Cape Verdean Theatre: Enacting Political Theory and Reclaiming Roots for Crioulo Performance

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by Eunice S. Ferreira

Abstract

Shining a spotlight on the Cape Verde Islands illuminates the rich diversity of theatre of the African diaspora and places its unique crioulo identity and creole identities in general, center stage. This article focuses on the post-independence theatre movement in Cape Verde where the re-Africanization theories of Amílcar Cabral (assassinated PAIGC leader in Cape Verde’s liberation struggle) shaped national identity and guided the pioneering work of theatre troupe Korda Kaoberdi (Wake up, Cape Verde). Under the dynamic leadership of Francisco Gomes Fragoso, a medical doctor who adopted the artistic name of Kwame Kondé, the troupe Korda Kaoberdi sought to create “a genuinely Cape Verdean and authentically African theatre.” Armed with the tenets of Cabral’s political theory, Fragoso reclaimed performance traditions that had been suppressed during Portuguese colonialism in order to train actors as combatants in cultural warfare. In doing so, Fragoso positioned the fledgling theatre artists of Korda Kaoberdi alongside the freedom fighters, asserting as Cabral did that culture is a weapon and sign of liberation. The author offers first-ever reconstructions of their historical productions based on archival research, Fragoso’s own writings, festival participant-observations, and personal interviews.
Towards a Crioulo Performance Theory

The Republic of the Cape Verde Islands provides a rich opportunity to examine theatre at the crossroads of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. It is only in the last few years that scholars have begun to study the practice of theatre on the islands, with a particular focus on how Cape Verdeans negotiate national and international identities in and through performance.\(^1\)

Recognized by many scholars as the “first creole society in the Atlantic world,” the complexity of Cape Verdean identity and its unique Crioulo culture, is rooted in the history, politics, and geographical separateness of the former Portuguese colony.\(^2\) The islands are simultaneously part of and separate from the African continent. This tension manifests on both theatrical stages and on global political stages where Cape Verde strategically positions itself as “a model African country.”\(^3\)

On July 5, 1975, the first Cape Veredean National Assembly declared independence from five hundred years of Portuguese rule. Just a few months later, Korda Kaoberdi, the first significant post-independence theatre troupe emerged, sharing its theatrical anniversary with the newly independent nation. Their mission directly related to independence ideology and the postcolonial objectives of forging a new national identity. The pioneering work of Korda Kaoberdi (Wake up, Cape Verde) was founded under the dynamic artistic leadership of Francisco Gomes Fragoso, a medical doctor who adopted the artistic name Kwame Kondé, and years later would controversially be dubbed “the father of Cape Verdean theatre.”\(^4\) Fragoso galvanized the amateur theatre troupe of teachers, students, musicians and laborers, with the urgent mission to create a national theatre that was "genuinely Cape Verdean and authentically African.”

In examining the theoretical foundations and early work of this troupe, I propose that studies of Cape Verdean theatre and the performance of Cape Verde’s brand of creoleness may expand and deepen the ways in which scholars approach theatre of the African diaspora and creole performance practices. While this article focuses on the theatre troupe’s re-Africanization mission, the full scope of post-independence Cape Veredean theatre offers a complex interplay among the African and European aspects of its Crioulo culture. Yet, even as this early troupe set out to create “a genuinely Cape Verdean and authentically African theatre,” Korda Kaoberdi and its leader Fragoso revealed the complexity of creole cultures in general and *kriolidadi* or Cape
Verdean creoleness in particular. In reconstructing their productions, I consider Fragoso’s own writings, personal interviews, commentaries, and group performance history in their attempt to “awaken” Cape Verde to its own history. Special focus is given to their acclaimed production of *Rai di Tabanka* (*King of Tabanka*).

Emerging in 1975 at this crucial turning point in Cape Verde’s history, Korda Kaoberdi, initiated an approach to a *crioulo* performance theory rooted in enacting political theory through theatrical and cultural resistance. Their primary strategy was to reclaim formerly suppressed cultural roots of expression and in so doing, they simultaneously championed and unintentionally questioned notions of authenticity. Fragoso co-founded the troupe just two months after independence with this brother Manuel (Peyroteo) Fragoso Júnior in the capital city of Praia, Santiago. Half of the nation’s 500,000 inhabitants reside there and its *badiu* culture (particularly emerging from the interior regions where formerly bonded West Africans found refuge) is both celebrated and contested as representative of national culture. Thus, it is most significant that Santiago, traditionally referred to as the most characteristically African island in the archipelago, is the birthplace of Korda Kaoberdi and a *crioulo* theatre.

**Political Theory and Cultural Roots**

First and foremost, director Fragoso and the members of Korda Kaoberdi theatrically manifested the political re-Africanization theories of assassinated freedom fighter Amílcar Cabral. Under Cabral’s leadership of the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde), the two African colonies united in the military struggle for independence, one in which warfare was restricted to the continent and never staged on the islands of Cape Verde. Cabral asserted that in mobilizing troops and the minds of civilians, “national liberation was necessarily a cultural act.” Cabral’s emphasis on culture as a strategy in the struggle for independence was the distinguishing revolutionary cry that forever linked cultural expression with political freedom for Cape Verdeans and others worldwide who were inspired by Cabral’s contributions to African critical theory and the Black Liberation Movement. Born in Guinea Bissau to Cape Verdean parents, Cabral charged Cape Verdeans to re-Africanize the roots of their *crioulo* culture as a key building block towards independent nationhood.
In the wake of independence, Cabral’s re-Africanization theories continued to bolster the new island republic and the governing PAIGC party championed artistic expressions of *badiu* culture from Santiago such as communal rituals, music and dance. During this period, it was common for organizations to garner political, cultural, and social support by claiming an inheritance from Cabral. Not only did such linkages offer validation, but most importantly, for Fragoso, Cabral offered a theoretical foundation for arguing the efficacy of theatre to liberate the minds of Cape Verdeans from colonial bondage. He echoed Cabra’s belief “that a people with no effectively expressed awareness of their history, culture, and language would never be destined to rule themselves and have their fate in their own hands.” As a medical doctor and PAIGC supporter, Fragoso treated the guerilla forces in Guinea Bissau and considered Cabral a comrade and friend. It was also during this period that Cabral asked Fragoso to invent a “nom de guerre.” Fragoso chose the name Kwame Kondé, which later became his “artistic name,” as a tribute to Guinea Bissau and as an homage to Kwame N’kromah, assassinated Ghanian independence leader who was the first prime minister and president of Ghana.

Armed with the tenets of Cabral’s political theory, director Fragoso positioned the fledgling theatre artists of Korda Kaoberdi alongside the freedom fighters, asserting as Cabral did that culture is a weapon and sign of liberation. Under Fragoso’s leadership, Korda Kaoberdi initiated a theatre movement that would have otherwise been suppressed under Portuguese rule. Fragoso’s intent was to resist colonial influences by reclaiming the African roots of Cape Verdean cultural patrimony in order to create “a genuinely Cape Verdean and authentically African theatre.”

Claims of authenticity can be problematic in attempting to define theatres of the African diaspora or when seeking to codify black expressive performance. Given that Cape Verde was uninhabited when “discovered” by the Portuguese, one may question how artists can eradicate - or in Fragoso’s and Cabral’s words - “liquidate” the colonial culture in a crioulo society? With no supposed indigenous population prior to colonization, Korda Kaoberdi’s mandate raises questions about which cultural traditions should be “liquidated” and at what gain or loss to crioulo identity. This line of questioning if further complicated by cultural theorist Biodun Jeyifo’s challenge of whether or not it is possible to "reappropriate an indigenous, pre-colonial performance idiom. . . to reinvent theatrical tradition"
Korda Kaoberdi – Pedagogy and Performance

Among Fragoso’s distinguishing contributions to Cape Verdean theatre was his commitment to train actors as combatants in cultural warfare by grounding their theatre-making in political theory. As founding artistic director, he documented their objectives and outcomes more than any other earlier troupe did, thus ensuring that the cultural memory of their performances was reinforced and alternately recorded in publications that Fragoso and others wrote over the last four decades. Drawing upon Cabral’s theories and military allusions, Fragoso published *Caderno Korda Kaoberdi*, a three-part book series to educate and equip the actors with theory and practice. He liberally quotes Cabral's rallying political cries for independence throughout the series and in his subsequent writings. In the first two books Fragoso provides a general overview of the troupe’s work in the context of a political and social mandate. To support his claims, he cites excerpts from the writings of other theatre practitioners and cultural theorists such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Bertolt Brecht, and Augusto Boal. Fragoso was well versed in all areas of Black Studies and also lists W.E.B. DuBois, Léopold Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop and José Martí as influences on the work. The third book serves primarily as an actor-training manual for Korda Kaoberdi members.

