

## **A WHIRLPOOL OF CULTURES at the Alto da Cova da Moura neighbourhood**

### **A testimony of the experiences in the Cultural Association Moinho da Juventude**

We are Portuguese, Angolan, Guinean, Brazilian, but mostly Cape Verdeans living at the Alto da Cova da Moura neighbourhood. Cars with dutch, french, or swiss numberplates are trivial in our neighbourhood. It's the husbands or uncles, looking for their family or coming on vacations. They make their own interchange programmes inside the European Union, without any grants from the European Social Funding. They have cousins living in the United States of America and brothers- in-law in Brazil. Our neighbourhood is an effervescence of cultural backgrounds.

They are cooks, masons, hod carriers, and cleaning-women, all living at the Alto da Cova da Moura ward.

The body is their fundamental instrument. If the body fails, the money will fail, and the joy also.

In the neighbourhood the adults salute themselves by asking:

**“corpo stá bom” ( Body's ok?- Is your body well?)**

There are few people living in the neighbourhood holding a university degree. Those who studied and achieved a diploma usually look for a house somewhere else, whether it's African or European. People with different qualifications tend not to mingle. And this fact has it's reasons and it's consequences.

There are economical, cultural and social reasons.

The consequences are serious: discrimination, the creation of stigmas, vicious circles...

" I don't sit next to a black person on a bus if there is a free seat next to a white", said the headmistress of a middle school located in a neighbourhood of African migrants. It's the same reactions that the French had towards the Portuguese that worked at the construction industry in Paris, in the 50s.

" They (the migrants, the poor) just get out of bed at lunch time", said a high responsible for projects within the sphere of Social Exclusion, at the Sofitel Hotel, in Lisbon.

" During the afternoon the women are chatting on the streets; they could clean up the streets or do something else to improve their neighbourhood", noticed some finalists of the Social Work course who were having their training period in our neighbourhood.

We asked them if they clean the street where they live, and reminded Gina. Gina is 40 years old, has four children, and gets up at three a.m. to go to the fish sale. She gets home around two o'clock in the afternoon. It just happens that she stays for a little chat with her neighbour.

In our daily work at the Alto da Cova da Moura neighbourhood we are confronted with several interrogations, to which we try to shape some answers. We want to invite you to "a new look over our neighbourhood- the look of the Moinho".

1. The migrants living in our neighbourhood are confronted with European society values:  
**"Those who's work depends on the body are less important than those who's work depends on the mind".**

In our Association we wish to think about these values, but not only! The title of "Dr."<sup>1</sup> is used a lot in the Portuguese society: If you no longer work with the body, if you are someone in charge over others that work with their bodies, you are a "doutor". It is not the profession that defines you anymore; you are not economist, social worker, mathematician but a "Doutor". A barrier is created.

Here, we ask the university graduated staff not to call themselves "doutor" but to assume their profession, whether it's social worker, psychologist, economist or other, and to make the body/mind link, at least at a symbolical level...

So we also ask them to undertake some physical works, in a rotation scheme with all the staff and trainees, for instance: empty the dustbin. (It takes a lot of doing to throw out the garbage; after years of fight the services of the Council still haven't placed a garbage container near the Association). We also ask the graduated staff to tidy their plate after lunch and to clear their desks and shelves. This option has been made because we are aware that speeches and treaties about hygiene and neatness are much more strengthened if you set the example... It is an acceptance of the body, of the physical space and of the works that come from the body.

This has consequences in what concerns relations with official bodies. Most of them find this option rather strange.

The body is much more accepted in the African culture. This is the challenge that the migrant population makes to the European one: rethink the relationship with their own body and with the "bodily/manual" types of work. Rethink the importance of the gesture... Not to create a segmentation, a division, but to live it as a whole!

2.The Moinho, by acting at the Alto da Cova da Moura quarter discovers the skills, the knowledges and the way of living of the migrant population.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of "Doutor" (Dr.) is given in Portugal to those that have a university degree.

When our neighbourhood is shown on TV it is almost always to point out poverty, dirtiness or the lack of urban planning. However, there is another look that reveals the richness that exists beyond that vision.

We want to challenge those who went to see the exhibition of the famous artist Antonio Tapiés at the Centro Cultural de Belém to roam about in streets of our neighbourhood. Look at it with that look!

The ward was almost entirely built by the residents themselves, during weekends, without any interference of architects. We invite you to think about the energy, the wisdom, and the firmness of these people. Instead of official support they had inspections, fines and obstacles.

All this energy could be put to good use, supported and stimulated!

