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Plantations Beyond Monocrops: Cannabis Ecologies From Colonial Angola to São Tomé

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Abstract

São Tomé, a small island in the Gulf of Guinea and a former Portuguese colony, is an exemplary place to analyze the development of plantation "cropscapes." These cropscapes emerged around sugar in the sixteenth century, evolved with coffee in the 1850s and consolidated with cocoa from the 1880s onwards. While is impossible to ignore the monocultural nature of São Tomé plantations and the centrality of specific plants for these plantation ecologies, there were other human/plant assemblages, that sustained, subverted or ran parallel to plantation goals of production, profit and power. This article zooms into cannabis to explore different relations between plantation working peoples and plantation environments, between suffering, healing, and violence, between labor, pleasure, and power. It will examine how cannabis was part and parcel of the lives of peoples from Angola recruited to São Tomé and, consequently, of the island's plantation worlds in the late nineteenth century. It will also discuss how colonial discourses on cannabis obscured and silenced the presence of this plant in contemporary plantation histories, regardless of its traces in the archive. Cannabis histories are in fact important ones: they counter imperial master narratives by showing how, even under conditions of exploitation, laboring communities and plants co-produced spaces of autonomy, care and leisure.

Keywords

plantations, maroons, forests, Angola, São Tomé

Introduction

São Tomé, a small island in the Gulf of Guinea and a former Portuguese colony, is an exemplary place to analyze the development of plantation "cropscapes" (Bray et al. 2023). In São Tomé, these cropscapes emerged around sugar in the sixteenth century, evolved with coffee in the 1850s and consolidated with cocoa from the 1880s onwards (Caldeira 2011; Nascimento 1992; Neves 1989; Seibert 2013). The importance of these recurrences goes well beyond the history of the island itself, as this territory served as a model for other plantations experiments in labor and land management in both sides of the Atlantic (Schwartz 1985; Macedo forthcoming). Growing these crops relied largely on coerced and intensive manual labor. São Tomé, supposedly uninhabited by humans until the arrival of the Portuguese in the late 1400s, was as much "planted" with new people as with flora. Over the centuries, plantation owners kept recruiting large contingents of men and women firstly from the Gulf of Benin, then from Angola and later from Mozambique and Cabo Verde. The brutal technologies used to render plants and enslaved or indentured men and women productive have been the object of several studies (Clarence Smith 1990; Nascimento 2002; Umbelina 2019).

It also is impossible to ignore the monocultural nature of São Tomé plantations and the centrality of certain plants for these plantation ecologies. As such, my research has evolved around the individual species that structured São Tomé's environmental, social, and political colonial worlds (Macedo 2016, 2021). Sugar, coffee, and cocoa — plants turned into crops turned into commodities — created uniform and degraded landscapes, racialized labor relations and unequal wealth systems. But there were other human/plant assemblages, that sustained, subverted or ran parallel to plantation goals of production, profit, and power. In São Tomé, these assemblages did not emerge around plantation provision grounds, as they were rare. They were forged in the forests. It was in these environments that many workers found ways of escaping the plantations, often accompanied by specific plants.

Maroon communities are part of São Tomé's plantation history from inception, but their specific ecologies have received less scholarly attention that the one payed to maroon

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contexts in the Americas (Ferdinand 2022; Rocha 2018; Silva 2021). These multispecies communities in the Americas have been rightly portrayed as geographies of autonomy and healing, struggle, and subversion (Wynter 1971). But authors tend to ignore the role of plants as sources of recreation and amusement that happed at the center or at the margins of these contexts of deadly colonial relations.

This article zooms into cannabis to explore different relations between plantation environments and maroon ecologies, between suffering, healing and violence, between labor, pleasure, and power. It will examine how cannabis was part and parcel of the lives of indentured laborers from Angola, the largest contingent of forcibly recruited people to São Tomé in the late nineteenth century, and, consequently, of the island's plantation worlds. It will also discuss how colonial discourses on cannabis obscured and silenced the presence of this plant in contemporary histories, regardless of its traces in the archive. Cannabis histories are in fact important ones: they counter imperial master narratives by showing how, even under conditions of exploitation, laboring communities and plants co-produced spaces of autonomy, care, and leisure.

While the history of cannabis cultivation and consumption by subaltern peoples clearly demonstrates that plants cannot be reduced to commodities and people to labor, it is not easy to decipher the meaning of this specific plant/human relationship. It is possible to look at cannabis as part of the broad material culture sustaining practices of healing, supporting religious rites, but we can also see it as a stimulant enhancing laborers working capacity, thus contributing to maintain plantation labor relations (Duff 2016; Duvall 2019; Glover 2018). It is also conceivable that the significance of this plant–human relation is both and none of the above. By blurring the binaries between accommodation and resistance, exploitation and struggle, cannabis consumption also allowed for distraction, reverie and pleasure. Regardless of the indeterminacy of the plant's values and meanings, the goal of this article is to integrate cannabis into these wider plantation and maroon stories. Without denying the importance of monocultures and their authority over lands and peoples (Besky 2020), I want to explore the fissures and breaches inside this monocultural system. In the cocoa plantations of São Tomé, cannabis was not a crop, it was not grown for profit, but it was integral to plantation ecologies.

