

# Practices and representations of gender: Autochthone women in the Portuguese State of India, 1500s–1600s

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## Abstract

Interactions between Europeans and the societies and cultures of contact during the early modern process of empire-building depended on the agency of women. This seems particularly apparent in the Portuguese case. Even if many of these interactions were imposed, women were crucial elements in the dynamics and outcomes of European colonization. This affected Portuguese and autochthone women alike, even if on different scales and levels. This article focuses on the latter. Between resistance, conflict, cheating, defection, intermingling and assimilation, those women performed as intermediaries between different worlds. Their presence and agency were vital to economic flows, as they were essential in negotiation processes. They were influential in social organization, through their role in the family, and in the reconfiguration of colonial settings. The concept of intersectionality underlines this analysis by describing the ways by which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity and other forms of discrimination intersected to create unique historical dynamics.

## Keywords

Colonial studies, intersectionality, Portuguese State of India, women's agency

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## Gender and intersectionality

This article starts from several assumptions. The first is that cooperation between the Portuguese and all local societies, economies and cultures of contact during the early modern process of expansion and colonization depended on the agency of women in all territories where Portuguese people settled. The second is that a great deal, even if not all, of that cooperation was imposed, since women were crucial elements in the dynamics of European colonization. This affected Portuguese and autochthone women alike, even if on different scales and levels. This rationale intersects both colonial studies, in its post-colonial standpoints, and gender studies.

Between negotiation, resistance, conflict, cheating, defection, intermingling and assimilation, women's agency was vital to the economic flows between worlds, as it was essential to the survival of the newcomers and strategic in negotiation processes of all kinds. They were influential in social organization and in the configuration of colonial empires, through their role in the family and on the fringes of institutionalized families.<sup>1</sup>

This article also assumes, as common sense, that the concept of gender as much as gender roles depended on cultural patterns and historical contexts rather than sex partitions. It encompasses and highlights differences between East and West, between Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas. In this article, gender is taken as an analytical tool, enabling us to discover neglected historical arenas by focusing on individuals and human groups that have been left out or forgotten.<sup>2</sup>

It is also assumed that the categories of both 'women' and 'gender' are not commonly agreed on. Gender is not applicable as a basic organizing principle in all societies and at all times, as suggested by western feminist studies. These stem from a European interpretive experience of power relations, focusing on the effects of colonialism on the reconfiguration of new identities.<sup>3</sup> Yet fresh perspectives on female authority – for example, in Central African societies – suggest that biological sex and gender do not necessarily coincide and are not necessarily criteria of social division, nor do they always work in the same direction.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Barbara Watson Andaya, 'From Temporary Wife to Prostitute: Sexuality and Economic Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of Women's History*, 9, No. 4 (1998), 11–34.
  2. Gisele Bock, 'Women's History and Gender History: Aspects of an International Debate', *Gender and History*, 1, No. 1 (1989), 7–30; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA, 1990).
  3. Oyèronké Oyèwùmí is groundbreaking in her assertions. Oyèronké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis, 1997). See also Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds., *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historizing Gender and Race* (Bloomington, IN, 1998).
  4. Nwando Achebe, *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa* (Athens, OH, 2020). See also Nwando Achebe and Claire C. Robertson, eds., *Holding the World Together: African Women in Changing Perspective* (Madison, WI, 2019), 5–18.

