

**CULTURAL RESISTANCE IN DANCE ANTHROPOLOGY:
BATUKO DANCE AND THE CAPE VERDEAN REFUGEES**

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RESUMO: Este artigo analisa a dança tradicional cabo-verdiana *Batuko* em dois contextos diferentes. A primeira é a tradição no país como prática social e a segunda é o contexto de *Batuko* dentro de uma aldeia de refugiados em Cabo Verde, chamada *Rabelados*. A vila surgiu dentro de um movimento de resistência religiosa na década de 1940, e viveu por mais de 70 anos em total isolamento, conservando e abandonando algumas de suas mais importantes tradições. Esta pesquisa combina algum material inédito do trabalho de campo da autora em Cabo Verde em 2015 com uma análise teórica da trajetória de *Batuko* e história de luta e sobrevivência dentro deste contexto de isolamento e refúgio.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Antropologia da Dança; Etnografia; *Batuko*; Cabo Verde; *Rabelados*.

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the traditional Cape Verdean dance *Batuko* in two different contexts. The first one is its tradition in the country as a social practice and the second one is the context of *Batuko* inside a refugee village in Cape Verde, called *Rabelados*. The village emerged within a movement of religious resistance in the 1940s, and lived for more than 70 years in total isolation, conserving and abandoning some of its most important traditions. This research combines some unpublished material from the author's fieldwork in Cape Verde in 2015 with a theoretical analysis of *Batuko* trajectory and history of struggle and survival within this context of isolation and refuge.

KEY-WORDS: Anthropology of Dance; Ethnography; Batuko; Cape Verde; Rabelados.

1. Introdução

This article is based on a research about a traditional dance from Cape Verde, called Batuko, and its relation with a local Cabo Verdean refugee village. The community was created in 1940, when the Catholic Church imposed new rules for its followers in the country, creating a rebellion by those who did not accept the newer regulations of the Church. Those who did not accept were persecuted and fled to the mountains, surviving for many years without any governmental contact and support.

They were known as the *Rabelados*. In the Creole spoken by the Rabelados themselves, the word refers to the Portuguese word “revelado”, meaning “revealed”. However, the mainland Cabo Verdeans, who speak very close to standard Portuguese, believe the word to have come from another root, “rebelado”, meaning “rebel”. Therefore, we can see that both groups have given their own input as to the origins of this word, “Rabelado”, clearly coming from their own viewpoint of the Rabelados break from society. The Rabelados considering themselves somewhat enlightened, and those who conformed the Portuguese standards considering the Rabelados to be just that, rebels. According to Évora, “the semantics assigned to the term is from the 13th century, during the period of the Inquisition, when ‘revealed’ concept symbolized a shortening of the distance between man and God” (2012:53).



Image 1: The main houses of Rabelados village. Photo taken by the author during the fieldwork in 2015.

The ethnographic research and fieldwork in 2015 provided me the opportunity to understand and describe to great extent the situations and circumstances pertaining to my main question which addresses the place of Batuko dance inside the Rabelados village as regards issues of continuity, change and transmission.

Batuko, a heritage and tradition from Santiago Island in Cabo Verde, can also be found in Brazil, being performed in the north region of the country. Slaves – considering that many of them were imprisoned in Cabo Verde before being transferred to Brazil - brought it during the eighteenth century, remaining until today in a few small communities.

To better understand this context, I will first expose the features of Batuko dance in Cape Verde and afterwards, demonstrating some analysis from my fieldwork in 2015, conceptualize the dance inside the Rabelados' village.

2. Batuko

Reports about the Batuko dance can be found since the eighteenth century by different authors. This dance can mainly be found in Santiago Island, the most important island in Cabo Verde, and since the last three hundred years its structure is relatively the same.

