-standing social division between the two groups found:

Forros and angolares feel genetically and ontologically distinct: the forros consider themselves superior due to the union with a greatly valued blood, the European one that ideally had only mixed with the forros ancestors. The angolares would have a “more African” blood and behaviour, being that way less civilized as a result of that supposed absence: they’re the purest, the untouchable, the real primitives. The mixed blood of the forros is the metaphor that gives legitimacy to a cultural group which consider themselves [*sic*] more civilized and so more prone to having valid access to socio-political and economic positions of power. (Areosa Feio, 2008, 1)

Against this widespread stigma against the *angolares* an awareness is dawning that in a country actively – perhaps even obsessively – engaged with debates about identity, it is they alone whose mythical origins, strong linkages with a specific territory and cultural cohesiveness have forged a clear image of themselves that includes allegiance to a tradition of king-making.¹¹ Among the CACAU artists, for instance, the consensual opinion was that, of all the different ethnicities on the island, only the *angolares*, possessed a strong sense of identity. Indeed, *Mlongo House*, the video installation that Sousa exhibited at the 2014 Venice Biennial (a co-creation with Tavares), drew upon the pair’s study of a community situated close to the Caué village of Porto Alegre. “In that part of the island,” he explains, “they all live in the same way.” Landscape, within this frame, takes on a mystical dimension that in the wake of the 7th STP Biennial was channelled as a yearning to return to the original festival location among the *angolares*, in order to recuperate or restore what had been broken in the process of collaboration with the Angolan foundation. It’s possible to compare this with a type of nostalgia for

village life that sometimes appears as a counter-discourse to state-driven development imperatives (Lachenal & Mbodj-Pouye, 2014, p. 11).

TRIPLE EXPOSURE

Having already made note of the *de facto* segregation of the Santomean artists at the 7th Biennial, as well as the conditions of social separation and discrimination endured by the *angolares* and Príncipe islanders, I will widen our focus to three additional phenomena that help us to register and encode the experience of isolation in the Santomean context.

The islands of São Tomé and Príncipe lie in the Gulf of Guinea, eighty-seven miles apart and less than two hundred miles off the western equatorial coast of Central Africa. The country is geographically remote not only from the continent, but specifically from the other Lusophone African nations. Equatorial Guinea and Gabon are its closest continental neighbours, followed by Nigeria, Cameroon and the Congo, as measured against the over one thousand miles that separate the nation from Angola. It's perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that overcoming this geographical separateness is one of the principal motivations behind the Biennial project, informing many of its past themes, such as "Partilhar territories" (Share Territories) motif of the 5th Biennial, with its goal to promote "dialogue and openness in various areas and latitudes."¹²

All of the CACAU artists told me of long-cherished dreams of regional collaboration. Malé insisted that the Biennial must open frontiers and reach out to its closest neighbours. He recalled conversations with Silva in which ideas were proposed for a regional festival that would include Senegal, which shares ties of history through the Portuguese trading presence in Casamance between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Cabo Verde with which it shares a labour history through the policy of

importing contract plantation workers to the island nation following the abolition of slavery in 1876.¹³ After control of the enslaved African population that was put to work growing coffee and cocoa proved too difficult for the Portuguese authorities, with perpetual uprisings, mass escapes and rebellions, the planters abandoned the islands for Brazil, and they were converted into a midway point in the transatlantic slave routes where captured Africans were ‘seasoned’ or, in other words, trained to their enslavement, before being shipped to the Americas.¹⁴ Malé (personal communication, June 13, 2014) said that he and Silva had shared the dream of recuperating this eighteenth century role of an entrepôt but in a new way.

Over and above the geospatial context, isolation also links to local experiences that are shaped by the development agenda. In their article for a special edition of *Politique Africaine* on the ‘politics of nostalgia,’ researchers Lachenal and Mbodj-Pouye (2014) describe the various spatial modes through which ‘development nostalgia’ operates on the continent. One of these is related to feelings of regret and mourning for family and friends who have left the islands for the North in search of jobs and economic opportunities, leaving behind abandoned homes and loved ones. This phenomenon has been felt particularly acutely in São Tomé where abandonment of the elderly has become an issue of concern for the national government. A study was commissioned in 2003 that highlighted poverty and financial difficulties as the principle cause of weakening family ties that sometimes lead to adult children relinquishing the care of their parents –a shocking consequence in a culture with a tradition of assigning a privileged position in society to those of advanced age (Udelsmann Rodrigues, 2004, pp. 35-36). Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the elderly have historically been imagined as repositories of ancestral wisdom, with a responsibility to maintain a link to the old standards of harmony and balance both within a particular community and also between

the community as a whole and its neighbours. This is an important point to reflect on because it seems at odds with the development model that eschews so-called 'outmoded' traditions to drive relentlessly towards progress and the future.

