

Adalberto M. Lourenco  
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### THE AZORES - NINE ISLANDS, ONE PEOPLE, ONE CULTURE

The archipelago of the Azores is composed of nine volcanic islands situated in the Atlantic North. Separated from Europe by almost a thousand miles and from North America by sixteen hundred, the Azores have a surface of about nine hundred square miles altogether and a population of three hundred thousand inhabitants.

When discovered by the Portuguese navigators in 1427, these nine islands were almost desert, with no fauna and very scarce flora. As at that time the Portuguese government was very occupied with the research of the North African coast and its consequent need of men to work in land and in the sea, only a year after the discovery, the Azorean islands started to be populated and explored. In fact, they were not found all at the same time. The period of intermission between the discovery of some of them was over a year. From that fact comes the origin of the names of some of the islands such as Terceira ( the Third ) which is called so because it was the third one to be discovered and populated.

The names of the other islands all have its origin in some specific characteristic or curious facts that the courageous pilgrims found interesting. For instance, the Pico ( Mountain ) island was called so because of its high volcanic cone that arises 7,615 feet above the sea. Another example is Flores ( Flowers ) that was named so because of the luxuriant pastures covered with all kinds of flowers. Even the partitions between the properties are

made with flowers called "hortensias" (hydrangeas). Graciosa, another island, was named upon its elegance and graciousness among the other islands. In fact, the adjective "graciosa" means gracious, elegant. Others were named upon whatever the name of the ship that first arrived there, like S. Miguel, Santa Maria and S. Jorge.

The Azores islands are attractive not only for their natural beauty, but also for its temperate climate. As a matter of fact, the North Atlantic Current, a branch of the warm Gulf Stream, ensures a climate without extremes of heat or cold. Moreover, the sea surrounding all the islands, works as a thermostat that keeps the temperature always in a fair average. However, not everything is just wonderful about the Azorean ecology, geography and climate. During the winter, humidity sometimes reaches the extreme 100%, which has a very uncomfortable influence on the people, not only because it is harmful for the health but, also because it affects and sometimes ruins some delicate machines like television sets, radios and other fancy electronic instruments. On the other hand, a peaceful, healthy summer can suddenly be disturbed by a series of earth quakes that often leave a few families without a home and, therefore, forced to emigrate or else to live with friends or relatives until the situation is resolved.

Such situation, climatic and ecological environment, has, of course, a very strong influence on the personality, character, ways of living and the general behavior of the people. Before that, however, such factors determine the type of social structure, means

of subsistence, type of social interaction and, consequently, culture as a whole.

The ethnic group to which the Azorean belong is doubtless the ~~hispanic~~ latin type for the islands were mostly populated by the Portuguese, although some of the pilgrims came from Flandres and Great Britain. From that comes the difference of accents in the Portuguese language from one island to the other. S. Miguel is the most characteristic one because it was the island that was mostly inhabited by the explorers from Flandres, as historians say. A curious fact that in a certain way proves that is the facility that the people from this island have in learning the French language, particularly the pronunciation.

The economy of the Azores is dependent on its organization of society and means of production and subsistence. Considering the fact that it is a small piece of land divided into nine smaller pieces separated by an unpredictable and often rough sea, anyone can easily imagine the primitive character of industrialization and therefore the slow pace of progress and development existent in the Azores. Supported basically by the products of its somewhat rich soil and abundant fish of the Atlantic, the Azorean productivity is rather lower than the necessity. Most of the essential goods, including some related to the nourishment of the people, come from the main land, Portugal, which not always makes the necessary efforts to deliver such products in satisfactory time and amount, either on

account of some real difficulties of communication or for a certain disinterestedness of the central government. Such a problem supposedly gave birth to a latent desire of autonomy and, in some bold minds, of total independence from Portugal. I shall return to this point with more detail later in this paper.

