Cape Verdean Cities now and then - A Structural Analysis of Assomada, Island of Santiago

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Resumo:
Santiago (ou São Tiago) é a maior ilha do arquipélago de Cabo Verde, um grupo de ilhas da África Ocidental ao largo da costa do Senegal (Figura 1). Tem quatro cidades importantes: Praia, a capital moderna, Cidade Velha, a capital dos primeiros tempos coloniais, Tarrafal, um refúgio litoral e local de um antigo campo de concentração no norte da cidade, e Assomada, uma cidade que serve a população rural de Santiago no centro da ilha. O desenvolvimento do país, a partir de uma colónia portuguesa para um país independente, lutando com as necessidades de uma sociedade pós-moderna do século XXI, pode ser bem ilustrado através do desenvolvimento da cidade de Assomada. Três diferentes fases de desenvolvimento são claramente visíveis no esquema atual do centro da cidade: o núcleo colonial, a expansão do centro nos tempos coloniais tardios e o desenvolvimento pós-colonial ocorrido há pouco tempo neste centro.


Résumé:
Santiago (ou S. Tiago) est la plus grande île de l’archipel du Cap-Vert, un groupe d’îles ouest-africain à la hauteur de la côte sénégalaise (Figure 1). Il y a quatre villes importantes: Praia, la capitale, Cidade Velha, l’ancienne capitale de l’époque coloniale, Tarrafal, ville côtière et site d’un ancien camp de concentration dans le nord, et Assomada, une ville au centre de l’île alimentant la population rurale de la région. Le développement du pays partant d’une colonie vers un pays indépendant qui est obligé de se préoccuper des besoins d’une société moderne du 21ème siècle, non-alignée à aucun bloc, peut être mis en évidence à l’aide du développement urbain de la ville d’Assomada: Les structures du centre-ville laissent reconnaître clairement trois stades de développement: Le cœur colonial de la ville, l’expansion du centre vers la fin de l’époque coloniale et le développement postcolonial tout au milieu de ce nouveau centre.


Abstract:
Santiago (or São Tiago) is the largest island among the archipelago of Cape Verde, a West African group of islands off the coast of Senegal (Figure 1). It has four important cities: Praia, the modern capital, Cidade Velha, the capital from early colonial times, Tarrafal, a seaside resort and site of a former concentration camp in the north, and Assomada, a city serving Santiago’s rural population in the centre of the island. The development of the country from a colony to an independent country struggling with the needs of a modern post-bloc society of the 21st century can be illustrated by the development of the city of Assomada. Three different stages of development are clearly visible in the current outline of the city centre: the colonial core, the late colonial spreading of the centre and the post-colonial development within this newly formed centre.

Key-words: Structural analysis. Cape Verde. Urban development.
Cape Verde - A Short Introduction

The West African archipelago of Cape Verde is a group of 10 islands (nine of which are inhabited) and some small islands, all of volcanic origin. While the easterly part, notably the islands of Sal, Boavista and Maio, have been flattened by erosion, the western islands of Santiago (or São Tiago), São Vicente, São Nicolau and Santo Antão are younger and therefore in parts very hilly and prone to fluvial erosion during the short spells of rain. The southwestern islands of Fogo and Brava still experience recent volcanic activity, most notably during the 1995 eruption of the Pico do Fogo (FONSECA et al., 2003).

The islands of Cape Verde belong, together with the Azores, the Canary Islands and Madeira, to Macaronesia, a group of islands which came into existence due to submarine eruptions along mid-oceanic faultlines during the late Jurassic and early Cretaceous with Maio, Boavista and Sal most probably being the oldest Cape Verdean islands. Subsidence then followed the cooling of the oceanic crust. Volcanic activity was beginning to shape the islands in the late Cretaceous but strongest during the Tertiary. In the Oligocene to lower Miocene followed deformation and erosion of the surfaces (cf. MITCHELL-THOMÉ, 1976 and PATRIAT e LABAILS, 2006; see also SCHIEDEGGER, 2002 and DUPRAT et al., 2007, for further information).