The practice of Batuko has different functions depending on the situation in which it is performed. Some people say that Batuko lost its social function during the years, no longer being a ritual and becoming a common occurrence in the day-to-day life of any given community. Moreira describes the Batuko ritual when he was a child, in the middle of 20th century:

Batuko was always a moment of conviviality: stories along the night, ladainhas, rosaries [...]. The story goes that Batuko was a cultural event that appeared only in wedding parties, christening.... In Boa Entradinha this was not so, it was a fill of free time, a daily thing, normal, women along the night, after work, gathered in the neighbourhood and had fun until a certain time, before going to sleep. (2009:55)

Another example quoted by Nogueira is Silva's description about a wedding ritual. 'For this investigator, marriage is the ritual, including a few elements in the

wedding and post-wedding, and Batuko is one of several elements, however with a playful aspect' (2011:44).

From a *batukadeira's*¹ point of view, a similar change occurred. She was interviewed by Semedo in 2009, and said that Batuko was part of her childhood, which gradually weakened, because the people who practiced it limited it to party time and weddings, and it ceased being something usual, in their day-to-day life. [...] But even at the weddings, where we had a sociable space, Batuko was danced as a real performance, having at the same time a playful and ritualistic character (apud Nogueira, 2011:46).

Besides the social function, Nogueira also described the technical features of the dance, giving us a general idea of a typical Batuko session when she says:

A Batuko session is presented as a set of percussion-vocalists, usually women, who sit in a circle in informal situations or semicircle when they are on a stage and should be facing the public, and will sing and play a percussion instrument that they have stuck between her thighs and clapping hands. There is usually a soloist, or more than one – a situation in which they alternate – which singing is answered by a group who sings the chorus. (2011:32)

During the session, traditionally performed only by women, there is a progress that occurs in most of the cases. In general, “the beginning of the session is with a slow pace and as the song progresses part of the group starts to play another rhythm. This sound set is called *xabeta*” (Nogueira, 2011:35).

Another important aspect of a Batuko dance session is when, at any given time, a dancer comes in to do the *torno*, one of the most impressive part of the dance, which is a dance focused to slam the hips almost without moving the rest of the body. Torno has been described in different ways along the history of Batuko, sometimes as “curves and turnings” or “contortions of the body” (Duarte in Nogueira, 2011:16), and sometimes as “an incredible progression of speed and a continuous hump of the hips aided by excessive tightening of the cloth” (Nogueira, 2011:16). The women who dance the *torno* tie a cloth around their hips to help with the movement. This movement that is based on the movement of buttocks will reach a climax of speed when *xabeta* becomes more intense - a change that is called *rapica*.

¹ Woman who plays and dances Batuko.



Image 2: Batuko dancer wearing cloth for *torno*. Photo taken by the author during the fieldwork in 2015.

The basic instrument is called *xabeta*, and consists of a piece of wrapped cloth. After many years, they started to put the cloth inside a plastic bag so they could obtain louder sound. Afterwards, to adapt their instrument, they started producing a pad made of synthetic skin (*napa*). Today the pad is a standardized part of the dance, representing one aspect of the development and change in Batuko.

The table below was developed to illustrate better the structure of a Batuko performance, considering the rhythm, lyrics and steps.

	Initial part	Chorus (closing)
Lyrics	Singed by a soloist; Narrative aspects	Singed by all women
Rhythm	Pampam (normal xabeta's rhythm)	Rapicado: Same tempo as Xabeta, different rhythm and stronger beat.
Steps	Foot stamp following Xabeta's rhythm	Double tempo and emphasis on hips movement

Table 1: Batuko dance structure

3. Rabelados and Batuko

Before I entered the field, the community was uncertain, the current reality of the Rabelados unknown, and my actual conditions in the field were unpredictable until the moment that I arrived there. The information was not enough to be well prepared, but it was interesting to arrive in the field like that. I felt that this condition made me more alert and open about what I could find there, which included, for example, the possibility of not having Batuko frequently or even at all.

