From Home to the Street: Children’s Street-Ward Migration in Cape Verde

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Introduction: Alex’s Puppy

Alex\(^1\) is eleven years old and comes from Porto Novo, the main village on Santo Antão, an island in the Cape Verde archipelago. His childish face

\(^1\) Most of the names of the children and young men I have been working with have been changed in this text. I have also omitted the names of the social workers and psychologists I interviewed in NGOs and outreach facilities. In a few cases though, the real names of street boys have been maintained, as I am sure that they would very much appreciate being represented and their story witnessed. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at “The Politics of Youth Mobilisation” workshop, Copenhagen, February 2008, organized by the Danish Institute for International Studies, at the “Children on the Move in the Developing World” workshop, May 2008, organized by the Development Research Centre at the University of Sussex and at the “African Children in Focus” conference, Leiden, September 2008, organized by the Netherlands African Studies Association. I would like to thank Nicolas Argenti, Dorte Thorsen, Ann Whitehead, Sam Punch, Jens Aagaard Hansen and Cecilie Lanken for their comments on these occasions, as well as Catrien Notermans for reviewing an earlier version of this chapter. Funding for research in Cape Verde has been provided by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia of the Portuguese Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Ensino Superior.
and short stature make him look much younger than he claims to be. He argues that he was living on the streets in Porto Novo and came to Mindelo because “there is more movement, more people, more tourists, more money.” His father, of whom he has no memory, emigrated to Spain when he was just a baby. Alex has three older brothers and one younger one; his mother is disabled.

I met Alex for the first time on a Saturday night in Praça Nova, the main work-place for young street people in downtown Mindelo. He was wandering with an older boy, asking passers-by for spare change. He ran away one week earlier, arriving in São Vicente as a stowaway on a ship, the Ribeira de Paul. He told me that he now slept on the street. After our first meeting, I tried to get institutions and NGOs involved in Alex’s case, attempting to contact his family and having him somehow returned home. He looked naïve and much younger than the other kids I knew.

A few days later, as I strolled through Praça Nova, looking for Alex, I met a group of children, led by Redy, a vivacious, exuberant kid I had known for some time. Redy used to live with his family but now makes money and finds extra food on the street. I explained that I was trying to get Alex back to his mother in Porto Novo. Defiantly, and almost angrily, Redy asked me, “Why the hell do you want to send him back to Santo Antão if he doesn’t want to go? He has already run away from there five times! If you take him back, he will just run away again!” All the boys confirmed that it was not the first time he had run away. “He comes here to São Vicente, and then goes back, but he keeps running away from home!” they told me.

When I finally found Alex, I asked him what he really wanted to do. “I don’t want to go back to Porto Novo,” he told me with a smile. “I want to stay here, on the street.” Later that night, when I was talking about Alex’s case with Xana, a young prostitute, she remarked: “At times it is better to stay on the street than with your family.” I later went back to Praça Nova and observed Alex playing with some younger street children, amid a crowd of strolling people, wondering about the right thing to do. Should I bring him back to his household (where apparently nobody cared about him and conditions were dire), ask ICCA (the Cape Verdean Child and Adolescent Protection Institute) to intervene, starting a process that could bring Alex to a street-child facility