The islands belong to the semiarid climatic zone of the Sahel. The differentiation between the northern Barlavento-islands ("islands above the wind") and the southern Sotavento-islands ("islands below the wind") refers to the north-easterly trade winds of the region. The average amount of precipitation on Santiago is around 450mm with a high variability (see MITCHELL-THOMÉ, 1976 or LANGWORTHY e FINAN, 1997). Santiago is the second coolest of the nine major islands of Cape Verde with an annual temperature average of 21.6°C (MITCHELL-THOMÉ, 1976). The combination of little rainfall in a short period of time and rather dry soils leads to a very limited natural vegetation on the islands (BARBOSA, 1968, LESOURD, 1995).

The islands were explored around 1450 by Portuguese seafarers and thus remained a Portuguese colony until 1975 (cf. SILVA ANDRADE, 1996). The import of animals to support an ever growing number of inhabitants added to the degradation of large parts of the islands, which triggered erosion and led to a decrease in agriculturally used areas. As Bigman notes (1993), the relation of slavery and sharecropping plus the cultivation of inappropriate crops for the benefit of the few landown-ers only hindered Cape Verde’s ability to feed its people (cf. MENTEL, 1983). As a result, droughts killed a large percentage of the population between 1773 and 1959 and led to high emigration rates. Today, an estimated 430,000 people live on the islands, two fifths of which live on the island of Santiago. Most Cape Verdeans are of Creole origin, a very small minority is European or Asian (ALBUQUERQUE e MADEIRA SANTOS, 2001; BARBE, 2003; CARRERIA, 1983; LESOURD, 2006).

Since gaining independence from Portugal, Cape Verde has reforested almost 80,000 hectares and built 3,000km of walls to protect slopes from erosion. The country thus tries to return to a more efficient and sustainable land use. But even though 70% of the population live in rural areas the contribution of the primary sector to the country’s income is only 12%. LANGWORTHY e FINAN (1997) state that, from the perspective of a local rural household, mere survival is the central issue which drives a short-run decisionmaking. They also point out that yields on the island of Santiago may vary from 80 percent below average in years with a poor harvest to 30 percent above average in good years, with the production dropping to zero in very bad years, as is characteristic for the meteorological conditions in this type of climate (LANGWORTHY e FINAN, 1997). That underlines the dependency of Cape Verde on food imports from other countries. One solution for roughly a quarter of the agriculturally used land on Santiago is irrigation from mostly natural springs or simple wells. The secondary sector, slightly more than 20% of the GDP, mostly produces textiles, shoes and canned tuna. Goods produced for the domestic market include flour, bread, beer, lemonade, cigarettes, tobacco, tarnish and soaps (ALBUQUERQUE e MADEIRA SANTOS, 2001; LESOURD, 1995, LESOURD, 2006).

Therefore, it is not surprising that tourism has become the largest sector on the islands (cf. ROCHA BRITO, 2010). The infrastructure, especially the road network, is still rudimentary, with a total of only 1,400km, 400km of which are dirt roads. The most visited island is Sal, it also features the most advanced touristic infrastructure of all islands. In 2004 Sal had almost 700,000 overnight stays. Second was the island of Santiago with 80,000 overnight stays. On Santiago, the capital Praia draws most visitors from abroad (Instituto Nacional de Estatística Cabo Verde 2009). Cidade Velha, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the major tourist attraction, followed by the town of Tarrafal (Figure 2).

Assomada, the old capital of the province of Santiago, is the most important city in the centre of the island. With approximately 14,000 inhabitants it is the second largest settlement of the island (Praia, the cap-
tial of the whole archipelago, has approximately 125,000 habitants (Instituto Nacional Estatística Cabo Verde 2009). It serves as the district capital for the district of Santa Catarina. Assomada is situated roughly 540m above sea level. Because of its central position Assomada is of special importance for traffic and trade. Tourism only plays a minor role in this area.

