

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Augusto Nascimento. *Histórias da Ilha do Príncipe*. Oeiras: Município de Oeiras, 2010. Illustrations. 408 pp. 35 EUR (cloth), ISBN 978-989-608-114-0.

Reviewed by Gerhard Seibert

Published on H-Luso-Africa (October, 2013)

Commissioned by Philip J. Havik

Histórias da Ilha do Príncipe is a large hardcover edition on gloss paper abundantly illustrated with old maps and images, published by the city council of Oeiras, one of the six Portuguese municipalities that maintain twinning agreements with Príncipe. Since 1995, the 142 square kilometer large tropical island, currently with 7,500 inhabitants, has been an autonomous region of the twin island republic of São Tomé and Príncipe, a former Portuguese colony located in the Gulf of Guinea. Augusto Nascimento's volume is possibly the first book that exclusively deals with the history of Príncipe, which due to its geographic and demographic exiguity usually appears only marginally in books on the archipelago that are included in the bibliography of the volume. The author has published several other Portuguese-language books on the colonial history of the archipelago, which all focus on São Tomé. The title of the book ("histories") is adequately chosen, since the author does not present an exhaustive history of Príncipe. The island's history of more than five hundred years is rather portrayed disproportionately, since some events are described in considerable detail, while others are given relatively little attention or are simply omitted. Apparently this unevenness depended largely on the availability and accessibility of sources of the author, who has worked almost exclusively on São Tomé and Príncipe's history with a focus on the archipelago's recolonization in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. The book privileges the period from 1795 until the country's independence in 1975, which occupies twenty-two of the twenty-five chapters, while Príncipe's early history from its discovery around 1471 is summarized in one single chapter and two chapters are dedicated to the postcolonial period until 2006.

The book begins with Príncipe's discovery by Portuguese navigators. Initially the hitherto uninhabited island was baptized Santo Antão or Santo António de Abade, the Catholic saint's day of January 17, the date the island was discovered. Later the island was renamed Príncipe in homage to Prince Dom João—later King João II (1481-95)—who was entitled to the taxes levied on the sugar produced on the island. Príncipe's settlement by Portuguese colonists and African slaves began in 1500 when the island was granted to the donatary António Carneiro, whose family possessed it for more than 250 years. After the decline of the sugar industry in the early seventeenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, the production of food for the provision of ships and the slave trade dominated the island's economy. In 1753, Príncipe reverted to the Crown when, due to the political instability in São Tomé, the archipelago's capital was transferred to its main settlement Santo António that at the same time was granted city rights. Despite its new status, Santo António always remained a small town with poorly developed infrastructures. During the hundred years that it remained the capital it did not even provide an official residence for the governor, who, consequently, relied on private accommodation.

In the book's chapters, the author provides many demographic data, which illustrate Príncipe's socio-economic development over the time. In 1771, Príncipe had a population of 5,850: 111 whites, 165 free mulattoes, 6 mulatto slaves, 900 free blacks, and 4,668 black slaves. Most of the whites were *brancos de fora*, nonpermanent residents, mostly civil servants, members of the military, and clergy. Many members of the local military and other colonial officeholders were from Brazil. Predominantly whites and a few mulattoes constituted the island's small

wealthy elite, whose members were frequently involved in conflicts among themselves or with the local governor. At that time, five white settlers owned more than 200 slaves each, three whites and one mulatto possessed more than 150 slaves, while eight whites and two mulattoes had more than 50 slaves. This asymmetric social-economic structure was typical for Príncipe throughout the colonial period. The abolition of the slave trade north of the equator, in 1815, and the return of the capital to São Tomé, in 1852, contributed to Príncipe's economic and demographic decline, although the illegal slave trade continued for several decades and coffee and cocoa were already introduced in the archipelago from Brazil in 1789 and around 1820 respectively. In 1855, Príncipe still had 4,381 inhabitants, including 35 whites, 165 mulattoes, 1,720 free blacks, and 2,461 slaves.

