

THE FIELDS (ROÇAS) OF SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE - a Lusophone heritage

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Abstract

The word “roça” originally means “cut scrub”, “cut vegetation to create a clearing” or “field whose scrub was cut”. However, there is no clear explanation as to why this term was chosen to name the fields of São Tomé and Príncipe. These fields hold some resemblance, in terms of their foundation and organization, to similar ones in Brazil (the sugar mills) and in Spain (the “fincas”). In view of the several architectural influences, the “roças” are more than a heritage of Sao Tome and Principe, they are a Lusophone heritage. The “roças” are the most inner heritage of a people, one that should be preserved and protected for the benefit of Lusophone culture and the future development of the archipelago.

Keywords: “roças” São Tomé and Príncipe, Lusophone, architecture, heritage

Full Paper

“There is a special place in Africa, a rather unique one, which, though small - two small islands in the Gulf of Guinea - have an important and unparalleled architecture and territory. This place is the archipelago of Sao Tome and Principe and its cities and, especially, its famous ‘roças’.”

This small excerpt by Architect José Manuel Fernandes summarizes a good description of Sao Tome and Principe. A territory of about 1000 square kilometres on the Equador, the islands hold an extremely significant architectural heritage for Lusophone countries, mixing South American, African and European influences.

We are referring to the rural settlements known as “roças”, which are highly relevant in the archipelago’s occupation process and which, due to the coffee and cocoa cycles, led to the islands’ economic development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In its origin, this process is not innovative in the Portuguese expansion movement. In fact, if we analyze the occupation of the territory since its discovery, in 1470, up to the cocoa cycle, we realize that the urban strategy implemented was similar to that used in other islands in the Atlantic and in South America, more specifically, in Brazil.



Picture 1 - Boa Entrada, Administration House [photo: Francisco Nogueira]

The morphology of the cities of Sao Tome and Santo Antonio, in the island of Principe is similar to other sea cities, such as: Ponta Delgada, in the Azores; Ribeira Grande, in Cape Vert; or Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, which evidences a specificity in overseas cities built by the Portuguese.

The colonization strategy of Atlantic islands shows common elements as well, such as the intensive agriculture of lucrative crops in large areas; using both free men and slaves to foster mixing of Europeans and Africans and thus give origin to a new free population.

The acculturation process of these islands also evidences several attempts to introduce Mediterranean subsistence crops, which deeply changed the native landscape and gave 'the territory a Portuguese home flavour'.



Fig. 2 - Boa Entrada, Interior of Bow-Window [photo: Francisco Nogueira]

The origin of the word “roça”

The word “roça” originally means “cut scrub”, “cut vegetation to create a clearing” or “field whose scrub was cut”. However, there is no clear explanation as to why this term was chosen to name the fields of São Tomé and Príncipe. These fields

hold some resemblance, in terms of their foundation and organization, to similar ones in Brazil (the sugar mills) and in Spain (the “finças”).

In the sugar cycle (15th century), the common agricultural unit in the archipelago was known as mill. The term, very common in Brazil, evokes the milling of the sugar cane. In Brazil, this huge agricultural structure typically included the owners’ house (casa grande - the big house), the servants’ quarters (sanzala), the production support structure (warehouses and mill) and the church or chapel. The mill in Sao Tome has some resemblances in terms of housing and agriculture and production units, in structure and shape, as well as in terms of the social systems - owners, free workers and slaves sharing spaces.

Although in Brazil the mill lasted, though with changes, until the end of the 19th century, in Sao Tome it was a failure right at the end of the 16th century due to lack of profitability and quality.

In the mid 1900s, in the beginning of a new production cycle (coffee), several references may be found of the term “fazenda” applied to the territory of Sao Tome. In fact, that was the name given to Brazilian agricultural structures for one-crop of cocoa, coffee or tobacco, while the term “roça” was only used in the Northeast of Brazil with the meaning “small field for family farm production”. In Sao Tome, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the word “roça” stood for a small field that resulted from cutting scrub and was used for subsistence crops by Europeans and Africans. This was a similar meaning to the one given in Brazil.



