Connecting Indo-Portuguese worlds. Women as brokers and go-betweens in the Portuguese State of India*

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Non-state actors and cooperation models in Early Modern history

The study of early modern empires usually centres around imperial rivalries, monopolies, warfare strategies and political disputes between European colonisers. The focus on such central power European strategies neglects the active influence of African, Asian, and American agents, societies and civilizations, ignoring local inputs into colonial dynamics. In the case of the Portuguese empire, a number of studies have already gone beyond this perception with regard to Asia, and particularly the Indian Ocean.[1] Classic and well established as much as new historiographical approaches, both European and non-European, have questioned traditional perspectives, giving rise to the concept of informal empires, or rather informal ways of empire building, that highlight all the

* This paper synthetizes ideas developed in greater detail, but not in this overall context, in papers by the same author, such as Polónia 2017, 113-139; Polónia and Capelão 2017, 58-89 and Polónia and Capelão 2018b, 269-295.

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1 See, above all, Subrahmanyam 1990a; Subrahmanyam 1996; Subrahmanyam 1990b; Subrahmanyam 1993; Pearson 1976; Pearson 1998; Boyajian 2008; Polónia 2019, 97-123.

unofficial ways in which the European overseas dominion was built in the First Global Age, the period from 1400 to 1800.

This paper follows this perspective, as well as recent historiographical approaches deriving from theories of cooperation.[2] One must bear in mind that there are different kinds of cooperation. In some situations, cooperation is enforced; in others, cooperation is promoted and encouraged in order to achieve state-oriented goals; there are situations where cooperation results from mechanisms that go beyond the intentions and the aims of the formal empire builders; and finally, there are cases where cross-cultural and cross-imperial cooperation among individuals, who appear to be part of different worlds, goes against the very purposes of the national entities they are supposed to belong to and serve (Polónia 2013, 133-58; Polónia and Capelão 2019, 107-123).

This understanding is the basis for our analysis of women who acted as intermediaries between different worlds in the Portuguese colonial setup. The focus on women as brokers fills a significant gap in colonial studies. Our approach aims at shedding new light on the crucial, but so far ignored, role of women. Literature addressing the role of women in colonial worlds has so far mostly centred upon Atlantic societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Catterall and Campbell 2012; Owens and Mangan 2012). Yet, regarding the East, including the East Coast of Africa, and the Far East, local women as social actors and their role in the emerging social and cultural patterns in colonial territories have remained neglected topics. This is even more obvious for the sixteenth century, the first and most decisive moment for the establishment of inter-cultural relations.[3] This chapter aims to fill this gap by analysing the roles of women who acted as intermediaries between worlds in a context where assimilation and confrontation seemed almost inevitable.

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2 On this, see the rationale of the international and interdisciplinary research project *DynCoopNet*, part of the European Science Foundation's TECT (The Evolution of Cooperation and Trade) programme. For further information, see http://www.dyncoopnet-pt.org/.

3 The Portuguese overseas world is a case in point. The study of the role of women in the Portuguese Overseas Expansion is mostly centred on women in Portuguese maritime communities: Polónia 2000, 153-78; Polónia 2004; Polónia 2007b, 269-86; Polónia 2007a; Polónia 2009, 705-720. On the building of a creole society in the Atlantic Archipelagos, namely in S. Tomé, see Caldeira 1999; Caldeira 2007-2008, 49-72; for Atlantic encounters: Havik 1994, 83-120; Havik 1996, 161-79; Havik 2004; or in their role in Brazil, but here again, centred on elite women and the period from the eighteenth century onwards: Silva 2002.

The colonial world examined here is the Portuguese *Estado da India*.[4] In this vast territory, unified by a web of maritime connections and characterised by diverse models of settlement, the heterogeneity of the roles, profiles and the actions of women varied greatly, as they were determined both by the strategy of the Portuguese settlers and by their status in the local economies, societies and cultures.

Since European expansion and control depended on the knowledge of climate, geography, production and consumption markets, maritime circuits, languages, cultures, trade products and trade hubs, information was the most valuable asset. Women were part of the chain of information and crucial elements of networks in which acquaintance and kinship consolidated patterns of exchange. Those exchanges were not unilateral, and the same women could be equally valuable to their own societies, communities and families by utilizing the power, and influence of the new-comers. They became natural brokers, connecting European and non-European worlds.

In the literature, local and indigenous[5] women within the Portuguese empire are primarily represented as filling the gap created by the lack of white, European women in those territories (Boxer 1988, 115). In the Portuguese case, however, state-driven policies sometimes intentionally promoted inter-marriage with local women as an alternative to the emigration of Portuguese women. Furthermore, the number and status of Portuguese women in overseas settlements varied by territory. The distance to the homeland, political and economic aims, the model of colonisation, climate and health conditions all played a crucial role in the strategies followed and the trends established.

Women in colonial contexts in the East and the Far East

In the East, even though registers – or the lack of them – suggest that a small number of families migrated to India, the crown encouraged marriages with women sent out from the kingdom. Portuguese women were therefore widely

4 "In the 16th century, the State of India did not designate a well-defined geographic space, but rather a conglomeration of territories, establishments, assets, individuals, and interests that were administered, managed, or governed by the Portuguese Crown in the Indian Ocean and neighbouring seas, and in the coastal territories, from the Cape of Good Hope to Japan." Thomaz 1994, 207. [Author's translation].

5 By "autochthone women" we refer to women from local societies with whom the Europeans interacted. It is easiest to identify them as such during the first encounter. From then on, as a more or less intense process of miscegenation occurs, it becomes difficult to ascertain if the women mentioned in the source are still autochthone or already a product of miscegenation and thus representatives of a second and later generation of settlers.

present, especially in Goa and other Eastern urban centres. Forced family migrations, such as for example, the New Christians, also contributed to the flow of women to the East, who became settlers in the new territories, as evidenced by Inquisition records from Goa (Baião 1930).

