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The Art of Running Away: Escapes and Flight Movements During the Great Depression in São Tomé e Príncipe, 1930–1936*

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ABSTRACT: As a coerced labour force living under repressive conditions, contract workers in São Tomé e Príncipe’s cocoa plantations belong to a wider phenomenon of global plantation experience during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Flight appears as an important element of that experience and this article is an attempt to interpret the strategies of runaways in São Tomé’s turbulent Great Depression years after 1930. The work set out here benefitted from a large selection of unexplored sources of the island’s labour inspectorate, which can be found in the archipelago itself. Its analysis has enabled interpretation of the motives of escaping workers, and with it discussion of three principal strategic contexts of flight: the experiences of runaways who formed communities; attempts by escaped workers to hide and become part of “native” (forro) communities in rural areas or in the city of São Tomé; and the agency of workers

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trying to run away to subsequently renegotiate their conditions with labour inspectors or with plantation administrators sympathetic to their situation. The last part of the article attempts to locate that experience in the global history of runaways, connecting it with the types of “ecosystems of running” discussed for Atlantic slavery and later indentured labour systems.

INTRODUCTION

In January 1931, Mozambican worker Uahite escaped from the mid-sized Montes Hermínios plantation on São Tomé island, in the Portuguese colony of São Tomé e Príncipe. As is frequently the case, the documentation of the event mainly offers the plantation administrator’s view of the incident, but is nevertheless useful as Uahite’s flight led the administrator to paint a picture of his impressions of everyday life on the island, which serves well to describe a whole phenomenon that came in the wake of the effects of the Great Depression. According to the administrator’s account, the plantation management did its best and accepted many sacrifices in an attempt to maintain high standards. The account claims that appropriate food was provided, and there was a suitable hospital, so that in 1930 the death of only one worker was recorded, and that was of an individual aged seventy who seems to have died of old age.¹

However, such a harmonious and even rosy picture of plantation life is certainly contradicted by the many previously unused sources available for studying the degradation of workers’ living conditions in São Tomé e Príncipe during the 1930s.² Declining prices meant lower income from exports, and export income reached a spectacular low during that period. In his principal work, the only long and detailed discussion of life on São Tomean plantations between the second half of the nineteenth century and World War II, Augusto Nascimento described an unexpected accommodation of workers to conditions that were just about bearable in the 1920s but broke down completely in the 1930s, as brutality and the intensity of exploitation on the plantations were again on the rise.³ Records created and kept by colonial

1. Arquivo Histórico de São Tomé e Príncipe, São Tomé [hereafter, AHSTP], Curadoria Geral dos Serviçais e Indígenas [hereafter, CGSI], 193 (cota 3.27.2.24), Administrator of Montes Hermínios plantation to Inspector-General for African Plantation Labourers and Settlers (with-out number), 7 January 1931.

2. The need of planters for such a narrative can be understood as a long-term reaction to criticism in the 1910s, following which various variants of a Portuguese “civilizing mission” were formulated. See also Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, *Livros Brancos, Almas Negras. A “missão civilizadora” do colonialismo português, c.1870–1930* (Lisbon, 2009), pp. 110–127.

3. Augusto Nascimento, *Poderes e Quotidiano nas Roças de S. Tomé e Príncipe. De finais de oitocentos a meados de novecentos* (Lisbon, 2002), pp. 475–481.

labour inspectors of the island's local administration are an essential source for understanding the changes as they help reconstruct the voices of the workers. Clearly, the inspectors were the most critical internal observers of the situation in the islands, and from their accounts, which use a certain amount of testimony from actual workers, it is evident that they were generally appalled by the social decline caused by the economic depression.⁴ Looming large was the unresolved problem of repatriation of workers who had worked out their contracts; many were compelled against their will to extend those contracts, which were normally signed for three or five years, and to stay on. To counter the losses in export income, a 1931 decree responded to the economic downturn in cocoa exports by halving the already relatively low wages on the plantations.⁵ That succeeded in preserving settler agriculture on certain plantations where the owners lacked the capital to weather the crisis, but the workers became desperate.⁶ Meanwhile, wage reductions were accompanied by increased brutality of plantation life. For example, part of a complaint from the Montes Hermínios plantation discusses how increased hardships changed workers' behaviour:

I do not go down into the small details because that is unnecessary, Excellent Sir (*Excelente Senhor*), but I come here to paint a very sad picture of the state of things, and in this I do not use exaggerated colour tones; it means we will be obliged to close the firm if the exodus of the labour force goes on, an exodus that does not abate with its constant flights; this provokes an imbalance, which only I am able to evaluate, because it is not only those who run away, but also those who remain, but with the same ideas, the same feelings, that they publicly manifest. What are the means I have to stop this? There are none.⁷

Extending into the 1900s and 1910s, plantation workers in São Tomé e Príncipe experienced a life regarded by many as similar to slavery, which became the target of a turbulent international campaign.⁸ By 1930, conditions had worsened again under the exigencies of the global downturn. Plantation workers attempted to counter the abuses and violence of plantation managers

4. William Gervase Clarence-Smith, "The Effects of the Great Depression on Industrialisation in Equatorial and Central Africa", in Ian Brown (ed.), *The Economies of Africa and Asia in the Inter-War Depression* (Abingdon, 2015), pp. 170–202. For the importance of the labour inspectorate by 1910 – much underestimated by older studies – see Nascimento, *Poderes*, pp. 409–410.

5. See the basic overview in Gerhard Seibert, "Colonialismo em São Tomé e Príncipe. Hierarquização, classificação e segregação da vida social", *Anuário Antropológico*, 40:2 (2015), pp. 99–120, which needs, however, to be complemented by Nascimento, *Poderes*, p. 362.

6. AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Afonso de Barros to Ricardo Monteiro Vaz, Governor of São Tomé e Príncipe (no. 6), 31 March 1936, p. 8.

7. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.27.2.24), Administrator of Montes Hermínios plantation to Inspector-General for Plantation Labourers and Settlers (without number), 7 January 1931.

8. The account by Catherine Higgs, *Chocolate Islands: Cocoa, Slavery, and Colonial Africa* (Athens, OH, 2012), should certainly be supplemented by a perspective on contract workers' experiences on the ground; this is offered partly by Nascimento, *Poderes*, pp. 424–425.

and agents of the colonial state, and flight and desertion were important parts of their response.⁹ Such experiences and strategies of resistance might seem comparable with similar wider phenomena on slave plantations in the Americas and eventually elsewhere from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries – such as the fleeing that has been interpreted as an essential factor in Atlantic slavery.¹⁰ We might, then, return to an analysis of fleeing in colonial Africa as a reaction to forced labour, a phenomenon that has remained astonishingly under-analysed despite early ground-breaking work.¹¹ Although labourers on the plantations of São Tomé e Príncipe were paid, many of them were recruited against their will, placing them within what had become a worldwide model of coerced labour in the second half of the nineteenth century. A third possibility for comparison is therefore with reactions and forms of resistance among indentured workers.¹²

Little is known of the whole picture of worker flight in São Tomé e Príncipe during the 1930s. However, as a widespread and important phenomenon, which became more thoroughly if controversially engaged with in the sources for that decade, flight is undoubtedly a most important subject for our understanding of workers' behaviour in the coercive plantation world. Study of worker flight feeds into the three fields of global historical analysis mentioned above, although to different degrees in each, as we shall see. In sum, the experiences of runaways on the archipelago during the 1930s must be analysed as an important case study.

Although in itself highly interesting, Nascimento's chapter on escaping labourers remains relatively vague both for our period in particular and insofar as it deals with few concrete occurrences of flight.¹³ William Gervase Clarence-Smith's classic article on the lack of productivity of contract workers in the archipelago's cocoa plantations as an explanation for the alleged decline of those plantations mentions flight before World War I as a constant but rather pointless reality. Clarence-Smith argued that "escapes were abortive, and fugitives were frequently re-captured or starved into submission after a few weeks". However, Clarence-Smith's observation must be qualified by the fact that his study was based solely on a diary by the cocoa baron and anti-Portuguese activist William Cadbury, and we might reasonably doubt its relevance to the 1930s.¹⁴ It is important to understand and classify what

9. For a long-term perspective, see also Nascimento, *Poderes*, pp. 393–445. Nascimento insists that life on the plantations was not timeless (see also p. 358), but he was ultimately less interested in the period after 1918.

10. Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY, 1982).

11. Anthony I. Asiwaju, "Migrations as Revolt: The Example of the Ivory Coast and the Upper Volta before 1945", *Journal of African History*, 17:4 (1976), pp. 577–594.

12. David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922* (New York, 1995).

13. Nascimento, *Poderes*, pp. 429–444.

14. William Gervase Clarence-Smith, "The Hidden Costs of Labour on the Cocoa Plantations of São Tomé and Príncipe, 1875–1914", *Portuguese Studies*, 6:1 (1990), pp. 152–172, 164–165.

runaways were trying to achieve and what strategies they used to enable us to approach more closely the fine lines between flight and absenteeism, between resistance and the quest for a less repressive local everyday life. Another interesting question concerns the rift between “native” settlements and their own social structures under colonial rule on the one hand, and the world of the immigrant plantation workers on the other, which was challenged by fugitives. In our view, such systematic interpretation and classification of flight has not been attempted for anywhere in colonial Africa or for any plantation region that relied on coerced or semi-coerced labour during the interwar period. Given the outstanding archival evidence, the case of São Tomé is highly illuminating for these debates.