Notwithstanding these considerations, it is necessary to employ the analytical categories of gender studies to interpret the presence of women in colonial contexts. For this purpose, we will draw on the idea of the existence of 'very different women'.<sup>5</sup> Scholarship operating through this multifaceted lens is less likely to follow a single comparative standard with western women as the focal point, avoiding omission or oversimplification of the experiences of other categories of women.<sup>6</sup>

Post-colonial feminism rightly argues that gender is just one of many elements determining symbolic power relations – with race, ethnicity, class/group and religion, to name a few – forming an intricate, evolving and often contradictory web of human relations leading to the subjective construction of women's identities. It highlights the standpoint of intersectionality. It assumes that women are not a gender-determined monolithic group but a category embodying a broad range of interconnected experiences, more or less shaped by ideological frameworks.<sup>7</sup>

Historiographical approaches to gender and empire are not entirely novel, as shown by several publications available from the 1970s, but more prominently from the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>8</sup> Most of these focus either on European women (excluding autochthone women) or on later historical periods (nineteenth to early twentieth century), in which European empires were consolidated and displayed characteristics quite distinctive from the earlier encounters that are the subject of this article. Their focus is predominantly on notable women and their roles in family structures, with a comprehensive analysis of the underlying gender frameworks clearly absent. Studies on the British Empire prevail against the scarcity of research on the Portuguese case. The literature on the role of women in Portuguese colonial territories so far has mostly focused on the Atlantic settlements,<sup>9</sup>

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5. Teresa de Lauretis, 'The Technology of Gender', in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington, IN, 1987), 1–30; Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988).

6. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Bajos los ojos de Occidente: Academia feminista y discurso colonial', in Liliana Suárez and Rosalva Aída Hernández, eds., *Descolonizando el feminismo: Teorías y prácticas desde los márgenes* (Madrid, 2008), 1–23; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Boundary 2*, 12, No. 3–13, No. 1 (1984), 333–58.

7. Pierson and Chaudhuri, *Nation, Empire, Colony*; Mohanty, 'Bajos los ojos'.

8. Selected references might be mentioned: Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2003) and Pierson and Chaudhuri, *Nation, Empire, Colony* cover extensive ground, with the latter still mostly focused on the British world and more recent colonial practices; Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville, VA, 1998) attempts a comparative approach to the topic. See also Philippa Levine, ed., *Gender and Empire* (Oxford, 2007); Phillip Buckner, ed., *Canada and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2010). For the colonial Americas, see Nora E. Jaffary, ed., *Gender, Race and Religion in the Colonization of the Americas* (London, 2007).

9. For the Atlantic in general, including the European Atlantic, see Douglas Catteran and Jodi Campbell, eds., *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500–1800* (Leiden, 2012); Sarah E. Owens and Jane E. Mangan,

particularly in Africa<sup>10</sup> and America,<sup>11</sup> with the Indian and Pacific arenas requiring further attention.<sup>12</sup>

## The Portuguese State of India

Based on these premises, the focus of this article is autochthone women.<sup>13</sup> The world under scrutiny is the Portuguese Estado da Índia, following the definition proposed by Luís Filipe Reis Thomaz:

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- eds., *Women of the Iberian Atlantic* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2012); Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, eds., *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (Durham, NC, 2005).
10. For Africa, see Philip J. Havik, *Silences and Soundbytes: The Gendered Dynamics of Trade and Brokerage in the Pre-Colonial Guinea Bissau Region* (Münster, 2004); Mariana Candido, *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World: Benguela and Its Hinterland* (Cambridge, 2013); Mariana Candido, *Fronteras de esclavización: Esclavitud, comercio e identidad en Benguela, 1780–1850* (Mexico City, 2011); Mariana Candido and Adam Jones, eds., *African Women in the Atlantic World: Property, Vulnerability and Mobility, 1680–1880* (Woodbridge, 2019).
  11. For Brazil, see A. J. R. Russell-Wood, 'Women and Society in Colonial Brazil', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 9, No. 1 (1977), 1–34; Alida C. Metcalf, *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500–1600* (Austin, TX, 2005); Carole A. Myscofski, 'Amazons and Cannibals: Imagining Brazilian Women in the Colonial Period', in *Amazons, Wives, Nuns, and Witches: Women and the Catholic Church in Colonial Brazil, 1500–1822* (New York, 2013), 142–55. For the Spanish Empire in Latin America, see Karen Vieira Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest: The Gendered Genesis of Spanish America Society, 1500–1600* (Albuquerque, NM, 2005); Jaffary, *Gender, Race and Religion*.
  12. For Asia, see Kim M. Phillips, 'Warriors, Amazons and Isles of Women: Medieval Travel Writing and Constructions of Asian Femininities', in Cordelia Beattie and Kristen A. Fenton, eds., *Intersections of Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages* (London, 2011), 183–207; Barbara Watson Andaya, *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 2000); Eric A. Jones, 'Fugitive Women: Slavery and Social Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies*, 38, No. 2 (2007), 215–45; Elsa Penalva, *Mulheres em Macau: Donas honradas, mulheres livres e escravas (séculos XVI e XVII)* (Lisbon, 2011); Anthony Reid, 'Female Roles in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22, No. 3 (1988), 629–45; Saiful Umam, 'Controversies Surrounding the Aceh's Sultanahs: Understanding Relation between Islam and Female Leadership', *Journal of Indonesia Islam*, 7, No. 1 (2013), 2–23; Amélia Polónia, 'Brokers and Go-Betweens within the Portuguese State of India (1500–1700)', in Rila Mukherjee and Radhika Seshan, eds., *Indian Ocean Histories: The Many Worlds of Michael Naylor Pearson* (New Delhi, 2019), 97–123; Amélia Polónia and Rosa Capelão, 'Connecting Worlds: Women as Intermediaries in the Portuguese Overseas Empire, 1500–1600', in Tanja Bühner et al., eds., *Cooperation and Empire: Local Realities of Global Processes* (Oxford, 2017), 58–89; Amélia Polónia and Rosa Capelão, 'Women and Gender in the Portuguese Overseas Empire: Society, Economy and Politics, 16th–17th Centuries', in Francisco Bethencourt, ed., *Gendering the Portuguese-Speaking World* (Leiden, 2021), 71–101.
  13. Here, we will refer to 'autochthone women' as those belonging to the local societies with which Europeans interacted. At the first moment of contact, it is easier to identify these women as such. From that moment on, a more or less intense process of miscegenation occurs, as has occurred since the very first contacts within the Portuguese Empire. It is difficult to ascertain if the women mentioned in the data source are still autochthone or already the

The State of India did not designate, in the sixteenth century, 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.<sup>14</sup>

This definition points both to the heterogeneity of the geographies, societies, religions and cultures that the Portuguese had to deal with during their presence in the East and to the presence of a multiplicity of Portuguese settlers, formal and informal, who were officially recognized or performing on the margins of the Portuguese State of India. These formal and informal settlers provide current Portuguese and European historiography with views of alterity, which this article cannot circumvent due to the lack of local female testimonies.

The representations of these ‘alter’ women were recorded in writing in chronicles, descriptions of territories, travel and adventure literature, personal letters, civil and ecclesiastical regulations, laws and bureaucratic documents. Other texts of an ethnocentric nature not only describe the achievements of the Portuguese, but also speak of the *other*. They include signs and evidence of surprise, admiration and disgust when describing otherness, acknowledging the limitations to an understanding or acceptance of what the authors were experiencing or describing. In many cases, their cultural references – western and Catholic – were not adequate to describe the *other*, their practices and their values. This applies even more to the writing in representations of autochthone women.

The narrators of these first encounters (all male) noted what was different and what surprised them – for example, polygamy, practices in connection with childbirth, reactions to ritual suicides (sati),<sup>15</sup> the participation of women in war, the role of intermediaries in diplomatic acts, or a different sexual morality. Everything was questioned, interpreted and, above all, judged from a perspective informed by the Portuguese mindset, which included a misogynist notion of woman,<sup>16</sup> of family and of monogamous marriage.