At the same time, particularly in the East, single women were also important agents of the Portuguese crown's colonisation strategies. This was, for example, the case with the so-called 'orphans of the king,' young women who were placed in various institutions throughout the kingdom, notably the Lisbon *Recolhimento do Castelo* (Castle Refuge), and intended by the crown to be sent to overseas settlements for marriage. However, as Timothy Coates has shown, the number of female orphans who actually ended up going to India was negligible.[6] Those are not, however, the ones we are going to talk about. Their agency is neverthess crucial and it was already the subject of analysis in other publications (Polónia and Capelão 2017, 58-89).

Women became indispensable partners in politics and war in the Portuguese empire. They can be found assuming the roles of local interpreters and messengers in different conflicts; they could perform as political leaders with whom the Portuguese had to negotiate or fight, as it happened with the queens of Coulão (Kollam) and Camorim (Kanyakumari) (Castanheda 1833, 215-16), confronting them at the beginning of their settlement on the Malabar Coast; they could also act as war ambassadors, appointed by the local power holders during wartime (Correa 1864, Livro Quarto, Tomo IV, Parte 1, 81-82).

Local women appear frequently in the sources as intermediaries and negotiators. In the following episode, narrated as happening in Banta after Fernão Mendes Pinto and his companions passed by Melaka, the author of *Peregrinação* comments on women's natural suitability to act as diplomats. Recounting the events that led to the initial negotiations performed by Nhay Pombaya, a widow of nearly sixty years, Pinto explains:

> "And so that you know why this message came from a woman and not from a man, there is to know that it was always a very ancient custom of the Kings of these realms since the very beginnings, to treat the very important things, & requiring peace & harmony by women; & this not only in private messages that were sent to vassals, as it is the case now, but also in public & general business

6 According to Timothy Coates, from 1550 to 1755 only between 615 and 1025 female orphans were actually sent to India (Coates 1998). However, in the 25 years between 1561 and 1585, at least 205 Portuguese women (mostly 'new Christians') are registered in the Goa Inquisition records (cf. Baião 1930).

> that Kings deal with each other by their embassies, & give to this by reason that the female gender, by the mildness of their nature, gave God more kindness, & authority & other parts so they would have more respect than men, because they are dry, & for that reason the less pleasant in the parts they are to be sent."[7]

In addition to their political and diplomatic roles, women were also agents of linguistic, cultural and knowledge transfer. It is therefore not surprising that women frequently appear in the sources as translators, as *línguas*, elements of communication between the different worlds, mastering several languages. Fernão Mendes Pinto acknowledges that this crucial role of women as interpreters pre-dated the arrival of the Portuguese. Arriving for the first time in Japan, he describes how

> "the Nautoquimaa prince of this island of Tanixumaa (Tanegashima) came to our junk accompanied by many merchants, & noblemen … And then, calling one Lequia woman, who was the interpreter, through whom he talked with the China captain, owner of the junk, he asked the Nacodà (Captain) where he met these men and under which condition he brought them with him to our land of Japan." (Pinto 1614, 158v).

Such a pattern is also acknowledged within the scope of the Dutch colonial presence in the East. The first Dutch mission to Cochin-China was accompanied by a Vietnamese woman who spoke excellent Portuguese and Malay and had long resided in Macao. She, along with another elderly woman who had had two Portuguese husbands as well as one Vietnamese one, had been the principal translator for the Cochin-China court for thirty years.[8]

Numerous accounts also show how local women ('molheres solteiras christãs') helped the Portuguese in Kannur (1507) (Correa 1859, Livro Primeiro, Tomo I, Parte 2, 702), in Calicut (1525) (Correa 1859, Livro Primeiro,

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7 "E paraque se saiba a razão porque este recado veyo mais por molher que por homem, se ha de saber que foy sempre custume antiquissimo dos Reys destes reynos desdo principio delles, tratarem as cousas de muyta importancia, & em que se requere paz & concordia, por molheres; & isto não somente nos recados particulares que os senhores mãdão aos vassallos, como foy este agora, mas tambem nos negocios publicos & gerais que hũs Reys trarão cos outros por suas embaixadas, & dão para isto por razão, que ao genero feminino, pela brandura da sua natureza, dera Deos mais afabilidade, & autoridade, & outras partes para se lhe ter mais respeito que aos homẽs, porque saõ secos, & por essa razão menos agradaueis â parte onde se mandão." Pinto 1614, 221-221v. [Author's translation].

8 J. Wonderaer, "Letter from Tachem (Tatchim, Cochin-China), 5 Abril 1602." Quoted by Reid 1988, 636.

Tomo I, Parte 2, 865), or in the second siege of Diu (1546) (Andrade 1589). Furthermore, in Moluccas in 1529, it was the intervention of an autochthone Christian and single woman, a slave freed by her Portuguese owner who she had a child with, that helped captain D. Jorge de Meneses uncover a plot to kill both Portuguese and Spanish (Correa 1862, Livro Terceiro, Tomo III, Parte 1, 366).

Local women are furthermore praised for their heroic warlike deeds as detached members of the local armies. Castanheda reports how, after fighting the king of Cambaya, the king of the Mughals left the battlefield with his armies, among which were "many single women all on horseback with bows and arrows which they shot." (Castanheda 1833, 228). One can also add an episode, in 1584, when a woman of great reputation came to Goa. She was one of the people who had been banished from the Kingdom of Idalcan. 65 years old, she rode a horse, and carried a quiver and bow. She followed the armies as an amazon, and was kept in high esteem by everyone. She was there to deal with the Vice-Roy on subjects that he was not informed about. Her name was Abehi and she was imprisoned by the Portuguese Inquisition and then banished to Hormuz, from where she went to the Mughal (Sousa 1675, tomo III, 17-18).