Finally, in terms of our study, isolation characterizes the experience of pursuing the financially precarious career of visual artist in a country where, in 2009, 66.9% of the population lived lives of subsistence below the poverty line.¹⁵ Represented by galleries in Amsterdam and Lisbon, Amado (personal communication, June 12, 2014) reported that "the general public considers artists to not have real jobs, to be laid-back. They don't valorize artists as productive actors in society." "The remedy," he states, "is time, we need to start at the school level to change perceptions that art can be a viable professional pathway" (Amado, 2014). While acknowledging that his children already have a greater artistic sensibility, he concedes that his parents don't see art as an adequate way for someone to make a living – "um trabalho digno" (gainful employment): "You need to be successful and make money in order to convince them" (Amado, 2014).

The task of making art is performed in isolation for long periods of time. For a few of the artists in São Tomé, CACAU serves as a space of community and conviviality to break this pattern; but increasingly the cultural centre is being perceived as "a place for elites." "Locals can't attend the openings and other events," reported Dias (personal communication, June 5, 2014), "Foreign artists come to do residencies in São Tomé, but they get paid. We can't afford to go out and view an exhibition and buy a juice or a beer to drink with friends or go to see a film." Sympathetic government officials have proposed the idea of grants for artists; but so far no action has been taken to turn this plan into reality. Sousa (personal communication, June 6, 2014) put it most

succinctly when responding to a question on the existence of an arts scene in São Tomé, “My art scene is my studio” (Figure 3).

In spite of the multiple layers of isolation that comprise the everyday lived experience of Santomeans, the artist movement has international roots. Many of its members began their training in workshops conducted by foreign teachers. Debra Miller shared with me her memories of giving instruction in techniques to the group of aspiring young artists:

At the time they were all around 17 years old. They were finished with high school - at that time it only went through junior year. They all wanted to be artists and were like sponges, wanting to know everything that was going on in the art world. My first day at CACAU, I wanted to see the supplies we were going to be working with so that I could plan some lessons. . . . The paint was acrylic and oil based house paint- what was left in the bottom of the cans when the job is finished. Brushes were in various states of hardness, some not much more than sticks. Canvas was from old awnings, and the stretcher bars were hand sawn and nailed together. I wanted to cry – this middle class American who was used to ordering new supplies for her students from colorful art catalogues! And then I saw their paintings and I did cry. . . .The paintings they made were hauntingly honest and beautiful. I worked with them for three weeks, and I have to say that I was the one who learned the most. (Debra Miller, personal communication, February 1, 2015)

Since that time, many of the artists have travelled the world to continue their studies, in residency programmes, or, less frequently, at art colleges in Portugal. Their artworks

form part of collections in France, the Netherlands, Angola, Cabo Verde, Spain, France, Portugal, and elsewhere. Nevertheless, according to Dias (personal communication, June 5, 2014), the most recent biennial had “almost no intellectual visitors.” Who did attend in droves were school children: in fact, ten thousand (a record number for the festival), leading to a divide in opinion amongst the CACAU artists about whether such a heavy emphasis on the participation of a young “untrained” audience supported or undermined the festival’s credibility (Figure 4). Or if it helped to achieve the objective to stimulate and rethink economic sustainability through culture. It seemed to me that the division reflected a crisis of faith in the role that culture plays in the development strategy of the country. In other words, whether culture can be valued for its own sake, or only in terms of a strategic instrument for capitalist growth (Kapoor, 2008, p. 20).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Overlaying the isolating events, circumstances and conditions of the 7th STP Biennial was the porous fabric of vulnerability. Porous because, at least in the initial phase of planning, it allowed the Santomeans to peer through to an exciting landscape of possibility composed of “residencies, debates, reflections, experiments, conferences, workshops and knowledge sharing between artists from various backgrounds and countries.”¹⁶ But in so doing, they lost sight of the calamities that haunt all asymmetrical power relations, whether North-South or South-South.¹⁷ At the same time, in one obvious respect, the STP team held a strong advantage against the more affluent Sindika Dokolo Foundation, which was the number of art festivals it had successfully – and independently – organized by 2014: six compared with the Angolan group’s two. Nevertheless, my concern is whether the fact of this remarkable achievement served to obscure the more pertinent question, which is whether the biennial/triennial paradigm is