A prominent member of the wealthy local elite at the time, who does not receive much attention in the book, is the legendary Maria Correia (1788-1861). A wealthy mestiço landowner and slave trader, locally known as the Black Princess, she was born in Príncipe to a Brazilian major of the militia and a native woman. In 1812, she married José Ferreira Gomes, a Brazilian military man who later established himself in Príncipe as a slave trader and landowner. Ten years after Gomes's death, in 1847, Maria Correia, aged fifty-nine, married Aureliano da Silva, a Brazilian painter, who was twenty-six years younger than she was. She widowed for the second time in 1852 when Silva suddenly passed away. Francisco Travassos Valdez, Portuguese arbitrator at the mixed Anglo-Portuguese antislavery commission courts in Luanda and Cape Town, who visited her during his journeys through Africa in the 1850s, was impressed by the great wealth exposed in her mansions. The islanders told him that she had widely traveled and had been well received where she appeared. "In Rome it is said she was favoured with the gift of one of the slippers of His Holiness; in England with the handsome present in diamonds from the late King, as an acknowledgement of her attention to the officers and crews of the British ships visiting the island; and in Paris she had the honour of being presented to Charles the X." [1] When the wealthy lady died childless at the age of seventy-three she bequeathed several plantations, four townhouses, and 376 slaves.

Ferreira Gomes's godson, João Maria de Sousa e Almeida (1816-69), was another prominent figure from Príncipe, whose remarkable career from slave trader to cocoa planter does not appear adequately in the book. His father, a mestiço colonel of the militia, and his mother were both from Brazil. In 1834, aged eighteen, Sousa e

Almeida left for Benguela, where he was in the military and a slave trader. In 1844, he returned to Príncipe, but already the following year he went to Europe, where he visited various capitals and thereafter spent several years in Brazil and Lisbon. In 1853, he came back to Príncipe, where he began to experiment with planting cocoa. Two years later, Sousa e Almeida moved to São Tomé, where he became a large landowner and prominent pioneer of cocoa cultivation. In 1868, the Portuguese king bestowed him the title of Baron of Água-Izé, the name of his large cocoa plantation in São Tomé. He died the following year of a tropical disease, deeply indebted at the age of fifty-three, and left eleven children he fathered with different women. His son Jacinto would also become a prominent plantation owner in São Tomé. Like Sousa e Almeida, several other local traders and landowners also left Príncipe for São Tomé during the 1800s, contributing to the decline of the smaller island.

In 1875, the year when slavery was officially abolished in the archipelago, Príncipe's population had dropped to only 1,946, of whom 45 were Europeans, 1,521 were free natives, and 380 were freemen. Many properties had been abandoned and the island was visibly impoverished. However, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, encouraged by tax exemptions, Portuguese investors acquired a large number of abandoned plots where they set up large plantations (*roças*) for the cultivation of coffee and cocoa. Príncipe's largest *roças*—Sundy, Porto Real, and Infante D. Henrique—were established during this period. In the early twentieth century, altogether fifty-two *roças* of different sizes employed between three hundred and five hundred African contract workers (*serviçais*), who had replaced the slaves immediately after the abolition of slavery. In 1908, Príncipe's population had increased to 3,830, including 3,330 *serviçais*, 150 whites, and 350 natives.

At that time, Príncipe was severely hit by the outbreak of sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis), which in all likelihood had been introduced by Angolan *serviçais* as early as 1880. The death toll reached such proportions that the authorities even considered abandoning the island. Between 1908 and 1912, the epidemic provoked mortality rates of 12.3 percent to 16.4 percent, killing hundreds of people. During the period from 1902 to 1913, sleeping sickness killed a total of 2,525 individuals on the small island. Initially the labor-intensive measures ordered by the local authorities to eradicate the tsetse fly, the transmitter of the disease, were only reluctantly implemented by plantation owners, who argued that they needed all available *serviçais* for work on the plantations.