Other accounts present women as operating politically against the Portuguese. A recent essay by Wendy L. Belcher highlights the importance that both Portuguese Jesuit chronicles and Ethiopian hagiographers attached to several seventeeth-century court women of Habesha (Ethiopia) as opponents of the Jesuits (Belcher 2013, 121-66). Being educated and powerful women, they came to be opinion makers and political leaders. They managed to mobilise masses of subjects, preventing the success of the Jesuit mission and the implementation of the Roman Catholic model of Christianity in Ethiopia. Their culture and education, their economic, political and social power as well as their freedom, even within the framework of marriage, are emphasized in the sources.

Elite women in local Eastern courts seem to have frequently exercised both political and economic power. Their ability to do so, however, depended on the particular role of women in local societies, heterogeneous as they could be. E. B. Findly provides additional evidence for this with her narrative of the capture of a ship owned by Maryam-uz-Zamānī, the mother of the Mughal emperor who had been imprisoned by the Portuguese. The dominant position of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean depended on the *Cartaz* system, which allowed only ships licensed by the Portuguese to navigate, with all others being subjected to privateering attacks. In 1613, the Portuguese attack on the Rahïmï, despite the fact that she carried the necessary safe travel pass, was a

provocation for the Mughal emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), mostly because the owner and patron of the ship was his mother, Maryam-uz-Zamänï. Most Mughal noblewomen of the period were wealthy, and many of them were active in highly risky business, investing in foreign trade. The capture of the Rahïmï reveals the substantial involvement of women in Indian trade during that period (Findly 1988).

Regarding the role of Asian women in the world pre-dating the mass arrival of Europeans, Anthony Reid has stressed the relatively high autonomy and economic relevance of women in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Southeast Asia, although of course one could not speak of them as being equal to men. There were very few areas in which they competed directly with each other and women had very different functions from men (Reid 1988, 629-45). Their roles included planting and harvesting rice, weaving, and trade. As he stresses, the prominent economic role of women explains why the value of daughters was never questioned in Southeast Asia, as it was in China, India, and the Middle East: on the contrary, he points to António Galvão' statement from 1544, declaring that in Southeast Asia, "the more daughters a man has, the richer he is." (Galvao 1971, 89).

As for the performances of common women, Reid's essay quotes expressive testimonies from several early European merchants and settlers, beginning with the Portuguese. Tomé Pires noticed in 1515 that Melaka benefited a lot from the women street sellers, since they operated in every street and even held a market at night (Pires 1944, 274, and Chung 1960, 128, quoted by Reid 1988, 635). António de Galvão in 1544 described how women in the Birman country managed the more important mercantile businesses of their husbands and how, surprisingly, Moluccas women were those who negotiated, did business, bought and sold goods (Galvao 1971, 75, quoted by Reid 1988, 634). The contributions of Barbara Watson Andaya on the role of women in the pepper trade must also be acknowledged (Watson Andaya 1995, 165-90). Her study points out the important role of women as rulers in Southeast Asia. As women were active participants in trade and shipping it was inevitable that the Portuguese had to deal with them as intermediaries in Indian and inter-Asiatic trade. Explicit evidence for this is, however, surprisingly scarce not to say almost non-existant in the reports of crown officers, in contrast to sources on the West Coast of Africa.

Even so, for Macao, the activities of Isabel Reigota have been documented. She was a widow of Japanese origin, known for her attempts to reintroduce Jesuits into Japan after their expulsion. In addition, she played an important role in the sandalwood war, this time acting against the Jesuits' interests. In this judicial

quarrel, Isabel Reigota was one of the main players in the Mau trade, namely in sandalwood (Penalva 2011, 115-42).

Even where we are able to locate in Portuguese official sources and archives evidence of Portuguese and Asian females performing as economic agents in the East, the material remains meagre, especially when compared to the evidence available for the Atlantic world. If that is so in a formal set-up, one would expect to identify more evidence of women as economic brokers within informal trade settings. This is the reason why we (re)oriented our research towards the ultimate testament of informal agency: the *Peregrinação* by Fernão Mendes Pinto (Pinto 1614). Interestingly, despite the multiple references to women in his work, their presence as economic agents is not paramount.

Nevertheless, the role of women as local agents of trade is evident. Noteworthy accounts involving woman performing as the saviour of the Portuguese are also frequent in *Peregrinação*. Pinto's stories involving women always stress their strength, humanity, intelligence and their usefulness as information providers or as intermediaries between the Portuguese and the local powers and societies (Polónia and Capelão 2018a, 21-83).

The overall content of the available sources points indeed to another unavoidable conclusion: women were elements of cultural transferences between worlds as well. First of all, as partners and spouses: it was inevitable that they would transmit language, practices of hygiene, diets and food preparation rules; ethical behavior and values, religious rites; house building and aesthetical sense. As mothers, they were educators, so their interceptive capacity to transfer, to the new generations, crossed codes of conduct, of values, of communication would be paramount.

Other ways of cultural exchanges involved the transfer of knowledge. This seems particularly noticeable as far as medical knowledge is concerned.

Women as health practitioners and agents of medical knowledge transfer[9]

As some diseases (like malaria) were new to the Europeans, they depended on local knowledge and cures. Some European accounts acknowledge women's medical expertise. Afflicted by one of those diseases, Father Manuel dos Santos refers to "an old Moorish woman, called Manâsùa, a great master, who had healed me from the air, very cautiously, for which I was very thankful." (Santos 1609, Segunda Parte, Livro Terceiro, fl. 77). Equally striking was the centrality

9 For further developments on this topic see Polónia and Capelão 2018b, 269-95.

of Antonia, the slave of Garcia da Orta, the Portuguese New Christian doctor practicing in Goa. During the dialogues between Doctor Orta and Doctor Ruano, she is called to assert, correct and confirm local knowledge. Authority thus lay with a woman and a slave (Orta 1563, 26, 41). In a world of doctors and wise men, she was considered the ultimate guardian of local knowledge and wisdom.