This text draws on empirical historical research to think about plantations' power and its discontents. The article is divided into four interconnected parts. First, I examine how plantation laborers, forcibly recruited in Angolan territories, used São Tomé forests as spaces to escape European domination. I then explore the relation between forest, plants, and West Central African healing practices and specialists. In the third segment, I introduce the historical relation between communities of Angolan descent and cannabis, discussing cannabis uses and their multiple and contradictory values. I conclude by looking at the pervasive presence of cannabis in São Tomé and interrogate how a critical historical framing of this plant can destabilize common plantation monocropping narratives and add new perspectives to the literature on marron ecologies, pointing to issues of playfulness and joy, beyond the common focus on sustenance and care. Conceptually complicating our interpretation of cannabis embodied, social and moral worlds is crucial to decolonize historical knowledge (Lewis-Jones 2016).

Evading from Plantations: Forests

Colonial plantation records are filled with chains and shackles, jails, and whips. Such objects are good reminders of the scale and consequences of planters' coercive rule, of the intrinsically brutal nature of plantations, and of their repressive regimes (De Vito 2022). They are also evidence of the continued reaction from laborers, always fighting for freedom. In fact, despite the violent and unequal power relations that sustained plantation complexes, workers always struggled for alternative livelihoods (Trouillot 2002).

In several plantations across the Atlantic, laborers created spatial arrangements that ran counter or parallel to violent plantation apparatuses and their forms of containment (Camp 2004). Assemblages of humans and nonhumans opened up possibilities to escape the plantation, if only temporarily. Crafted and nurtured food gardens tended by plantation laborers during their "free" time allowed these subaltern subjects ways to alleviate or evade the disciplines of the plantation space–time relations (Wynter 1971). In São Tomé plantations there were no provision grounds, but the island forest (*mato*) provided a place, that while being far from safe, allowed workers some kind of command over their destinies and showed a struggle for life outside the control of the plantations.

Forests were foundational to almost every colonial plantation project (Ferdinand 2022). Their elimination was a necessary step to open new ground for profitable crops. This primeval destruction affected more than the trees, as forest dwellers were also displaced and persecuted. As plantations occupied cleared lands, remaining forested environments harbored those runaways, maroons or *quilombolas*, escaping plantations' regimes of violence. Forests and fugitives created particular colonial imaginaries and anxieties: these "wild" pieces of nature, just like the "wild" men and women they harbored, were ultimate dangerous and disruptive spaces, indomitable, disordered, and illegible, which should be fought and brought under strict control. Such tropes are still valid today in many territories across the world (Price 2011).

In fact, in the long history of Atlantic plantations, São Tomé's forests might have been the first that sheltered runaways, serving as a model of what was to come in the sugar colonies of the Caribbean and Brazil. It was in this island, that the earliest documented revolt of enslaved individuals took place in 1517 (Silva 2021). That rebellion against the tyranny of sugar would be followed by other conflicts, confrontational or veiled, countering the disciplines of coffee and cocoa. In all those moments, the montane cloud forest ecosystems helped

sustain the lives of those fugitive men and women. As maroons adapted to the unique features of these rugged mountain environments with lower temperatures, heavier rainfalls and more persistent condensation than lowland forests, and learned how to survive on mushrooms or birds, insects or frogs, forest remained almost impenetrable to Europeans.

While several studies have already examined *quilombolas* agricultural landscapes across the Americas and maroon ecologies in West African mangroves, there is scant information about how such fugitive communities cared for São Tomean forest ecologies (Carney 2003; Gonçalves et al. 2022; Green 2019; Steward and Lima 2017). However, the archive is clear about the importance of São Tomean *matos* for those fleeing plantations. In the late nineteenth century, colonial authorities continuously reported that "rare is the plantation that has no runaways" harbored in the island forests (Negreiros 1895, p. 261). According to planters, the deleterious effects of those men and women were multiple: they not only freed themselves from the disciplines of the monocrop, depriving plantations of labor and thus capital, but also, through their example, they inspired other workers to escape. In fact, nothing was more disturbing than the possible consequences of flights on these "others, the honest and good servants who stay in the plantation."[1] In an overtly racist language, colonial authorities claimed: "their rudimentary spirits of savages will have that mirage to seduce them: not to work, live in the woods, unrestrained in their barbarous customs."[2] The specter of "uncivilized" woods and its dwellers condensed a myriad of colonial anxieties.