Continuing the analysis of the Azorean economic and financial possibilities, I would like to call attention to the fact that, although it may seem poor, primitive and many years retarded from progress, that does not mean that there are not any rich sources of subsistence at all. Indeed there are many. The cause of such retardment in the economy and unbalance in the finances is, above all, an enormous lack of interest and, therefore, disuse of the appropriate means of exploration of the natural resources existing in these Atlantic islands. In fact, the usage of extremely old-fashioned tools in agriculture, for example, reduces to less than a half the quantity of production that the fertile soil would be able to produce with modern and advanced machinery. The internal-combustion engine is still in its beginning and very slowly replacing the horse and oxcart. The ground, divided in very small properties does not allow the use of heavy machinery such as big trucks for transportation or any other thing of the sort. Difficulties of communication between the islands and especially with the continent, give occasion to delays on the importation of seeds, fertilizers and other important materials, and accumulation of the products for exportation.

Nevertheless, even facing all these and other problems, the islanders are able to achieve "the bread for each day", and there is hardly any symptom of misery, hunger or poverty. And, whenever someone is really in need, there is always a "good and generous heart" ready to share some corn, potatoes, beans or fish and, in that way, "little becomes enough" for two or more. That is indeed a characteristic of the Azorean society: an incredible natural socialization characterized by a very strong sense of the other, that is, people do not feel comfortable having much while there are others in starvation. Of course, there are exceptions but, as a rule, the simple, rural and humble people are very much altruistic.

Besides agricultural and pastoral activities, there are some islands, or zones of islands, turned to another type of occupation: fishery and exploration of the rich Atlantic sea. That is the very particular case of Pico where many men spend most of their lives in permanent duel with the impetus of the waves, the wildness of the winds and the ferocity of the whales. As a matter of fact it is known that the mid-Atlantic archipelago, namely Pico island, is one of the few places on earth from which men still go forth in small boats with hand harpoons to challenge the greatest creatures of the seas. This is indeed the quite old-fashioned method still used to chase the dangerous sperm whales in the Atlantic. Some people may not believe it but it is still the support of one of the small industries existing in the Azores. The captured whales are then towed to a factory where its blubber will be rendered

into oil, to be sold abroad as a base for margarine and cosmetics, and the remainder ground into meal for use as fertilizer and in livestock feed. Each year Azorean whalers harvest from one to two hundred whales, which is a very small amount considering the abundance of such animals existing in the Azorean seas. The same problem affects also other types of exploration of the sea such as fishery of tuna fish, "chicharro" (large type of horse-mackerel fish) which is one of the basic means of nutrition of the poor, and other rich products of the Atlantic sea like lobsters, crabs and others.

Knowing the poor means of exploration of such richness by the Azorean, other countries often took advantage of that and, particularly Spain and even Russia, sent large fleets to the Atlantic to catch the abundant tuna fish. The Azorean islanders, however, soon became aware of the tremendous injustice that was victimizing them and requested from the Portuguese government the application of the law of the two hundred miles, which claims that the two hundred miles of sea surrounding each island belong to its inhabitants and therefore they are the only ones with the right to explore it. Fortunately, the law was put into practice and that has really helped the Azorean economy recently.

Another very important economical resource of the Atlantic islands could be the tourism. In fact, the almost unbelievable beauty of the islands, associated to the mildness and stability of the climate, attract copious crowds of tourists from different

parts of the Globe, particularly from Europe and America. However, the extreme difficulties of communication, the almost total inexistence of hotels and other structures to support the development of so much profitable industry allied to an incredible absence of propaganda about the islands, make tourism almost impossible. At least, it is not even a small percentage of what it could actually be.

Evidently all these economical problems and difficulties affect the Azorean's daily life in all its aspects. The limitation that they feel by living in a small piece of land, distant and isolated from the rest of <sup>the</sup> world, leads to a certain melancholy, insecurity and abandonment. Fortunately, they have found some means of calling the other people's attention to the fact that they are human beings too and that they have much to give and exchange with the others, if the necessary co-operation is put in effect. One of the facts that have shown to the other nations, especially to the continental Portugal, that the Azorean people have problems and are willing to solve at least some of them, is the constantly increasing "avalanche" of emigrants that every year leave the islands and go to the United States of America, Canada and Brazil, looking for a more pleasant and secure life. But that, most of the time, does not mean that they no longer like their peaceful islands. On the contrary, their bodies leave but their hearts and their souls stay! They will always remember the small whitewashed house where so many happy moments were lived with all the joy and excit-

ment of the whole family gathered together. They will never forget the pleasant smell of the flowers and of the luxuriant grass of the pastures in the spring. They will also remember the peace of the sunset when, after a tiresome day in the fields, they used to get together with their friends and talk for a little while!...