The construction of the Association's headoffice took place during '89-'90, without any official support. We had the goodwill of university students from Belgian and Holland on our side. But the youngsters (and the children!) had to teach them to make the concrete, to apply it, to plaster a wall. A relationship of mutual exchange was created between the youngsters from the North and the youngsters of the neighbourhood!

The youngsters of the North reflected on their way of being in life, lost some of their superiority and won new perspectives.

The neighbourhood youngsters showed their respect towards the students who volunteered to spend their vacations doing hard work but at the same time they discovered their own skills.

Many youngsters living in the ward think that everybody knows how to do the mason work! They find manual works "obvious, trivial, natural".

Residents don't like to be filmed by the TV channels. They want to show them in their working clothes, preferably dirty and torn. They feel tarnished in their dignity, because they impose them a role. It is an attack to self-respect, because they like nice well-made clothes, good food, to be good-looking. We just need to take a look at the parties in the ward!

The party of the Kola San Jon was organised for the first time five years ago, by the Association members. It was a surprise: the resident's ability to build drums, to build the pirates boat! (See photos). The apprentice-master relationship changed. And this didn't happen only with the joiner work. The party is a solidary convivial. It is a party where body and solidarity go together. (A Portuguese writer that attended to the last party had to get up from the chair at a certain moment and follow the group because, as she said, that movement was a calling that couldn't be refused). The elder residents in the neighbourhood had never celebrated the Kola since they left Cape Verde and weeped for joy with this new meeting with their roots, in 1991.

In that year even the priest of Buraca's church was impressed by the joy, the colours, the beat of the drums, the show that invaded the church porch, and asked us if there was something that he could offer, as a contribution to the party.

That is what we want to do here at the Moinho: improve communication between the migrant population and the Portuguese community by stimulating the recognition of the migrant's cultural richness, a richness that can fertilise the Portuguese society.

3. The **recognition of the resident's cultural identity and traditions** has always been patent in all the work that we develop.

The first generation of migrants tolerates the discriminations that the Portuguese impose them. They have shown a great respect towards the Portuguese population habits but kept their own traditions and way of being and living inside the ghettos where they succeeded in getting a house.

It was in '88, at the hut-house that the Association then had that women got together and started to reflect on the importance of the "batuque"<sup>2</sup> that they performed in their wedding and baptism parties. Intuitively they felt its importance, they were aware of their cultural identity; an identity not built over the negative side, for or against a European reference, but over the positive side, for what it is. The "batuque" is an integration of the body, of the feelings: dancing and singing they express their fears and apprehensions, their concerns, they give advises and hopes, they reflect upon woman's role.

At the beginning their sons were a bit reluctant with their mothers participation in the batuques in the presence of Portuguese: it is the complexity of the cultures contact.

Finka-Pé, our "batuque" group, achieved recognition through performances at the world exhibition in Seville in '92, and at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, in '93. This has provoked a leap in the self-esteem but mostly the acceptance of the parent's culture by their sons.

Finka-pé is not a folklore group: daily life is integrated in this art, which is the art of the body, a body where emotions, feelings, sensations and problems are fully lived and expressed. They create new songs before the new experiences they live. When skinheads killed Alcindo Monteiro, they expressed their grief and revolt through "batuque": " racists, watch out, we are not afraid of the dark or of the moon".

Each performance is a unique event and its deepness depends on the interaction with the participants, with the public.

The ward is in the wave of multiculturalism, like the whole Europe.

From '93 to '95 we had a project funded by the European Social Fund: NOW (New Opportunities for Women). The project's goal was to transfer knowledges from the northern projects to the partners in the Southern countries. We learned a lot with our partners, but we still listen to people in charge of enterprises or projects of professional training for women in Belgian and in the Faculty of Pedagogy of Leuven saying that the interchange with Moinho da Juventude was a turning point in their working methods.

" We learned with you how important is to start from the acceptance of people's cultural identity". By accepting and starting from the trainee's cultural values, the relationship between trainers and trainees is deeply changed.

Technicians who work in gettos very often have to face the difficulty of starting hygiene and cleaning actions in 'degraded' neighbourhoods.

To the Kola San Jon Party, on June 22nd, several adults and children cleaned the street near their houses, without any incentive or technician's request. With a good organisation a general cleaning action would be possible because the population feels the incentive through the recognition and respect shown towards their culture's parties.

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<sup>2</sup> "Batuque" is the generic designation of Afro-Brasilian Negro dances.

We need a different look! We can learn a lot with the cultural values and with the solidarity that the first generation brought from Africa.

And respect for the land: Who bothers to look at the migrant's kitchen gardens on the border of the highways, where sugar-canes, corn, cabbages, are grown with care? They carry the water to these kitchen gardens holding water drums in the head. It is this ability that we want to stimulate!