One medical practice deserves particular attention, given its significance to most women: childbirth. The Diocesan Councils of Goa in 1567 banned local infidel midwives from attending the childbirth of Christian women – including converted ones, unless they had explicit permission from the Bishop (Rivara 1862, Fasc. 4, 25, 133). The fifth ecclesiastical council stated that a heathen *daya* was allowed to help, but only if there was no Christian available and on the condition that two other honest Christian women were present in order to perform baptism and to prevent any superstitious practice (Rivara 1862, Fasc. 4, 263-64). For different reasons, the same ecclesiastical council forbade any Christian to be treated by infidel physicists or even to be shaved by an unfaithful. Yet in reality, intense transfers of knowledge from Eastern to Western society persisted. Medical and healing practices, a central ground for knowledge transfer between different cultures indeed deserve further analysis from historians.

The question remains: to what extent were there effective exchanges of practices, techniques and knowledge around childbirth, among Portuguese and local midwives? Mobility between Eastern and Far-Eastern territories is also suggested, when focused on the activities of midwives. At the same time Garcia da Orta mentions Javanese midwives operating in India (Orta 1891, 354), other sources identify Portuguese women carrying out the same occupation, as in Goa.

In Portugal, as in Europe, childbirth prevailed as a privileged occasion for women's medical roles because of the requirement of an intimate contact with other women's bodies. Furthermore, the reproductive organs are also the sexual organs, and any physical contact is conditioned by a heteronormative cultural context. It is thus understandable that women would dominate empirical practices around childbirth, associated with the need for and the prestige of a still predominantly practical and generational knowledge surrounding childbirth. Even today, in many parts of the world, women prefer to be treated, when obstetric and gynaecological issues are involved, by other women, and the increasing masculinisation of obstetrics is considered anomalous (Green 2008, 487-518).

There are other areas women are increasingly associated with, both in Portugal and the East, and that are those connected with bodily hygiene and the

practice of cleaning the colon with a bath of warm water. Women who used that method are called "cristaleiras" (from the Portuguese word "clister" used to identify the method). Their presence is acknowledged in the East. In the sources, one might assume that they are Portuguese women,[10] suggesting that kind of practice as brought from the west. It is in fact totally in keeping with the Galenic procedures and healing philosophy, performed mostly by purges and bleeds to extract the bad humours.We can also find similar practices described in the work of the adventurous Fernão Mendes Pinto, *Peregrinação*, inspired by experiences in the East and the Far-East, in the mid-sixteenth century and put into writing at the end of it, while the author was already back in Portugal. When describing China, he mentions women as "cristaleiras" (those who administrate intestine bleeds), along with men who heal sores, "boubas" (syphilis), and give "suadouros," sweatings (Pinto 1614, 114). The author does not refrain from mentioning old women who served as midwives and "give medicines to pregnancies, and to give birth or not give birth." (Pinto 1614, 113v.).

The author presents himself as a protagonist of curative practices, using local woods, which fluids can cure, or employing a technique of suturing wounds, "as he sometimes saw how to do in India." (Pinto 1614, 162v., 164v.).

This topic leads us to another challenging field of enquiry: the use of abortive methods both by local women and Christians, inspired and supported by available local techniques and medicine. Those methods are recognized and noticed by European travellers, as in the case of Pedro Teixeira, which shows the relevance of those topics for outsiders of the narrow field of medical practitioners. Some plants are mentioned as being used both to facilitate the childbirth and to abort undesirable pregnancies. In the narrative in point, the author, Pedro Teixeira, mentions, in a book published in 1610:

> "Not less than this [herb], another is admirable, which was presented on the Isle of Seylan to the wife of a captain of Columbus, almost of a figure of a herring, black and bristly: which was so valid, and efficacious in facilitating childbirth, that, if they were not very careful to remove it from the thigh, in order to give rise to the child, the entrails would come through. A thousand experiences were seen, one of which I have witnessed, [in which a woman] who had been pregnant, put it in a box, which a slave put under the mistress's bed, and she had aborted, and such a flow of blood

10 "Mandado de Lourenço Moreno para o Almoxarife dos mantimentos de Cochim dar a Inês Fernandes, cristaleira, 50 parás de trigo à conta de seu soldo." (PT/TT/CC/2/47/39).

> gave her that it was never possible to remedy it, and she had almost died, and asked for the Sacraments. […] That happened in Goa, and I was there." [11]

On the herb, he says, "I did not know who had it, and although I was in Ceylon afterwards and tried to find out, there was no one to tell me about it." (Teixeira 1610, 166).

Returning to the described medical plant, and even if Orta only refers vaguely to its use by Java midwives, who he explicitly says that "have here crafts of physicians," and without specifying its use for childbirth, the testimony of Cristóvão da Costa goes deeper, by clarifying its use to expel dead foetuses and, potentially (this is our own claim), to support abortive practices.[12]

> "Of the *Carambolas*. Its fruit is called by the Portuguese *Carambola*: and by the Decanins, and Canarins, *Camarix*; by the Malays, *Bolimba*; by the Juggling, *Carambolas*, who also call the Canarins, *Carabeli*; and the Parsians, *Chamaroch*: and in Turkish and Arabian it has no name (because they do not know it). The fruit is from a tree the size of a quince, the leaf like the one from an apple tree, a little longer, tinged with a deep green and a bit bitter taste […] I saw a midwife or *comadre* , which they call *Daya*, using this dry powdery fruit, with leaves of *betele*, to expel the afterbirths after the birth, and the dead creature that was in the womb."[13]