Indeed, there is an awfully radical change in the way of living, when someone leaves a pastoral, quiet and primitive society and goes to an industrial, noisy and extremely advanced one. That fact called "culture shock" is very well known by the almost one million Azoreans living in the United States, where they have the largest colony. As a rule, they are well accepted in the factories and other places where they go looking for jobs because they are hardworking, dedicated, generous and honest almost beyond credibility. A good example of such honesty is that on Corvo, the smallest of the islands, the jail has not been occupied within memory. On any island a visitor or even an inhabitant who happens to forget a wallet or some other important thing in a "cafe" will be chased down the street by someone trying to return it. Lately things have changed a little bit and probably this would not happen now, but there were times when everyone could sleep at night with the doors unlocked and the windows opened with no risk at all.

What is said above gives already an idea of what the Azorean people are like. Living in a pastoral, agricultural and fishing society where the main institution is the family, these people are very sentimental, sensitive to social problems and with their lives

almost thoroughly controlled by the strings of kinship. This, evidently, characterizes the whole movement of society and the way its problems are faced and solved. For instance, the old-aged are not "thrown" in nursing-homes ~~so~~ that they can have a peaceful death without bothering the other members of the family. No! In the Azores the older people are respected as very knowledgeable, experienced and the best counselors about life and its problems. Besides, on account of the close attachment to the family and of the great importance given to the strings of kinship, someone who places a parent in a nursing-home is severely criticized by the society and considered disrespectful, ungrateful and "with no heart". And people immediately apply the correct old saying: "You are a son now, you will be a father later!" That means, the same you are doing to your father(or mother) now, your sons will do to you later.

Another specific characteristic ~~of~~<sup>of</sup> the Azorean society is the domination of the major professions by the men. Women in the Azores are brought up since early childhood with a definite ideal: to get married, to have children, to educate them and to take good care of them and of the man of the family. Thus, women are mostly homemakers except in the cities where they work in the small industries. Also in the field of elementary education they perform an important role for they are more than fifty percent of the school teachers.

The level of education in the Azores until not so long ago was rather low. In fact, to study more than the four obligatory

years was considered luxurious and a privilege of the wealthy people. However, with the installation of television in the islands four years ago, things have changed on this aspect. The contact with more advanced cultures made possible through the TV influenced especially the young people, and the number of students in the high schools has increased very remarkably. Even higher education has started to be sought by many young people, including young women. This is due to the introduction of sections of the Portuguese Universities in different islands, which gave to the Azoreans some more facilities for seeking higher education. This is now considered a very important accomplishment in the advancement of the Azorean life because the existence of technical and scientific resources will doubtless contribute a great deal to the development of the economy and of the whole social ~~progress~~ <sup>PROGRESS.</sup>

Having in mind all the problems, characteristics and possibilities of the Azorean islands, there are two different opinions about what should be the future of the Azores. On one side are those who believe that the resources are more and stronger than the problems and therefore the islanders should ask for their independence from Portugal. On the other side are those who are convinced that the Azores would never be able to survive economically under an independent regime. These are favourable to autonomy but not to total independence.

I personally include myself in the second group, not only

for economical and financial reasons but especially for other, to me more important, issues. In fact, what there<sup>is</sup> to be discussed is not only whether the Azores would be able to "survive" economically or not. We also have to consider the ethnic, racial, cultural and social characteristics of the Azorean people. First of all, I think that in order for a movement of independence to go ahead there has to be radical diversity of culture, race and ethnic origin. That does not happen in the Azores in relation to Portugal. Our ethnic origin is the same<sup>as</sup> that of the Portuguese, our race is the same, then our culture, even though with certain original aspects, is basically the Portuguese and, above all, our nation has always been Portugal. When the islands were discovered there was no one there. The Portuguese inhabited and cultivated them, thus we are by all means Portuguese. Independence is not plausible!

After all, in spite of all the problems, limitations and isolation of these nine Atlantic islands, they are inhabited by a simple, friendly and peaceful people, always striving by pacific means for more justice, well-being and...happiness! And it is no exaggeration to say that, if the Azorean islands are really beautiful for its extraordinary landscapes, they are still more lovely for the wonderful character of its inhabitants!...

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