Fragoso’s concept of a “a genuinely Cape Verdean and authentically African theatre,” signifies a collaborative political and artistic mode that utilizes components of text, acting, music, and dance in a staged representation that seeks to reflect the national heritage and act as a public service to the citizens of the new nation. The troupe’s name was derived from Fragoso’s poetry collection by the same title and published in 1974 under Kwame Kondé. The literal and metaphorical references of the name “Korda Kaoberdi” (Wake up, Cape Verde) defined their mission to “awaken” the people of the newly independent nation. Their objective was to "dig up from the deep, tumultuous colonial sleep" the very means of expression which were condemned under colonialism and "to awaken [the people] onto the true path of artistic recreation." In so doing, they sought to create a unique theatre tradition rooted in Cape Verdean expressive culture and performed in the Cape Verdean language. Surprisingly, however, the troupe did not rule out performing in Portuguese.

In addition to creating a genuinely Cape Verdean and authentically African theatre, Fragoso also asserted that theatre must be “ecumenical” and “universal.” He justified this
seeming contradiction by dividing their productions into two categories he called national and universal. The national plays are original Crioulo language plays such as *Preto Tomo Tom, Storia dum Pobo* and *Rai di Tabanka*. Fragoso asserts that these plays are “genuinely Cape Verdean,” and prove that Cape Verde has its own unique theatrical expression, based on “our socio-historical and socio-cultural reality.”\(^{14}\) Universal plays, by which he means politically conscious theatre from other countries, were always performed in Portuguese. Fragoso did not consider performances in Portuguese to be a linguistic or cultural compromise. Rather, he claimed that the troupe could achieve “new aesthetic dimensions and a universal or ecumenical essence” by exploring other models of theatre making.\(^{15}\)

It is strikingly paradoxical, or perhaps indicative of the complexities of crioulo identity, that Fragoso surprisingly did not exclude Portuguese as a performance language in the immediate post-independence years. In fact, this band of artists, so dedicated to *authenticity* and the forging of a new national identity, performed at least half of their pieces in Portuguese. In keeping with Cabral’s assertion that the Portuguese language was “the best thing the colonizers ever gave them,” so too, Fragoso and other Korda Kaoberdi members fully claim Portuguese as their own.\(^{16}\)

Fragoso recognized this critical area of discrepancy in his theatrical treatises for he argued that emphasizing "our cultural heritage … does not mean renouncing possible foreign influence, experiences and teachings." He found European and American models in published Portuguese translations of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* and in the plays, theories and practices of experimental and activist theatre artists including Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed (Brazil), Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre (Germany) and in the political works of El Teatro Campesino (United States, Latino theatre). In 1977, Korda Kaoberdi performed Augusto Boal's *A lua muito pequena e a caminhada perigosa (A Tiny Moon and a Dangerous Walk)*, an homage to the last days of Che Guevara in Bolivia. In 1980 they mounted Brecht's *Lucullus (The Trial of Lucullus)*, originally a radio play about a military general placed on trial in the after-life to determine his eternal fate.\(^{17}\) Perhaps under the tutelage of Boal and Brecht, Korda Kaoberdi presented several music-poetry-dance montages featuring theatrical interpretations of poetry with political commentary. In the short grass-roots *actos* of El Teatro Campesino, Fragoso found a "true theatrical model of agitation and propaganda" centered on direct language and use of humor.\(^{18}\) The strong appeal and accessibility of the *actos* led Fragoso to adapt and stage two of
their pieces in a 1978 performance dedicated to El Teatro Campesino. The plays *As duas caras do patrão* (*The Two-Faced Boss*) and *O soldado raso* (*Buck Private*) respectively dealt with issues of worker exploitation and war.\(^{19}\)

Fragoso continually sought to bridge the distance between spectator and actor in his experiments or “dramatic exercises,” his preferred term. This objective reflects his study of Boal and Brecht, whose theories on theatre called for intellectual engagement and civic response. Fragoso did not wish to merely aesthetically please his audience with theatre. In keeping with the meaning of the troupe’s name, Fragoso wanted theatre to “awaken” the audience so that they in turn would become “actors” in the world.

**Early Experiments: Cape Verde’s Story is an African Story**

Their first two productions, *Preto Tomo Tom* (*Black Man, Beware*) and *Storia dum pobo* (*Story of a People*) were viewed as experimental or exploratory research endeavors in which Fragoso broke from Eurocentric models. These "dramatic exercises” as Fragoso called them, established the group’s purpose to decolonize cultural expression by offering an experience that was far removed from the Portuguese variety shows or religious dramas of the past. Audiences were introduced to a type of theatre that immediately broke from the colonial traditions not only in subject matter and language, but also in structural form. Fragoso presented the seventy-five minute performance without the standard European intermission and disrupted the performer-spectator distance enforced by a raised stage and orchestra pit by staging the actors’ entrance through the audience with improvised movement and gestures.\(^{20}\) In keeping with their mission to offer theatre as a public service, ticket prices were a nominal 50-150 escudos or free when there was sufficient financial funding.\(^{21}\)

The inaugural *Preto Tomo Tom* (*Black Man, Beware*) was performed on May 27, 1976 in Cine-Teatro Municipal, Praia’s only cinema.\(^{22}\) The title comes from one of Fragoso’s own poems and is a Crioulo idiom closely translated as “Black man, be careful.” Fragoso interpolated texts from renowned freedom writers Amílcar Cabral, Ovídio Martins, Kwame Kondé (Fragoso), Kaoberdiano Dambará, and Mário Fonseca.\(^{23}\) His intention was to combine the poems with the theatricality of folk dance and music, namely those of *batuko* and *tabanka*, communal traditions
that were and continue to be closely associated with the *badiu* culture of Santiago, particularly in the interior regions where formerly enslaved Africans found refuge.\textsuperscript{24}

Wishing to draw upon the collective strengths of the community, Korda Kaoberdi collaborated with several groups of artists and maintained an adult and youth acting company. At the core was the artistic triumvirate of Fragoso, Djirga and Tchim Tabari.\textsuperscript{25} Gregório Xavier Pinto, better known as Djirga, was an accomplished local musician who created original compositions for the group. Tchim Tabari (née Cipriana Tavares) brought her own group of *batucadeiras*, an intergenerational group of women who were skilled in the pounding, percussive rhythm and hip gyrating dance of *batuko*. Tabari was an expert teacher and resource on the traditional music/dance form of *batuko* and the processional ritual of *tabanka*.

Tchim Tabari’s embodiment of cultural memory and the reintroduction of long suppressed traditions, were integral to the troupe’s goal to decolonize Cape Verdean theatre and culture. In prominently featuring *batuko* dance and music, practices widely perceived as African in origin, Fragoso literally and figuratively placed Cape Verdean women and Africa center stage.