Often men and women on the run organized and engaged in guerrilla-like activities. A confidential letter from one plantation manager to the colony's governing bodies reported that "at eleven o'clock in the evening of March 9, 1896, the lands of the plantation were attacked for the sixth time by an armed group of runaway contract laborers." The letter reported that "the circumstances in which these facts occurred proved an extraordinary boldness on the part of the assaulters" and for that reason the administrator asked permission to "use all the indispensable means for his defense."[3] These attacks, happening during the harvest season, amplified the concerns of planters and of the colonial authorities regarding the subversive potential of maroons.

Manhunts were the reverse of flights, part of the repertoire of domination, and were as common in São Tomé as in other plantation contexts (Chamayou 2012). Forests became the targeted environments. A seven-page report by a colonial officer, describes one of these expeditions against fugitive laborers.[4] This rich narrative shed light on the difficulties colonial authorities and plantation managers had in coping with the forests of São Tomé.

The goal of that particular expedition was to destroy a *quilombo* of "60 men and many women" led by the maroon Tua Tua, located in remote forested lands. On the June 6, 1896 at sunrise, the Parish administrator accompanied by three other "white employees" departed from the town of Santana commanding a force of 150 black men, comprised of rural police and 120 plantation workers, some from the plantation attacked during the previous months. In the afternoon, the group reached the entry point into the rainforest occupied by Tua Tua. While familiar to the marrons, the *matos* were almost unknown to the police force and the Europeans. To navigate the foggy mountainous slopes densely covered with trees and slippery mosses, they depended on local guides. And the ones that knew those forest were laborers from nearby plantations. The text shows us how these people negotiated their knowledge and their loyalty to their fellow workers. One plantation administrator complained that the man "we took as a guide was completely unaware of that place or he didn't want to teach us." After a long day walking, the group camped right by the *quilombo*. The following morning things precipitated: plantation overseers, seduced by a bounty on Tua Tua's head, had taken the supposedly "best guides" and decided to march ahead. Trapped by the maroons, they were stoned as they climbed the mountain: hunters had become prey and had to flee.

Healing Practices: Plants

These were not the most common finales of such organized searches. According to Henry Nevinson some "[man]hunting-parties" were nothing more than excuses for murder (Nevinson 1906, p. 204). He transcribed a planter's encounter with one runaway worker hidden in the forest during one of these occasions:

> "We took him," said the planter who told me the story, with a sportsman's relish, "and we forced him to tell us where the others were. At first, we could not squeeze a word or sign out of him. After a long time, without saying anything, he lifted a hand towards the highest trees, and there we saw the slaves, men and women, clinging like bats to the underside of the branches. It was not long, I can tell you, before we brought them crashing down through the leaves on to the ground. My word, we had grand sport that day!" (Ibid, p. 205)

Because of the danger it represented, escaping to the woods was not always an option for many plantation workers. But forests provided laboring men and women other forms of relief or evasion that became accessible through plants and the mediation of African healers.

When combing the colonial archive, it is possible to find innumerous registers of the prevalence of African rituals and healing practices in São Tomé. These practices are almost always dismissed and belittled. Since the first colonial encounters, black ritual and health specialists often fell under the category of "charlatans," "sorcerers," or "witches" (Breen 2019; Gómez 2017). Early modern Portuguese authors employed the term sorcery (*feitiçaria*) to describe Angolan healing therapies, co-opting medieval perceptions of those materialities and

spiritualities that went beyond the catholic normativity (Federici 2004). Whenever Portuguese encountered African herbalists or ritual practitioners (*curandeiros, quimbandas* or *ngangas*) and their plant worlds they looked at them with more suspicion than curiosity.

The radical anxiety of authorities regarding African healing specialists operating in São Tomé in the late nineteenth century built upon these previous colonial ideas. Such apprehension not only reflected the consolidation of western biomedicine, but also mirrored the concern regarding plantation workers' recognition of the authority of those persons. The power *curandeiros* held threatened the colonial order in multiple ways.

Ethnographies of contemporary São Tomé can help shed some light on the worldviews of colonial plantation laboring communities regarding disease and cure (Valverde 2000). These past experiences of unimaginable suffering and pain their categorization and diagnosis, and the therapeutics mobilized unfolded "outside the boundaries of the modern divide between the natural and the moral, nature and human, and the ideal and the material" and were closely associated to new "sensorial landscapes" that produced new knowledge about the natural world (Gómez 2017, p. 4). As in other contexts, in the island, black ritual and health specialists "experiential power over nature and bodies" shaped the corporeal experiences of laboring men and women in a very material way.