Fig. 3 - Uba-Budo, Administration House [photo: Francisco Nogueira]

The different terms used to name the agricultural settlements (mills, “fazenda”, “roça”) corresponded to similar methods used to occupy the territory - cutting scrub and burning the soil.

The large agricultural production and exporting units are internationally known as “plantations”. If directly translated, the word “plantation” (“plantação”) has several meanings in Portuguese and is therefore not adequate to designate an estate.

The success of coffee and cocoa plantations in Sao Tome led to the implementation of several agricultural structures and to large production. The dimension and magnificence of the “roças” led to the need to establish a specific name for these estates. This name would identify fields that had started as scrub, which had been cut to become an agricultural field, which had been named, in a

process of acculturation, “engenho” (mill) and “fazenda” and had finally acquired the name “roça”.

The term “roça” gains prominence in Sao Tome, both as a term that identities the specificity of the territory’s agricultural and social system and of how its implementation has become part of its culture and history.



Picture 4 - Nova Olinda, Administration House [photo: Francisco Nogueira]

The development of the “roça”

The creation of many production units in Sao Tome and Principe led to the foundation of around two hundred “roças”, considering their main and secondary locations. This number was the result of former experiences (“engenhos” - mills) and their social and architectural organization (housing and production structure). Thus, the implementation of “roças” was structured and included housing (the administrators’ house, the houses for the European workers and “sanzalas”), agricultural and industrial units (driers, warehouses and production support

buildings) and social equipment (health, education and social care units). This structure evolved significantly due to three main factors: the constant demand for strategies to boost production, the need for self-sufficiency and the changes in labour conditions - slaves became hired workers.



Fig. 5 – Caldeiras, Administration House and Cabin [photo: Francisco Nogueira]

From small agricultural settlements (with a main house, “sanzalas” and warehouses), “roças” became complex production plants highly mechanized and industrialized, with a rich and varied structure.



Fig. 6 – Bernardo Faro, interior of the Administration House [photo: Francisco Nogueira]

The increase in production occurred at the same time as the knowledge on coffee and cocoa production grew. Adapting new production techniques implied adopting new technologies and building new structures in the “roças”. The fact that these structures, with communities of thousands of people, were on an island forced them to obtain maximum autonomy and self-sufficiency. Thus, equipment

for maintenance (stables, sawmills, carpentries or repair shops) transformation (soap and palm oil factories) and food production (bakeries, pig sties, chicken coops, barns and shops) was introduced. The agricultural companies would thus meet most of their workers' needs not only in terms of housing, health and education, but also in terms of food and clothing.



Fig. 7 – Agostinho Neto, Hospital, Fig. 8 – Diogo Vaz, Hospital [photos: Francisco Nogueira]

The two small islands of Sao Tome and Principe were provided with goods and services structure for all the “roças”. Each would play a specific and significant role in the industrial and productive network implemented in the territory (administrative headquarters, “roças” dedicated exclusively to housing or import and export harbours).

The changes in labour was forced by slavery having been abolished in 1875, when provincial regulations were laid down on new health and sanitation conditions in the “roça”. These law-decrees aimed to decrease the high mortality rate and included preventative measures against the harsh climate, perfect for the appearance of endemic and epidemic diseases. The architecture of the new buildings, regardless of their function, aimed to integrate principles of sustainable construction (localization, implementation, ventilation and materials). New neighbourhoods (“sanzalas” - (in Brazil they are called “senzalas”)) were built, as well as health units (hospitals, infirmaries, maternities, clinics and pharmacies) and education facilities (nurseries and day-care centres).

Besides the laid down regulations, the constant need for workers, crucial for the sustainability of the plantations, forced “roça” owners to improve the working conditions and the services provided to attract new workers and as a means to show the world the efforts made to change the working conditions in the plantations. The improvements in housing and health conditions allowed to keep the population active and healthy, thus maximizing the hired workforce. What was created as mere provincial regulation and an element of propaganda became crucial for the sustainability of the agricultural companies. In the second half of the 19th century, units with more than a thousand workers had to have a hospital.