suitable for the African reality. By aspiring to follow Western/Northern temporalities ruled by predetermined dates and deadlines, are countries that for a variety of cultural and economic and societal reasons operate according to the modality of 'in time' in contrast with 'on time' setting themselves unrealistic and unrealizable goals? If so, the problem I see is that the inability to meet the scheduling expectations implied by the tags 'biennial' or 'triennial' feeds into stereotypes that deride the 'lateness' of all things African, even within the countries themselves, thus contributing to a perennial discourse of deficiency.

In the lusophone African frame of reference, an alternative scenario could be the organization of a regular arts festival through the CPLP initiative, which in the long term could conceivably rival the French-funded Dak'Art festival in Senegal. However, the question of power imbalances in the community (critics charge that Portugal and Brazil are effectively in control) would need to be addressed and, if necessary, rectified for such an initiative to serve the needs of São Tomé and Príncipe.

In closing, perhaps the most heart-breaking facet of this tale of a failed alliance was the way that it highlighted the durability (maybe even invincibility) of old notions of status and value that were formed in the crucible of the transatlantic slave trade.¹⁸ Thus, the desire of João Carlos Silva of São João dos Angolares to build a bridge to Angola mirrored the collective longing for reconnection with the ancestral past that sometimes stirs the exiled descendants of enslaved Africans. However, what is often overlooked or downplayed in diaspora discourse on the abominable trade is the collaboration of African elites with the Europeans. This, in turn, reduces awareness of the emergence of a new political and economic culture described by Berlin (1996) as 'Atlantic Creole,' that set in place the structure of all future national projects – colonial and postcolonial – and predetermined the terms of engagement between former slaving

nations like Angola and ex-slave societies such as São Tomé and Príncipe, one example being the cultural imperialism displayed by the former towards the latter in our small case study.

Viewed in these terms, the Santomeans appear overly trusting, and their hopes for the 7th STP doomed to fall apart. But, coming to terms with the reasons for the failure – the exposure inherent in the Santomean reality – is a chance for the organizers to understand what the artists, leading their isolated, segregated and vulnerable lives, already know. As Castro (personal communication, June 3, 2014) described, “Art is creation, that’s what differentiates it. People in STP are always creating.” Malé (personal interview, June 13, 2014) said, “I don’t see the artist as separate from society.” And Amado (personal communication, June 12, 2014) made the essential point that, “Art is a form of struggle. It can demonstrate this idea for the people. Every work represents a battle, a form of expression. Even if they don’t like it, they can learn something from it.” In other words, the fact that Santomeans make art must function as the reason for an art festival, and inversely festivals should serve as an inspiration to make art. In this way, artmaking holds the potential to be a strategy towards greater self-awareness, self-discovery and ultimately self-reliance.

NOTES

1. I am referring, in particular, to vulnerability which has various meanings according to specific contexts, but most commonly relates to questions of “access to resources, predisposition to harm, poverty, and their persistence” (Miller et al, 2010). Consequently, the current study is aligned with the general focus of vulnerability research which is “on the interaction between historical and contemporary processes that may result in situations in which certain groups, regions, or sectors are more vulnerable to the effects of such events than others” (ibid).