Above other things, it was a new sensorial relation with the forest environments that granted those health specialists their power to cure. *Matos* held the plants and roots, materials with bodily effects, that were incorporated into the healing rituals (Madureira 2007). And it was in the forest that many of those healers lived. Plantation workers, in moments of fear, rage, or pain, procured help from them.

It is important to note that despite the incredibly lavish and massive hospitals inside all the major São Tomé plantations, plantation laborers relied very much on the knowledge of healers to mitigate their bodily and emotional sufferings (Jobbitt 2016). A close examination of colonial sources reveals that doctors working for the colonial medical service had little presence on the plantations. The picture is clearer if we look at the numbers: in 1901 there were three doctors on the colonial health board, seconded by eight private physicians (Magalhães 1900). The latter experts were the ones responsible for assisting the workers of the island's plantations, which at the time surpassed 18.000 persons (Nascimento 2002). Outside of this equation were the men and women of European descend (around 1000), and the free island's free black population that also outnumbered 18.000 people. Taking into consideration the precarity of the island's communication, "there [were] almost no pathways and those that exist [were] bad," private doctors made, at best, monthly visits to the various plantations (Moller 1885, p. 200). Local healers were in fact the ones responsible for plantation worker's daily medical care.

Almada Negreiros, a colonial officer and the author of a late nineteenth century ethnography of São Tomé, wrote extensively about what he named "indigenous medicine." Common to other ethnographers of the time, Negreiros highlighted the "superstitious beliefs" of both patients and healers: for them "it is the spell (*mulogi*) that attacks the diseased person, because souls of the dead (*Cazumbi*) are the origin of all evils" Almada Negreiros (1895, p. 273). But Negreiros also stressed the role of *milongo* (remedies) prepared by women with local plant, used to treat and cure all sorts of ailments. He also stressed the role of women as midwives. So, despite being criticized and deprecated, some of these health practices and plant preparations were tolerated if not encouraged.

Besides healers living as workers in plantation quarters there were also powerful ritual and health specialists inhabiting the island forests. An impressive description by Pedro Muralha (1924) helps us understand the importance of those specialists, the menace they posed to the colonial authorities and how planters and the state responded with repressive police violence. Muralha was a journalist, self-described "as an impartial chronicler aimed at creating a Portuguese colonial consciousness" visiting the island's plantations in the mid 1920s (Ibid, p. 13). In the book he published after his journey to those "magnificent schools of discipline and education" — it is important to note that forced labor regimes were still in place at the time — he dedicated an entire chapter to the "sorcerers and the power that they hold" (Ibid, pp. 35, 75–82). Muralha narrates, with first-hand knowledge, an expedition to hunt a "sorcerer" (*feiticeiro*) called Dadá. The expedition had been organized after plantation workers began consulting Dadá and talking about "extraordinary things." The list of Dadá's "evil doings" gives a good portrait of the concerns colonial planters had regarding their laboring population: he brought tuberculosis to robust workers, madness to the weak spirits and performed abortions in young women. These were in fact among the main causes of death among plantation laborers.

No archive is detailed enough to know what really happened when men and women ventured into the *mato*, described as "full of small wooden shacks (…) authentic dens of perdition and immorality," but we can get a sense of the fear unleashed among both workers and planters (Ibid, p. 76). Workers, who looked for help in exchange for cocoa, respected healers' power and "if any worker did not steal the amount required, he was possessed by such a power of suggestion that he would never eat again, and in a short time he would end his days in a hospital bed" (Ibid, p. 79). Planters were surely anxious about the ways healers' practices disrupted the regular functioning of plantations.

The hunt for Dadá began one morning in a torrential rain. After a long walk "in the middle of the woods" the group found Dadá, an "horrific figure, tall and skinny." In his "little chapel" they also discovered a human skull with which the "sorcerer exerted his macabre rites." When authorities were finally able to sequester Dadá, his partner's "sinister screams echoed through the dense forest" (Ibid, p. 81). What could be interpreted as a gesture of despair, was understood by white hears as a call for action, as a "signal for that entire population of bandits to arm themselves with spears and come upon us to

snatch our prey." Very often colonial anxieties were fought with guns: Muralha "squeezed his pistol, pointed it to that face and the forest regained its normalcy" (Ibid, p. 82). Plantation power prevailed this time.