The sources reveal attempts to quantify the scope of the phenomenon of flight from plantations in the 1930s, but the numbers recorded are complicated and unclear in that they seem to agglomerate a range of differing situations.¹⁵ Or so the labour inspectors claimed, at least. However, the hundreds of boxes in the archives of the labour inspectorate (*curadoria*) of São Tomé e Príncipe, which include reports, correspondence, and complaints by workers, are an almost completely untapped source within the country’s national archives (the Arquivo Histórico de São Tomé e Príncipe). They offer information about such a wide range of situations, sometimes explained in impressive detail, that they enable us to discuss individual workers’ strategies and decisions. Even without quantification therefore, we may reasonably claim that the experiences are significant, and that they can be classified.

The files of the labour inspectorate are colonial sources. In a sense, of course, they are Eurocentric, for they were generally produced by Europeans. Some contain protocols of workers’ testimonies, although the transcribed African voices rarely tell of escapes, with complaints about violence or withheld wages being much more typical.¹⁶ However, in spite of their undoubted limits, these vast dossiers still represent a type of colonial source that is relatively easy to contrast and deconstruct. Their impressive quantity allows for the study of parallel situations, but they also show the frequently underrated conflicts among the European authors of such documents.¹⁷ In the case of São Tomé e Príncipe, most such conflicts were between, on the one hand, European plantation owners and their managers,

15. This problem was mentioned by Nascimento, *Poderes*, pp. 419 and 428, who saw the decreasing numbers but warned too of the manipulation of statistics. See selected data for 1934 in Table 3.

16. Allen Isaacman attempted in the 1980s to obtain oral evidence relevant for the 1930s, with many problems obvious in the presentation of the material, regarding the coerced cotton-growing schemes in northern Mozambique. That approach is anyway not feasible for São Tomé e Príncipe. See Allen Isaacman, *Cotton Is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938–1961* (Portsmouth, NH, 1996), pp. 13–14.

17. This has been discussed for the late Portuguese Empire by Alexander Keese, “‘Proteger os pretos’. Havia uma mentalidade reformista na administração portuguesa na África Tropical, 1926–1961?”, *Africana Studia (Porto)*, 6 (2003), pp. 97–125, 103.

who together were struggling to maintain impunity in their violent rule over their workers, and, on the other, labour inspectors trying to maintain certain standards and insisting that many “disciplinary” practices were frankly illegal. On the one hand, that often meant that an inspector, no doubt feeling responsible for protecting the workers to a certain level, might accuse managers of mistreatment.¹⁸ On the other hand, it was the job of the inspectorate’s office to facilitate the plantation staff’s efforts to catch runaway workers. The inspectorate was responsible, too, for calling in the local police in pursuit of runaway workers, who were seen as deserters and vagrants, and for their eventual punishment through penal labour.¹⁹

In this article, we shall first discuss the importance of the São Tomean case by pointing to key processes and elements of Portuguese rule in the archipelago and the plantation system there during the first half of the twentieth century. We shall then present a number of situations that we regard as representative of flight, including absenteeism, for the years of socioeconomic degradation of the 1930s. We shall situate workers’ motivations and strategies, with the aim of considering their possibilities of response and their chances, however small, of achieving some degree of personal autonomy. We shall further systematize the available evidence into an analysis of three strategic contexts of flight. In the final part, we will discuss the case of São Tomé e Príncipe in relation to the experiences of those under Atlantic slavery, those under the global indentured labour systems of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, and flight from forced labour under colonial rule in Africa between 1880 and 1960, thus linking it to the global history of runaways.²⁰

LIVING CONDITIONS AND MISTREATMENT ON THE COCOA PLANTATIONS

With a combination of a tropical climate and rich volcanic soil, the archipelago of São Tomé e Príncipe provided an environment highly suitable for cocoa farming. By 1936, the majority of the ninety-four surviving cocoa-producing operations were installed in the densely forested interior of the island. Runaways no longer strove to reach the more remote mountainous parts of the interior, for the surrounding vegetation offered ideal opportunities for

18. Nascimento, *Poderes*, regards the increasing attempts by the colonial state at direct control as a principal difference from the late Portuguese Republic onwards; see p. 363.

19. Beatriz Valverde Contreras and Alexander Keese, “Between Violence, Racism and Reform: São Tomé e Príncipe in the Great Depression Years, 1930–7”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 56:2 (2021), pp. 243–267, 258.

20. See the discussion of a common platform for flight in Leo Lucassen and Lex Heerma van Voss, “Introduction: Flight as Fight”, in Marcus Rediker, Titas Chakraborty, and Matthias van Rossum (eds), *A Global History of Runaways: Workers, Mobility, and Capitalism, 1600–1850* (Oakland, CA, 2019), pp. 1–21, 4.

them to find hiding places close to their plantations where in some instances they could remain at large for long periods. A certain amount of deforestation before World War I did not alter the environment to any great extent, and forested areas near plantations remained difficult to control.²¹ The acquisition of advanced equipment for the fermentation of coffee beans and the adoption of mechanized sorting came later to local cocoa farming. However, although during the 1930s, with only two exceptions, the plantations (called *roças*) were now in the hands of European individuals or firms, most of whom were absentee owners, they continued with the same labour-intensive organization as when cocoa production began during the last decades of the nineteenth century (Figure 1).²²

In principle, plantation managers could have looked for a labour force among the local slave-descendant communities, whose members were called *nativos*, *filhos da terra*, or *forros*, and which had formed over the previous two centuries of relative absence of colonial control until the second half of the nineteenth century. A second group of “natives” were descendants of slave runaways from the late sixteenth century. These were the *angolares*, whom the interwar colonial authorities held to belong to the same category of “native” residents as the *forros*. However, most members of both groups refused to work at plantation labour, which had formerly been marked down as slave labour, and then, for a long time thereafter, offered only miserable wages.²³ As in Cape Verde, São Tomean *forros* and *angolares* could rely on established legal and social practices from before the intensification of colonialism in the late nineteenth century, which limited the effects of coercion.

21. Marta Macedo, “Disrupted Ecologies: Conflicting Repertoires of Colonial Rule in Early Twentieth-Century São Tomé”, in Nuno Domingos, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, and Ricardo Roque (eds), *Resistance and Colonialism: Insurgent Peoples in World History* (London, 2019), pp. 229–250, 238–240.

22. On environmental and production conditions, see Marta Macedo, “Standard Cocoa: Transnational Networks and Technoscientific Regimes in West African Plantations”, *Technology and Culture*, 57:3 (2016), pp. 557–585, 559–561, 564–571, which, in spite of its title, is mainly São Tomé e Príncipe-focused; Sandra Kiesow, “Cocoa Culture on São Tomé and Príncipe: The Rise and Fall of Cocoa on the Islands in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”, *Agricultural History*, 91:1 (2017), pp. 55–77. For a discussion of differences between more or less coercive plantation regimes and smallholding farms in cocoa production, see William Gervase Clarence-Smith and François Ruf, “Cocoa Pioneer Fronts: The Historical Determinants”, in William Gervase Clarence-Smith (ed.), *Cocoa Pioneer Fronts since 1800: The Role of Smallholders, Planters and Merchants* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 1–22. See for lack of productivity of the *roças* and “overmechanization” with inadequate machinery before 1914, Clarence-Smith, “Hidden Costs”, pp. 161–163, 171.

23. Pablo B. Eyzaguirre, “Small Farmers and Estates in São Tomé, West Africa” (Ph.D., Yale University, 1986), pp. 111–158; for the *angolares*, see Gerhard Seibert, “São Tomé and Príncipe: The First Plantation Economy in the Tropics”, in Robin Law, Suzanne Schwarz, and Silke Strickrodt (eds), *Commercial Agriculture, the Slave Trade and Slavery in Atlantic Africa* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 54–78, 64–66.



Figure 1. Sulphation squad, Diogo Vaz Plantation, São Tomé e Príncipe, early 1920s (“Roça Diogo Vaz, Brigada de sulfatagem”). This photograph (photographer and date are unknown) comes from a collection of photographs provided by the Coleção Ângela Camila Castelo-Branco e António Faria to the Centro de Estudos Africanos da Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal. It was probably taken in the first half of the 1920s, but is a good illustration of work conditions in cocoa agriculture on the plantations into the 1930s. We thank both institutions for the courtesy.

Aspects of forced recruitment were more dominant in the search for migrant labour in other colonies, particularly Angola and Mozambique, where opportunities for imposing forced labour or recruiting contract workers through coercion were much greater.