![Figure 2: Female chorus of Preto Tom Tom. Fragoso (with beard) is seated behind the women. Lina Silva who assisted in performance reconstruction is third from the left with braided hair. The photograph is from the author’s personal collection, courtesy of Abel Rodrigues and Korda Kaoberdi.](image)

\textsuperscript{26}
Batuko is a music and dance genre utilizing call and response patterns. Music ethnologist Susan Hurley-Glowa, finds similarities with a range of other forms including Mandinka griots and praise singing practices, verbal sparring in Portuguese folk competitions and Afro-Brazilian genres. In spite of lingering questions about its origins or influences, batuko is celebrated as one of the most African expressions of Cape Verdean culture and has since become a marker of national culture, often featured in political campaigns for PAICV candidates and a common site at Cape Verdean events in the New England diaspora. It was Korda Kaoberdi’s goal to revitalize and reinterpret on stage the strong rhythms and dances that were considered subversive and censored under colonial rule – in other words, to “awaken” the forms and by so doing, awaken the people from the traumatic hold of colonialism.

Batuko was thus implemented as an ideological symbol of resistance. Typically performed by badiu women, a chorus sits in a semi-circle around the soloist while beating juxtaposing rhythms on panos (rolled cloth usually wrapped in plastic bags) positioned between their thighs. While the polyrhythmic beats play, the soloist initiates the finason, improvising verses that are then repeated by the chorus of women. In the story-telling nature of finason, the singer draws upon historical facts, evokes popular heroes and incorporates intertextual references. Fragoso believed the form “esthetically expressed the most pure and sublime agonies and anxieties of our people.” Functioning like a griot, the soloist weaves a story with social commentary on everyday life, dispensing a moral or offering advice. Verses and chorus alternate until they reach the txabeta or musical climax, during which the beating grows faster and louder and a dancer echoes the music with rapid hip gyrations and rolls.

The actors entered the auditorium using improvised gestures and dancing while singing the lines of the opening poem that I have translated as “Black Man, Beware. Beware the beating drum. If you don’t beware the drum, the drums will beat you.” According to Abel Rodrigues, a principal performer and troupe archivist, the repetitive and percussive consonant sounds were strongly accented, reminiscent of the striking and pounding rhythm of batuko. Original actress Lina Silva demonstrated by recreating the text in an impromptu performance of her own outside O Cometa, a fast food café in Praia’s Achada Santo António neighborhood, the same area that was home to the members of Korda Kaoberdi. “We performed with enthusiasm, jumping, in a spirit of liberty,” Silva passionately recalled, “Everyone did his or her own thing with gestures
and movement.” The rhythmic pattern of the text (and perhaps the memory of the group’s glory days) was so compelling that Silva returned to the song several times throughout our interview even underscoring the comments of other Korda Kaoberdi members present with her singing. Fragoso’s original lines are densely packed with metaphors and a compelling rhythm that I also found myself repeating long after my interview with three of the original actors. My translation from Crioulo of “O preto toma tom, si bo ka toma tom, tom ta tomabo” pales in comparison to the original haunting lines but is an attempt to recreate the percussive rhythm of the original with a plosive repeating “b” sound in the English translation: “Black Man, Beware. Beware the beating drum. If you don’t beware the drum, the drums will beat you.” The repeated cautionary line, “O preto toma tom,” alludes to the onstage use of percussion by the batukaderas and sets the mood for the interpreted poetry that followed the singing.

Whereas Preto Toma Tom drew from Cape Verde’s oral and literary poetry tradition, their second production Storia dum Pobo (Story of a People) employed spoken oral traditions, symbols and political iconography to historically link Cape Verde to Africa. Fragoso wanted to reinforce that Cape Verde’s story is an African story and part of the continent’s history. Storia dum Pobo staged the origin of Cape Verde’s history on the African continent, not in the islands where the colonial educational system privileged Portuguese discovery narratives. Drawing upon the griot tradition, the troupe incorporated storytelling along with pantomime, music, and dance. The play was conceived as a prologue followed by scenes to recount the story of its people within its “true context” - as part of Africa. The play was presented in Crioulo and premiered on September 13, 1976 at Praia’s municipal theatre. Fragoso indentified Storia dum Pobo as the troupe’s second attempt to discover research avenues that would allow them to establish a foundation for an authentic theatre.

The performance began with a prologue delivered by six actors dressed in the tradition of prophets, known for their wise sayings and predictions of the future. The barefoot men wore old coats, straight pants, hats and held walking sticks as they emerged from their auditorium seats and crossed to the stage much to the surprise of the unsuspecting audience. Fragoso refers to the opening as representing the force of Cape Verde’s oral tradition and the contributions that Africans have made to civilization and humanity. Then, through a series of pantomimed scenes, actors depicted a “peaceful and natural” existence on the African continent prior to the arrival of the colonizers, after which were scenes of violence, protest, revolution and eventual liberation.
One of the most memorable colonial era scenes was a poetic reenactment of the pivotal 1959 Pijiguiti Massacre at the Port of Bissau, Guinea Bissau which left approximately fifty dead and one hundred wounded. The PAIGC had organized a strike among the dockyard workers as a means to promote their nationalist agenda to gain independence from Portugal. The violent actions of the Portuguese officials and the strike’s tragic ending focused the mobilization of the newly organized PAIGC. The strike became a catalyst towards armed struggle (1961-1974) because “there were now martyrs and friends to avenge.”

Actors Abel Rodrigues and Lina Silva emotionally recalled the ending of their favorite scene, describing how actors representing the dead workers lay strewn on the stage floor, covered in white sheets while soloist Menu Pecha sang Djirga’s composition “Balentis di Pidjiquiti” (“The Brave Ones of Pidjiquiti”). As the song ended, a voice cried out “Nhô labanta!” (“Rise up!”), to which the actors slowly rose to their feet in a theatrical resurrection of the political martyrs.

The collage or historical scenes ended in a visual homage to the assassinated Amílcar Cabral. The reveal of Cabral’s image on stage resulted in several minutes of a standing ovation. The actors joyously exited the stage and encircled the audience in the style of tabanka, a street procession repeatedly prohibited during the colonial period and which Fragoso inserted as a display of “authentic nationalistic force.”

A journalist who witnessed their July 1977 performance to commemorate the second anniversary of independence, noted the energetic manner in which the actors and the audience melded in an enthusiastic celebration of liberation. The communal spirit of tabanka which ended Stória dum Pobo became the creative framework for the raucous Rai di Tabanka (King of Tabanka).

**Rai di Tabanka (King of Tabanka) – Reclaiming Ritual as Metaphor**

This article offers the first reconstruction of their celebrated performance Rai di Tabanka (King of Tabanka). It garnered the most acclaim for the troupe and best represents their attempts to create a unique crioulo theatrical idiom. The forty-five minute performance contained no spoken dialogue, no linear plot and no traditional mise-en-scène as in conventional European plays. Instead, Fragoso reclaimed, abstracted and theatricalized the processional street ritual of tabanka, a disdained and repeatedly outlawed practice during colonialism, as the central metaphor of liberation in Rai di Tabanka. The festival events of tabanka are inherently
Theatrical and represent syncretic aspects of this culture. *Tabanka* is celebrated during Catholic saints days and dates back to the eighteenth century. Participants dress in an array of military and court figures designed to represent and perhaps mock the colonial authorities, including a King and Queen of Tabanka. Activities are set into motion after a symbolic representation of a saint is “stolen” from the chapel. After a week of nightly prayer vigils, the participants conduct a lively and noisy procession with drummers, blowers of conch shells and a hierarchy of costumed characters and flag bearers who sing and dance through neighborhoods and city streets on their way to reclaim the stolen saint. The dramatic resolution of *tabanka* ends with the procurement of the saint followed by food, music and the saint’s eventual restoration to the chapel.\(^{41}\)

In the post-independence spirit of re-Africanization, *tabanka* associations were formed and supported by the ruling political parties as expressions of nationhood. No longer limited to saints days, *tabanka* has become an ideological symbol of crioulo culture and more specifically the *badu* culture of the main island. In July 2005, as part of the commemorative events of Cape Verde’s thirtieth anniversary of independence, I participated in the venerated “Tabanka of Achada Grande.” Leaving the chapel, I honored the hierarchy of the costumed participants taking a place towards the end of the line with a group of women who warmly welcomed me. I slipped on the bright orange anniversary T-shirt that was given to me and anxiously awaited the start of the procession while the drummers beat their *tambores* (drums) and blew the *buzios* (conch shells). I followed my new companions as we paraded through the neighborhood and down the main street of the capital city, a route that was banned during colonialism when *tabanka* was routinely prohibited and limited to the outskirts of the capital.\(^{42}\)