As I have heard and read before, I went to the field with the expectations of watching them dancing/singing Batuko during their social activities, such as cooking, harvesting, and cleaning. During my first week at the village, I was more concerned about getting to know them and their practices, without talking about the Batuko dance and my intentions there. Day by day I was watching them and becoming desperate due to the fact that I was not observing any kind of Batuko manifestation, nor songs, nor random steps being “accidentally” danced during their activities.

3.1. Dancing Children

The daily routine was different for adults and children. As part of the harvest season (July, August, and September), the adults left their houses around 5am to go to the plantations, returning around 2pm. During this period, the younger children – on vacation from school – stayed around playing and trying to interact with me, the only white person in the village, while the children over thirteen years of age were able to follow their families to the plantations.

As soon as the adults were back from the plantations, the women started preparing dinner and taking care of their children while the men had time to go fishing or swim. The dinner was around 7pm and it was set in three or more houses, which means that you had to eat at least a small portion in each house to show respect for each family. After the dinner, most of them – adults and children – would gather together at Ficu’s house for their entertainment moment. Ficu’s house was one of the main houses in the village and it was also the only house with a television, donated by previous volunteers in the village. The Brazilian’s soap opera was a complete success among them.

Since I had children around me full-time, and therefore it was easier to have access to their daily routine, I started discussing their motivations for dancing. They already knew that I was an actress and dancer from Brazil, so there was a looming expectation that I was going to teach them something, and not the reverse.

When I finally decided to be more direct and ask them what kind of dance they like, they answered in unison: “Ballet!!!”. I endured a 5 seconds shock before I could answer anything, and I asked them where they heard about Ballet. The television, of course, was their response.

My first week in the field showed me a little bit of their routine and gave me a better idea of what I was dealing with. I knew that the children would be around me during the day and that I would not have much contact with the adults until the end of the day. The children being very excited about learning Ballet, I started teaching them every morning and gaining their trust within the context of these lessons. At the end of each class, I asked them to teach me a dance from Cabo Verde, which, of course, eventually bore the fruit of Batuko.

After eight days in the village, I finally had my first contact with the dance. Inspired by a simple question of mine about the dance’s rhythm, the first Batuko took place in the community kitchen, improvised with tablecloths and benches. The girls that were taking the Ballet class started the drums and the singing and in less than five minutes I had more children approaching, attracted by the noise. Some of them arrived dancing and some of them were just watching and being entertained. In the end, there were around fifteen children, boys and girls, having fun with a Batuko performance for more than half an hour.



Image 3: First Batuko performance seen in the field, performed by the children in the common kitchen. 2015.

In Image 3 we can see that the three girls sitting improvised the Xabeta (Batuko drums) with table cloths enveloped by plastic bags, while the boy and the girl dancing used a bigger cloth to tie around their hips, part of the traditional costume of Batuko.

From that moment, I realized that the young generation was much more interested in Batuko than the adults. It was easier to access the Batuko dance having children around me every day and they started performing it in an entertaining way, having fun and making jokes.

We started having more or less of a routine: I was teaching them ballet and in the end of every class I had a chat with them about Batuko. Most of the time the chat ended in practical demonstrations and explanations of steps, lyrics and rhythm, which later helped me to develop “Table 1” in this article, showing the basic structure of the dance.

3.2 Rabelado Batuko Dance Company

During those 3 months living with Rabelados, I could not see Batuko as a social practice as I was expecting. However, we were informed that a group of tourists were coming to visit the village and would like to watch a Batuko performance.

That was when I got aware of *Rabelado Batuko Dance Company*, a company ruled by adult’s women in the village who perform only under specific circumstances, such as festivals or paid performances, like the tourist’s context.

The first rehearsal for the performance happened at night in front of Ficu’s house. They pushed three benches together and around twelve women were sitting and playing the xabeta while singing. They were singing one song after another and no one from the official group was dancing. On the other hand, the children were entertaining themselves with the rehearsal, where they could experiment and show their Batuko skills.

There was no external light in that area so I felt embarrassed to use the camera’s flash, although I took a few pictures and did some videos of the rehearsal, afraid of never seeing it again. We can identify that they are sitting in a circle, which is the most common position in Batuko, with the xabeta between their legs and the young girl in the centre showing the hip movement.