This account reveals the ways nonconforming laborers fought against the strict disciplines of the plantation, the ways they were able to evade the mobility restrictions and venture into the forests at night to find help in *curandeiros* and their plant remedies. But forest landscapes hosted other gatherings. These nocturnal, transgressive and hidden celebrations allowed laborers some time and space for themselves. While they are scantly documented in the colonial archive, these parties survived up to this day (Espírito Santo 1998). Among the most powerful of those rituals was the *djambi*, drum performances around a bonfire. In these ceremonies, Angolan men and women were able to appropriate São Tomé forests, creating their own "sonic landscapes" (Gómez 2017, p. 102). While some of the *djambis* had healing purposes, others were pure drifting experiences for pleasure and amusement. These nocturnal assemblies did not shake plantation foundations, but nonetheless planters always complained about their consequences: "in the morning roll call, sometimes workers appear wounded or appear sick" (Negreiros 1895, p. 264). Plant intoxicants were very often part of those rituals.

Comforting and Conforming: Cannabis

The literature has already stressed the important dimension played by substances like palm wine and cannabis (known in Angola as *liamba*, *riamba*, *pango*) in the practices of *ngangas* (Duvall 2019, Breen 2019). Smoked cannabis was used to communicate with spiritual energies to treat lung afflictions, and cannabis infusions, alone or mixed with other plants, were common remedied for a wide variety of pathologies. The transversality and pervasiveness of its uses among West Central African communities makes it impossible to frame it under a single category. In Angola, at least since colonial times, cannabis always blurred the lines between a licit substance and an illicit one.

There is no historical register of the date this plant, native to Central and South Asia, arrived in West Africa and was adopted by its peoples. But already in 1782, there are references that, besides tobacco, communities living in Angola regularly consumed "pango, another herb, smoked in pipes" (Correia 1937 [1782], vol 1, p. 159). It is important to stress, once again, that Angola is where most workers in São Tomé came from. In 1803 a colonial governor mentioned "a hemp plantation" in the Bengo province in northwest Angola "which promised a good harvest and showed that the land was suitable for this crop" (Gama 1839, p. 73). That text was also clear about the pervasiveness and ordinariness of that "hemp" that "the blacks cultivate and (…) smoke dry." But the richest descriptions of cannabis use by African populations were written by European medical experts. In these records, the plant often comes associated with the illegal trade and traffic of enslaved persons, which increased significantly in the first half of the nineteenth century (Silva 2017). Such pieces of literature, while voicing overtly racist considerations, give some hints into the social, cultural, medical, and religious meanings of the plant.

Willian Freeman Daniell, a British surgeon, with a significant experience in Western Africa reported the popularity of the plant in Angola. During a residency of many months in this colonial territory, he saw how cannabis was procured in the hinterland and brought to the European slave trade factories on the coast. He concluded that this substance, commonly known as "tobacco of the Congo," was "no unimportant item" (Daniell 1850, p. 363). Traders provided the plant to the captives, that saw it as "a useful *remedial agent*, and one that was highly esteemed for the circumstances of its supporting the strength and condition of the slaves when on the long and toilsome marches towards the place of their embarkation" (Ibid, p. 36, my emphasis). While it is important to stress that cannabis helped sustain chattel slavery and that the plant was an item of production and commerce — for instance, the specimen Daniell collected came from a plantation in the banks of Ambiz — it is also crucial to acknowledge that cannabis was carefully nurtured in home gardens. Daniell talks of cannabis seeds sown on vacant lands or "amid the native plantations of mandioca" (Ibid, p. 363).

The way the plant was consumed by enslaved men and women captured by the British navy was also reported by George McHenry, surgeon to the Liberated African Establishment at St Helena. McHenry noticed that those "negros coming from Cabinda, Ambiz, Luanda and Benguela," all Angolan ports, were very fond of "a certain narcotic root, called (…) 'diamba' bought from the Lascars in James Town" (McHenry 1845, p. 437). He recognized that "this root is being thought to be very *efficacious in drawing off cold* and considered likewise to be *a greater promoter of exhilaration of spirits, and a sovereign remedy against all complaints*" (Ibid, p. 437, my emphasis). While we now know that "diamba" was a local name for cannabis, McHenry, at the time, could not determine what this "root" was, but he realized that lascars obtained it in India. Even if revealing the same prejudice against African "revolting superstitions" and "fetishes," McHenry was far more tolerant regarding black healing practices of which cannabis was part, than early twentieth century experts. He stated: "the knowledge possessed by the negros respecting the art of healing is more considerable that Europeans would be inclined to give them credit for (…) there are many skillful practitioners (…) that are intimately acquainted with the medicinal qualities of plants and other articles employed in their pharmacopeias" (Ibid, p. 440).