2. “Thick description” has become a commonplace interpretive technique in cultural and sociological studies. Originally, the term appeared in Ryle (1949), and was later used by Geertz (1973) in the ethnographic context.
3. By which I mean the misappropriation of food and other supplies donated by aid agencies, as described by Seibert (2000, p. 67).
4. The current number of CPLP member states stands at nine, with the admission of East Timor in 2002 and Equatorial Guinea, which was ruled by the Portuguese between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, in 2014. The organization includes a number of associate observer nations with varying ties to one or more member states, these include: Senegal, Mauritius, Japan and Turkey. Starting to flex its economic muscle as the fourth largest oil producer in the world, the CPLP is growing beyond its original focus on a shared linguistic and cultural heritage. At the same time, it has, from the outset, attracted both cynicism and criticism for a plethora of alleged faults, from neo-colonialism to indolence and weakness as a player in international affairs, as well as accusations of human rights abuses by member states such as Angola and Equatorial Guinea. A review and analysis of these criticisms may be found in Santos (2003), “Portugal and the CPLP: heightened expectations, unfounded disillusion,” available at http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/bitstream/1822/3079/1/lantos_CPLP_2003.pdf.
5. “A CPLP assume-se como um novo projecto político cujo fundamento é a Língua Portuguesa, vínculo histórico e património comum dos Nove – que constituem um espaço geograficamente descontínuo, mas identificado pelo idioma comum. Esse factor de unidade tem fundamentado, no plano mundial, uma actuação conjunta cada vez mais significativa e influente. A CPLP tem como objectivos gerais a concertação política e a cooperação nos domínios social, cultural e económico” (CPLP website, <http://www.cplp.org/id-2752.aspx>). Translation by author.
6. Censuses taken in 2013 put the STP population figure at 192, 993, compared with 512, 096 in the island nation of Cabo Verde.
7. <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2013/10/the-7th-biennale-will-promote-the-cultural-richness-of-the-sao-tome-e-principe-and-demonstrate-the-important-role-which-this-has-in-the-development-strategy-of-the-country/>.
8. Interview with artist Catita Dias, São Tomé, STP, June 5, 2014.
9. President of the Foundation, Sindika Dokolo is a Luanda-based art collector who is married to Isabel Dos Santos, daughter of Angolan president, José Eduardo Dos Santos. Born and raised in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he is reported to have the largest collection of contemporary African art, estimated at around three thousand works.
10. The plantations have always been remote communities isolated from the towns and from one another. Living conditions were characteristically harsh, bleak and insalubrious, and rural life in general was, and continues to be, marginal. While many of these workers returned to the Cape Verde islands after fulfilling the terms of their contracts, a significant number remained, their descendants subsisting in impoverished circumstances. (Shaw, 1994, pp. xviii-xix; Coelho Barras Romana, 1996, p. 223; Nascimento, 2003, p. 47).

11. The tradition follows on from the reign of Rei Amador, the famous king of the *angolares*, and now a national symbol, who led a historic uprising against the Portuguese in 1595.
12. <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2011/10/if-the-v-biennial-was-to-share-territories-promoting-knowledge-dialogue-and-openness-in-various-areas-and-latitudes-the-vi-biennial-will-focus-on-heritages-to-enable-and-enrich-territories/>.
13. A system of forced labour ensued, although illegal slavery continued on plantations for at least twenty years. Most of these coerced workers were brought in from Angola, Cape Verde and Mozambique. However, it was only in 1903 that the first great wave of laborers from Cape Verde arrived in the wake of the drought that afflicted the islands. A further sizeable influx resulted from droughts occurring in the 1940's. See Castro Henriques, (2000, p. 69).
14. By the mid-seventeenth century, the sugar-producing industry had gone into complete decline. The primary purpose of the islands then switched to the "acclimatization" of enslaved Africans until the subsequent round of Portuguese colonial expansion which introduced the cultivation of coffee and cocoa in the early 1800's (Benigno da Cruz, 1975, p. 21).
15. CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2046.html> 06/02/2015.
16. <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2013/10/the-7th-biennale-will-promote-the-cultural-richness-of-the-sao-tome-e-principe-and-demonstrate-the-important-role-which-this-has-in-the-development-strategy-of-the-country/>
17. In 2012, Angola's GDP was \$130.4 billion compared with \$408.6 million for STP. The Angolan economy is one of the fastest growing in the world, mainly powered by high international oil prices and rising oil production, although among the general population poverty remains high, and a third of Angolans rely on subsistence agriculture. STP receives its oil supplies from Angola at preferential rates, a financial dependency that is bound to influence any conceivable collaboration regardless of the sector involved. Added to this, as Seibert (2006, p. 267) reminds us, "the two countries are linked by historical and cultural ties. Angolan troops were based in Sao Tome from 1978 to 1991 to protect the regime of Pinto da Costa, who is a personal friend of Eduardo do Santos."
18. The *roça* or plantation was the principle structure of geographic, economic and social organization until independence in 1975. However, as I have attempted to show in this essay, the ghosts of that former way of life continue to haunt present-day society in ways that impede social and economic inclusion as well as efforts toward national cohesiveness. At the same time, there is a movement to restore the material culture of the plantations (through the development of eco-tourism) in order to safeguard this foundational element of STP culture. In a recent article in the Portuguese newspaper, *Público*, João Carlos Silva estimated that only a decade remained before it would be too late to save the *roças* (Rato, 2013).

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