The second day of rehearsal was a little bit shorter than the first one, with the duration being approximately forty minutes. The scenario was very informal and also a little bit disorganized from my outsider point of view. They were talking all the time, very loud, intermixed with the children running and playing around and a few dogs,

cats, pigs, ducks and chickens among us. But they were absolutely comfortable and able to understand each other.

It was clear for me during the rehearsal that the lyrics were created by them or someone else from Rabelados, as the narratives were all about their village, their people, their religion and their culture. It was also very difficult to understand the lyrics because they were all sung very fast and in Creole. They kept singing different Batuko songs created by the group and discussing some performance details in between each song.

I knew that they were discussing the songs but at that moment, I could not understand everything and did not want to interrupt them. Later I understood that they were choosing which songs they should perform for the tourists, since they had to select only two from amongst a wide repertoire.

The next moment that I saw them performing Batuko was my first opportunity to watch the Rabelado Batuko Dance Company performing in a professional setting. I could see for the first time their official costumes, which was simple but planned: a black skirt of medium length (below knees), a white t-shirt, a white cloth around their hair and a cloth around their hips (called tornó), as shown in Image 2. This performance was the only opportunity that I had to see the Rabelado Batuko Dance Company on stage. After that day and until the end of my fieldwork I never saw them performing again.

It was also interesting to observe the connection between the steps and the lyrics. In all actuality, what I found is that there is no connection. The lyrics always have a deep narrative about Rabelado history, describing different aspects and practices from the village and some jokes about love stories. On the other hand, the steps are completely connected to the rhythm, and not narrating a story. Either Pampam or Rapicado steps mark the beat and move the feet and hips, without following any kind of narrative from the lyrics.

To clarify some of these aspects, I created the following table to compare the practice of Batuko in the past (according to interviews and ethnographic data) to its current practice in the village.

	PAST	2015
WHEN	Social events: weddings, baby born, religious gathering, cooking and general festivities.	Formal performances for tourist events in the village and dance festivals.
WHO	All generations from the village, men and women.	Professional Batuko Dance Company (women between 16 and 30 years old) and informally by children.
WHERE	Their houses, yards and common areas.	Main stage of the village for formal performance and in front of their houses for rehearsal.
FREQUENCY	At least every weekend during religious gathering, but also on weekdays for special occasions.	Occasionally once a month
HOW	Daily casual clothes, basic steps (pampam and rapicado).	Formal costumes (black skirts and white shirt), basic steps.

Table 2: Comparing the practice of Batuko in the past (according to interviews and ethnographic data) to its current practice in the village.

4. A Path to Walk

The reason is still a bit unclear as to how the children knew so much about a rarely performed dance, even the youngest ones, and that they had so much curiosity for Batuko. Although I cannot say for certain and risk my analysis in highlighting this point, it appears as though the children have become the “safe-keepers” of this old tradition, as they were playing and dancing it daily.

I, as a stranger, could not help but affect the children’s routine, because I was next to them during the whole day almost every day. After a while, they knew that I was interested in Batuko and they knew that they could catch my attention with any kind of information. In this sense, and with insufficient time in field, I could not immediately discern if every information given to me by the children about Batuko was accurate. Although they were absolutely lovely and excited about me and my interest for the dance, they could have been exaggerating and overreacting to my presence, constructing any kind of information (theoretical or practical) to impress me.

Thus far, this research gathered a precious material about dance safe-guarding traditions in this specific Cape Verdean refugee village. It is still in my best intentions

to go back to the field (still in 2018) and continue this research, being able to observe more deeply the relation between Batuko and children from the Rabelados' village, as well as analyze their relation with the dance in a season out of harvest time, when I would be able to experience their daily-routine without having them working on the plantations for ten hours a day. It may well be that the lack of social dance practice of Batuko was in fact a seasonal phenomenon.

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