The significance of cannabis in the slave trade can only be understood if we recognize the pervasive use of the plant by peoples living in the territories of Angola. The missionary Heli Chatelain, writing about the marriage costumes of communities near Luanda, mentioned it as a common present of the husband to his future wife (Chatelain 1896). Joachim John

Monteiro, a British mining engineer and explorer of Portuguese descent, made a powerful description of the cultural uses and local discourses on *diamba*, "cultivated around the huts everywhere in Angola":

> It is a wonderful sight when travelling with a caravan (…) to see perhaps two or three hundred blacks wake up in the cold misty mornings, and crouch in circles of ten or a dozen together round a fire, shivering and chattering their teeth. It is then that they enjoy smoking [in water pipes] the 'diamba'. (…) The effects of the wild help are curious and appear to be different from those described as attending its use in other parts of the world. There is no intoxicating effect produced, but, on the contrary, the negros affirm that it wakes them up and warm their bodies, so that they are ready to start up with alacrity, take up their loads and trot off quickly. (Monteiro 1875, vol. 2, pp. 256–257)

Monteiro's text is pervaded by contradictions that are often present in European understandings of the plant. In fact, he mentioned that the supposed benevolence of cannabis was not shared by colonial authorities. As with other plants with mind altering effects, it was actually viewed with suspicion, and, as such, Portuguese in Angola "prohibit their slaves from indulging in this habit" (Ibid, p. 257). The illicitness of cannabis is further reiterated by a remark made by the Austrian explorer and botanist Friedrich Welwitsch in his field notes: "this plant is cultivated in all the interior districts of Angola, but always in more or less hidden or solitary places, to remove the plantations from the travelers' greed" (Welwitsch 1862, p. 45).

Henrique Augusto Dias de Carvalho's colonial ethnography cast light on the transversal uses of cannabis, and its meanings, among communities from northeastern Angola. Carvalho was a military officer and commander of the Portuguese expedition to the Lunda kingdoms. While narrating the transits of elephant hunters into the lands of nowadays Kasai in the Congo, he showed how in the 1860s these groups "never forget to bring seeds, particularly that of Cannabis Indica, *liamba*. The *Matchioko* men and women will not go without their *mutopa* [water pipe] and the *liamba* leaves, previously prepared, to smoke during the hours of rest or when engaged in company" (Carvalho 1889, pp. 10–11). According to Carvalho, the plant proved to be an important social lubricant, as it mediated the relations between Chokwe peoples of Angolan and Congo, very much like the political uses of tobacco in pre-Hispanic America (Norton 2008). Besides discussing ivory trade, community leaders shared a pipe of cannabis and exchanged views on "the excellency of such smoking, which stopped hunger, *caused oblivion of all the ills that afflict man*, *transporting him to regions entirely new, where everything is pleasant to the sight*, and besides in sleep *one came by the knowledge of things which when awake could only be learned by witchcraft*" (Ibid, p. 12, my emphasis). The outcome of these encounters, and the formation of the *Bena Riamba* (Brothers of Hemp) movement, is outside the scope of this article (Duvall 2019; Fabian 2000).

Carvalho's description is particularly relevant because he was one of the few Europeans to admit having smoked cannabis and enjoying the experience. Recognizing his own tobacco addiction, he recalled a night when "desperate without anything to smoke" he decided to try cannabis (Carvalho 1894, p. 161). He felt "close to paradise" but decided not to use it again (Ibid, p. 163). To better understand Carvalho's cautious attitude regarding a plant that he perceived as pleasurable, we have to bear in mind the negative consensus regarding cannabis in Africa. Perhaps Carvalho had fresh in his mind Alfredo de Sarmento's description published in a feuilleton of one of Lisbon's most important dailies "Diário da Manhã" and later printed as a book: cannabis "narcotic properties, very similar to those of opium, produce vertigo, lethargy and perhaps ecstasy, in those who inhale the smoke, and generally the smokers of this noxious plant, fall into a complete state of idiocy that annihilates and prostrates them" (Sarmento 1880, p. 106). Or Conde de Ficalho's, an eminent botanist, similar considerations about "the noxious and *common* riamba (…) like opium, like alcohol, tenaciously takes possession of the victim, and will never let her go" (Ficalho 1884, p. 267 my emphasis). These are just a few of a myriad of nineteenth century sources that associated cannabis consumption in Africa with what Europeans regarded as intrinsic black racial behaviors, such as laziness, ignorance or stupidity. Of course, in those same years, cannabis meant different things to other Europeans living on the mainland: from cannabis uses by intellectual and artistic vanguards aiming at creative psychedelic experiences to doctors prescribing it to cope with multiple afflictions (Mills 2003).

European perceptions of cannabis use by Africans were enmeshed in colonial ideas about race and class. However, contemporary literature somehow over emphasized the role of the plant as a stimulant associated with work (Duvall 2019). While it is hard to argue that "cannabis has helped social elites extract value from workers by enhancing the capacity of people to endure risky environments while caught in exploitative labor relationships" characteristic of plantation economies, it is also important to acknowledge that African peoples also used cannabis subversively (Ibid, p. 31). Understanding cannabis mainly as a "way to cope with stressors produced by socioeconomic inequality and to self-treat trauma or mental illness" is somehow reductionist and effaces other dimensions of this human/plant relation (Ibid, p. 228). These other insurgent relations might better explain the prohibition policies enforced all over the continent in the early twentieth century (Duvall 2019).