At first glance, there is practically no space assigned to women. They were not the protagonists of the narratives but it is not difficult to find them ‘hovering’ in the background of these scenarios. On occasion, their presence does not seem to fit the traditionally assigned western stereotypes or roles. However, when one looks at these narratives in depth, it becomes clear that, despite the apparent initial invisibility of women, their presence is nevertheless crucial.<sup>17</sup>

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result of a miscegenation process, and then representatives of a second or even later generation of settlers.

14. Luís Filipe Reis Thomaz, *De Ceuta a Timor* (Lisbon, 1994), 207; our translation.

15. Sati means the sacrifice of the widows by fire.

16. Charles R. Boxer, *A mulher na expansão ultramarina ibérica (1415–1815): Alguns factos, ideias e personalidades* (Lisbon, 1977), 125; António Manuel Hespanha, ‘O estatuto jurídico da mulher na época da expansão’, in *O rosto feminino da expansão portuguesa* (Lisbon, 1995), 53–64; António Manuel Hespanha, *Imbecillitas: As bem-aventuranças da inferioridade nas sociedades de Antigo Regime* (São Paulo, 2010).

17. Amélia Polónia and Rosa Capelão, eds., *Primeira obra de aventura e contactos intercivilizacionais*. Fernão Mendes Pinto, *Peregrinação*, in José Eduardo Franco and Carlos Fiolhais, eds., *Obras pioneiras da cultura portuguesa*, vol. 19 (Lisbon, 2018), 63–8.

As monolithic as the colonial values could be, heterogeneity prevails, and the roles, profiles and performances of women within this vast world, unified by a web of maritime connections and characterized by diverse models of settlement, vary largely, as they were determined by women's status in the economies, societies and cultures of contact. This is reflected in the sources by the way in which the authors perceived, categorized and valued those different women and the diverse ways of being women.

## Views of alterity

In the vast area of 'the Indian Ocean and neighbouring seas',<sup>18</sup> one might observe several geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural complexes. Leaving aside the narratives about Japan and China, in the Indian Ocean the historical sources are particularly eloquent about the axes centred on the Indian subcontinent, directly connecting the Malabar Coast and the Coromandel Coast, feeding and serving several intra-Asian routes, merging at Malacca and reaching out as far as South East Asia. In another way, they also reflect a diverse reality, focused on the eastern coast of Africa. This triple focus on India, South East Asia and Africa determines differentiated hierarchies of perceptions of alterity.

Referring to autochthonous women, who were the favoured marriage partners of the Portuguese settlers due to the Portuguese policy of mixed marriages, Afonso de Albuquerque, the main architect of this strategy, claimed:

I never meant to marry men with these Malabar women, because they are black, corrupt in their living and their behaviour; the women who have been Moorish are lily and chaste and withdrawn into their homes and their way of living, as the Moors of this land have by practice, and women of Brahmins and their daughters also are chaste women and good living and are white and with a good presence. So, my Lord, anywhere where we took white women they were never sold or ransomed: they were all given to good men who wanted to marry them.<sup>19</sup>

Taking this statement at face value, race and ethnicity, also reflected in the colour of the skin, seem to be the main criteria for the choice of a bride. However, in Cochin in 1514, 58 women were acknowledged to be married to Portuguese men.<sup>20</sup> The designation of these women as *malavar*, *moura*, *nayra*, *canarym*, *java*, *bramena*, *çacotorina* and *guzarate* shows, on the one hand, that they came from different places on the Malabar Coast and, on the other, that their profiles did not comply with the selection process proposed by Albuquerque; a heterogeneous racial, religious and social palette seemed to prevail among these brides.

Local women are also portrayed as saviours of the Portuguese. Numerous accounts show how local women helped the Portuguese in Kannur (1507), Calicut (1525) and

18. Thomaz, *De Ceuta a Timor*, 207; our translation.

19. Letter from Afonso de Albuquerque to D. Manuel, 4 November 1514, in António da Silva Rêgo, ed., *Documentação para a história das missões do padroado português do Oriente: Índia, 1º vol. (1499–1522)* (Lisbon, 1947), 119–21; our translation.