In preparation for *Rai di Tabanka*, Fragoso noted that since some *tabanka* traditions had been lost or forgotten, the group was obligated to conduct artistic research in order to reinterpret or reinvent them for the stage.\(^{43}\) The performance was promoted as a “poetic, musical, choreographed staging of Tabanka Songs.”\(^{44}\) Fragoso wrote the multi-stanza poetic text and attributes its origins to the traditional oral poetry of *finason*. He later published the text in *Caderno I* under the title “Kantigas Tabanka-batuco pa Teatru’l” (“Tabanka-batuco Songs for Theatre”).\(^{45}\)

My participation in the “Tabanka of Achada Grande” allowed me to witness and experience the inherently theatrical components from within the processional festivities. It was clear that Fragoso did not literally transport *tabanka* to the stage as criticized by individual
theatre artists on another island. Traces of the processional practice such as ritualized singing and dancing were also present in *Rai di Tabanka* but the most visually representative components – the various flags, sounding on conch shells, and the array of costumed participants mocking colonial hierarchal authorities -- were completely absent. Rather, Fragoso found inspiration in the ritualistic and celebratory nature of *tabanka*, using the popular source as a metaphor of liberation from the oppression of colonialism and its attempts to annihilate the human spirit. Writer Luis Romano confirmed the troupe’s alternate use of *tabanka* tradition by emphatically insisting that *Rai di Tabanka* was not folkloric nor “made for tourists.” He commended them for moving beyond ethnic displays to offer a performance that demonstrated a historical, social and protesting spirit. In short, Romano lauded Fragoso’s intention to situate Africa center stage, in the theatre and in the minds of the Cape Verdean people.

*Rai di Tabanka* (*King of Tabanka*) premiered in August 1980 and played to full houses on the raised stage of Praia’s Cine-Teatro Municipal. Fragoso explained to me that their choices for viable venues were limited and that ideally, he would have preferred to stage the performance in an arena theatre in which the audience surrounds a circular playing space – an arrangement designed to intimately engage the public and rupture the “safe” aesthetic distance of the European proscenium stage. As in all their original national plays, actors performed in the Crioulo language in order to underscore the “poetic validity” of the lingua materna as an expression of nationhood. The performance began with pantomimed scenes of slavery and culminated with the liberation of a rebel slave amidst an array of dance, music, and singing styles, that resulted in a cacophony of joy or what actor Abel Rodrigues simply called “a lot of noise”. Along with Lina Silva and João de Deus, the founding actors recaptured the spirit of their hallmark production and greatly assisted in describing key moments in this reconstruction.

The major poetic text of *Rai di Tabanka* consists of eighteen stanzas and a chorus. Poetry has long held a romantic position in the national imagination and in the construction of Cape Verdean national identity, as championed by the Claridade literary movement (1936-1960) during the colonial era. In the absence of a body of dramatic literature, Fragoso defends his use of poetry as both an aesthetic and practical choice. Today, poetry and fiction continue to serve as literary founts for Cape Verdean theatre in addition to a still emerging national dramaturgy.

During the course of performance, a rebel slave is tied to a pillory, a whipping and selling post that remains one of the most iconographic reminders of Cape Verde’s slave history. Until
his eventual liberation, the bound titular “king,” laments his bondage through the voices of the ensemble, and then boldly and exuberantly claims his birthright for himself and for his people. Again, Fragoso literally and metaphorically placed slavery and Africa center stage with the prominence of the pillory and the use of *tabanka* and *batuko*, perceived as the archipelago’s most African performance idioms.

The “king” and his eventual liberation are a theatrical manifestation of what Fragoso aspired to accomplish in the minds of the Cape Verdean people. In keeping with Cabral’s political theories, Cape Verdeans needed to both affirm and embrace Africa in order to be free from colonial oppression. The onstage pillory is an ever-present symbol of the transatlantic middle passage and Cape Verde’s complex legacy with slavery. Whether the “king” is bound on Cape Verdean soil or on the African continent, his captive body reminds the audience that their history begins in Africa. The allusions of the central text and its shifts from individual to collective points of view, further imply that audience members are meant to align themselves with the central character.

![Figure 3: The king of *tabanka*, played by Manuel (Tchira) Mendes Rodrigues, is tied to the pillory. *Batukaderas* are seated behind him. The photograph is from the author’s personal collection, courtesy of Abel Rodrigues and Korda Kaoberdi.](image-url)
The performance opened with a tableau of slavery in which a *kapataz* (foreman), dressed in the ubiquitous white hat and clothing of colonial authority, kept the enslaved people in line. Wielding a whip, he treated them as animals, the actors’ bodies curved in pain and obeisance. The rebellious “king of tabanka,” was tied to the pillory by other slaves tragically forced to carry out the violence.

During a group interview with three original members, actor and archivist Abel Rodrigues demonstrated how the scene of pantomimed enslavement then morphed into a Cape Verdean dance form. While a violin played slow-tempo traditional music, male actors filed in with their backs curved, stepping in time to the rhythm. The actresses were already on stage in kneeling positions with their faces downcast, as each man approached his partner. Actress Lina Silva suggested that I reenact the scene with Rodrigues and of course, I was more than happy to become a Korda Kaoberdi actor, if only for a few moments. Following their directions, I knelt on the patio floor while Rodrigues stood behind me so that we were both facing front. As I started to rise to my feet, my partner assisted by slowly raising my arms above my head until I was standing. While lifting my arms, he turned me in order to face one another, fluidly moving into a dance hold position for *funana*, the next segment in the performance. Today, the rapid *funana* is more likely to be equated with party dancing, but the traditional dance/music genre, historically objected to by colonial secular and religious authorities, became a marker of Cape Verdean resilience and resistance during the liberation movement. Thus, the dancing pairs visually and kinesthetically reinforced Fragoso’s efforts to re-Africanize Cape Verdean culture by juxtaposing a visual embodiment of slavery with the Cape Verdean dance form of *funana*.

Further linking the lives of Africans on the continent to the African diaspora of Cape Verde’s own history, a subsequent shift in the music cued the actors to break from their partners and move into their assigned positions for a pantomimed agricultural scene or “cultural manifestation,” as Rodrigues described. In this scene Fragoso depicted the daily lives of the *badius*, having the actors perform typical tasks of Santiago rural life - sifting corn, carrying baskets on heads, grinding corn with the *pilon* (large mortar and pestle), planting seeds and watering vegetation. By conflating images of *badius* culture with the same actors who had just depicted enslaved Africans, Fragoso grounds Cape Verdean daily life in its historical, social and cultural parallels to the continent.
Having suggested the resonance and remnants of Africa in *badiu* culture, the actors shout “It’s we who will come to liberate the King of Tabanka!” To the accompanying percussion of *batuko* music, the actors danced, encircling the pillory and the bound “king.” After several revolutions the actors divided into a male and female chorus, taking positions on opposite ends of the stage in two rows extending from the front of the stage to the back so that each person in profile faced a partner of the opposite gender. The *batuko* rhythm began anew as both rows moved in towards the center of the stage in a direct path opposite their partner. After both choruses met in the middle, they returned back to their assigned spots, leaving an actor center stage to recite the lines of the central text while the musical accompaniment diminished so that the actor could be heard.\(^{53}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hm sentenciado hm nega} \\
\text{Hm bendedo hm ka ceta} \\
\text{Hm degredado hm ka bai} \\
\text{Ami ké rai di tabanka.}
\end{align*}
\]

[I was sentenced, I refused  
I was sold, I didn’t give in  
I was exiled, I didn’t go  
I am the king of tabanka.]

