Chapter 16
Forbidden Batuko:
Historical Social Tensions in Cape Verde Through Music and Dance

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ABSTRACT

European navigators claimed the Cape Verde archipelago for Portugal in the 15th century, leading to European settlement focused on agriculture, fishing, and trade. From the 17th to 19th centuries, enslaved Africans were brought to the islands, shaping a stratified, oppressive society marked by cultural and genetic diversity. Portuguese colonial rule imposed violent social hierarchies among landowners, clergy, traders, slaves, and escaped slaves (badius/vadios). After slavery's abolition and ongoing economic neglect, Cape Verde remained largely rural until independence in 1975. Music and dance reflected these tensions, with African-rooted forms like batuko enduring despite bans. Today, such practices are key to Cape Verdean postcolonial identity, both locally and in the diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

After the discovery of the uninhabited Atlantic archipelago of Cape Verde in the fifteenth century, the territory was gradually settled by populations arriving from Europe, who engaged in agricultural production, livestock farming, fishing, and trade. The African slave trade began as early as the fifteenth century (Caldeira 2013, Eltis & Richardson 2010, Marques 2004) and became particularly significant during that and the following centuries. Slaves were brought via Atlantic routes from different regions of mainland Africa, Christianized, and then sold to Europe,

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the other Atlantic islands, and, later, to the Americas and the Caribbean (Meintel 1984, p. 37).

Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, a complex process of local societal structuring took place—comprising at least three major cycles, according to Correia e Silva (2002, p. 18)—which led to the emergence of a Creole society and culture with its own distinctive characteristics. This process was marked by social segmentation that combined or brought into confrontation a complex mosaic of geographical and genetic origins, cultural traditions, and personal and collective trajectories. The establishment of Portuguese-rooted political, religious, and military institutions helped to delineate not only the social positions of individuals from various backgrounds, but also the control of both formal and informal powers, whether economic, political, or religious. Colonial authorities associated with the Portuguese crown, various military personnel, merchants of different origins, clergy, landowners deportees, autonomous workers, slaves, and fugitive slaves, referred to locally as *badius*[2] (vagrants), were all identified and mutually recognized by the local population. Following the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the nineteenth century, the impoverished local economy, devoid of investment from the colonial apparatus, gave way to a predominantly peasant society that remained largely unchanged until the period of independence in 1975.

The dynamics within the colonial empire that led to this scenario (Boxer 1991, Meintel 1984)—apart from the terrible aspects associated with slavery, exploitation, and forced domination—also included factors such as ecological crises, social change, slave escapes, and political tensions. The repeated famines that afflicted the archipelago, hitting slaves and freedmen particularly hard, and the alliance with landowners against the authorities appointed by the crown, were mechanisms of social disruption at certain times, for example, at the end of the sixteenth century, particularly on the island of Santiago (the largest and most important in the archipelago), and later at the end of the 18th century (Correia e Silva 2002). Relationships between different social groups were reflected in their expressive behavior involving music and dance. At certain times, between the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, social extremes clearly marked their cultural practices and preferences. The local elites associated with colonial power identified with European musical genres (including the French and English *contradances* and *waltz*), while the *badius* and peasants engaged in repeatedly outlawed musical and dance practices that were deeply indebted to the resistant memory of mainland African cultures (notably genres such as *batuko*[3] and *finasom*). Historical records spanning two centuries—as well as their absence—vividly illustrate the tensions and precarious equilibrium balance that arose between fugitive slaves and their descendants, landowners, and royal colonial authorities.