

A bittersweet inheritance: the cocoa islands of São Tomé and Príncipe from colonial hegemony to developing microstate

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The small African archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe, located in the Gulf of Guinea on the Equator line, has been one of the world's leaders in cocoa exportation at the outbreak of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, and though it retains tangible potential and resources, it is nowadays included in the group of the Least Developed Countries, combining macroeconomic fragility, profound poverty difficulties and socioeconomic disparities.

Formed by two islands and some islets, summing a total of one thousand square kilometres, this archipelago is the second smallest African nation, with around a hundred and seventy thousand people. It has been a former Portuguese territory for more than five centuries, and its colonisation focused mainly in two aspects: on the one hand, its role as important trading port for the African and Atlantic commercial routes provided by its privileged geostrategic location; and on the other hand, the favourable conditions for extensive plantation on its territory, created by fertile soil and humid climate. The cultivated products were mainly sugar-cane, coffee and cocoa, all of which relied heavily on extensive workforce - provided by slave and contracted labour - which shaped profoundly the society, the relation between social groups and the spatial distribution of the population throughout history and its economic cycles.

From the sugar cycle along the sixteenth century, to the coffee and cocoa period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the territory has undergone intense manipulation - vegetation removal and radical changes in land use, implementation of infra-structures or the construction of production estates - which has shaped a built environment that reflected, and responded to, the specific purposes of the colonial project. The independence brought great socioeconomic changes, along with territorial ones: the nationalisation of great part of the land, which was later distributed, and the intensification of the urbanisation process.

These different periods are also reflected upon urban evolution: the capital city of São Tomé has grown from the first implantation spot to stretch along the bays and to the interior of the territory, accompanying the tendencies of the different periods into the current morphology of an extensive blur without clear limits [Figure 1].

From an older core, supported by a waterfront-parallel axis and its surrounding buildings, the city has expanded inwards through infiltration lanes, which have in turn thickened and extended to fill the in between areas. Urban growth, though already visible from the sixteenth century ahead, has intensified halfway along the twentieth century, accompanying the expansion plans of colonial modernism and the urban attractiveness of the independent nation. Nevertheless, within the economic difficulties faced by the new nation, the provision of infrastructures was unable to reach a similar rhythm of growth, which has caused informal settlements to vastly increase, creating fragmentation and disparities between planned and unplanned areas.

Nowadays, poverty affects more than half of the total population of São Tomé and Príncipe, fifteen per cent being under extreme poverty. In this context, informal settlements of basic housing units have grown both within the remainders of the colonial buildings and in recent peri-urban areas, as the number of total urban dwellings considered to lack the minimum living conditions gets close to three quarters of the total existing dwellings.

The post-colonial city gathers therefore constraints and potentials that are strongly related to the socioeconomic evolution process that it has witnessed, resulting both from the colonial legacy and the independency process that followed. This paper focuses on two aspects: on the one hand, the discussion of factors that throughout time have strongly contributed to the specific conformation of the capital city of São Tomé, and on the other hand the challenges that these and the current situation pose for the integrated development of an inclusive urban territory.

The first part will therefore suggest an analysis of features such as the change in the impact of the geostrategic location of the archipelago from part of a colonial system to an independent microstate, the role of the city as an irradiation point to the occupation of the land, the specialisation of this territory as a plantation colony and the influence this has produced in its organisation, the land distribution or the interaction between social groups.

The second part will then focus on the challenges that this legacy carries, namely in the discussion of issues such as the land use and its property, the urbanisation process and its counterpart the metamorphosis of the rural environment, the spatial repercussion of disparities in the income distribution, governance and intervention stakeholders, as well as the inheritance of structures, the idea of shared heritage and its potential as catalyser for development.

Through the presentation of this territory, this contribution aims at discussing the bittersweet inheritances of post-colonial contexts.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, developing country, São Tomé and Príncipe, urban growth, informal settlements

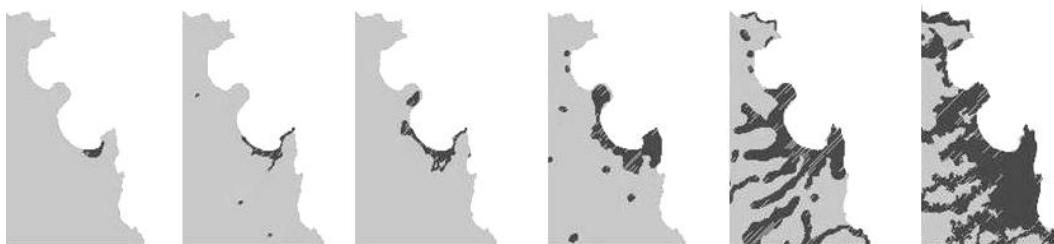


Figure 1 - Diagram of the evolution of the city of São Tomé along five hundred years: (a) discovery and settling, XVth century (b) sugar and slave cycle, XVIth century (c) slave cycle, XVIIth-beg.XVIIIth (d) coffee and cocoa cycle, XXth-beg.XXth, (e) from modernisation to independence, mid-XXth century, and (f) from independence onwards, 1975-2010 [Fernandes et al].

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