While tremendously successful in economic terms around 1900 as a principal location for cocoa production, the archipelago of São Tomé e Príncipe was therefore also a laboratory experimenting with the use of coerced or semi-coerced labour. Augusto Nascimento looked at the continuities from practices of late slavery in the treatment of labourers in the Portuguese archipelago, seeing an emancipation and “apprenticeship” system and then what proved an abortive liberal volte-face within the Portuguese Republic immediately after 1910. The authoritarian regime in Portugal from 1926 onwards allowed the colonial administration openly to tolerate and even partly encourage a system under which strong elements of coercion still reigned.²⁴ Various phases of introduction of Mozambican and Angolan labour during the first three

24. Nascimento, *Poderes*, p. 355.

decades of the twentieth century were built on manhunts and coerced recruitment in their regions of origin. Cape Verdeans were an alternative, but they had more rights in their colony of origin, were better acquainted with the Portuguese language, and therefore generally more difficult to control.²⁵ At the end of 1935, the labour inspectorate gave the overall number of plantation workers as 24,600 (for worker origins in 1935, see [Table 1](#)), which amounted to only two thirds of the labour force that had been common before the crisis. The sizes of plantations varied considerably, with some of the biggest, including Água-Izé and Rio do Ouro, still accommodating a thousand labourers, while the smallest required fewer than a hundred workers. Most of the plantations with the largest labour forces were organized as one main plantation site and a number of dependent units, all relying on the same processing machinery, as used in the plantation's headquarters but otherwise autonomous. For purposes of discipline, which might include corporal punishment, the European administrators installed overseers appointed from among the plantation labourers. The overseers were expected to take part in repressive measures.

Officially, slavery had been abolished in the Portuguese Empire in 1875, but the expansion of cocoa production that led to São Tomé e Príncipe's economic exploitation encouraged both officials and planters to perpetuate coercive forms of labour. As a result, São Tomé e Príncipe's plantation system went through two major storms of international campaigns before the 1930s. The first, during the first decade of the twentieth century, reflected outrage among anti-slavery activists, who enlisted the support of major international chocolate producers to attack the obvious continuities in slavery-like practices seen in the treatment of workers on the plantations.²⁶ The second moment of international pressure came in 1924–1925 and was exerted under the auspices of the League of Nations. It led the US sociologist Edward A. Ross to agree publicly that the conditions of Angolan recruitment for the *roças* were indeed “slavery-like”.²⁷ Despite vociferous denials from Portuguese plantation managers and owners and from politicians, both episodes appear to have contributed to two decades of improved conditions on São Tomé's plantations. However, the Great Depression had the reverse effect, as, in macroeconomic terms, even in a context of only light overall deflationary trends, the price per metric tonne of export cocoa fell from 2,200 to 500 Portuguese escudos during the 1930s. Producers maintained their export quantities until 1937, and that meant a dramatic loss of gains, the burden of which the plantation owners and managers tried to shift onto the workers. There were dramatic

25. Augusto Nascimento, “Representações sociais e arbítrio nas roças. As primeiras levas de caboverdianos em São Tomé e Príncipe nos primórdios de novecentos”, *Arquipélago*, 2nd series, 5 (2001), pp. 325–370, 357–358.

26. Higgs, *Chocolate Islands*; Lowell J. Satre, *Chocolate on Trial: Slavery, Politics, and the Ethics of Business* (Athens, OH, 2005).

27. Bandeira Jerónimo, *Livros*, pp. 211–225.

Table 1. *Origins of plantation workers in São Tomé e Príncipe given for 31 December 1935.*

Angolans	Mozambicans	Cape Verdeans	Tongas	Others
10,969	10,762	923	1,934	12

Source: AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Afonso de Barros, Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers, to Ricardo Vaz Monteiro, Governor of São Tomé e Príncipe (no. 8), 28 April 1936, p. 9. “Tonga” was a local term for individuals born on the plantations.

cuts in wages, while ever harsher conditions and greater violence were applied to make the workers produce more.²⁸ The fact that, for once, this was immediately documented in labour inspectorate reports, workers’ testimonies, and correspondence makes that period extraordinarily useful for the study of runaways.

Together with worsened pay and conditions, the matter of the repatriation of plantation workers also remained unresolved (for details on workers still awaiting repatriation in 1944, see Table 2). Following forms of recruitment in which coercion played an important role, the contracts foresaw the repatriation of the workers. Permanent settlement (the “fixed abode” or *fixação*) was a possibility, but few opted for it. Normally, workers were supposed to be transported back to their regions of origin, and many workers did insist on repatriation. But in the five years prior to 1936, some 10,000 Angolans in the archipelago had had their repatriation delayed for at least five years, and forty per cent of them had been waiting more than fifteen years.

The Great Depression led to decline in other parts of the plantation world, but its impact on São Tomé e Príncipe, and especially its repatriation schemes, was more dramatic. Refusal to repatriate multiplied existing frustrations caused by wage reductions and increasingly violent practices²⁹ and, as we shall see, such conditions frequently became an additional motive to run away.

In theory at least, the labour inspectorate of São Tomé e Príncipe was the principal instrument for both protecting and disciplining workers, in the interest of the plantation owners: both sides were entitled to appeal to the inspector. Created in 1878, the inspectorate (consisting of a single official and his agents) was for many years practically powerless, although all workers had contact with the inspectorate when disembarking in São Tomé e Príncipe. For the first decade of the twentieth century, Clarence-Smith still describes labour

28. Maciel Santos, “A rentabilidade do cacau de São Tomé e Príncipe. Hipóteses de explicação”, *Africana Studia*, 5 (2002), pp. 181–212, 184.

29. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.1.3.12), Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers to Luís Augusto Vieira Fernandes, Governor of São Tomé e Príncipe (without number), 4 November 1930.

Table 2. *Numbers of plantation workers whose repatriation was refused in the 1930s (evidenced by years present), statistics from 1944.*³⁰

Territory of origin	1 to 5 years	5 to 10 years	10 to 20 years	More than 20 years	Total	Children over the age of 14	Total
Angola	2,619	310	3,194	6	6,129	135	6,264
Mozambique	-	19	5,801	2	5,822	175	5,998
Cape Verde	-	2	114	-	116	-	116
Other territories	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	2,619	331	9,109	8	12,067	311	12,378

inspectors as horrified by the conditions they found on the plantations, but, according to him, those inspectors were far too weak to intervene.³¹ However, by the 1930s they had become both more critical and more engaged in denouncing abuses, which, while it did not lead to immediate improvements, placed the labour inspectors increasingly in conflict with plantation managers.³² That situation is why the labour inspectorate series in the archives is full of such rich and generally well-reflected material on the conditions that led workers to run away during the 1930s.

THE INTENSIFICATION OF FLIGHT: CHALLENGING THE PLANTATION'S DYNAMICS

In late 1934, no fewer than 1,374 plantation labourers were reported as absent.³³ That amounted to a good six per cent of the archipelago's total contract workers – probably more – and it showed that certain plantation managers in São Tomé e Príncipe were finding the situation extremely difficult. An example is Água-Izé, which, in the 1930s, before modernization greatly improved its material conditions, stood out as one of the big plantations characterized by particularly problematic conditions which led to its impressive official figure of 342 runaways.³⁴

30. AHSTP, CGSI, 003 (cota 3.15.1.13), António Rodrigues de Almeida Correia, Acting Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers, *Serviçais esperando Repatriação* (without number), 5 April 1944.

31. William Gervase Clarence-Smith, "Labour Conditions in the Plantations of São Tomé and Príncipe, 1875–1914", *Slavery & Abolition*, 14:1 (1993), pp. 149–167, 158.

32. Valverde Contreras and Keese, "Violence", pp. 262–263.

33. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.3.18), Acting Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers, *Relação das roças e patrões que teem trabalhadores fugidos, com referência a 31 de Dezembro de 1934* (without number), 31 May 1935.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

The especially dire picture at Água-Izé, with conditions similar to those on many of São Tomé e Príncipe's plantations in the period discussed, is similarly exemplified by the experiences of particular workers. For example, a man named Franca had obtained the support of the labour inspectorate to live at the same dependency as his parents. However, soon after he was placed on the Claudino Faro dependency, he fled. The administrator, José Antunes Limão, presented Franca's history of flights as shown in [Table 3](#).

The table shows that worker flights could last for both impressively long periods, such as one of six months in 1927–1928, or might involve absences of around a month, or perhaps even just a few days. Limão, applying the standard argument of plantation administrators, held that Franca was an incorrigible idler, but, in fact, this runaway's actions were responses to strategic motives of resistance to separation from his family.³⁵

Workers' strategies were also the subject of the long account given by Afonso de Barros, who was the acting labour inspector in 1936. Barros affirmed that the labour inspectorate took part in the renegotiation of working conditions for a number of escaped workers. The labourers themselves were aware of that, and a percentage of those who ran away came into the town precisely for that negotiation. An appreciable number refused to return to the plantations to which they were originally contracted but agreed to consider working on other plantations.³⁶ While Barros had his reservations about the numbers presented, he admitted that runaways were omnipresent and acknowledged the importance of workers' goals and strategic choices.

This article will not focus on Príncipe's plantations, although the smaller of the two islands was even more subject to abusive interpretation of the repatriation system than was São Tomé, and its workers reacted on a huge scale. The labour inspectorate's agent on Príncipe, Captain Manuel do Rosário Curado, reported resistance among plantation managers to repatriation of any but the oldest labourers and perhaps those without families, which left individual workers frustrated and eventually enraged.³⁷ In 1936, Curado admitted retrospectively that over a number of years Príncipe had experienced what he described as an "exodus" into the town of Santo António. The administration restricted access to the town for plantation workers to Sundays, on other days allowing off the plantation only those with written authorization from their

35. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.22.3.23), José Antunes Limão, Administrator of Água-Izé Plantation for Companhia da Ilha do Príncipe, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 25 September 1934.

36. AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Afonso de Barros, Acting Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers, to Ricardo Monteiro Vaz, Governor of São Tomé e Príncipe (no. 6), 31 March 1936.

37. AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Captain Manuel do Rosário Curado, Agent of the Labour Inspectorate in Príncipe, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (no. 141), 22 October 1936, p. 2.

Table 3. *An individual history of running away.*

Fled	on	14-7-1927	Presented	on	21-7-1927
"	"	5-10-1927	"	"	24-4-1928
"	"	11-11-1933	"	"	16-11-1933
"	"	30-7-1934	"	"	1-8-1934
"	"	17-8-1934	"	"	15-9-1934
"	"	18-9-1934	"	"	21-9-1934
"	"	25-9-1934	"	"	

plantation’s managers, and it returned to their plantations any runaways found in town.³⁸ The link between repatriation prospects and flight was therefore one essential element, and on both Príncipe and São Tomé fewer workers went on the run at times when repatriation was more frequent. Workers, in fact, tried to be present at those times because their hopes were raised that they would be repatriated.³⁹

Strategic elements therefore played a vital role, and we shall discuss their three principal variants. However, to place strategic escapes within the wider picture, it is important first to show the variety of motives for different types of flight, which might range from absences and long-term flights to the spontaneous outcome of other conflicts, and misinterpretation of workers’ behaviour by the authorities. Certain examples and plantations provide a particularly good overview.

WHY LEAVE? DISCUSSING MOTIVES OF ABSENCE AND LONG-TERM FLIGHT

In the 1930s, we find notably diverse situations in the category of *fuga*, or flight (see Figure 2 for plantation locations). While it is possible to classify experiences, the task is complicated by overlapping motives, including plans, push factors, and temporary absences, perhaps to deal in alcohol or perhaps simply to drink it. We shall show three motives for long-term flight. First, some made plans to escape from the archipelago altogether; some absconded as the immediate reaction to violence; and a third group were running from penal labour. Those will be contrasted with three contexts of temporary absence, namely, first, leaving the plantation during free time; secondly, to obtain alcohol; and thirdly, to pursue commercial activities. We shall then look briefly at the overseers. Certain motives we might expect to see are actually rare in or absent from the sources, notably so for the subject of sexual abuse.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

39. AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Afonso de Barros, Acting Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers, to Ricardo Vaz Monteiro (no. 6), 31 March 1936, p. 12.



Figure 2. Plantations in São Tomé e Príncipe, 1930s.

Perhaps the primary motive was the hope of long-distance flight, which needed to be meticulously planned. A number of workers managed to reach the neighbouring Spanish-ruled island of Fernando Pó by boat, while a few, rather unnervingly for colonial administrators in 1930, even managed to return to Angola or Mozambique.⁴⁰ Numbers are unknown but seem to have been very limited.⁴¹ Correspondence from 1934 shows that refugees to Fernando Pó were unhappy with conditions in the Spanish colony, and that some even returned to be captured later.⁴² As in the case of Mozambican worker Omar, recaptured after such an experience of flight and return by personnel of the Lima & Gama company, such an apparently dispiriting experience might in the end lead to quick repatriation, as owners were keen to remove such “troublemakers” as soon as possible.⁴³

Particularly violent conditions on some plantations formed another motive for escape. We are rather well informed about which plantations had the most notorious reputations, although there is little direct testimony from workers themselves about the exact nature of their mistreatment. In certain cases, however, accounts corroborate each other, such as in the case of the Quinta Santo António plantation, which was infamous for particularly harsh violence against women, and where flights were common. A woman called Mariody who worked there explained to the labour inspector why she had taken flight and concealed herself for an entire month after she had been mistreated while pregnant. She claimed she was set to hard labour in spite of her condition and so, like others, had run away.⁴⁴ Generally, as might be expected of enquiries by the labour inspectorate, the subject of sexual violence was generally absent from the sources, for while it is true that inspectors seem to have been particularly outraged at brutal physical punishment of female workers, we can find little detail on the subject of sexual abuse. The question was easier to raise in relation to “competition” between white plantation staff and male workers for sexual relations with female labourers, which could lead to violence.⁴⁵

40. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.1.3.12), Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers to Agent of the Labour Inspectorate in Príncipe (without number), 3 September 1930.

41. AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Afonso de Barros to Ricardo Vaz Monteiro (no. 6), 31 March 1936, p. 11.

42. Ibrahim K. Sundiata, *From Slaving to Neoslavery: The Bight of Biafra and Fernando Po in the Era of Abolition, 1827–1930* (Madison, WI, 1996).

43. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.19.1.14), Administrator of Lima & Gama Company to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 25 September 1934.

44. AHSTP, CGSI, 207 (cota 3.22.4.25), José Amaro da Costa, Administrator of Quinta Santo António Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 18 October 1932. It would be interesting (but impossible, alas!) to know how that worker came by that name, which means “bad” or “troublesome” in the Cape Verdean Creole/*crioulo* language.

45. Significant incidents of that kind are to be found in AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.1.3.12), Inspector-General for Contract Workers and Settlers to Administrator of Lembá Plantation (without number), 11 December 1930; see also Valverde Contreras and Keese, “Violence”, p. 261.

Incidentally, we have not come across a single reference to sexual abuse of male workers. A number of references to “conflict about women” and details of punishment certainly do suggest frequent sexual violence, but it is difficult to find more evidence for the 1930s. Most probably, only the detection in scattered files of a major scandal would give us more substantial material, but the situation is not especially different from our sources on Atlantic slavery in the Caribbean for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, where sexual violence is referred to in rather few, but dramatic, accounts.

Experience of prolonged punishment was a third motive to try to escape. For many plantation workers who anyway had to endure many hardships in everyday life, hard labour maintaining roads as punishment for “misdeeds” was an unbearable additional burden, especially as the period of any such penal labour would be added to their contract period. A good example comes from the documentation we have on April and May 1934. Within days of each other, workers like Moziene from Água-Izé, Zagaia from Praia das Conchas, the later recaptured Mozambican labourer Gireque, Namuca from Tráz-os-Montes, and António from the Porto Alegre plantation took their opportunities to escape from the principal penal road labour gang.⁴⁶

At the other end of the spectrum were temporary absences, sometimes to evade plantation regulations or, if the absentee was essential for the plantation’s operation, even to exert pressure on the management. Occasionally, there proved to be a fine line between genuine absence and misinterpretation of workers’ rights. For example, during a 1936 scandal, three workers named Correia, Munica, and Viemba from the Morro Peixe plantation were apprehended and subjected to violent corporal punishment as runaways, despite having simply gone for a walk beyond the property’s boundary on their free Sunday.⁴⁷ Some temporary absences had to do with access to alcohol, which many used to make plantation life bearable with its hard labour conditions. An example is given from the Larangeira plantation, from which the Mozambican workers Guiza, Zubota, and Salaua ran away to obtain alcohol from places nearby. After being locked up as punishment, they escaped again.⁴⁸ The worker Passile from

46. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Angolares Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 17 April 1934; AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Angolares to Inspector-General (without number), 24 April 1934; AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Angolares to Inspector-General (without number), 11 May 1934; AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Angolares to Inspector-General (without number), 16 May 1934; AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Angolares to Inspector-General (without number), 22 May 1934.

47. AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Afonso de Barros to Ricardo Vaz Monteiro (no. 8), 28 April 1936, pp. 1–2.

48. AHSTP, CGSI, 207 (cota 3.22.4.25), Joaquim Pinto de Andrade for Administrator of Larangeira Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 14 June 1932.

the Bom Retiro dependency of Boa Nova plantation was a similar case. His complaint to the labour inspectorate initially found a response because he claimed to have been beaten and forced to do hard labour in spite of his physical frailty. Afterwards, the inspector apparently deduced that the matter actually concerned Passile's getting hold of alcohol from *forro* traders and passing a Saturday drunk.⁴⁹

Some incidents concerned not the consumption of alcohol but the dealing in it, namely, in the locally produced palm wine. Workers regularly absented themselves to buy or sell the spirit, and were sometimes pursued and punished. Mozambican workers Quirinamala and Sumana – the latter a woman involved in illicit trading in spirits – were caught red handed and beaten by the manager; both fled into the forest soon afterwards.⁵⁰ On the São Nicolau plantation, workers had a tendency to walk during the night to the Nova Moka plantation without permission, to buy local alcohol. The administrator organized nocturnal search squads which attempted to catch such individuals, but they were mostly unsuccessful because the numerous groups were well organized.⁵¹ In certain local cases plantation managers – like the administrator of the Rio Leça plantation – made attempts to produce and sell the palm wine themselves. The Rio Leça administrator was later the subject of a complaint by the town warden of Neves for such dealings.⁵²

For African overseers, who were important to the smooth functioning of plantation labour processes, flight, absenteeism, and the threat of both were useful in defending their positions, as illustrated by the following two episodes. On the Monte Macaco plantation, the *tonga* (local-born) overseer Sumbulla appears to have had a history of insobriety and was accused of other minor infractions too, such as theft. However, because Sumbulla was the only *tonga* in the labour force, and because he constantly threatened to run away if he were subjected to any disciplinary measures, the administrator ultimately imposed no sanction.⁵³ Chimbandi, on the Angolares plantation, was a former overseer who as punishment had lost his position. Chimbandi then escaped and went into hiding for a long period, even attacking workers in that sector. Captured and sent to Vila Verde dependency, Chimbandi

49. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.22.3.23), Administrator of Sociedade Civil Agrícola Roça Boa Nova to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 18 September 1934.

50. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.22.3.23), Administrator of Quinta das Palmeiras Plantation to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 27 September 1934.

51. AHSTP, CGSI, 207 (cota 3.22.4.25), Administrator of São Nicolau Plantation to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 21 July 1932, pp. 1–2.

52. AHSTP, Vários, Administração do Concelho de S. Tomé, 095 (cota 2.19.2.5), Amadeu Silva, Warden of Borough of Neves, [*Relatório*] (without number), 1 August 1934.

53. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.22.3.23), Manoel da Cruz Fortes, Administrator of Monte Macaco Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 5 January 1933.

continued to refuse to work in the cocoa harvest. Considering an absconded overseer a dangerous precedent, the plantation management demanded Chimbandi be transferred.⁵⁴ While some of those motives, as discussed already, point to strategic goals of runaways, we now come to three important strategic contexts.

FROM INDIVIDUAL ESCAPES TO MAROON-LIKE STRATEGIES

The individual experience of flight was normally linked to instances of violence or sometimes to attempts at resistance. The examples for the period discussed are so numerous and offer such ample evidence that it is possible to categorize typical incidents. Many of those who ran away did so without any real plan. Take the case of Mahancha, for example. Mahancha had been officially entrusted with the role of wine-seller, but he stole some of the money, was identified as the thief, and ran off.⁵⁵ In another example, Assane received a cutlass wound in a riot among drunken labourers. The managers of the small Linda Vista plantation refused to arrange treatment by a nurse, so Assane ran away, only to reappear sometime later at the labour inspectorate with a complaint about his lack of medical care. Wounded as he had been, he was of course lucky to have survived in the forest.⁵⁶

In an instance of the common trope of blaming African workers for attacks, the administrator of the Pedroma plantation reported that a Mozambican worker named Mussechegue had attacked one Afonso Ferreira, an employee of the Bussaco dependency. Mussechegue then fled into the bush.⁵⁷ If workers did manage to present their own version of events to the labour inspectorate, experiences often sounded quite different. Typically there was talk of a sequence of violence or the threat of punishment and subsequent flight, as in the case of a worker named Quipungo in Uba-Metade. Quipungo stated that he had been assaulted by the overseer, defended himself, and then fled

54. AHSTP, CGSI, 207 (cota 3.22.4.25), Pedro Gouveia, Administrator of Angolares Plantation, to Inspector-General of Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 26 January 1932.

55. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), João da Silva, Companhia Agrícola da Roça Laura, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), without date (March 1934), pp. 1–2.

56. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator and Proprietor of Linda Vista and Água Tanque Plantations to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 14 May 1934.

57. AHSTP, CGSI, 965 (cota 3.16.5.11), José de Vasconcelos e Sá Guerreiro Nuno, Scribe, Inspectorate-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers, *Autos de transgressão do art.º 352º-A do C.T.I. – Queixoso ou participante O Administrador da Roça Pedroma José da Costa Pereira – Arguido o serviçal Mussechegue, N.º 1225, fr. 22, L R.13 serviçal Moç. da Roça Pedroma – Auto de Declarações* (without number), 19 July 1937, pp. 3–4.

during the night to escape more serious punishment.⁵⁸ In certain cases, the fear of punishment was sufficient to prompt flight, as in the case of Angolan labourer Quissata of the Roça Nova dependency of the São Nicolau plantation⁵⁹ and the Mozambican worker Massequel, who ran away when reprimanded for his “aggressive refusals” to work.⁶⁰

Many flights were prompted by transfers of workers between plantations. The more concrete incidents varied. In some cases, newcomers fell into conflict with other workers over the distribution of certain tasks, which was what happened when a Mozambican called Pocar was posted to the Filipina plantation. He had a violent dispute with another worker, an Angolan, likewise placed on the same plantation.⁶¹ If conditions were significantly worse for transferred workers than they had been on their original plantation, many of them took more time and trouble to plan their escapes. One of many examples is that of a man named Giraca, who fled from the Porto Alegre plantation, having been sent there from Tráz-os-Montes, which was known for its more benign labour regime.⁶²

Some runaways were captured relatively quickly but others had support from labourers on neighbouring plantations or from settlements in the area, as in the case of João from the Monte Leão plantation. João had fixed his residence in 1931 and therefore had even better contacts outside the plantations, so after his escape in 1932 he managed to stay hidden until 1935.⁶³ It is difficult to estimate how many remained at large, but it was not uncommon for runaways to remain undiscovered, and so it is safe to assume there must have been some hundreds at least.

Other runaways banded together in what frequently appear to be attempts at better-prepared flight.⁶⁴ Sometimes labourers created small runaway

58. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.27.2.24), Elísio dos Santos, Administrator of Uba-Metade Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 17 June 1931.

59. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.22.3.23), António Antunes, Administrator of São Nicolau Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 25 March 1934.

60. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.22.3.23), Acting Administrator of Sociedade Civil Agrícola Roça Boa Nova to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 24 February 1934.

61. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.27.2.24), Joaquim de Almeida, Administrator of Filipina Plantation (belonging to Mendes Lopes, Lda.), to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 22 January 1931, p. 1.

62. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Pedro Santa Martha, Deputy Manager of Tráz-os-Montes Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 19 February 1934.

63. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.3.18), Januário José da Silva Júnior, Administrator of Monte Leão Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 8 April 1935.

64. For the period before 1910, see Clarence-Smith, “Hidden Costs”, p. 165.

communities after initial individual attempts to escape penal labour gang work, which as we know was regarded as particularly arduous.⁶⁵ However, we have more detailed evidence on group flight from certain plantations, a significant incident being that on the Dona Eugénia dependency of the Angolares plantation. The workers allegedly made a great deal of noise, the white employee tried to silence them but was threatened by a group of labourers armed with cutlasses. The leaders of the movement then fled into the bush, remaining in hiding for weeks despite the attempts of the plantation manager to find them.⁶⁶ Some groups hid just outside other plantations where labourers brought them food and water. In early 1934, the administrator of the Porto Alegre plantation caught five labourers hiding on the territory of the plantation. They were from a mixed band of runaways including the Angolans Joaquim and Manuel from Monte Café, Mozambicans Maquina from Rio do Ouro, and Macau from Lembá, and another Angolan, Silvério from Rio do Ouro.⁶⁷

In the case of the Pinheira plantation, Angolan and Mozambican workers banded together to hide in the bush. They were supported by *forros* in the area who apparently incited them to steal from neighbouring plantations, giving them small sums of money in exchange. The complaint by Pinheira's administrator might have been exaggerated to induce the labour inspectorate to provide armed support, but there is no doubt the fugitive group did exist⁶⁸ and it was generally quite common for locals to assist runaways. Other groups were formed by "ringleaders", an influential such leader being the *tonga* Maloba of the Aliança plantation. Maloba convinced workers like Angolan labourer Enhama and others like Massango, Goi II, Ventura, and Saide to run away. Interesting evidence appears in the form of letters sent by Maloba to certain workers he knew could read, such as Enhama.⁶⁹

The creation of fugitive communities was therefore possible, but no longer very common by the 1930s. The labour inspectorate never offered even approximate numbers of workers who organized themselves like that, but they are unlikely

65. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Angolares Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 18 May 1934; AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Jaime Raposo, Warden of Borough of Santa Cruz dos Angolares, to Pedro d'Abreu, Administrator of Angolares Plantation (without number), 15 May 1934.

66. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Pedro Gomes d'Abreu, Administrator of Angolares Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 5 March 1934.

67. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Porto Alegre Plantation, for R. Jonglas, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 26 March 1934.

68. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.27.2.24), A. Ribeiro, Administrator of Pinheira Plantation (Companhia D. Aurora de Macedo), to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 15 September 1931.

69. AHSTP, CGSI, 207 (cota 3.22.4.25), João Baptista dos Reis, Administrator of Aliança Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 12 November 1932.

at any one time to have exceeded a hundred individuals on the island in perhaps four or five such groups. More important were local networks and support for individuals to remain in hiding. However, as we have seen, evidence suggests that local helpers profited from those rarer large groups who were in a position to appropriate resources or even organize attacks on outlying dependencies.