The *batuko* then returned to its loud and strong rhythm as both sides of the chorus danced to center to “pick up” the solo actor who had just recited the verse. Once both choruses had returned to their original sides, they repeated the whole cycle. *Batuko* intensified while the chorus moved center, “dropping off” the next soloist, and then diminishing while the actor spoke and the chorus returned to their side positions. After the stanza, the *batuko* intensified again as the chorus “picked up” the soloist at the close of the stanza. This pattern was repeated for the entire eighteen stanzas of the poem. The cyclical dancing and call-and-response patterns reflected the repetitive elements of street *tabanka* as well as the structure of *batuko* music. When I questioned Rodrigues and Silva about whether or not I correctly understood the lengthy pattern, they knowingly laughed and responded that it was a “long *batuko.*”\(^{54}\)

Rodrigues likened the
repetitive back and forth dancing of the chanting actors to the expanding and contracting pleats of a *gaita*, the diatonic accordion used in *funana* music. The composition of *funana* is coincidentally based on repetitive patterns played on the small *gaita* accordion and the *ferrinho*, a homemade strip of iron which is scraped with a knife. In fact, considerable repetition is a shared characteristic of the musical genres of *badiu* culture that inspired Korda Kaoberdi, namely *batuko, tabanka, funaná, and finason*.

Throughout the subsequent stanzas, the ensemble recounts personal and societal injustices, evoking images of the back-breaking labor of stone cutting, the toil of fieldwork, the extended bellies of famine, of times gone by, and the emotional pain of leaving one’s country because there seems to be no other way to survive (a possible reference to the indentured slavery in São Tomé to which many Cape Verdeans from Santiago fell victim). In spite of all hardships, the “king of tabanka” tenaciously claims his birthright through the voices of the chorus members, as exemplified in the third verse:

Nha nacimento negado
Nha distino skecedo
Nha nomi trokiado
Ma mi ké rai di tabanka.

[My birth denied
My destiny forgotten
My name butchered
But me, I am the King of Tabanka]

The twelfth stanza, which I consider to be the fulcrum of the poem, expresses a jubilant shift as the soloist cries out:

Kantaderas Korda poeta
na si sono di mort, na tumba, fasse poesia
Batuko, tabanka, funaná, morna, koladera
Um toke, um badjo, um musgo di rai di tabanka.

[Singers, awaken the poet]
from his sleep of death in the grave, make poetry
Batuko, tabanka, funaná, morna, koladera
A chord, a dance, a song for the king of tabanka]

Amílcar Cabral was celebrated as a revolutionary poet and it is most likely that the reference here “to awaken the poet” is a metaphorical resurrection of Cabral or at least of his ideology. In this moment, the memory of the assassinated Cabral is also conflated with the “king of tabanka” whose body still remains bound to the slave post. The conjuring of Cabral coincides with a radical transition in the poem as it begins to depict both hope and revolution. Referencing Cape Verde’s maritime romanticism and common literary trope, a subsequent stanza describes how fish will gladly give themselves up to the fisherman because they are “our fish” and part of “our rich nature.” Then in the next to last stanza, there is an overt revolutionary cry to reclaim lost time by striking back with the very stick that once beat them like a dog.

The final stanza evokes political, cultural and mythical sentiment. Its opening line calls the listeners to unite their efforts -- “djuntos, mó djuntado.” This phrase references the popular Cape Verdean maxim *djunta mon* or “join hands/hands together” to garner political and cultural strength. The ensemble literally joined hands as they spoke in unison to the soft rhythmic underscoring of *batuko.* The last two lines are a mythical appeal, combining the power of storytelling with an inclusive allusion to the audience:

Era um bez… Um pobo hnkantado londji, na tempo
Rai di tabanka nhundi bu sta: além li,
 aleno li, além li; aleno li…

[Once upon a time… a long time ago, there was an enchanted people.
King of Tabanka, where are you? Here I am,
here we are, here I am; here we are…

After the choral recitation, two men stepped out from the group to free the “king of tabanka” from the pillory. The rest of the men then joined in, lifting the “king” high in the air and parading his body. At the moment of his liberation, Rodrigues and Silva described how a “musical revolution” broke out as they all sang the refrain:
Alternating with each stanza, the refrain is sung more than twenty times throughout the performance, aligning the central character with the history and destiny of all Cape Verdeans. Thus, the ensemble of men and women in turn represent both the captive “king of tabanka” and oppressed Cape Verdeans under colonial rule. The essence and spirit of the ending was designed to express the nation’s transformation from slavery to freedom and similar to Stória dum Pobo, the performance ended with a boisterous, joyous finale. Singing and dancing in an improvisational spirit, the actors repeated the refrain while circling on stage. Rodrigues described how one group sang the melody while everyone else improvised as they pleased. The layering of individual voices and multiple styles also extended to the musicians and batukaderas, who simultaneously played the different genres of the fast-tempo funana and percussive rhythms of batuko.

The final stanza with its communal appeal to djunta mon or unite reinforces the political and cultural strength of Cape Verdeans both locally and transnationally since Cape Verdeans world-wide were involved in the fight for independence. Enacting the unifying concept of djunta mon, the actors continued to sing the refrain while moving through the audience. After several cycles, the actors returned to the stage where they circled again before exiting in single file.
Figure 4: The King of Tabanka is liberated from the slave post. The title “Grupo Cénico Korda Kaoberdi’ was transferred onto the original photo and was presented to me as reproduced here. From the author’s personal collection, courtesy of Abel Rodrigues and Korda Kaoberdi.

The heroic figure of the tabanka king, ever present and among us, is a symbol of cultural resistance. In the closing lines and the repeated refrain, he and the chorus members are one and the same, while also reminding the audience of the power of story-telling to invoke, record and recreate the past in the ever-present hero, the “king of tabanka”, who is “here” and who is “us.”

The success of *Rai di Tabanka* led to performances at the 1981 FITIEI international theatre festival in Porto, Portugal, where one critic hailed it as the “first and best sensation” of the festival organized to celebrate theatre of the Iberian expression.⁶² Although they had several Portuguese language plays in their repertoire, Fragoso chose to present the all Crioulo *Rai di Tabanka* to the primarily Portuguese-speaking audience. In spite of overlaps in the Portuguese and Crioulo lexicon, most audience members at FITIEI would not have been able to understand the text of *Rai di Tabanka*. Actor Rodrigues insisted, however, that the audience “understood
With Fragoso’s emigration to Portugal in 1982, Korda Kaoberdi dissolved. According to Fragoso, he and the troupe did not feel that they had enough support to allow them to flourish and build upon the work they had thus far accomplished, particularly after their performance at the FITEI festival. Furthermore, Korda Kaoberdi was not under the auspices of a government sponsored organization such as the JAAC-CV (Amilcar Cabral's African Youth of Cape Verde) nor were they affiliated with the ruling political party. Fragoso suggested that it was perhaps the troupe’s autonomy that engendered some aggressive pressures against Korda Kaoberdi, including a failed attempt by the JAAC-CV to initiate a rival theatre troupe.

Korda Kaoberdi offered a collective and community-based model to post-independence theatre. The scope of their multi-generational and multi-disciplinary approach remains unequaled and represents Fragoso’s encompassing sociocultural mandate for theatre to “to effectively play the role it fulfills in the fight for the transformation of communities, of ways of thinking . . . of the world.” In the spirit of Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Fragoso believed that the collective process of theatre-making and its potential to “decolonize the mind,” was just as important as the final performances they presented to local communities or to international audiences in Guinea-Bissau or Portugal. The collaborative spirit of Korda Kaoberdi also contributed to the valorization of traditional music and dance forms. In addition to the artists who regularly performed with them, the troupe had numerous fundraising and creative arrangements with well-known musicians. Contemporary musicians continue to fondly recall the significance of the troupe’s work, including former Minister of Culture Mário Lúcio Sousa, an accomplished musician and published playwright.