In fact, among mid nineteenth century African communities, cannabis was not stigmatized as a substance associated with subaltern peoples, as it was also smoked by important governing figures during councils or just for recreation (Henriques 1997). It had multiple meanings: it was a stimulant, an appetite

suppressant, it was a remedy and a substance consumed to reach spiritual enlightenment. There are in fact many threads that place cannabis inside broader cultural, social, political, and moral worlds that go well beyond the narrow perception of Europeans. No less important, were the ways the plant emerges inside practices of playfulness and recreation, at the center or at the margins of violent colonial relations.

Plantations Ecologies: Multispecies Worlds

To understand the social and cultural role of cannabis in São Tomé it is important to bear in mind that in the 1900s the island was a model plantation colony, producing no less than 1/6 of the worlds' supply of cocoa. To plant, grow and process that cocoa, around 67.000 men and women were recruited as indenture laborers in Angola, between 1875 and 1905. The violence of recruitment, of the labor regime, its disciplines and physical coercion, are common topics in the literature (Macedo 2016). While it is obvious that São Tomé plantations bounded the lives of those Angolan workers to a specific plant, processes of simplification of both people and nature that rendered plantations possible were never absolute. Plantations depended on other plant/people assemblages beyond cocoa: cannabis was integral to that wider plantation ecology.

It is impossible to know exactly when cannabis reached São Tomé. But we know that before the huge influx of laborers in the 1870s, the island was already part of important transits of enslaved person from the ports of Luanda and Benguela in Angola since the late eighteenth century. "Cannabis sativa" was, "among many other precious drugs," referenced in a publication as arriving at the island in 1826, without further information (Lima 1844, p. 10). It is reasonable to believe that the plant might have been brought earlier by one of the many thousands of enslaved men and women.

Already in 1869, Manuel Ferreira Ribeiro, a Portuguese doctor working in São Tomé, mentioned that "it is worth noting the pleasure with which [blacks] smoke the leaves of a plant they call liamba" (Ribeiro 1871, p. 104). Besides referencing the custom of smoking, it is also highly relevant that Ribeiro classified the plant among the vast complex of "common medicinal drugs used in the island" (Ibid, p. 258). *Liamba* (*diamba, riamba, canhâmo*) appeared alongside licorice, balsam of São Tomé, aloes, malvas, tamarind, *herba santa Maria* and many other plants that constituted the pharmacopeia of these African populations. This botanical complex was used to treat wounds, intermittent fevers, edemas, eye problems, or intestinal afflictions. These plants give of us a sense of the geographies of empire, labor, and knowledge crossing the Atlantic Ocean and beyond. Moreover, they point to the unequivocal agency of subaltern men and women in the process of caring for their bodies and of finding pleasure and joy by mobilizing a series of plant allies.

Adolpho Frederico Moller gives us a clearer picture of cannabis meanings inside São Tomé's plantation ecology. In 1885, this botanist was hired to conduct an exhaustive survey of the island's flora. Over a period of four months, he collected 430 plants, 96 fungi, and 78 lichens, and also 249 animals, among mammals, insects, birds, reptiles, and frogs. But besides Moller's relevant scientific contributions, he also wrote a series of letters addressed to the director of the *Journal of Practical Horticulture* (Jornal de Horticultura Práctica), where he combined botanical descriptions to a lay public with reports on the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of São Tomé. He bluntly stated having eye-witnessed brutalities that happen "when planters want[ed] to punish a black man for having ran away or having gone to the city to complain about bad treatment" (Moller 1885 p. 222). Planters "almost always ordered the application of four dozen paddle strokes, always by a white man, two in the hands and two in the sole of their feet" (Moller 1885, p. 222). He also revealed plantation administrators' disregard for colonial laws: "legislation regulating work on the plantations gives two hours of rest for the *negros*, but they usually give them solely half an hour" (Moller 1885, p. 222). The same emotionlessness prevailed over the descriptions of the *batuques*, the common percussion performances, echoing on the plantations at night and during Sunday afternoon, or images of the island as a place where domestic animals had turned feral: "in the woods there are pigs, goats and chickens that had escaped from the plantations and live in their wild state (…) chickens fly as any other bird" (Moller 1885, p. 198). Moller observed and registered natural and social events in the language of science, without sentimental moods or valuations.