BLENDING IN WITH “NATIVE” SOCIETIES: CHANCES AND LIMITS

Solidarity between *forro* natives of São Tomé e Príncipe and plantation workers was, at best, unstable. It is difficult to form a fuller picture of their relations for the 1930s, as conflicts and more systematic hostilities between members of the two groups seem to have intensified (or further intensified) after World War II.⁷⁰ However, there is little evidence to suggest that the *forros* were generally enthusiastic about hosting runaway workers. Even so, as labour inspector Afonso de Barros pointed out in 1936, there were a good number of cases of escaped workers hiding among the *forros*, adapting to their ways of life, emulating their behaviour, and ultimately blending in for long periods.⁷¹

Existing studies offer us only rather general observations on relations between plantation labourers and local *forro* residents.⁷² Barros's report is the principal source for the role of the *acoutadores*, small “native” landholders who employed them. While the labour inspectorate could not give concrete numbers and while scholars will thus probably never be in a position to quantify the phenomenon, the nature of the records of the discussions on the matter makes clear that inspectors expected a substantial number of the runaways to live in such conditions, which points to at least a few hundred. The inspector remarked that labourers often came to the labour inspectorate to complain about unpaid wages, and that he advised the *forros* identified as their employers to withhold such wages, suggesting they deposit them with the administration to avoid giving labourers another incentive to run away. According to Barros, it was useful to be rather generous to both the illegal “native” employers and the runaway workers; he explained that sometimes he even directed workers to the former, and claimed that “the need to create an atmosphere that does not entirely upset the labourers, obliges me to allow for certain flexibility that at first regard might seem worthy of criticism”.⁷³ In that way, the

70. Alexander Keese, “Forced Labour in the ‘Gorgulho Years’: Understanding Reform and Repression in Rural São Tomé e Príncipe, 1945–1953”, *Itinerario*, 38:1 (2014), pp. 103–124, 116.

71. AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Afonso de Barros, Acting Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Natives, to Ricardo Vaz Monteiro (no. 6), 31 March 1936, p. 11.

72. Eyzaguirre, “Small Farmers and Estates in São Tomé”, pp. 193–194.

73. AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Afonso de Barros to Ricardo Vaz Monteiro (no. 6), 31 March 1936, pp. 12–13.

inspector believed, the runaways at least continued to contribute to the island's agricultural economy, although in a "very immoral way".⁷⁴

What was initially a trickle quickly became a stream. By 1936, large numbers of runaway workers approached certain "native employers", provoking panic on more than one plantation, where managers now hastily sought help from the inspectorate. Even so, Barros was reluctant to react. He claimed that ultimately the island's agriculture profited from the flight movement, and moreover that its appeal was obvious "because of the tendency that I identified in a great number of labourers [who] tend towards this labour regime, which is far away from the regime of military style camps that is followed to the current day in São Tomé".⁷⁵

The administrator of the Rio do Ouro plantation, one of the biggest agricultural firms, was among those complaining about the considerable number of runaways. Trying to find out the reasons, with the help of the police he managed to organize a search of the houses of several *forros*. However, on that occasion only a few runaways were found and arrested, which demonstrated the limits of clandestine *forro* recruitment of runaways. The police received information that fugitive workers escaped from Rio do Ouro and from Diogo Vaz had left their shelter with *forros* and had been recruited by the Novo Brazil plantation, but that rumour cannot be corroborated by currently available sources.⁷⁶ What we can find is evidence of runaways' progression, showing that a number of them switched between *forro* employers and plantations managed by individuals who had no scruples in enticing workers away from their competitors. A good example of that is the account of eighteen-year-old *tonga* worker António from the Nova Olinda plantation, who fled in search of another employer. He worked at the commercial house of Elias Lopes Rodrigues, then went to the Diogo Nunes plantation after contacting its administrator. After making an error in his plantation work, he ran away to the city, sleeping and eating in the houses of various *forros* of the urban elite who were interested in employing him. He was ultimately recruited by a *forro* named Torres, who worked at the town hall. However, a guard from the Angolares plantation found António strolling in the street in his free time and, considering him suspicious, arrested him and brought him to the labour inspectorate, where António was confirmed as indeed a multiple runaway.⁷⁷ A considerable number of the "vagrants" who came into the city

74. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

75. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

76. AHSTP, CGSI, 207 (cota 3.22.4.25), Administrator of Sociedade Agrícola Valle Flor Lda, in Rio do Ouro, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Natives (without number), 12 August 1932, pp. 1–2.

77. AHSTP, CGSI, 965 (cota 3.16.5.11), José de Vasconcelos e Sá Guerreiro Nuno, Scribe, Inspectorate-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers, *Auto de Declarações – Queixoso ou participante a Curadoria dos Serviçais e Colonos – Arguido Joaquim Lopes Rodrigues, Administrador da Roça Diogo Nunes*. (without number), 22 March 1937, pp. 1–2.

and occasionally worked for *forros* were young women runaways from plantations. The labour inspectorate referred to this phenomenon in the case of the *tonga* Mariana, assigned to Guegue plantation where some of her family lived, but who fled after only two days and reappeared in town.⁷⁸ Of this complex group of female runaways (which for the 1930s would need more research), a number of individuals also worked as intermediaries to sell stolen cocoa in São Tomé city, as was reported by the administrator of the Quinta das Palmeiras plantation about Angolan worker Monomuenho.⁷⁹

The phenomenon of runaways blending into “native” or *forro* communities has a difficult source base, and the fact that our most important document is a long colonial report with certain biases is less than ideal. Even so, the evidence clearly shows that these situations appeared much more frequently than has been identified in earlier research. In the 1930s, this was a risky but ultimately feasible strategy – runaways lived in constant fear of being caught by police anti-vagrancy operations. However, for many the opportunities were clearly too great to be ignored.

RENEGOTIATING INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

Some runaway workers were simply attempting to reach the labour inspectorate to hand in a complaint about conditions on their plantations. Poor food was one notorious such motive. When Angolan workers Bié and Magalhães and Mozambican worker Uaseria fled from the São Nicolau plantation, they presented themselves to the inspectorate to complain about the European acting administrator, João Graça. It seems he finished up assaulting them, although the truth of the story is elusive, the evidence contradictory.⁸⁰ We have already mentioned the Água-Izé plantation in the 1930s as a particularly problematic place, with extraordinary numbers of runaways. Many workers escaped from there and tried to approach the labour inspectorate.⁸¹ In May

78. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Onório Pinheiro Neto, Administrator of Guegue Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 23 May 1934.

79. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Quinta das Palmeiras Plantation to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 20 April 1934.

80. AHSTP, CGSI, 965 (cota 3.16.5.11), José de Vasconcelos e Sá Guerreiro Nuno, *Autos de transgressão do art.º 346 do C.T.I. – Queixoso ou participante Os serviços da Roça São Nicolau de nomes Bié, angolano, Magalhães, angolano, e Uaseria, moçambicano – Arguido João Graça, europeu, encarregado da Roça São Nicolau. – Auto de inquirição de Testemunhas* (without number), 3 September 1937, pp. 7–8.

81. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Francisco Bopadech, Administrator of Castello Dependency, to Administrator of Água-Izé Plantation (without number), 11 May 1934, p. 1.

1934 alone two bands of fugitives approached the inspector to complain about harsh treatment at Água-Izé.⁸²

Such episodes are representative of numerous flights of runaways who hoped that problems with plantation life could be remedied. However, the inspectorate's intervention frequently only aggravated the situation, provoking further escapes and eventually creating a chain reaction. As Inspector-General Afonso Barros claimed in 1935, the rural police increasingly captured runaway workers, who claimed they had fled after returning from the inspectorate, where they had successfully lodged a complaint or been punished. The captured and returned runaways were then severely castigated after their return, with extra duties and corporal punishment. Such measures, which in theory were strictly prohibited, represented an enormous problem because they further increased the trend towards flight.⁸³

The strategy of a number of the refugees was to try to normalize their situation afterwards, so as to return to service elsewhere. A worker named Chinaingire escaped from penal labour on the road to Tráz-os-Montes. He proceeded to the labour inspectorate in São Tomé and after convincing the inspector that he had come from Monte Mário received a new worker's pass (*guia*) in the name of Mendi, as which he was accepted at Monte Mário.⁸⁴

However, many workers fled in order to involve the inspectorate, whether directly or indirectly, in addressing the even more important matter of the remoteness – in spite of the law – of their prospects of repatriation. We have already mentioned the importance of that question for workers' attitudes, so it is no surprise that for individuals who were willing to take the risk, a worthwhile strategy was to run away and then after eventual capture to protest against the irregularity of their conditions. Indeed, it appears in the case of Angolan workers Quissange, Sebastião, and Ribeiro, who fled from the Nova Ceylão plantation in July 1931, were caught and sent to the Milagrosa plantation, ran away again, and after pointing out that their right to repatriation had been disrespected, announced that they would not work anymore.⁸⁵ In several individual cases the experience was even more frustrating and extreme. Angolan worker Francisco José of the Santa Margarida plantation had arrived in the archipelago in December 1927, with a three-year contract. When he learned in February 1930 that he had no prospect of repatriation at

82. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Água-Izé Plantation to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 11 May 1934.

83. AHSTP, CGSI, 140 (cota 3.3.3.7), Afonso de Barros to Ricardo Vaz Monteiro (no. 6), 31 March 1936, p. 25.

84. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Pedro Santa Martha, Deputy Manager of Tráz-os-Montes, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 10 February 1934.

85. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (Cota 3.27.2.24), António Lanza Pinheira, Administrator of Companhia das Roças Plateau e Milagrosa, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 17 August 1931.

the end of that year, he escaped and installed himself in the city only to be caught in May 1930 during a raid in São Tomé City. He was sent back to the plantation but managed to get away yet again after only five days; he was once more arrested but on that occasion escaped during the journey back to the plantation. The message was clear: Francisco José would no longer stay in any plantation work whatsoever if his repatriation rights continued to be disrespected.⁸⁶

Aimé Palanque, administrator of the Santa Catarina plantation, described what he said was the dilemma in that type of worker flight. He discussed the case of workers António Francisco, Muriata, and António who had been deposited on Santa Catarina when their previous plantation, Santa Adelaide, went bankrupt. The three had convinced some of the other labourers, such as Capitão-Mor, Camosso, Francisco Miguel, Filipe Augusto Martins, Roberto, Nhama, Francisco Joaquim, and Issacacumba, to join their runaway community. António claimed they would no longer work but would simply go into hiding to await repatriation. According to Palanque, other Angolan workers “with their specific mentality” in turn reasoned that successful flight could be expected to lead to repatriation. Unfortunately for them, in order to maintain discipline the administrator asked the labour inspectorate to send the escaped workers back as a clear sign of reprisal and to repatriate only those who showed good behaviour.⁸⁷

In early 1931, the Jou plantation was another place from which a substantial band escaped. Their motivation was that the administrator had sent three workers for repatriation, prompting various other labourers to decide that flight was therefore a worthwhile stratagem to apply pressure for their own repatriation. The administrator’s attempts to negotiate with individuals came to nothing. Although many workers insisted their motives were genuine, such motives were always complex and varied. Within a band of runaways some might have wanted to get to the city to buy spirits for distribution back on the plantation. Workers like Melondo, Canda, Capapelo, and the apparent leader Mateus were identified as principal individuals involved in such activities. During a moment of relief, the administrator hoped that this meant that most fugitives had more mundane motives for escaping, but he was disappointed when, after a cohort of Mozambicans were repatriated, another group promptly escaped!⁸⁸

86. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (Cota 3.27.2.24), Gilberto Simões, Administrator of Santa Margarida Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 19 August 1931.

87. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.27.2.24), Aimé Palanque, Administrator of Companhia Terras de Santa Catarina, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 12 August 1931, pp. 1–2.

88. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.27.2.24), Manuel da Oeste Pinheiro, Administrator of Jou Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 11 February 1931, pp. 1–2.

Of the runaway groups from the various origins, Cape Verdeans, although still a relatively small minority of plantation workers, had a particular reputation for absconding in the hope of triggering their repatriation, and the administrators of the Nova Brazil plantation were worried their Cape Verdean workers would act true to form. In 1932 seven of them managed to run away, to live as “vagrants” in the city for seven months until in the end they were indeed repatriated. Their story was told and retold among the other forty-six Cape Verdean workers on the plantation who threatened to use the same tactics. The administrators’ fears led the manager to insist that the labour inspectorate act against vagrancy and resistance – although without much success, as the inspector had no great interest in the case.⁸⁹

Alongside views on repatriation, the second form of renegotiation was to try to improve local material and working conditions. If workers could not avoid a longer stay in São Tomé e Príncipe, or even their permanent settlement, they could at least try to obtain better conditions. A typical strategy for runaways was to turn up at plantations offering a better environment that were known to take in such individuals. In March 1934, the Angolan workers Manito, Fuluma, and Quinhamo appeared at the Porto Alegre plantation, where managers were known for accepting escaped workers.⁹⁰ Claiming to have come from Água-Izé, the plantation with probably the worst conditions in the period, the Angolans asked for work.⁹¹ Administrators like that of Santa Catarina repeatedly protested against managers at Porto Alegre and certain other plantations for their connivance with runaways, but without much success.⁹² There were, however, other administrators with whom escaped workers negotiated, such as at the Vila Graciosa plantation, which refused to accept workers. The administrator at Vila Graciosa in fact feared renewed conflicts with his colleague from the Monte Macaco plantation, with whom the relationship was already strained.⁹³

In certain specific cases, such as that of the Mozambican labourer António from the Dona Augusta plantation, the inspectorate sympathized with and supported workers’ requests. That worker had run away to consult the labour inspectorate about an authorization to change plantations. António had fled from Dona Augusta because he had been sent to work as a fisherman, even

89. AHSTP, CGSI, 207 (cota 3.22.4.25), José Curado, Administrator of Novo Brazil Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 9 February 1932.

90. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.19.1.14), Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers, *Informação ao Governador* (without number), 12 September 1934.

91. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.17.5.8), Administrator of Porto Alegre Plantation, for R. Jonglas, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 14 March 1934.

92. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.19.1.14), Employee of José Pimenta Limitada Company, merchants and agents, who represent Porto Alegre Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), without date.

93. AHSTP, CGSI, 207 (cota 3.22.4.25), Casimiro Monteiro Santos, Administrator of Vila Graciosa Plantation, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 8 July 1932.

though he lacked any skills for that job. The labour inspector was impressed that the runaway had a contract dating back to 1914, and that he said he would be content to stay on the island; he praised António's attitude, commenting that fishing was "lazy man's work".⁹⁴ In António's case, therefore, the inspectorate allowed his claim.

In some cases, workers who, instead of being repatriated, were forced to renew contracts after three or five years tried to outwit the system. In February 1934, the managers at the Santa Catarina and Monte Café plantations armed the workers to catch a group of runaway labourers who, after being forced to accept renewed contracts, had received their bonus at the labour inspectorate and had then fled. The runaways were suspected of seeking work at other plantations.⁹⁵ An even more ingenious stratagem was adopted by workers who ran away and then tried to convince the labour inspectorate that they had completed their contracts and wished to settle permanently. A number of such workers indeed had quite long plantation histories, an example of which can be found in a petition by an Angolan worker named João Franco Ferreira. Living in Bom-Bom in the Graça subdivision, Ferreira had some time ago managed to acquire a strip of land and now claimed he wished to fix his residence there officially and to withdraw his bonus deposit paid by Água-Izé. Ferreira had paid his native tax and worked as acting lance-constable of the rural police of Caixão Grande Division. However, in this petitioner's case the labour inspector noticed that he was in fact a runaway from Água-Izé and refused his claim.⁹⁶ It is only fair to say that of those we learn about, more are failed attempts at strategies of that type, but it is certainly plausible that in the 1930s a number of workers did manage to make them work. It is therefore fair to assume that as a result a probably greater number at least managed to negotiate improvements to their plantation lives, even if most failed in their ultimate aim of achieving repatriation. Whatever the outcome, running away was clearly an important precondition for negotiation.

FLIGHT FROM COERCED PLANTATION LABOUR: A GLOBAL HISTORICAL PHENOMENON?

The strategies and experiences of runaways from plantations in São Tomé e Príncipe in the 1930s can be understood as potentially relevant to three

94. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.19.1.14), Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers to Administrator of Água Izé (without number), 18 January 1934.

95. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.22.3.23), Lima e Gama to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers (without number), 23 February 1934.

96. AHSTP, CGSI, 193 (cota 3.19.1.14), Petition of João Franco Ferreira, to Inspector-General for Plantation Workers and Settlers, signed by the requester Marco de Espírito Santo (without number), 19 June 1934.

contexts of coerced labour in global history. Comparison with Atlantic slavery might at first glance seem far-fetched, but there are important parallels with plantation situations during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the Caribbean especially. That is probably less true for maroon-style experiences, which were a feature of American slavery systems.⁹⁷ Before 1910, maroon communities were still common in São Tomé e Príncipe, with attacks carried out against planters “as they had done for centuries in the islands”, to quote Clarence-Smith.⁹⁸ As we have pointed out here, while such long-lasting and stable runaway communities sometimes remained successful into and during the 1930s, especially when well-connected with *forro* settlements and enjoying support from other plantations, they were far less typical between the wars.

On the contrary, experiences of flight in São Tomé e Príncipe in the 1930s offer an interesting and illuminating connection to the reactions of slaves in the Caribbean, as recently pointed out by Simon Newman,⁹⁹ for like runaway slaves in the Caribbean many runaway plantation labourers on the archipelago “hid in plain sight” relatively close to their original plantations or on neighbouring properties. In both cases, they made use of support networks some of which included freed/non-indentured populations. Regarding the Caribbean before the abolition of slavery, Hilary Beckles has written of an “ecosystem of running” – and our case shows that a similar “ecosystem” existed in later cases of plantation labour that was based on coerced or semi-coerced contract labour.¹⁰⁰ Runaways took part in local commerce and the labour market, and while the range of production by labourers in the São Tomean case might have been restricted to palm wine and foodstuffs, and the range of possible alternative employers for runaways more limited, the parallels with examples from Caribbean slavery are striking.¹⁰¹ Especially in terms of runaways staying in the region, finding temporary work and for a time taking part in local commerce, other examples from eighteenth-century North America or nineteenth-century Brazil also constitute a worthwhile comparison.¹⁰² That parts of such an “ecosystem” of

97. Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Kingston, 2006).

98. Clarence-Smith, “Hidden Costs”, p. 165; for the early modern experience, see Arlindo Manuel Caldeira, “Rebelião e outras formas de resistência à escravatura na ilha de São Tomé (sécs. XVI–XVIII)”, *Africana Studia*, 7 (2004), pp. 101–136.

99. Simon P. Newman, “Breaking Free: Digital History and Escaping from Slavery”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 76:1 (2019), pp. 33–40.

100. Hilary McD Beckles, “Running in Jamaica: A Slavery Ecosystem”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 76:1 (2019), pp. 9–14.

101. Shauna J. Sweeney, “Market Marronage: Fugitive Women and the Internal Marketing System in Jamaica, 1781–1834”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 76:2 (2019), pp. 197–222, 212–214.