Reconsidering Crioulo Imagination

Like the vast Atlantic Ocean surrounding the islands, each troupe from 1975 to the newest group of artists, signifies momentous waves in the ebb and flow of the crioulo imagination. Korda Kaoberdi attempted to initiate a tidal wave of change, seeking to decolonize Cape Verdean culture by articulating a performance aesthetic grounded in Cabral’s theories and African cultural roots. Two years after the disbanding of Korda Kaoberdi, a wave of regional and
social consciousness crested with Juventude em Marcha (Youth on the March), now the longest-running theatre troupe, who shifted the theatrical gaze to other regional specificities (namely, the island of Santo Antão) and a criouloness that may or may not have anything to do with Africa. In spite of, or perhaps because of the governmental tendency to promote Santiaguenese (badiu) culture as representative of national culture, Juventude em Marcha lays a regionalized claim on the Cape Verdean imagination based on the unique aspects of life in Santo Antão. In the 1990s, the new MpD ruling party (Movement for Democracy) changed the pan-African design of the flag, prioritized privatization efforts and strengthened lusophone and transnational relations.

Emerging within this monumental shift were two significant theatrical movements in the port city of Mindelo, São Vicente - the founding of the GTCCPM (Theatre Group of the Mindelo Portuguese Cultural Center) and the birth of the Mindelact International Theatre Festival. From the Mindelo port, artists looked across the Atlantic to international models, creolizations of western plays and artistic exchanges as inspiration for theatre-making. The Mindelact Association organized in 1996 has also inspired more theatrical activity by promoting a variety of theatre events across all the islands, including World Theatre Day, celebrated throughout the entire month of March.

The diverse range of productions over the past forty years, has dynamically engaged audiences in the nation’s most pressing domestic and transnational issues. While most Santiago artists continue to draw from traditional cultural practices, troupes on other islands perform their own brand of regional and transnational criouloness or kriolidadi. This celebrated and contested characteristic of crioulo performance drew Fragoso, “the father of Cape Verde theatre,” out of retirement to launch invectives against contemporary Cape Verdean theatre. Since then, the pioneering director has become a very controversial figure.

While Cabral’s assertions on culture as political theory are widely revered, Fragoso’s arguments for a genuine and authentic theatre, initiated a “hot debate” during the thirtieth anniversary year of independence. The 2005 highly publicized debate was waged in newspapers, television, and internet sites. The main figures were Fragoso, a Cape Verdean director living in Portugal since 1982 and João Branco, a Portuguese theatre artist living in Cape Verde since 1991 in Mindelo, São Vicente, an island traditionally viewed as having stronger European influences. Branco, is the artistic director of the GTCCPM (Theatre Group of the Mindelo Portuguese Cultural Center ) and founding member/artistic director of the annual
Mindelact International Theatre Festival and the Mindelact Association. In that capacity, Branco has been a galvanizing force in the promotion and production of Cape Verdean theatre. Ironically, it was Branco who praised Fragoso as the “father of Cape Verdean theatre,” honoring him with the 2000 Mindelact Theatre Award and inviting him to write the preface to his 2004 book, Nação Teatro (Nation Theatre), the first book on Cape Verdean theatre history. Further accolades were bestowed upon Fragoso in January, 2005 when Minister of Culture Manuel Veiga honored him with citations and named his childhood street “Kwame Kondé,” a tribute to Fragoso’s revolutionary and literary pseudonym.

The debate quente or hot debate, became a contested public site for theorizing crioulo performance in post-colonial lusophone Africa. One week after Fragoso’s 2005 honors, the newspaper Expresso das Ilhas printed an inciting interview that initiated a flurry of passionate responses, engaging a transnational readership in the politics of contested cultural and national identity in a multi-media performance. The newly honored Fragoso reinforced his mission and mandate to reclaim the African roots of Cape Verdean society and boldly declared “there is no theatre in Cape Verde,” understandably insulting theatre artists from various islands. Furthermore, he argued that since João Branco is not an authentic Cape Verdean, he is not capable of being his successor as a director and producer of Cape Verdean theatre. Moreover, Fragoso suggested that Branco’s Portuguese identity privileges him to gain access to resources and funding unattainable to others like him or in the past to Korda Kaoberdi. Fragoso insists that it is the responsibility of government to define national culture and specifically calls upon its leaders to create a national theatre, with careful attention to the person selected to be at its helm.

For Fragoso, that person cannot be the Portuguese Branco. The multiple insults were especially surprising and hurtful since they so closely followed the prestigious homage paid to Fragoso. The interview ends with Fragoso lamenting the unfortunate dismantling of his troupe which he attributed to lack of resources in comparison to the “extraordinary support” given to Branco. The ensuing, public debate was a theatrical appetizer to the events of carnival, an event which parades and celebrates uniformity and diversity within Cape Verdean culture.

Korda Kaoberdi’s mission – to create a national theatre that is "genuinely Cape Verdean and authentically African” – directly relates to independence ideology and the postcolonial objectives of forging a new national identity. The fervor of the post-independence period may have waned but Santiago performance troupes in many ways continue to reinforce the contested
The retired Fragoso ensures his place in Cape Verdean theatre through publication, Cape Verdean and Luso-African media outlets, and mentorship to theatre troupes.

Critical questions that emerged from the “hot debate” ask what it means to embody crioulo performance in daily life on and off stage. The ongoing artistic riff between the islands of Santiago and São Vicente, respectively described as more African or more European, also plays out in longstanding and ongoing discussions around Crioulo language variants, educational access, political representation and issues of national culture.

Figure 1: Theatre directors from three different islands discuss their responses to Fragoso’s criticism of Cape Verdean theatre on TCV television show Konbersu Sabi. (L to R) Jorge Martins, director of Juventude em Marcha; Armando da Veiga, director of Santa Kultura; Matilde Dias host of Konbersu Sabi and João Branco, director of GTCCPM and Mindelact Festival. Photo by the author.

The issue at the core of the debate was not merely theatre pedagogy or resources, but the anxiety of finding oneself placed on a crioulo spectrum, with Europe on one end and Africa on the other. The cultural roots of Cape Verde are undeniably African and European, a central characteristic that emerges from more than five centuries of co-influence. Since 1975 and the re-Africanization movement that fueled the struggle for independence, the small island republic has
opened its government to multiple political parties, welcomed privatization by foreign investors, and actively promotes “a Global Caboverdiano Nation.” While the Cape Verdean government positions itself somewhere between these two poles, so too, theatre activity across the islands employs various models of cultural and linguistic engagement, representing the inherent flux of crioulo identity and its historical practice of absorbing and transforming the “other.”

Korda Kaoberdi was the first prominent theatre of the first Atlantic creole society. They reclaimed oppressed cultural traditions as a means to enact and embody Cabral’s re-Africanization theories. In doing so, Fragoso and Korda Kaoberdi revealed the linguistic and cultural complexities of crioulo identity, even as they championed a genuine and authentic theatre. The diverse scope of post-independence Cape Verdean theatre troupes, who for the most part work without compensation, contribute to the promise of Cape Verdean theatre to transform the colonial tensions that exist within a crioulo society into creative acts of political engagement and freedom, what post-colonial theorist Homi Bhaba describes as “the liberatory signs of a free people.” Perhaps a crioulo performance theory – one that encompasses the contradictions, ambiguity, and fluidity of creolized or mixed race identities – can continue to enact the political while also reclaiming a place for embodying the genuine and authentic experiences of all individuals in the transnational creole world.

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1 This article builds upon my dissertation and excerpts are reprinted here. All translations into English are mine. See Eunice Ferreira, ‘Theatre in Cape Verde: Resisting, Reclaiming, and Recreating National and Cultural Identity in Postcolonial Lusophone Africa.’ Ph.D. Diss, Tufts University, 2009.


3 The United States recognizes Cape Verde as a “model” African country for stability in governance and human rights, granting the country the Millenium Challenge Corporation award of $110 million dollars to address poverty, water and agricultural management, infrastructure, and private sector investments. After successfully fulfilling the compact’s provisions in 2010, a second compact was awarded in 2012 to reform water, sanitation sector and land management sectors. Official website for the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a United States government corporation whose “mission is to reduce global poverty through the promotion of sustainable economic growth.” https://www.mcc.gov/where-we-work/program/cape-verde-compact-ii.