As a botanist, he was particularly interested in exploring how African men and women related with plants. He explained that "the fruits of the banana tree *cachibá*, boiled and mixed with palm oil was the most normal poultice used by plantation blacks to solve tumors" (Moller 1885, p. 222). He also mentioned that the balsam of São Tomé, and a Gramineae named Tea from Gabon (Chá do Gabão) helped to treat fevers. Other leaves and barks, addressed by their common names, appear as purgatives, energizers, or antipyretics.

Moller also wrote extensively about *liamba* "another frequent plant in São Tomé" (Moller 1886, p. 41). There he found specimens reaching 1 to 2 meters tall, growing "in the medium and high altitudes, until 1300 meters" (Ibid 1886, p. 41). These were clearly forest environments. He also mentioned that "negros make a pervasive use of the leaves of this plant." Angolan water pipes were common: workers "smoked through special pipes, made by themselves, and which varied in shape, passing the smoke, to reach the mouth, through a container filled with water" (Ibid 1886, p. 41). Moller gives us valuable information about the way plantation workers planted these shade-intolerant plants. Men and women laboring in these colonial plantations used forest clearings to grow cannabis: "when they are employed in weeding the fields, and they find a plant of *liamba*, they always spare it" (Ibid, p. 41). Prohibitionist measures regarding cannabis were enforced in several plantations. Moller writes about the strategy of the

"intelligent administrator of the Monte Café plantation, that forbade the cultivation of this plant on his property and demanded that all those that accidentally appear should be uprooted" (Ibid, p. 41). State-sponsored prohibition policies would come some decades later. In April 1911 the provisional government of the newest Portuguese Republic would pass a law "forbidding the culture, conservation, selling and import to São Tomé of *liamba* or Indian *canhâmo*" (Collecção 1914, p. 668). All plants should be destroyed, and fines imposed on those that grew them. This legislation should not make us forget the adoption of cannabis by western medical circles. Moller, for instance, mentioned how the plant was part of European pharmaceutical portfolios, how it "was used internally in the form of an extract, at a dose of 5 to 20 centigrams, in pills" and also as potions and tincture "applied in a dose of ten to thirty drops of water" (Moller 1886, p. 43).

Colonial control and prohibition enforcement can have multiples meanings, but in the case of cannabis in São Tomé it is clear that both the state and planters were targeting a cherished plant for many of plantation workers of Angolan descend. Laborers, inserted in a cocoa regime impregnated with different meanings different from those of their local agriculture, were able to create spaces for themselves with the aid of their own botanies. Along with these plant allies they nurtured previous social relations, healing practices, cultural and religious ceremonies, or just found some space for leisure.

Conclusion

Late nineteenth century cocoa plantations in São Tome were extremely violent environments, aimed at conforming laborers bodies and narrowing laborers identities to that of plantation workers. Plantations tried to mold men's and women's communitarian relations and intimate ones. Food, housing, clothing, affects, and pleasures were to be confined to these structures of dispossession and productivity. But plantation workers were able to craft mutualist associations among themselves and with other species to survive, creating more complex ecologies than what literature on plantations often acknowledges (Tsing 2015). Cannabis histories show the power and perils of such multispecies alliances. These human/plant relationships also open up windows to the agency of subaltern peoples beyond the grammars of resistance or collaboration.

This article showed that in Angola, men and women, across the social spectrum, smoked cannabis to heal themselves, to reach enlightened reasoning, to withstand work, to connect to metaphysical forces or, more prosaically, to have fun. They did so according to a variety of deeply engrained social, cultural, and religious practices, established before and during colonialism, that they carried along when transplanted to São Tomé plantations and to their new social roles. This paper also argues how cannabis can be seen as part of the forest subversive spaces, of a specific maroon ecology.

We know all too well that plants shaped human projects and histories, but when talking about plantation we tend to forget the importance of those species that fall beyond the monocropping scene. Forest and cannabis stories are a good reminder of what we gain when we expand the focus and look at ecologies that, paradoxically, transcended and were integral to the spaces of monocultural production. This case study shows how cannabis and cocoa, forests and compounds, *feiticeiros* and overseers, runaways and laborers can open up wider plantation histories.

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Notes

1. Arquivo Histórico de São Tomé e Príncipe (AHSTP), Correspondência Confidencial 1901–1902, Carta do Curador Geral dos Serviçais para o Secretário do Governo de São Tomé Arnaldo de Figueiredo para o Regedor da Trindade, 19 de Junho 1902.
2. Ibid.
3. AHSTP, Correspondência Confidencial 1890–1896, Carta de Arnaldo de Figueiredo para o Regedor da Trindade, 11 de Março de 1896.
4. For the references of the following paragraphs see: AHSTP, Caixa 225, Administração do concelho, carta de Francisco da Silva Bandeira, Regefor da Paróquia de Santana para o Adminsitrador do Concelho, 10 de Junho de 1896.

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