Leisure activities were also part of the program at “roças” and a growing concern for their owners, not only as a means to ease the regime and the isolation of the islands, as well as a way to motivate the communities. Festivities and cultural rituals were imported from Portugal for the workers’ acculturation and support to the Portuguese diaspora. Throughout the archipelago, dovecotes, bullfighting arenas (at Java and Bombaim “roças”) bandstands (at Colónia Açoreana) and museums (at Sundry and Rio do Ouro), among others, were built.



Fig. 9 – Conchas Beach, School and Chapel [photo: Francisco Nogueira]

The hierarchy of spaces and constructions was established based on a central and unifying element, called “terreiro” (yard). The yard was square and open and its origin lies in Mediterranean culture, evoking the traditional Portuguese squares or, with a similar scale, the patio of Roman villas. In the “roças”, the yard is almost always present; it is the place where goods and products, workers and owners, converge. The yard was the “heart” of the structure, having several functions and uses, among which drying the cocoa bean, daily formation, payment to workers and festivities. This constant activity was part of the routine at the “roças”.

The permanent enhancement of the “roças” and their functioning led to occupation models which we could designate as patterns or types: RoçaTerreiro (“roça”-yard), Roça Cidade (“roça” city) and Roça Avenida (“roça” avenue).

The first type, “roça terreiro” (“roça” yard), was organized around the yard. It was the initial settlement model and the most common in the archipelago because of its size, easy implementation and adaptation to the islands’ topography. As it was very simple, it was adaptable to all kinds of production.

The “roça avenida” (“roça” avenue) was organized based on an axis towards which the several yards and buildings would converge; this type developed into bigger and more complex “roças”. This type of “roça” evidenced project intention. As it derives from a deeper knowledge of daily routines and the techniques used in cocoa production, structures were designed more accurately, considering its size and objectives.

In the “roça avenida” (“roça” avenue), the unifying role of the yard is continued by a line that goes along the whole structure. At each top it would have either an entrance or a striking building and its most remarkable example is the old Rio do Ouro “roça” (currently called Agostinho Neto). A deeper analysis shows that this a structure present throughout the territory, as is the case of “roças” Diogo Vaz, Pinheira or Queluz.

The type “roça cidade” (“roça” city) was organized via a network of streets, gardens and squares, with different functions and relevance, in a similar process to that of cities. This model was also quite large and was similar to an urban settlement and its population density was rather high.

While in the types “terreiro” and “avenida”, the structuring element is quite defined, in the “roça cidade” it is the expansion process that is most evident. The strategy was based on defining several structuring elements (yards or axes), with no established hierarchy, and a functional distribution of housing, assistance and productive units.

Água Izé roça is the most relevant example of this model. Located on the coast, the need for expansion led to building anew hospital, new sanzalas and production support buildings (warehouses, soap factories and stables).



Fig. 10 – Agostinho Neto, Sanzalas (quarters) [photo: Francisco Nogueira]

Conclusion

The layout of the complex building structures is of significant value, namely as to how they were implemented and penetrated the hilly territory and as to their architecture and know-how. The “roças” are remarkable for their size, magnificence and urban relevance. Nevertheless, the richness of the “roças” lies not only in their typologies, in iconic cases such as Rio do Ouro, Água-Izé and Sundy, or in their elegant and luxurious architectural elements.

More than the uniqueness and the richness of a given structure, the impact and relevance of “roças” lie especially in their whole as networks on which a thriving production cycle was based. Moreover, the “roças” were an important factor in the mixing of races, as there were workers from Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-

Bissau or Cape Vert. As such, they became and will remain symbols of the history of the archipelago, representing not just an architectural legacy as well as an identity and cultural legacy. In view of the several architectural influences and the different origins of the people inhabiting the islands, the “roças” are more than a heritage of Sao Tome and Principe, they are a Lusophone heritage. Finally, the “roças” are, without a doubt, the most important legacy of Sao Tome and Principe, and should be preserved and protected for the benefit of Lusophone culture and, especially, for the future development of the archipelago.

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THE EQUATOR in the name given to the imaginary line on the Earth's surface, perpendicular to the Earth's figure axis, which divides the Earth into two hemispheres.

PARALELO ZERO (PARALLEL ZERO) is also an imaginary line that divides research and practice in architecture.