6 Lobban, 85.
Lopes 2003, 26; Cavaco 2005, 10.


Email to author, May 1, 2015.


Ibid., 19.

Ibid., 21.


The original title in German is *Die Verurteilung des Lukullus* (1940).

He admired that in the actos, "communication with the public is direct and immediate. The image is not abstract, nor confusing nor intellectual . . . it leaves no time for subjectivism, nor psychological investigations or psychoanalysis . . . it is a theatrical production which comes directly from collective improvisation, thus being a reflection or mirror of social reality." Kondé, *Caderno “Korda Kaoberdi,”* No. 1, 38

The original Spanish titles are respectively *Las dos caras del patronocito* (1965) and *Soldado Razo* (1971).

I am most thankful to original Korda Kaoberdi members, Abel Lopes Rodrigues, and Lucialina (Lina) Fernandes Silva who greatly assisted my work in performance reconstruction. Interviews were conducted in July 2005 in Santo António, the neighborhood of Fragoso and members of Korda Kaoberdi.

The ticket cost today would be equivalent to approximately $0.50-$2.00 USD. Francisco Fragoso, personal interview, April 2005.


Kondé, *Caderno “Korda Kaoberdi,”* No. 1, 16.


Other respected musicians worked with Korda Kaoberdi including Katchas, Zezé di nha Reinalda, and Djonsa de Farol.

From author’s personal collection courtesy of Abel Rodrigues and Korda Kaoberdi. I am most thankful for the generous gift of original photographs. Fragoso (with beard) is seated behind the women. Lina Silva who assisted in performance reconstruction is third from the left with braided hair.


Lina Silva played various roles in Korda Kaoberdi as did the other members of the group. She played chorus roles, and danced tabanka in a Guinea-Bissau performance. Her favorite role was as Ché Guevara’s teacher in *A lua muito pequena e a caminhada perigosa*, an homage to the revolutionary leader. In *Caderno Korda Kaoberdi*, the play is interchangeably referred to as *A lua muito pequena e a caminhada perigosa* or by the descriptor, *Homagem a Ché Guevara*, from the title of one of Fragoso’s poems. The play is based on Augusto Boal’s original play and was performed in Portuguese.
preeminent African scholar, he criticized Eurocentric historical narratives, argued for the Black African origins of ancient Egyptian culture and its influence in world history.

35 Ibid., 18.
36 Lobban, Cape Verde: Crioulo Colony to Independent Nation, 90.
37 "Digressão do “Korda Kaoberdi” à ilha de S. Vicente Julho/77 – Festas de Independência de Cabo Verde,” originally published in Jornal de Angola, No. 0 (July 30, 1977) and reprinted in Caderno Korda Kaoberdi, No. 1, 24.
38 Francisco Fragoso, personal interview, April 2005.
40 There are variations on the spelling of the title (Rei di Tabanka, Rai di Tabanka, Ray di Tabanka). Since Fragoso refers to it as Rai di Tabanka in his own notebooks, I also use Rai di Tabanka for the sake of clarity. Under the recently adopted orthography of ALUPEC, the title would be spelled Rei di Tabanka in the Cape Verdean language.
41 José Maria Semedo and Maria R. Turano, Cabo Verde: O Ciclo Ritual das Festividades da Tabanca (Praia, Cape Verde: Speen Edições, 1997), 68.
42 Ibid., 68.
43 Contemporary artists have also “rediscovered” tabanka, employing its music and traditions in a variety of ways. Representative examples from dance, music and theatre include Raiz di Polon, Ferro Gaita and Ramonda. Praia dance-theatre company Raiz di Polon incorporates the use of tambores (drums) and the búzio (conch shell) in modern dance creations that fuse tradition with new inspirations from international practices. The musical group Ferro Gaita, best known for the musical style of funaná, also makes use of the conch shell in their popular song Rei di Tabanka. Praia theatre group Ramonda attempted to literally transport the festival of tabanka to the theatre festival stage of Mindelact 1999 with Tabanka Tradição. According to Christina McMahon, Ramonda’s production did nothing more than reproduce the main elements of street tabanka. For her description and response to Tabanka Tradição see Christina S. McMahon, “Theatre in Circulation: Performing National Identity on the Global Stage in Cape Verde, West Africa,” (Ph.D. Diss., Northwestern University, 2008), 9-11.
45 Kondê, Caderno “Korda Kaoberdi,” No. 1, 49-51. The poem is printed in Caderno 1 while the performance is introduced in Caderno 2.
46 Criticism and dismissive statements about Korda Kaoberdi’s mission and work were common responses to Fragoso’s invectives against Cape Verdean theatre in the 2005 “hot debate.” Mindelo audiences offered similar criticism in reponse to Tabanka Tradição.
48 Luis Romano, “Korda Kaoberdi na Apoteose da Tabanca-Teatro,,” in Caderno Korda Kaoberdi, No. 2, 29. This review was a reprint from Voz di Povo, No.239 (September 20, 1980), 2. It has since then been reprinted in other Cape Verdean newspapers.
49 Fragoso, personal interview, April 2005. As an alternate example he described a subsequent staging of Rai di Tabanka in a very large rectangular room with a circular playing space in the middle. Musicians were positioned in the circle, the female group of batukaderas on the outside of the playing circle and the actors interspersed among the audience members.
50 Kondê, Caderno “Korda Kaoberdi,” No. 2, 22-23. Italics mine. “È nossa intenção este exercício definir as autênticas linhas de força no domínio da nossa poesia, da nossa música e da nossa coreografia, procurando estudá-las, penetrando artisticamente nos seus meandros e nos seus mistérios, sem violentar a sua peculiaridade e daí erguer todo um trabalho de recriação e criação simultaneamente no caminho duma forma poética válida (nacional e, por isso, na nossa língua nacional) e duma coreografia e música prospectivas capazes de nos definir estética, artística e culturalmente.”
Susan Hurley-Glowa, “Funana,” in Lobban and Saucier, Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cape Verde, 113-115. The text is published in Caderno Korda Kaoberdi, No. 1 as “Kantigas Tabanka-batuko pa Teatru’l.” There is no subtitle or note to identify it as the text to Rai di Tabanka. The translation is mine, however, I am grateful to my mother Lotty Ferreira for her assistance with some of the more colloquial references. All citations from the poem are from Kwame Kondé, Caderno Korda Kaoberdi, No. 1, 49-51.

Rodrigues and Silva, personal interviews, July 2005. 


List of traditional Cape Verdean music and dance forms.

“Kamíinho grandi, kamíinho kláro / Odja piskador ta piska n’agu limpo / Pexe ta bem, hmgodado, pexe manso / Si pexe, nös pexe, rikessa nauressas.”

Karpintero tornia pó, manduku manduka / Katchor, Katchoron, Katchorinho, kal mas runho / pó també ta sirbi p’oto kussa, bus mós, karpintero / di nos tera, di rai di tabanka, konche si oto usso.”

Fragoso wrote the poem using his own orthographic system as was and continues to be the case with many writers. I use the spelling djunta mon when I do not literally quote Fragoso’s text since it is the most common orthographic representation I have seen in practice today.

I have tried to capture the figurative meaning of the second line “Nu bem pa pila moko.” The line makes a literal reference to grinding corn but the figurative meaning refers to fully investing oneself in an activity. I am grateful to Rita Vaz, my Praia host and family friend, who assisted me by explaining the colloquial use of the phrase. My hope is that “heart and soul” will capture some of the emphasis and exaggeration of “moko.”

Rodrigues and Silva emulated some of that spirit as they zealously recalled the emotional climax of the piece while simultaneously talking to me. “One sang batuko, another sang koladera, another sang funaná, another sang morna,” explained Rodrigues. Silva reinforced her colleague’s recollection saying, “We all sang. Everyone sang in his or her own way,” before launching into her own musical version of the refrain.