20. Letter from Pero Mazcarenhas, 20 December 1514, Sobre a Cristandade de Cochim [About Christianity in Kochi], in Rêgo, *Documentação*, 232–9.

the second siege of Diu (1546).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, in the Moluccas in 1529, it was the intervention of an autochthone single Christian woman, a slave freed by her Portuguese owner with whom she had a child, that helped Captain D. Jorge de Meneses uncover a plot to kill both Portuguese and Spanish settlers.<sup>22</sup>

Local women are furthermore praised for their heroic warlike deeds as detached members of local armies. Fernão Lopes de Castanheda reports how, after fighting the King of Cambaya, the King of the Mughals left the battlefield with his armies, which included 'many single women all on horseback with bows and arrows that they shot'.<sup>23</sup>

Reflecting the definition by Luís Filipe Reis Thomaz cited above, in general terms, the concept of the State of India encompassed not only those interests that were officially governed by the Crown; it also covered non-official modes of settlement. These developed regardless of the State and, in some cases, even against its interests.<sup>24</sup> These colonies proliferated throughout the Indian Ocean in places like Pattani (southern Siam), Nagapattinan, Saint Thomas of Millipore (the Coromandel Coast) and, most importantly, Macao. The roles and functions of women in these colonial settlements also varied. With regard to practices in Pegu (Myanmar), another peripheral territory for Portuguese settlement, one account, for example, states:

Most Portuguese going to this land, take women by monsoon, whom they pay very well. Besides being beautiful, sweet & caressing, the biggest disgrace there is between them is to make themselves available for free. Some pay them for when they return; their children cannot be taken from that land without the licence of the King, which costs a lot, and not everyone can have them. Many affronts suffer the Portuguese on this land, and most of them return saying that they should be stopped by justice to go there; but as with all people who already lost their panache, they boast the greed, & the delights of the land, particularly the lecherous love.<sup>25</sup>

Besides the reality of these practices and acknowledgment of the affective ties between Portuguese men and Myanmar women, a detrimental judgement of these women prevailed, associated with their beauty and lust.

The south-eastern women are, nevertheless, described positively by Portuguese authors. Fernão Mendes Pinto, the author of *Peregrinação*, for instance, frequently put his life in the hands of these women, irrespective of their colour, race, ethnicity or religious beliefs. His stories involving women always stress their strength, humanity, intelligence and usefulness as information providers or intermediaries between the Portuguese

21. Gaspar Correa, *Lendas da Índia*, Book 1, Vol. 1, Part 2 (Lisbon, 1859), 702; Gaspar Correa, *Lendas da Índia*, Book 2, Vol. 2, Part 2 (Lisbon, 1860), 865; Francisco de Andrade, *O primeiro cerco que os turcos puserão há fortaleza de diu nas partes da Índia defendida pelos portugueses* (Coimbra, 1589).

22. Gaspar Correa, *Lendas da Índia*, Book 3, Vol. 3 (Lisbon, 1862), 366.

23. Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, *História do descobrimento e conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses*, Book 8 (Lisbon, 1833), 228.

24. Thomaz, *De Ceuta a Timor*, 207.

25. António Freyre, *Primor e honra da vida soldadesca no Estado da Índia* (Lisbon, 1630), 98; our translation.

and the local powers and societies. The episodes multiply, giving credit to these women as saviours and supporters of Portuguese men in distress. He also shows their centrality to both societies as translators, diplomats and opinion-makers.<sup>26</sup>

While there are positive and dignifying representations of women in diverse Portuguese sources, who are recognized according to European and western patterns of behaviour, African women are usually perceived more negatively. In the accounts of the first intercultural encounters of the Portuguese overseas expansion, there are descriptions of societies led by women. Let us take as an example the account of a clergyman, who observes on the east coast of Africa, in the 'Kingdom of Maute' close to the lands identified as Prester John's, a society dominated by the presence of women with great bodies and force, and with great courage, called *pagodynys*, who are presented as Amazons.<sup>27</sup> They choose their governors from among themselves and, when they want to have sex, ask the queen's permission to take a man to their home, who then cannot leave without their permission. When a male child is born, he is abandoned in neighbouring territories outside their kingdom, 'and they never see him again, neither mother knows the son, nor son knows the mother'.<sup>28</sup> It is understood that, here, all gender relations, as perceived by Europeans, are completely subverted, as well as the very essence of motherhood.

