

## **‘AS YOU RECEIVE WITH ONE HAND, SO SHOULD YOU GIVE WITH THE OTHER’: THE MUTUAL-HELP PRACTICES OF CAPE VERDEANS ON THE LISBON PERIPHERY**

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### **Abstract**

Rural Cape Verdeans employ a number of mutual-help practices to mitigate the uncertainties surrounding activities fundamental to their subsistence. One of these practices is *djunta mon* (“to work together”), a loosely planned, non-monetized system of allocating labor at peak intervals during the islands’ notoriously unpredictable growing season. By means of *djunta mon*, neighbors or family members work in each other’s fields until the tasks of every land-owning participant, such as planting, weeding, and harvesting, are complete. Alongside *djunta mon* in rural Cape Verde exist a number of other non-remunerated mutual-help practices, such as *ajuda mútua*, *entreaajuda*, and *laja kaza* (“to add concrete to one’s house”). While less visible than *djunta mon*, they are nonetheless equally as important in completing tasks essential to life in the Cape Verdean countryside, such as building water cisterns and constructing and expanding homes.

In this paper, I will attempt to show how Cape Verdean immigrants, many of whom live in the city’s peripheral neighborhoods, have adapted the mutual-help practices of rural Cape Verde to a new, transnational context. The iterations of these practices in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area differ from their rural counterparts in that they involve fewer people (mostly women), take place on a year-round basis, and are concerned primarily with domestic work. They also help people find employment, access childcare, secure interest-free credit, construct or repair houses, share scarce household appliances, and “consume” (without purchasing) circulating goods such as clothing, jewelry, and consumer products. In the paper, I will argue that extensive mutual-help ties ensure Cape Verdean migrants in Lisbon a sufficient pool of family and friends upon which they can rely for support and assistance. In this sense, the wide extent and range of Cape Verdean kinship and neighborly networks introduce an element of stability into what are situations frequently marked by precariousness and hardship.

An additional element I will explore is the perception among Cape Verdean immigrants that these mutual-help practices seem to be occurring with less frequency. Whereas Cape Verdeans used to expect the aid of others in helping them to “get by,” my informants contend that their friends and family are increasingly hesitant to do so, even in the current crisis. As such, Cape Verdean migrants in Lisbon express empathy for the misfortune of others, but often fail to act in helping them improve their circumstances. While this shift is in part due to the availability of other means of support, such as state assistance, I will contend that the changing attitude of Cape Verdeans in Lisbon towards mutual help is also due to their encountering hegemonic, neoliberal notions of “self-accountability.” As a result, Cape Verdeans perceive that their mutual-help practices are in decline, while simultaneously needing the material support that they provide. A wider aim of this paper is therefore to investigate the influence of these and other dynamics on the mutual-help practices that Cape Verdean immigrants currently employ in the transnational context of the Lisbon periphery.

**Keywords** – Cape Verde, Lisbon, social economy, mutual-help practices, exchange networks.

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Any description of the mutual-help practices of Lisbon’s Cape Verdean labor immigrants known interchangeably as *djuda mutua* or simply *djuda* must include a discussion of similar practices in Cape Verde. After all, per an article by Åkesson (2008:256), these are the phenomena that ‘travel’ with a population as it begins a ‘new’ life in the destination country. The most evident of these mutual-help practices found in Cape Verde is *djunta mon* (literally, ‘the joining of hands,’ but implying ‘to work together’ or ‘a joint effort’).

Conceptually, *djunta mon* and *djudá* are different, though in practice they merge into one another and may be intermixed (cf. GUDEMAN, 1976:34).

A defining characteristic of everyday life in rural Santiago, the island from which hails a majority of Lisbon's Cape Verdean population, *djunta mon* serves as a loosely organized mechanism to distribute labor during peak periods of the growing season. Though groups need to be organized before the first rainfall, there is considerable continuity in their composition from year to year. During seasons of sufficient precipitation, *djunta mon* enables the reproduction of Cape Verdean agriculture, based on maize and pulses. The practice allows for flexibility and autonomy in the allocation of workers according to the needs of the farmer, cuts the amount of time spent on fundamental tasks, reduces the uncertainty around activities essential to rural subsistence, and reinforces relations between cooperating friends and family members (FARELO & GONZÁLEZ, 2008:78).