FITEI has been held annually in Porto, Portugal since 1978, making it the longest running theatre festival in Portugal. FITEI also claims to be Portugal’s first theatre festival. FITEI stands for the Festival Internacional de Teatro de Expressão Ibérica (International Festival for Theatre of the Iberian Expression). See also Carlos Porto, FITEI: Pátria do Teatro de Expressão Ibérica (Porto, Portugal: Fundação Engenheiro António de Almeida, 1997). Please note that in Porto’s book the performance is Ray di Tabanka. The late Carlos Porto was a long-time Portuguese theatre critic. I had the opportunity to interview him in his Lisbon home in April 2005 thanks to the recommendation and introduction of João Branco. Porto graciously offered me a copy of his book but unfortunately, the aging critic could not recall details from almost twenty-five years ago. For a collection of Portuguese responses to the FITEI performance see Manuel J. Silva, “Korda Kaoberdi: A Cartada da Época,” Voz di Povo no. 281 (November 26, 1981), 5.


Fragoso, personal interview, April 2005.

José Vicente Lopes, Cabo Verde: Os Bastidores da Independência (Praia, Cape Verde: Spleen Edições), 604-605.

Kondé, Caderno “Korda Kaoberdi,,” No. 1, 34-35.

Mário Lúcio Sousa, personal interview, July 2005. Playwright Mário Lúcio Sousa was not a member of Korda Kaoberdi but recalls the powerful impact of witnessing their performances.

In recognition of their contributions to Cape Verdean theatre, Juventude em Marcha (founded in 1984) received the first Prémio de Mérito Teatral (Mindelact Theatre Award) on March 27, 1999, awarded annually on World Theatre Day.

From independence until 1992, the Cape Verdean flag featured pan-African colors and except for the addition of the symbols of a scallop shell and two corn stalks, the flag resembled that of Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde’s partner in the independence struggle. Both flags, with color blocks of red, yellow, and green and emblazoned with a black star were based on the party flag of the PAIGC which first governed the new Republic of Cape Verde. The new design replaced the more traditional African colors with red, white, blue and a circle of ten yellow stars. The new flag, proposed under the leadership of the MpD, was adopted on July 24, 1992 amid controversy. See Lobban, Crioulo Colony, 123-124.

GTCCPM is an acronym for the Grupo de Teatro Centro Cultural Português do Mindelo. The Mindelact Theatre Festival premiered in 1995 and two years later became an international event, with numerous Cape Verdean...
troupes and international artists primarily from Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Italian speaking countries. Grupo de Teatro do Centro Cultural Português do Mindelo (Theatre Group of the Mindelo Portuguese Cultural Center).

71 Branco is especially noted for his “creolizations” of foreign plays including Shakespeare, Becket, Lorca, and Molíère. For more on his Crioulo adaptations, see Eunice Ferreira, “Crioulo Shakespeareano e a Creolizing of King Lear,” African Theatre: Shakespeare in and out of Africa., Edited by Martin Banham James Gibbs Femi Ososifan, Nov. 2013.

72 Matilde Dias, journalist and former host of Konbersu Sabi, coined the term “debate quente” in her blog “Lantuna.” She used the phrase to describe a January 27, 2005 debate on the state of theatre in Praia. I borrow her term to describe the Fragoso-Branco debate which was initiated not long after the Praia meeting. See Matilde Dias, “Crónica: Debate quente no Palácio,” January 28, 2005, http://lantuna.blogspot.com/2005/01/crónica-debate-quente-no-palcio.html.

73 João Branco, Nação Teatro: História do Teatro em Cabo Verde (Praia, Cape Verde: Instituto da Biblioteca Nacional e do Livro, 2004), 44. In recognition of Fragoso’s contributions, Branco asked him to write the preface to this first book on the Cape Verdean theatre history. Additionally, in an ironic twist of fate, an article in praise of Fragoso which Branco had written prior to the “hot debate” was published just days after Fragoso’s venomous critique. See João Branco, “Francisco Fragoso: O medico cirurgião transformado em parteiro teatral,” A Semana, February 4, 2005, sec. Krioliddi: 2-3.

74 Francisco Fragoso, interview by António Monteiro, “É difícil olvidar todo o contributo do Korda Kaoberdi (II)” Expresso das Ilhas, February 2, 2005, sec. Cultura: 26. “Estou pessimista em relação ao nosso teatro. A não ser que o Governo tomasse uma decisão de criar, de facto, um teatro cabo-verdiano. Cabo Verde precisa de ter um teatro seu, com características caboverdianas, mas sem perder aquela ambição universalista de que falei, para que nós, também, tenhamos o nosso índice de civilização...Porque é por isso que eu estou pessimista: num País onde não há teatro (em Cabo Verde não se pode dizer que existe teatro, neste momento) falta o tal índice de civilização.”


76 During the 2000 trip to receive the Mindelact award, Branco and Fragoso sat down for what Branco termed an intergenerational conversation on Cape Verdean theatre. Although Fragoso praised the work of the GTCCPM and Mindelact, the conversation subtly foreshadowed some of the aggressive and defensive positions that each would take in the 2005 media “debate.” For Branco’s transcript of the 2005 meeting see “Uma conversa sobre teatro Cabo-Verdiano: Diálogo entre gerações,” Mindelact Revista, no. 6 (January/June, 2000), 33-44.

77 After its initial introduction in Expresso das Ilhas, the archipelago’s other media venues printed, aired and electronically disseminated responses to the controversial interview. Participants included prominent literary figures, journalists, and theatre artists whose views were represented in other weekly papers, the bi-weekly television program Konbersu Sabi (Good Conversation), the Mindelact website (for which Branco was webmaster) and Lantuna, a blog operated by journalist Matilde Dias who also hosted Konbersu Sabi, a nationally broadcast talk show on Cape Verdean culture.

78 OTACA, directed by Narciso (Chicho) Freire, a contemporary of Fragoso, remains committed to producing Santiago history plays. Célia (Fuka) Varela, director of Finka Pé and one of the very few female directors, performed a well-received short play entitled Maria Badia as part of Mindelact’s Festival Off, in which she challenged gender and cultural stereotypes. 79 Raiz di Polon, under the artistic direction of Mano Preto, is Cape Verde’s preeminent and only professional dance company. Based in Praia, the company dancers and choreographers draw from badiu performance traditions but recreate them by deconstructing, inverting, and questioning norms. Their innovative and non-folkloric approach to dance has made them a favorite of the Mindelact International Theatre Festival held annually on the island of São Vicente while other Santiago troupes, influenced in part by the central vision of Korda Kaoberdi, have been critiqued on the basis of overemphasis on badiu customs and history—Praia troupe Fladu Flá was often criticized on these very points. Thus, it was particularly significant that Fragoso served as a consultant to their 2006 play Proficia di Kriolu, directed by Sabino Baessa, the troupe’s director and playwright. A theatrical essay on the officialization of Crioulo, the play was structured in the tradition of Korda Kaoberdi, depicting scenes of Cape Verdean history, featuring a tribute to Amilcar Cabral, and including artistic collaboration from Raiz di Polon’s Mano Preto and musician Principiato.

79 Perhaps energized by the 2005 “hot debate,” Fragoso recruited actors, musicians, and technicians in Portugal to form “Tchon di Kauberdi,” a theatre troupe made up of Cape Verdean descendants living in Portugal.
The name has several interpretive layers. The translation of tchon refers to earth, ground, or land. When placed in the phrase “Tchon di Kauberdi,” the phrase figuratively conveys immense homeland pride, authenticity, and cultural roots.

80 I am most grateful to Matilde Dias who allowed me to watch the taping of the show live in the studio. A reprint of her reflections on the event are available at http://www.mindelact.com/noticiasArq-36.htm. Photo by the author.

81 At a 2005 world conference on Cape Verde held in Washington, D.C., Pedro Pires, President of the Republic of Cape Verde, delivered the closing address, “Connecting the Global Cabo-Verdiano Nation.”