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11 "Pero no menos que esta [herva] es digna de admiración otra que en la Isla de Seylan se presento à la mujer de un capitán de Columbo, quasi de figura de una espiga de sevada, mas negra y hirsuta: la qual era tã valida, y efficáz en facilitar el parto, que si cõ mucho cuidado no la quitaban del muslo en saliendo la critatura, se veniã las entrañas en por della, vironse dello mil experiencias, y de un caso que succedio con ella à su misma de unna foy yo testigo, la qual andando prennada, metiola en una caxeta, la qual una esclava metiò debaxo del lecho de la señora: acaesciò que abortó, y tal fluxo de sangre le diò que jamas fue posible remediallo yvase muriendo, quizo Sacramentarse, fue menester, para preparar la casa alguna cosa, que estaba en la arquilla: abriose, hallaron en ella la yerva, pensaron si quiça seria tal su fuerça, que dende allí obrasse en la enferma: llevaron la à otra casa, inmediatamente fue cessado el fluxo hasta sanar de todo, pasó ansi en Goa, yo me hallé presente…". Teixeira *1610, 165*-66. [Author's translation].

12 It is important to notice that Cristóvão da Costa uses a strategy that we will find in manuscripts of later medical and pharmacy treaties, authored by Indian physicians performing under Portuguese rule, as the one of Luís Caetano de Meneses, from the second half of the 18th century. In both works, the plants designations are presented in several idioms, so it can be identified by different practitioners, also revealing its uses within diverse medical universes. Bracht 2017, 233-251.

13 "De las Carambolas Capitulo XXXIIII. Es fructo llamado delos Portugueses Carambola: y de los Decanins, y Canarins, Camarix: de los Malayos, Bolimba: de los Malabares, Carambolas, a quien tambien llaman los Canarins, Carabeli: y los Parsios, Chamaroch: y en Turco y Arabio no tiene nombre (porque no lo conocen) es fructo de un arbol del tamaño de un membrillo,

Even if not always directly mentioned, abortive methods existed, and the same medicines used to expel dead foetuses were frequently used to trigger the end of undesirable pregnancies.

The same Cristóvão da Costa, when referring to the properties of pepper, says that "It treats the bites of wild beasts, removes the dead creatures from the belly, and it is believed that, in the nature of the woman, after childbirth, it takes away the hope of being pregnant again."[14]

All societies had access and knowledge, in their local pharmacopoeias, to substances known as having properties which could interfere with fertility in one way or another. It is, though, difficult to prove that women had an effective knowledge of the chemical properties of those plants. However, they certainly knew their applicability and direct uses, including for abortions. Many cases of abortion would nevertheless go unnoticed, since it was very difficult to differentiate an induced abortion from an unintentional spontaneous one. What the documented episodes seem to prove is that the use of some emmenagogue herbs (stimulants of menstruation) for expelling the dead foetus, could in fact hide (or not hide) the real intention of causing an abortion.

Some testimonies point to the use of abortive practices, always connected with women's actions (the very own mothers of the children, or others) as related to other parts of the Portuguese and the Spanish empires (Polónia, Capelão 2018b, 290-91).

Women in the Eastern Coast of Africa

Eastern African women are not absent from the narratives either, performing important roles, be it as slaves, spouses, or community leaders, as it is illustrated by the following examples.

First of all, there were marriages with Europeans in those territories, yet previous and parallel to the Portuguese arrival, as reflected in the statement of a Venetian, identified as Hieronymo Cherubi, who travelled to Lisbon with his

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la hoja como la del Mançano, un poco mas larga, teñida de un verde escuro y al sabor un poco amarga […] Una partera o comadre, a que ellos llaman Daya, vi usar de este fructo seco en polvo, con hojas de Betele, para expeler las Secundinas despues del parto, y la criatura muerta en el vientre." Costa 1578, 254-55. [Author' translation].

14 "Socorre a las mordeduras de fieras, extirpa la criatura muerta en el vientre, y creese, que metida en la natura dela muger, despues del parto, le quita la esperança, de jamas empreñarse." Costa 1578, 28. [Author's translation].

Abexim wive and child.[15] The same probably happened to Pêro da Covilhã, a Portuguese emisssary sent by the Portuguese king John II, in order to prepare the Portuguese maritime arrival in India, as the king was still searching for help from the mythical Priest John Christian's kingdom. Pêro da Covilhã must have arrived in Ethiopia in about 1492-1493, and seems to have adapted to life in Abyssinia. He is though to have been given administrative responsibilities, privileges and land by the local king, started a family and lived to be over seventy. He had his experience registered by the Jesuit Francisco Álvares under the title *A Verdadeira Informação da Terra do Preste João das Índias* (Albuquerque 1992; Ficalho 1988; Pereira 1990, 147-55).

On the framework of the consolidation of the Portuguese State of India, it was inevitable that the Crown should pay attention to the settlement in Mozambique, due both to requirements of naval logistics and the access to the Monomopata region. Besides "degredados" and "degredadas," Portuguese couples as such were also sent to the region. In a consultation of the Overseas Council (Conselho Ultramarino), in Lisbon, in 1648, it is stressed, for information of the vice-Roy of India, the need for people to settle in the Cuama river area:

> "the V. Rey of India warns us in a letter […] of the lack of settlers in Mozambique and Rivers of Cuama, and the great difficulty of being able to remedie India. So should your Majesty send in the same ship up to twenty couples to leave them in Mozambique when they pass there in their way to India."[16]

The presence of Portuguese women is also testified by the payments of maintenance that are registered in the Sofala and Quiloa captaincies after 1511.