*Djunta mon* is not simply a rural practice. In her dissertation, Solomon (1992) describes the importance of *djunta mon* as a matter of survival among the women of Tira Txapeu, a peripheral neighborhood of the capital Praia. In her description, Cape Verdeans negotiating a marginal and largely urban existence have transformed *djunta mon* to meet new challenges. This 'urban' *djunta mon* differs from its rural counterpart in organization, time spent, and task chosen. It involves fewer people, mostly women; operates on a year-round basis; and primarily centers on domestic work. As such, *djunta mon* can take the form of people offering others meals, shelter, or water; collaborating on tasks such as cooking and childcare; and sharing essential items such as refrigerators, stoves, and washboards.

The plasticity afforded to these concepts provides the rationale for my scholarship: an investigation of how Cape Verdeans in Lisbon adapt and reproduce their mutual-help practices. As such, *djunta mon* in rural Cape Verde should be seen as conceptual starting point. My objective for this paper, therefore, is to highlight four of the ways in which Cape Verdean immigrants have creatively reinterpreted their mutual-help practices in order to deal with the challenges of life on the Lisbon periphery.

First, in Lisbon, as in Cape Verde, Cape Verdeans rely on the mutual help of *laja kaza* when constructing or repairing houses. Those wishing to build a home in the future are keen to help the ongoing construction projects of kin and neighbors in order to secure ties that they can call upon when building their own house. In his dissertation proposal, Ascensão (2008:29) calls this event a "summoning of allies," during which the proprietor brings together the labor and knowledge of kin, food and alcohol, heavy equipment 'barrowed' from a construction site from Saturday afternoon until Sunday evening, and materials in order to erect a house. Regarding the beginnings of neighborhoods like Cova da Moura and Seis de Maio, my musician

informant mentioned how construction organized by *djunta mon* and *laja kaza* allowed for the rapid growth of these areas.

At a building party, helpers are considered to be kin or friends and not ‘workers.’ In this regard, the field observer should not ask ‘what *work* did the informant carry out during a particular day?’ but rather ‘what did she *do* on that day?’ (cf. ORTIZ, 2003:898). It is important to note that the house, or *kaza*, is a practical and symbolic entity of special significance among Cape Verdean labor migrants. To be the owner of a large house, ‘well built’ or *ben konstruidu*, is above all an indicator of prestige and success (FERREIRA, 2010:80).

Second, mutual-help networks among Cape Verdean parents allow them to rotate childcare responsibilities (ANDALL, 1999:252). While paid daycare occasionally supplements these arrangements, childcare networks necessitate sharing and negotiation between mothers, their spouses, and elder children. As has been described by Stack (1974), Fonseca (2004), and Lobo (2006) in other contexts, temporary child-exchange between islanders is a symbol of mutual trust, or *konfiansa*, and points to the flexibility and horizontal nature of the Cape Verdean *familha*.

A number of my informants grew up with ‘upbringing parents,’ or *pais di kriason*, typically with female kin as ‘upbringing mothers,’ a fact indicative of the deep-rooted fosterage culture found among non-elite Cape Verdeans. In these relationships, children often develop strong links with the *pais di kriason* who raised them. These are not bonds based on ‘biology,’ ‘parenthood,’ or the transfer of bodily substance, but ones that have formed due to mutual co-presence during the child’s upbringing (SAHLINS, 2011:12).

Third, on the Lisbon periphery, finding work in a cleaning or construction outfit usually necessitates the strategic activation and utilization of local mutual-help networks and loyalties. From her interviews with residents of Cova da Moura, Horta (2008:221) stresses the importance of a person’s contacts in being able to arrange for her short-term work, or *trabadjinhu*, in a sector like civil construction or cleaning services, in which labor supply frequently outweighs demand.

Two of my informants who work in *limpeza*, or the domestic-work and cleaning-services sector, described a kind of “rotational labor” (ANDALL, 2008:86), where they worked for a family for a few months and then were replaced by a female relative or a close friend who had just arrived from the islands. In this regard, while still in Cape Verde, my mother-of-two informant found a job in Lisbon as a live-in domestic worker through a paternal aunt. Replacing the aunt, who returned to Cape Verde to be with her children, my informant proceeded to work for this Portuguese family for four years. In 2008, she had to leave this job due to a pregnancy and the arrival of her eleven-year-old daughter from rural Cape Verde, for the family wanted their domestic worker to live in its house. Reproducing this ‘rotational labor’ scheme, my informant arranged for a friend to replace her.

Last, many inhabitants of rural Santiago participate in at least one *totokaxa*, a rotating credit association that brings together kin and friends for the purposes of saving and lending. Cape Verdeans of similar socio-economic status operate *totokaxa* as a vital non-market economic resource that incorporates financial assistance with more traditional kinds of mutual-help cooperation (BIGGART, 2001:142). By taking part in or 'playing' (*djuga*) a *totokaxa*, members agree to make regular contributions to a pool of money that is given to every contributor once during the course of each rotation (cf. CHAMBERLAIN, 1999:260), thus allowing cash-poor rural Cape Verdeans to have periodic access to relatively substantial amounts of capital.