**Aim of investigation**

It can be assumed, therefore, that tourism does not affect the original and typical African market structure of Assomada, which has been developed in this city due to endogenous processes over a long time, at least over the past 150 years. Especially the functions trade and commerce have led to a specific structure of the city centre. Assomada, thus, is very appropriate for an investigation of how trade relations and processes without special touristic influence in more recent times have led to a specific market structure in a typical African city in a rural area. This was the reason why Assomada was selected for the investigation presented in this paper, where the analysis of the city structure will be examined and interpreted for the first time.

**Methods**

During an excursion in the spring of 2007, students from the Department of Geography at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich, Germany, performed a GIS-analysis of the city centre of Assomada. Every street was surveyed, and the function of each house was filed in a data sheet and eventually a map was produced to show the internal structure of the city. The different categories were: market (square), services, crafts, retail with and without food, restaurant, hotel, Chinese shop, administrative building, school, church and other. In addition to that, buildings from Portuguese times were specially designated on the map to show the old city centre from colonial times in comparison to the current one. The city centre was divided into four quarters which were defined by means of aerial photographs. The meeting point of all quarters was the Praça Gustavo Monteiro. The excursion group was then divided into four smaller groups which had to analyse one quarter of the city centre each. If a building had more than one storey only the ground floor was analysed.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1**
Orientation and Administrative Map of Cape Verde (Cartography: M. Vetter)

![Figure 2](image2.png)

**Figure 2**
Island of Santiago/Cape Verde with major settlements and the study area Assomada (Cartography M. Vetter)

**Analysis**

The Praça Gustavo Monteiro is the old city centre of Assomada. It is located in the middle of the main NW-SE axis of the inner city. It also lies right in the centre of the assemblage of old colonial buildings and is a natural meeting point for the locals due to its many seating opportunities and the shading trees. Small food stalls offer refreshments. The square is also at the centre of the administrative buildings in Assomada.

The northern quarter shows the most distinct contrast to the old Portuguese city centre. Since the historical centre of Assomada has always been in European hands and because of the fact that this is still the administrative core of the town, the African community, with the largest birth rates on the island, needed to go elsewhere to establish their way of life. This led to the transformation of the northern quarter into an African-dominated quarter with a bigger market square,
where on Wednesdays and Saturdays an African market is being held. The houses around the square are formed like a U with its opening towards the NE. Only few of these houses have flats or apartments, most of them are occupied with food stores, handicrafts, services and Chinese stores. The Chinese stores have everything on offer but food and hardly differ from each other in terms of the variety of products. The buildings in which these Chinese stores can be found are clearly distinguishable as post-colonial. The fact that these stores are situated close to each other hints at a sort of Arab outline of a city with the basar divided into different sections where the goods on offer can be immediately compared with each other. On top of that, the vicinity of all sorts of services and stores offers the customer a kind of shopping mall feeling.

The African market itself can be found inside the U. The structure of the goods on offer is mixed here. One can find food, kitchenware, clothes, and furniture (Figures 3 and 4). The southern part keeps more clothes stalls, whereas in the northern part, towards the local market in the west, there are more food stalls. In the southern part many clothes stalls can be found, in the Northeast more furniture stalls, due to the vicinity to the major road. Right at the corner of the quarter at the historic town square, Assomadas only museum, the Museu Tabanca, with some historic exhibits and handicrafts, can be found.

The second group dealt with the area east of the town square. Most buildings there are used as living quarters with flats. The greater the distance from the old town square, the less colonial buildings can be found. This also shows that Assomada used to be only a very small country town during Portuguese rule. The two administrative buildings of the city are located in distinct colonial buildings. Only at the fringe of the quarter, by the side of the major thoroughfare, some restaurants and bars can be found.

The third group surveyed the southern quarter. In this part of town the old Catholic Church and the new town hall can be found. Most of the administrative buildings in town can be found here (Offices of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Social Issues, and the library). There are only very few shops in this area, some office supplies can be found around the hotel at the southern border of the quarter. There are also just a few apartment blocks. The quarter is dominated by former army facilities transformed into an agricultural cooperative.