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15 "…& também por via de hum Veneziano mercador chamado Hieronymo Cherubí homem de muyto bom entendimento, o qual passou aos Reinos do Preste Ioão por via de Alexandria, com suas mercadorias, & correo quasi todos, & residio nelles alguns annos, & depois se tornou polla via do mar Roxo pera a India, trazendo consiguo hũa molher Abexìm, & hum filho, que della tinha, & da India se veyo pera Portugal com elles na mesma nao, em que eu vim, onde me informei delle de muytas couzas, que lhe perguntei, & me disse destes Reynos, que são muy conformes com as que escreverão o Patriarcha D. Ioão Bermudes, & o P. Francisco Alvarez Clerigo de missa, os quaes andarão muyto tempo nestas partes, & virão as mais das couzas notaveis que nella ha, & dellas tao bem relatarei neste livro algũas." Santos 1609, Primeira Parte, Livro Quarto, fl. 102-102v. [Author's translation].

16 "E tambem pareçe, pello que o V. Rey da India avisa em carta que se reçebo nestas vias, de falta de gente cazada que há em Moçambique e Rios de Cuama, e grande dificuldade de se poder remediar da India. Deve V. Magestade mandar que na mesma caravella vão embarcados athé vinte cazaes, para os deixar em Moçambique, quando passar á India." Publ. Brásio 1965, 224. [Author's translation].

Some of them are specifically identified as "degredadas" and others as slaves (presumably of Portuguese).[17]

The settlement in the Eastern Coast of Africa, mostly in the region later incorporated under the ruling of the captaincy of Mozambique island, was contingent upon the acceptance of the Portuguese by the local communities, both the Swahili people on the coast or the communities established on the way to the golden markets, in the Zambezian area of influence. The Portuguese had to integrate as much as intermingle with local populations. Their own subsistence, even in Mozambique Island, totally depended on the cooperation of the locals and their willingness to provide food, water, information and goods to trade.

For Quiloa, a 1507 letter reveals the importance of the mixed marriages between the Portuguese *degredados* and the local women in order to promote Portuguese settlements. It states that:

> "these banished you will order to be fed and work to make some benefits on the territory to produce food and anything else that suits. And see if you can work for the people of the land become Christians, especially women and these 26 you will work to marry with the convicts who want to marry them in order to settle them in this land and we can better be served. Also give them permission to do fishing and any other thing so that they may be well kept."[18]

This formal incentive to miscegenation will be taken further later on, with formal marriages being promoted and accepted between Portuguese and local women (Polónia and Capelão 2017, 58-89).

In Portuguese eyes, other characteristics involving the role and performances of local women were also noted. They stressed, for instance, the strength and the power of women. Referring to Monomotapa (kingdom of Mutapa), Fr. João dos Santos explained:

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17 Rego and Baxter 1962, vol. I, 424, 434, 437-38, 462, 464, 494, 644, 734; Rego and Baxter 1963, vol. II, 452, 458, 468, 502, 514, 516, 528, 542, 556, 568; Rego and Baxter 1964, vol. III, 28, 30, 32, ,50,98, 120, 128, 130, 140, 150,160, 174, 196, 208, 218, 230, 270, 288.

18 "…e a estes degredados mandardes dar somente de comer e trabalhares como façam algumas bemfeitoryas na terra asy pera se fazerem mantimentos como pera qualquer outra cousa que convier. E vede se podes trabalhar de da gente da terra fazerdes christãos especialmente das molheres e estas 26 trabalhardes de casar com os ditos degradados que com ellas quiserem casar porque seja causa de mais asesegarem na terra e podermos ser deles melhor servidos. Tanbem lhe day hordem a fazer pescarias e toda outra cousa per que se posam bem manter." ANTT – Cartas dos Vice-Reis, nº 102. In Rego and Baxter 1963, vol. II, 28. [Author's translation].

> "The Monomotapa has many women, & the principal, whom he much loves, called Mazarìra, is his full sister, & a good friend of the Portuguese, & she defends, & speaks for them to the king & for that reason when they give the Curve to the king, they also give it to her." (Santos 1609, Primeira Parte, Livro Segundo, fl. 63).

As much as political agents, these women acted as economic intermediaries and were essential elements of trade networks. Even though their economic power was widely acknowledged at the time, their activities as economic intermediaries are not particularly well-documented.

Similarly, women as property owners in the Zambezi region have already been the subject of several studies, the seminal work of José Capela and Eugénia Rodrigues on the Prazos do Zambeze being some of the most relevant (Capela 1995; Isaacman 1972; Lobato 1962; Newitt 1973; Rodrigues 2002).

As it is well known, the Zambezi came under Portuguese influence and was ruled, first by the head of State of India, then by the Mozambique island captain whose intention was to bring the huge properties granted by the Bantu Chiefs under Portuguese rule, administration and exploitation. Those were latifundia transformed into royal Portuguese properties, granted by the Crown for successive generations in return for an annual fee paid in gold dust by the holders of the rental contract. This territory became important after the 1607 and 1629 treaties with the Monomotapa, which acknowledged the Portuguese Crown's ownership of vast areas in exchange for military support. These grants not only involved the transfer of the land, but also the jurisdiction over the African people living there. The apparent singularity of these contracts derives from the fact that during the seventeenth century, the local representatives of the Crown tended to grant them to women, daughters of the Portuguese, who only obtained and retained them, though, on condition of marrying white Portuguese men. The sons from these marriages were to be, if the norm became a practice, excluded from the succession, since the properties were only transmitted along the female line. As it has been said, this was not totally exceptional, as Portuguese law allowed inheritance through daughters and locally, there was a prevalence, even if not total exclusivity, of matrilineal lines of property succession (Boxer 1977, 94-97). This is maybe the reason for the apparent disregard for this practice and orientation in the Indian 'villages in the North,' from Chaul to Daman, a region administered from Bassein, an area where matrineal transmission of wealth and property and lineage did not occur through the female line.