Like *djunta mon*, *totokaxa* participation takes place among Cape Verdean labor immigrants in Lisbon, though the practice is not as widespread as it is in rural Cape Verde. My mother-of-four informant detailed her *totokaxa* in Lisbon as a group of twenty Cape Verdean women, each of whom contribute a monthly installment of ten Euros. Thus, each woman in the *totokaxa* collects 200 Euros once every twenty months. My informant mentioned that her *totokaxa* cohort uses the money for a range of purposes, including debt repayment, funeral or baptism expenses, tuition or school supplies, retail purchases, and business expenditures. Members are usually 'model' individuals, or *genti sertu*, who are employed in similar labor fields and earn a comparable salary, while the leader is someone who has long-standing ties to the group and a steady income. Because *totokaxa* take place among kin and close friends, all participants are well aware of each other's economic dependability and moral standing. Privileging qualities that socially 'ground' potential participants, such as ownership of a *kaza ben konstruidu*, steady employment, and a large family, further reduces uncertainty in the *tototaxa*.

Before concluding, I would briefly like to mention some of the social aspects of my informants' mutual-help practices. Several families or sets of neighbors who trade goods and services among themselves make up these mutual-help networks, which should be seen as representing a series of ongoing social relations (cf. EPSTEIN, 1969:117). As such, each Cape Verdean labor migrant in Lisbon is 'entangled' in a number of different mutual-help relationships, usually a combination of ties initially made in the islands with others formed on the Lisbon periphery.

The mobile nature of Cape Verdeans in Lisbon necessitates that one initiate mutual-help relations with a number of people. In general, there are frequent changes in the composition of Cape Verdean sociality networks due to arrivals and departures from the country, educational opportunities or medical care sought elsewhere, marriage of offspring, births, conflict with in-laws, and internal disputes, as well as participants leaving the network for more advantageous prospects or congenial kin in another place. Vital here is that the network does not collapse due to the withdrawal of one particular member, for only an intact mutual-help

network can be mobilized in order to deal with the crises a particular member is facing (LOMNITZ, 1978:189; cf. BOSWELL, 1969:252-253).

A palpable subtext in the discourse of my informants is an awareness that the giving of mutual help is becoming an increasingly less-common activity. Economic expansion on the Lisbon periphery has given way to the current crisis, which has exacerbated discrepancies in wealth and privilege. My informants are adamant that they are no longer able to rely on aid from others in helping them to 'get by.' Fewer people seem to be embedded in the webs of mutual-help circulation that can enable a person on the margins to subsist (FIKES, 2010:65). Worse, they say, friends and family continue to express empathy for those in need, especially during the current time of crisis, but are hesitant to take action to help the less fortunate among them. More and more Cape Verdeans fear putting themselves in a situation in which they might be the only person who steps in to provide the proverbial mutual-help 'gift.' For example, my mother-of-two informant said that she had difficulty finding a *kumadri*, or godmother, for her youngest daughter, a prospect previously regarded as unthinkable.

This collective sense of crisis is in part due to a particular notion of time that is shared by my informants. The link between the remembered past and a changed present is complex and takes place at many levels. As shown, years of crisis have weakened Cape Verdean immigrants' ability to offer help in a spirit of mutuality, such that they are unable to counteract the perception of the present (*gosi*) as one of discord and aberration. In the current crisis, 'before' (*antis*) is idealized as a time in which Cape Verdeans had more 'control' over everyday life by being able to provide mutual help (cf. PINA-CABRAL, 1987:730). That they can no longer achieve this state reflects the polarization between 'before' and the present crisis. As a result, 'crisis' has become a starting point towards a future that will be characterized by instability, irreversibility, and fragmentation.

Even though the current moment of crisis has caused my informants to believe that these collective practices are in decline, the giving of mutual help remains an integral part of the experience of being a Cape Verdean labor immigrant on the Lisbon periphery. The act speaks to a wider social community, draws from a similar cultural tradition, and communicates a message of hope (LOBO, 2008:143). In this light, mutual-help circulation seeks to stabilize a world whose 'order' is both elusive and estranging (cf. COMAROFF, 1985: 253-254). Though hardly able to reverse the structural challenges that Cape Verdeans encounter, the giving of mutual help continues, albeit in a tentative manner. It is in these situations that I find the famed Cape Verdean resilience or *forsa*, which I enjoy in their company admiringly and affectionately, if always a bit concerned for the future.

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