Only in 1913 did the measures to eradicate the tsetse fly result in a significant decrease of the death rate, and the following year the flies completely vanished from the island. Following the disappearance of sleeping sickness the island's population increased as a result of the introduction of new *serviçais* and the natural growth of native islanders. In 1921, Príncipe's population already reached 7,000, of whom 5,409 were *serviçais*, the largest number ever. The majority of the contract workers in the twentieth century came from the drought-stricken Cape Verde islands. In the following decades, the number of *serviçais* decreased from about 2,300 in 1934 to about 900 in 1961, when due to the decline of cocoa production only five large plantations survived. Príncipe's total population of 4,332 in 1950 remained largely constant until 1970, since the decrease of plantation workers was compensated by a natural increase of the local population, which until the present day is predominantly composed of former Cape Verdean plantation workers and their descendants.

The author stresses that, due to a lack of government investments, until the 1960s Príncipe's infrastructures remained deficient and public buildings were badly maintained. One of the few improvements was the establishment of a regular flight connection with São Tomé, in 1949. However, until 1965 there was not a single tarred road in Príncipe. Only during the reign of Governor Silva Sebastião (1963-72), when the armed struggle in Angola, Portuguese Guinea, and Mozambique had already commenced and Portugal started to invest more in the development of her colonies, Príncipe started benefiting from the various public works programs. In the second half of the 1960s, three tarred roads, a tarred airstrip, and a new primary school were constructed in Príncipe. After São Tomé and Príncipe's independence in 1975, however, the smaller island continued to feel the adverse consequences of its double insularity. In December 1981, a lack of food supplies provoked a revolt against the government in São Tomé, which was accompanied by secessionist slogans. In 1995, a few years after the country's democratic transition, Príncipe became an autonomous region. The island's first regional government was elected in the same year. The central government's failure to hold any local election in the years thereafter caused another popular protest in June 2006 that forced Príncipe's regional government to step down.

The author focuses primarily on developments that took place during the last hundred years of the colo-

nial period, which are described and examined in considerable detail. However, as already pointed out, a few episodes of Príncipe's history are omitted. For example, the Dutch occupation in 1598, when decimated from initially five hundred men to fewer than a hundred by disease and fighting, the occupants abandoned Príncipe after only four months. The famous scientific expedition of the British astro-physician Arthur Eddington (1882-1944) is also ignored. On May 29, 1919, he observed a solar eclipse on Sundy to prove Albert Einstein's (1879-1955) general theory of relativity, developed between 1905 and 1916. Nor does the author refer sufficiently to Príncipe's cultural history. The colorful popular play *Auto da Floripes*, a medieval drama on the fight between Moors and Christians and the love between a Moorish princess and a Christian knight, is only mentioned in passing by name. (Three photos of the play are included, albeit without any accompanying text.) It was probably introduced from Portugal in the nineteenth century and is performed annually by dozens of amateur actors in the streets of Santo António around St. Lawrence's Day (August 10). The local language Lung'iyé, one of the three distinct Afro-Portuguese Creole languages spoken on the two islands, is not referred to in the book either. Despite these omissions, this well-illustrated volume on Príncipe's history is certainly a welcome and valuable contribution to the historiography of São Tomé and Príncipe.

Around the time when this book was published, Príncipe's tropical beauty attracted the attention of the South African information technology millionaire Mark Shuttleworth. He has become known in Príncipe as *homen de lua* (man of the moon), since he was the world's second space tourist in 2002 when he participated in a Russian space mission. Meanwhile, Shuttleworth's local company HBD ("Here Be Dragons") has started a project to transform the impoverished island into a showpiece of sustainable development based on luxury ecotourism and tropical agriculture. The ambitious project entails Príncipe's largest socioeconomic transition since the late nineteenth century.

Note

[1]. Francisco Travassos Valdez, *Six Years of a Traveller's Life in Western Africa*, vol. 2 (London: n.p., 1861; facsimile of original edition, New York: Adamant Media Corporation, 2006), 17.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-luso-africa>

Citation: Gerhard Seibert. Review of Nascimento, Augusto, *Histórias da Ilha do Príncipe*. H-Luso-Africa, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39831>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.