The City Councils could support this energy and creativity to develop the municipal barren lands.

The migrant population, mostly of the first generation, has another relationship with time and space. But by living in the Portuguese society, they learn and accept its rules and principles.

4. The second generation adapts even more to the rhythms and spaces - expressions of the Portuguese. Nevertheless:

They don't tolerate the discriminations to which their parents were subjected.

They have firmness and denounce their problems.

Rap groups rehearse their music at the Moinho: Menace II Society, Dream Factory and Emissores express their anger in their lyrics. We find that it is very important that politicians listen to them.

These youngsters know that the problem lies in a Department of Education that doesn't recognise the Creole<sup>3</sup> as a language, that doesn't have teachers motivated to teach and educate children of migrant families, that has school boards that don't respect their parents.

We fight for the creation of employment for this second-generation youngsters. In Moinho they have shown their ability to take responsibilities. Monitors and nursery-nurses from our kindergarten, from the ATL (After School Club) and the school support witness a great commitment in their work:

Pedagogical planning, contacts with the parents, concerns with the development of the children are in their hands. They work in group, had training on multiculturalism together, where they produced a "Manual for the Monitor of a multicultural Child Centre". Together with other Child Centres they organise projects of community intervention. They also organise walks and summer camps. They involve children and make them take on the responsibility for their space, with their colleagues and respecting their parent's culture.

The youthworkers are second generation youngsters and they were the ones that created the Moinho dance groups: "Estrelas da Cova da Moura", "Os Corações Africanos", "As Wundjabas" and "Bom Ki Bali". They create the group's choreographies. The ability to work with the body and to express, through their body, their sorrows and hopes is unbelievable. There aren't many university graduates prepared to support them on this area.

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<sup>3</sup> Creole is the portuguese african dialect spoken in Cape Verde; it is designative also of other portuguese african dialects.

There are four peer-educators/social mediators, second-generation youngsters, and 16 Portuguese students working on a project that involves the monitoring of 48 children in our neighbourhood with social integration difficulties. The Portuguese students give them school support but the youthworkers make the connection with the families, children, schools and medical centres. Here there is also exchange of ideas, values. Children teach their student-teachers to dance “Funaná” and “Kizomba”, making them discover the joy.

5. In what concerns professional training our bet is on training through practice:

The training of football coaches – we have three federated teams. The training of basketball and handball coaches. They learn and teach the control over the body, the team spirit, to know how to win or loose. On the training courses the young youthworkers have the opportunity to put the problems that they have to face with in the lawn.

The training of cooks, that have to prepare over a hundred meals each day.

The training of joiners.

The European society values have already been incorporated by the second generation: We have difficulties in motivating neighbourhood youngsters to work in the kitchen. They prefer the status of monitress of an ATL and dream of being secretaries and not having to get their hands dirty.

We are committed to restore the value of the profession of cook. We invest on the promotion of this profession, by harmonising creativity, the condition of professional career, organisation, hygiene, management, economy, the healthy food nourishment as the basis of a healthy body. What they learn in the kitchen is transferred to their homes. This learning process awakes the desire to restart the Portuguese and mathematics studies. Mizá is a 16 years old cook’s assistant. She hasn’t finished the primary school because she had a daughter, but she is now motivated to reattach the bonds with school again. She wants to know how to write the recipes that she tries in the kitchen and also to help her daughter with her home-works in the future.

At the joinery workshop “street youngsters” and “pombos-correio” (“courrier pigeons” for the drug dealers) are working in furniture with design, which will go to the ATL children and to the Kindergarten. They realise the importance of aesthetics in a child’s education. They learn to calculate the prices of the toys that they make, and they have the responsibility of cleaning the space where they work. (See: leaflets and catalogue); they evaluate the work planning.

This is the work we bet on.

And we challenge you to help us to overcome the cleavages that we feel:

There are studies about ergonomics for the work of cooks, masons, carpenters, but there is no translation to the target-group. The bridge between university studies and the fieldwork is still unbuilt.

We challenge those who want to know and respect the cultural identity of the migrants and those who want to bet in a training that starts with practice, to work in exchange with us.

It is difficult to find technicians capable of giving us support at this level... African or Portuguese, they prefer Lisbon: the roads in our neighbourhood are muddy in the winter and dusty in the summer!

But, paraphrasing Angela's reaction to Violeta Hernando's bestseller, "Mortos ou Coisa Melhor", we see, in contrast to this book, a lot of "breeding and growing" in the migrant population, in our neighbourhood, in the Moinho!