Equally relevant is the fact that this intended transmission of land through the female line was awarded with the attached condition to marry a Portuguese man. The meaning of this is twofold. First, it recognised the role of women, including

mixed women, in empire building processes; secondly, it represented an attempt to 'whiten' the colonial set-up of the region, since those daughters of Portuguese men were not necessarily white, but rather the offspring from mixed marriages.

Examples of powerful and influencial women are abundant in the sources. Maybe the one we are going to refer to is one of those "Donas do Zambeze." This woman was married to a Portuguese. She became a victim of the difficult multi-racial and multi-cultural relations and ended up being murdered by her husband, who was then killed by her slaves:

> "In the year of our Lord 1596 in Mozambique occurred the following case. On this island lived a Portuguese, named Francisco Leitão, married with a mestiza, who had already been married before, & was rich, & had farms, & palms on the other side on the mainland where she had her slaves, who administered her farms for her." (Santos 1609, Primeira Parte, Livro Terceiro, fl. 77v).

One cannot avoid noticing the importance of the bride's wealth and economic power. She explored the land. She owned slaves. She mastered their loyalty. It is our claim that throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Portuguese access to the Monomotapa gold area depended also on such female intermediaries, landowners and leading characters of their territories.

Beyond political and economic performances of these women, social models were at stake. Indeed, within different cultural and political setups, different models of family and marriage imposed different adjustments on the Portuguese rulers and settlers. In East Africa, the Ethiopian and the Zambeze region seem to prevail in Portuguese sources, although it is not certain how much is reality and how much is due to phantasy. Some matrilineal drifts, characteristic of various African societies, stimulated the attention of the source producers, the same way different sexual practices, different matching strategies and different social hierarchies based on the social dominance of women come up in the historical narratives.

Referring to a kingdom dependent and paying tribute to the mythic Preste João, identified in the sources as the *Maute kyngdom*, Gaspar Correia explains:

> "In it, there are women of great bodies and forces, and hardworking, which they call *pogodynis*, which are like amazons. They have possession and command of the kingdom, where they have no man; they elect among themselves who governs them and governs as King, and when they want to talk to a man they ask permission to the Queen, which gives them the men for some days and months sulking in their homes without coming outside.

> They are not ever seen by the others, until they lay them off and put them back where they brought them; and if any man enters without permission, they kill him, and if a woman puts a man in without a license, she is killed, and being authorised, if a man goes out of the house, they kill him."[19]

Besides the aspects involved by the female gouvernance and the unusual, for the European, sexual behaviours, the author is taken by the justice and the truth of the consuetudes and regulations of these kingdom, as much as by the fantastic ways these women seem to deal with maternity:

> "Children who are born, they give them to be fed by the goats, and sheep, and other animals, which they get when they get pregnant; and when the children know how to eat, they throw them out of the kingdom in lands around, and never see them again; nor the mother knows the children nor the children their mother."[20]

Interesting how in a world in which women are rulers and warriors, and men are sexual objects, used to satisfy women's desire, maternity is treated as an anti-natural feature, within this upside-down social and cultural universe.

Female rule in African societies inspired admiration, but also fear, as it happened with their abortive practices and the diseases they allegedly transmitted to the European men, whose cure in turn also depended on their practical medical knowledge.

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19 "Junto das terras do Preste ha hum Reyno a elle sogeito, em que ha hum grande trato d´ouro, que o vem de fora parte a resgatar; o qual ouro dizem que vem per muytas terras e rios, que se diz que vem da Mina e que o trazem cafres. Chama se este Reyno Maute. Ha n´elle humas molheres de grandes corpos e forças, e muy trabalhadoras, a que chamão pogodynis, que são como amazonas. Ellas tem a posse e mando do Reyno, em que nom tem nenhum homem; enlegem ellas antre sy quem as rege e governa como Rey, e quando querem conversar com homens pedem licença á Raynha, que lha dá por certos dias e mezes, metidos em suas casas sem sayrem fóra, nem são vistos das outras, senão quando os despedem e os tornão a pòr donde os trouxerão; e se com elas entra algum homem, sem licença, o matão, e se alguma molher mete homem sem licença a matão, e estando com licença em casa de alguma molher, se say fóra da casa, o matão." Correa 1862, Livro Terceiro, Tomo III, Parte 1 76-77. [Author's translation].

20 "Os filhos que lhe nacem dão a criar a cabras, e ovelhas, e outras alimarias, que pera ysso tem buscadas quando andão prenhes; e como os filhos sabem comer os levão, e deitão fora do Reyno em outras terras derrador onde ella querem, e nunca os mais vem, nem conhecem a mãy ao filho nem o filho á mãy." Correa 1862, Livro Terceiro, Tomo III, Parte 1, 76-77. [Author's translation].

> "There is another disease in this whole coast of Sofala, rivers Cuama, & Mozambique, very sticky to any kind of man, which is caused by the black women of these lands, because many of them, particularly the slaves of the Portuguese, if they get pregnant, & do not want to come to light, take a concoction of juice of a certain herb, which exist in these parts there, & just move with it; but when removed it becomes so poisonous that if they do not take that evil to any man, they will be drying, & consumed little by little, until they die. Because of that, soon after they remove [the fetus] they soon look for a man, whom grab this infirmity, so they stay healthy: & the man gets so sick that he rarely escapes death, because at the very same moment they are taken by great pain in the groin, from which they die in a few days." Unless they took an antidote, provided by the same women, to be taken on the same day of the sexual contact.[21]

The inherent power of these women, even as slaves, and the degree of dependency of the Portuguese in order to guarantee their own survival, is straightforward established in the sources. It underscores the intense relationship between Portuguese and local women.