Likewise, in the East, we find accounts of groups of women who are described as living like men. A very interesting example, in the eyes of the Portuguese, was that found in the Kingdom of Pegú (Bagó, Myanmar), where Portuguese sources describe, in 1566, a neighbourhood of sailors where beautiful women lived who rowed their vessels better than male forced labourers in Europe. They lived in separate quarters and married each other, and then lived together.<sup>29</sup>

Equally important, and returning to the African women, is their association not only with their sexual practices, usually seen as a great disgrace by the Portuguese men, but also with the practice of abortion as a way of resistance to the miscegenation resulting from imposed sexual relations. Some of the supposed protagonists of these practices are slaves. Again, gender, race and social conditions matter when trying to attribute meaning to these supposed practices and the reliability of the sources. João dos Santos, a Catholic priest, writes:

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, and do not want that to come to light, take a concoction of juice of a certain herb, which exists 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 foetus] they soon look for a man, to whom to give this infirmity ... & the man

26. Fernão Mendes Pinto, *Peregrinação* (Lisbon, 1614).

27. Kim Phillips, 'Warriors, Amazons and Isles of Women: Medieval Travel Writing and Constructions of Asian Femininities', in Cordelia Beattie and Kirsten A. Fenton, eds., *Intersections of Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages* (London, 2011), 183–207.

28. Correa, *Lendas da Índia*, Book 3, Vol. 3, 76–7.

29. Diogo do Couto, *Decada Outava da Asia, dos feitos que os portugueses fizeram na conquista e descobrimento das terras, & mares do Oriente ...* (Lisbon, 1673), 40.



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 take an antidote, provided by the same women].<sup>30</sup>

If one has any doubts about the simultaneous confluence and intermixing of variables like gender, race, ethnicity and status in the colonizers' reaction to autochthone women in these fictional representations, one might take the example of Nzinga, the leader of the Kingdom of Ndongo (present-day Angola). Around 1626, she organized a struggle of resistance against the Portuguese around the so-called *kilombos*. In those communities, women and men lived on equal terms. These were military camps that moved according to the needs of war, with strict military discipline. In these *kilombos*, the creation of children was prohibited, and any that were born were given away at birth to be taken care of.<sup>31</sup> Again, motherhood models were at stake, as much as the status of warriors, which gave these women a bad reputation.

While we have been dealing until now mostly with representations of autochthone women, practices of gender are also to be examined to better understand the agency of women around the Indian Ocean.

## Women's agency in the Indian Ocean World in the face of European colonialism

In the adventure of settlement, autochthone women were not only the basis for the reproduction of colonial societies but also key elements in marriage strategies or assets in the sexual market. The colonial structure makes it impossible to avoid the question of how women enabled further economic contacts and trade between local populations and the Portuguese. What roles did women perform as economic agents? The enactment of family or even sexual ties implied further social connections and very probably economic ones as well. Here, two dimensions need to be analysed: the role played by Asian women before the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century and the role played by local women in the context of colonial settlement or trade arising from the new economic conditions.

The first dimension is beyond the aims and scope of this article. The focus, then, is on the second. Nevertheless, we will have to acknowledge some contributions on the first topic for the period under analysis – namely, the work of Anthony Reid and Ellison Findly.<sup>32</sup>

Reid stresses the relatively high level of female autonomy and economic importance in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century South East Asia, even claiming that women were not equal to men as there were very few areas in which they competed directly with each other, with women having different functions from men, such as planting and harvesting

30. João dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental, e varia historia de cousas, notáveis do Oriente*, Part 1 (Évora, 1609), 89v; our translation.