South of the cooperative the houses get smaller and poorer with some artisans and a small hotel. In this area the typical local way of building new houses is clearly visible. First the ground floor is built (see Figure 3 for comparison). People may already live in the ground floor even if the other storeys have not been finished. It can take several years to finish the house, step by step, owing to financial and fiscal reasons. Several buildings in the southern part of the southern quarter were being reconstructed or demolished at the time of the examination and new buildings are being built up there.

Group four surveyed the western quarter which is dominated by the local food market within an old colonial structure. South of the market there are many small restaurants, bars, retail stores, small supermarkets and artisan shops. Again the different services are grouped together, Basar-style (like haircutters, bars etc.). To the southwest a SOS-Childrens village can be found and several poorer apartment buildings.

Despite the size of Assomada, the city has very few hotels. There is no airport, no beach and only few
hiking trails, which makes Assomada less attractive for tourists than other regions on the island of Santiago or other islands of Cape Verde. There is also hardly any industry to be found. The reason for the rapid growth of Assomada is consequently to be found in the central position right in the middle of the biggest island with its relatively good conditions for agriculture. The main attraction is the African market which caters for people from the surrounding area beyond the needs that can be covered at a local village market alone. Santiago is considered the most "African" of the Cape Verde islands, Assomada in turn the most "African" of the cities on the island of Santiago.

The African market offers the rural communities a wide range of products beyond their everyday needs. Food can be found especially in the classical market.
nearby and on the streets between the two market-places. A very distinct feature of Assomada’s retail store situation is the clustering of the Chinese shops in the quarter of market and African market. The Chinese shops also offer a wide variety of goods, concentrating on clothes and household products. The clothes are of “western” style and of cheap quality (otherwise they would not be affordable for large parts of the population, considering the very low income of most Cape Verdians). Household items include kitchenware, china, and cheap decoration items. The Chinese shops by and large have the same products in stock. They are grouped together around the area of the African market and, especially on days without the market, offer items similar to those at the market. They are the youngest addition to the importance of Assomada as the shopping centre of the island.

Results

The structural analysis of Assomada clearly shows three different stages of the city’s development (Figure 5):

- Colonial times: Assomada was a small administrative centre for the rural communities on the island of Santiago. Its situation right in the centre of the island between the mountain ridges offered a convenient spot for establishing some central means of infrastructure. Although Praia soon took over from Cidade Velha the main administrative features for the whole archipelago and thus became the natural place for the development of a capital and largest city on the islands, Assomada remained of importance due to its geographical position in the centre, halfway between Praia and Tarrafal. The old market square (Praça Gustavo Monteiro) served as a meeting point and market and all houses of importance were grouped around it (the today partly defunct colonial houses).

- African city: the large number of peasants of African descent led to a predominantly African community on the island of Santiago. In contrary to the more mixed capital of Praia with its international orientation, the rural inhabitants remained largely African. To meet the needs of this fast growing population the original food market needed to be shifted to where it is now, to the northwest of the Praça. In addition to that the large African marketplace, east of the food market, came into existence.

- Modern city (Chinese shops): The modern city is bypassed by the major roads between Tarrafal and Praia on the eastern side of the old town centre, and to the western coast on the southern side. The administrative offices were taken over by the new independent administration after 1975, but the colonial city centre gradually lost its dominant position. Since the distance between the capital Praia and all other towns on the island can nowadays easily be bridged in less than three hours with modern transportation, the central function of Assomada as a hub for the whole island has diminished. It still is, though, a central hub for agricultural goods and food, and for other needs catered for by the African market. The newly opened Chinese shops came after the collapse of the Soviet bloc with the recent Chinese attempts to get a hold on African countries.

The city of Assomada therefore serves as an ideal example of a slow and gradual transformation of a former colonial town into a modern bustling city in Western Africa.

References


