

# GHOST

## The Afterlives of Contract and Enslavement

### NARRATIVES ON INDENTURED LABOUR BETWEEN CAPE VERDE AND S. TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

To document the cultural history of forced labour practices in Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe during Portuguese colonialism, the research project *GHOST. The Afterlives of Contract and Enslavement: Narratives on Indentured Labour between Cape Verde and S. Tomé and Príncipe* is initiated.

This research, hosted at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra (CES), which will run until 2027, aims to produce new and in-depth knowledge about forced labour in these two archipelagos, which still impacts the life dynamics of Cape Verdean and Santomean societies to this day. GHOST thus intends to contribute to the discussion on the recognition of neglected colonial pasts and their legacies, by paving the way for a more critical and democratic approach to forced labour.

#### BRIEF CONTEXTUALISATION

Between 1903 and 1970, around 80,000 Cape Verdeans were sent to work on the coffee and cocoa plantations of São Tomé and Príncipe. As a result of this massive influx of Cape Verdean indentured laborers, commonly referred to as *contrato* (a veiled term for servitude and/or forced labour), a profound impact was made on both societies, affecting their culture and social structures.

In this study, the analysis will be based on a detailed analysis of indentured narratives, including poetry, prose, paintings, cinema, music, newspapers, and life stories. By examining *how* and *why* indentured labor narratives evolved over time in two African archipelagos, the research project addresses a gap in global plantation studies, which tend to focus on the Americas.

To this end, the project offers a novel conceptual framework for thinking about colonial plantations, forced labor, and memorialization processes: haunting. Haunting is about the ways in which an unresolved colonial past — and, in this case, the violence of plantation labour — makes itself known in the present. This concerns, for example, the return of dead indentured laborers as spirits, through ritual possession or other mechanisms, as well as the active processes of dehumanisation, silencing and exclusion through which concrete (post)colonial subjects are transformed into ghosts.

#### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Located within the interdisciplinary fields of Postcolonial Studies, Cultural Studies and Memory Studies, the project seeks to answer three central questions:

- 1) what were the cultural manifestations of colonial plantation labour in Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe from the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards?
- 2) how are forced labour and *contrato* portrayed in these narratives?
- 3) can haunting serve as a method of decolonising this shared colonial past?

To answer these research questions the project aims to:

- (a) Provide a comparative cultural history of indentured labour by mapping and analysing Cape Verdean and Santomean narratives, and determine how these experiences are both the object and subject of divergent memories.
- (b) Examine memorialization processes of colonial plantation labour in two African archipelagos, contributing to the internationalisation of a marginally represented aspect of global history.
- (c) Demonstrate how (post)colonial hauntings may highlight the political and social power of humanities and cultural analysis in recognizing dismissed colonial pasts and their long-lasting legacies.

#### EXPECTED IMPACTS OF THE PROJECT

In addition to disseminating the advances and results of research through scientific content — namely publications and presentations at academic events — GHOST also intends to disseminate knowledge to other spheres of society, including a podcast series, documentary film screenings, and formative activities (for example, workshops, school sessions and advanced training courses). A policy brief will also be prepared, primarily aimed at policy-makers and Portuguese international organisations working in cooperation with these African countries, especially in the field of culture and education. The goal is to maximise the inclusion of the history of forced labour as a central dimension in memory practices relating to the colonial past and to strengthen the capacities of local communities and different (inter)national actors involved with respect to knowledge of colonial legacies in post-colonial societies.

#### FURTHER INFO

🌐 [ghost.ces.uc.pt](http://ghost.ces.uc.pt)  
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#### TEAM

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#### HOST INSTITUTION

**Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra**

#### ASSOCIATED PARTNERS

**Universidade de Cabo Verde**  
**CACAU — House of Arts, Creation, Environment and Utopia, São Tomé e Príncipe**

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