102. Ian Read and Kari Zimmerman, “Freedom for Too Few: Slave Runaways in the Brazilian Empire”, *Journal of Social History*, 48:2 (2014), pp. 404–426, 410–411.

running and hiding could also be urban is neatly demonstrated in Mary Niall Mitchell's study of antebellum New Orleans.¹⁰³

However, São Tomean contract labourers were not slaves, but shared the experiences of indentured labour in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in regions as diverse as Suriname, Trinidad and Cuba on the American side, the Spanish-ruled plantation island of Fernando Pó in sub-Saharan Africa, or Mauritius and Fiji in the Indian and Pacific oceans.¹⁰⁴ For most of those locations, we know less about flight – which was probably more difficult anyway because many of the labourers came from South, Southeast, and East Asia and would naturally have found it more difficult to “hide in plain sight”. Therefore, our evidence for runaway experiences is particularly rich whenever the similar physical appearance of workers made runaways less obvious, such as with Indian coolies on the tea plantations of Assam.¹⁰⁵ However, in his most poignant chapter on “vagrancy” in Mauritius, Richard B. Allen points out the importance to Indian contract labour on the island of absenteeism, desertion, and hiding. Allen equally suggests the importance of magistrates, whose role was analogous to that of the labour inspectorate in São Tomé e Príncipe.¹⁰⁶ Benjamin N. Narváez's study on Chinese contract labourers in Cuba and Peru demonstrates how important the phenomenon of runaways remained in those cases, although for Narváez the perspective of administrative pursuit prevails.¹⁰⁷ Lisa Yun points to the importance of depositions by coolies in Cuba and of their denunciation of abuses, although she does not systematize practices of flight.¹⁰⁸ Finally, in the work of Lomarsh Roopnarine – scholar of Indian indentured labour in the Caribbean – we see references to runaways as a more marginal phenomenon. They were no longer able to create maroon communities, and Roopnarine's studies seem to show less interest in individual

103. Mary Niall Mitchell, “Lurking but Working: City Maroons in Antebellum New Orleans”, in Rediker *et al.*, *A Global History of Runaways*, pp. 199–215, 208–209.

104. Richard B. Allen, “Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism and the Global Origins of the Post-Emancipation Indentured Labor System”, *Slavery & Abolition*, 35:2 (2014), pp. 328–348; Gopalan Balachandran, “Making Coolies, (Un)making Workers: ‘Globalizing’ Labour in the Late-19th and Early-20th Centuries”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 24:3 (2011), pp. 266–296.

105. Nitin Varma, *Coolies of Capitalism: Assam Tea and the Making of Coolie Labour* (Berlin, 2017), pp. 57–70.

106. Richard B. Allen, “Vagrancy in Mauritius and the Nineteenth-Century Colonial Plantation World”, in A.L. Beier and Paul Ocobock (eds), *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective* (Athens, OH, 2008), pp. 146–147 (on numbers of runaways), 150 (on magistrates).

107. Benjamin N. Narváez, “Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State: Cuba, Peru, and the United States during the Mid Nineteenth Century”, *The Americas*, 76:1 (2019), pp. 5–40, 22–27.

108. Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008), pp. 143–182.

absenteeism.¹⁰⁹ The late case of flight from plantations in São Tomé e Príncipe is, therefore, an important demonstration that “ecosystems of running” remained highly relevant in the world of indentured plantation labour after the end of slavery.

Finally, runaway workers in São Tomé e Príncipe might be compared to the plentiful experiences of desertion and flight on the colonial African mainland. These included public forced labour but also coerced recruitment for contracts with private companies, as described by Clarence-Smith and Jeremy Ball for Angola, and by Zachary Kagan Guthrie for Mozambique.¹¹⁰ It has even been argued that the creation of runaway communities in remote areas was much more common at least in Central Africa than it appears from mainstream studies.¹¹¹ However, in those cases the “ecosystem of running” was very different, relying on the existence of extensive remote regions that were not under sustained colonial control. The strategies of hiding and blending in, the particular mixture of absenteeism and long-term flight experiences, and the attempt at mobilizing a labour inspectorate were very different in São Tomé e Príncipe from what was possible in other parts of Africa. In that regard, running away from the São Tomé plantations during the interwar period follows a long history of wider, global coerced plantation labour experience, and the São Tomean case therefore offers important insights into individuals’ options for that particular plantation complex.

CONCLUSION

In a recent publication, Corey Ross has pointed to the “plantation paradigm” as practices in tropical plantation agriculture which between the 1870s and World War II, he says, constituted an experience of environmental history and of circulation of knowledge about agricultural practices.¹¹² We consider here that while the interesting articles by Macedo and Kiesow have indeed

109. Lomarsh Roopnarine, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation, 1838–1920* (Kingston, 2007), p. 51; *idem*, “Indo-Caribbean Migration: From Periphery to Core”, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 49:3 (2003), pp. 30–60, 34.

110. William Gervase Clarence-Smith, “Runaway Slaves and Social Bandits in Southern Angola, 1875–1913”, in Gad Heuman (ed.), *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, Resistance and Marronage in Africa and the New World* (London, 1986), pp. 23–33, 26–27; Jeremy Ball, *Angola’s Colossal Lie: Forced Labor on a Sugar Plantation, 1913–1977* (Leiden, 2015), p. 105; Zachary Kagan Guthrie, *Bound for Work: Labor, Mobility, and Colonial Rule in Central Mozambique, 1940–1965* (Charlottesville, VA, 2018).

111. Alexander Keese, “Colonialism and Fugitive Communities in West Central Africa, 1920–1955: Seeking Parallels with Maroon Societies”, in Kadya Tall, Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, and Michel Cahen (eds), *Collective Mobilisations in Africa / Mobilisations collectives en Afrique: Enough is Enough! / Ça suffit!* (Leiden, 2015), pp. 143–163.

112. Corey Ross, “The Plantation Paradigm: Colonial Agronomy, African Farmers, and the Global Cocoa Boom, 1870s–1940s”, *Journal of Global History*, 9:1 (2014), pp. 49–71.

offered new and important insights into methods of organization and environmental matters concerning São Tomé e Príncipe that match Ross's concerns, the matter of labour and the experiences of labourers remain at least equally fundamental. Our article shows that the reactions of plantation workers, notably in terms of becoming runaways, are an important element of a global history.

Coercive mechanisms, violence, and breaches of contractual rights – such as repatriation as described in our case study – remained part of the everyday life of workers well into the 1930s, and their running away was an important response. We have demonstrated that it is possible to analyse and categorize both the more spontaneous reactions and strategic motives of workers that led them to flee. There emerge from that analysis clear mid-term strategies, such as staying close to plantations, banding together, attempting to blend into outside communities, or trying to use the labour inspectorate to renegotiate individual situations. These possibilities led to an “ecosystem of running” in the term so aptly coined by Beckles as applying to Caribbean slavery up to the first decades of the nineteenth century.

The recent debate about and praise for Simon Newman's reinterpretation of runaways as part of the experience of plantation slavery in the Americas shows the importance of such strategies and behaviour in the context of slavery. We hold that while São Tomean contract labour in the 1930s was of course different from the forms and practices of plantation slavery into the first – and sometimes the second – half of the nineteenth century, the similarities in strategies are no coincidence. The study of flight in slave-based plantation systems in the Americas might have its limits in the nature of the documentation available to scholars, but it has received a recent boost. It has in fact been shown that runaways were a lasting phenomenon during the process of transformation from plantation slavery to other forms of coerced or semi-coerced labour employed in the worldwide system of plantations.

Recent studies have improved analytical coverage of indentured labour on post-slavery plantations, from which readers may now learn much more about the actual experience of the labourers themselves. However, much of the debate on runaways still concentrates on the repressive mechanisms employed by colonial administrators, notably through the use of vagrancy legislation. At the same time, recent studies have also insisted on new ways of identifying scandals, and have pointed to a trend of strengthening local public control of labour, in ambivalent forms but which potentially included protection of workers against violence. The latter trend reached even the most repressive colonial regimes, such as in São Tomé e Príncipe, where, as we have demonstrated for the 1930s, workers fled for reasons that included trying to renegotiate their situations with the inspectors.

Our analysis makes a plausible case for the overwhelming importance of runaways in nineteenth and twentieth-century plantation societies dominated by indentured labour. We have argued here that while in the first four decades

of the twentieth century, and certainly in the 1930s, São Tomé e Príncipe might have been a more repressive context than most other plantation zones with a similar labour force, it is, nevertheless, an ideal starting point for a new global history of runaways in that context. The effort to identify sources on runaways in other plantation zones that relied on forced labour offers important insights into strategies, experiences, and lived decisions for the particular case of São Tomé e Príncipe, and it is likely to be successful regarding other regions in the worldwide plantation system.

During the war years between 1939 and 1945, abuses at São Tomé e Príncipe became extreme. The international context allowed the Portuguese colonial administration to forget their restraints, and labour inspectors found themselves with less room for manoeuvre – which meant that they could do less to assist runaways. Plantation managers in fact enjoyed one last period of impunity such as in our view was unmatched anywhere in the plantation world. One would still need to see how the changes affected the “art” of strategically running away. As conditions for plantation workers generally improved from 1945 onwards, it is likely that the phenomenon of flight in São Tomé e Príncipe slowly disappeared, bringing that colonial archipelago back into the mainstream of labour practices on plantations.