A difference in the accounts is evident, nonetheless, between the description of African tribal societies, presented within an ethnographic register, and the more political and religious approach when referring to the vast and undetermined region of "Ethiopia." Here, marriage practices were reported with particular emphasis. The documents, mostly created by missionaries and Church representatives, pay specific attention to the role of women in marriage and their political power and influence. Polygamy, concubinage, divorce, allegedly

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21 "Outra doença ha em toda esta costa de Sofala, rios de Cuama, & Moçambique, muy pegadiça a todo o genero de homem, a qual he causada polas negras destas terras, porque muitas dellas, particularmente as escravas dos Portugueses, se acertão de conceber, & não querem que o parto venha a lume, tomão hũa beberagem do çumo de hũa certa herva, que nestas partes ha, & logo movem com ella; mas depois do mouito ficão tão apeçonhentadas, que se não pegão aquelle mal a algum homem por meyo de ajuntamento, vãose secando, & consumindo pouco & pouco, atè que morrem. Polo que depois de moverem logo buscão algum homem, a quem peguem esta infirmidade, pera ficarem com saude: & o homem fica tão apeçonhentado, que raramente escapa da morte, porque logo no mesmo instante se lhe causão tão grandes dores nas virilhas, que dellas morrem em poucos dias. E jà aconteçeo este acto deshonesto, acabarem juntamente a vida. A esta infermidade chamão Entaca, & contra ella ha hum sò remedio, que he beber o çumo de outra herva contrapeçonha da que tomão as negras pera mover, com a qual beberagam escapão da morte. Mas pera aproveitar esta mêzinha, ha de ser tomada no mesmo dia, em que o mal se pegou porque se lhe dilatão a cura, logo lavra a peçonha atè chegar ao coração, & já então não tem remedio. Destas duas hervas ha muita quantidade na terra firme de Moçambique, mui conhecida de todos." Santos 1609, Primeira Parte, Livro Terceiro, fl. 89v. [Author' translation].

authorised by law and accepted by the ruling classes as much as the easy solvability of marriage seem to have been intolerable to those who wanted to impose the Roman Catholic religion upon a country that was already assumed to be Christian: Ethiopia, identified as the Priest John kingdom.[22] The accounts studied in a recent paper by Wendy Laura Belcher give added notice to this fact: the facility by which women, namely elite women connected to the court, could dispense of their husbands and exchange partners by divorcing, along with the apparent social tolerance towards infidelity seemed to be one of the resistance points between them and the Jesuits, even if not the only one (Belcher 2013, 121-66). This could have been one of the reasons that led to the unsuccessful attempts of the Jesuits to convert Ethiopia to the reformed Roman Catholic model during the sixteenth century.

Conclusion

Summing up, Portuguese settlement on the Indian Ocean, including the Eastern Coast of Africa, along with cooperation between the Portuguese and autochthone societies, economies and cultures depended on the agency of women, performing as brokers and go-betweens across different societies, economies and cultures. This involved both Portuguese and autochthone women, even if on different scales and levels.

In any case, against a background of resistance, conflict, cheating, defection, intermingling and assimilation, those women, Portuguese and autochthone alike,

22 "A liberdade, & facilidade em repudiar as molheres, era tam grande, que cada hum deixava a molher que tinha quando queria, & tomava outra; & outros com licença de seus Patriarchas, tinham mais que hũa, & com a mesma licença tinham hũa amiga, quando nam se pagavam de sua molher, & falandose na obrigação que avia na Igreja Romana, de sostentar pera sempre o matrimonio, & nam se desfazer nunca se nam por morte, ouve muytos senhores principaes que representaram ao Emperador ser este preceito pera elles jugo intolerável; mandou elle fazer hũa junta de todos os senhores da Corte Azaguès que sam como Dezembargadores, Iuyzes, Letrados, & Frades, & que nesta junta declarasse o P. Superior dos da Companhia o estillo de Europa, neste particular. O P. lhes declarou a insolubilidade do matrimonio, & como polas leys civis tinha o adultério pena de morte, salvo a parte inocente lhe perdoasse, avendo causas de consideração o juis ecclesiastico por sua sentença fazia separação entre casados, ficando porem elles incapaz de contrahir matrimonio com outros. Quadrou a todos este estillo, & assentaram, que assim se guardasse inteiramente em Ethyopia; de que logo se lançou pregam geral por mandado do Emperador. O que se vay guardando, porem com muita dificuldade ainda entre senhores Catholicos, com quem corria por hũa estrada muy larga, & o obrigam a caminhar por atalho muy estreito: tendo o contrario como por ley, em que viviam à sua vontade, tanto mais quanto eram mayores senhores de sangue, & casta real os que ouzavam." Veiga 1628, 6-6v. [Author's translation].

acted as intermediaries between different worlds. Their presence and agency were vital to economic relations and the survival of newcomers. They also played an important role in negotiations and when it came to accessing local knowledge. They were active agents of complex processes of identity construction in colonial set-ups, as well as influential in processes of social organization, through their role in families (and on the fringes of institutionalised families) and in the reconfiguration of colonial social environments.

Beside their central roles in families, material culture and everyday life, their economic role was also impressive, as were their actions as political intermediaries. Equally important was their impact on religious practice and syncretism, on the emergence of new linguistic patterns, and on knowledge transmission. Those practices emerged as a result of cross-cultural interaction, featuring women within colonial societies, whether they were colonizers, colonized, placed in the centre or on the margins of the system.

By providing empirical evidence for the centrality of these women, this chapter brings to the fore the role of women as intermediaries between different worlds and highlights the centrality of trans-cultural relations to empire building processes in Early Modern Asia.

Summing up, dyadic interactions between individuals proved as important to the building of the Portuguese empire in the East as formal political strategies. This insight has provided the basis for our analysis of women who acted as intermediaries between worlds in the Portuguese colonial setup, with particular emphasis on the Eastern Coast of Africa.[23]

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23 An approach also followed by recent historiography. See, among others, Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts 2006.

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