31. Mariana Bracks Fonseca, 'Ginga de Angola: Memórias e representações da rainha guerreira na diáspora' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of São Paulo, 2018).

32. Reid, 'Female Roles'; Ellison B. Findly, 'The Capture of Maryam-uz-Zamānī's Ship: Mughal Women and European Traders', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 108, No. 2 (1988), 227–38.

rice, weaving and selling in the marketplace. He also stresses that the important economic roles of women explain why the value of daughters was never questioned in South East Asia, as it was in China, India and the Middle East; on the contrary, 'the more daughters a man has, the richer he is', as António Galvão, a Portuguese agent, commented in 1544 when referring to that region.<sup>33</sup>

Both Reid and Findly stress the important role of women rulers in the East. This does not only apply to South East Asia, as the Portuguese sources corroborate, sometimes with significant perplexity. Findly provides the narrative of the Portuguese capture of a ship called *Rahimi*, owned by Maryam-uz-Zamānī, the mother of the Mughal emperor. The dominant position of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean depended on the *Cartaz* system – this is well known. This allowed only ships licensed by the Portuguese to navigate, with all others considered illegal and so potential targets for attack. In 1613, the Portuguese attack on the *Rahimi*, even though she carried the necessary safe-travel pass, proved to be a provocation for the Mughal emperor, Jahangir (ruled 1605–1627), since the owner and patron of the ship was his mother. Most Mughal noblewomen of the period were wealthy, and a number of them were active in highly risky businesses, investing in foreign trade. The story of the *Rahimi* reveals substantial female involvement in Indian trade during that period.<sup>34</sup>

They were not the only ones. Besides exercising political power, elite women in local courts seem to have been involved in significant economic activities. As they were involved in trade and shipping, it was inevitable that the Portuguese had to deal with them as intermediaries in Indian and inter-Asiatic trade.<sup>35</sup> Reid notes the comments of early travellers in South East Asia on the commercial independence of women. This was the case of the imperial Chinese envoy, Zhou Daguan, who visited Cambodia in the late thirteenth century and was struck by the fact that 'the women take charge of trade', while a century later another envoy recorded that in the country of Hsien-lo (Ayudhya, Thailand), most men, from the king down, entrusted 'all trading transactions, great and small', as well as other important decisions, to their wives.<sup>36</sup>

Also, European men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries remarked on the participation of women in small-scale trade. In most areas, as in the Moluccas, 'it is the women who negotiate, do business, buy and sell'.<sup>37</sup> Throughout South East Asia, women also played an important role in agricultural production – a feature that sets the region apart from many other societies where the introduction of grain crops, herding and ploughs saw men dominating agriculture, with women's tasks becoming secondary.<sup>38</sup> This is,

33. António Galvão, *A Treatise on the Moluccas* (circa 1544). This was probably the preliminary version of Galvão's lost *História das Molucas*. See Hubert Jacobs, ed., *História das Molucas*, by António Galvão (Rome, 1971), 89.

34. Findly, 'Capture of Maryam-uz-Zamānī's Ship'.

35. Barbara Watson Andaya, 'Women and Economic Change: The Pepper Trade in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 38, No. 2 (1995), 165–90.

36. Chou Ta Kuan, *Memórias sur les coutumes du cabodge de Tcheou To-Kovan* (1297; Paris, 1951), 20; quoted in Reid, 'Female Roles', 634.

37. Galvão, *Treatise on the Moluccas*, 75; quoted in Reid, 'Female Roles', 634.

38. Andaya, 'Women and Economic Change'.

however, a perspective that faces revision. The role of women throughout the Asian maritime region is underrated, with a lack of documental sources and therefore studies.

On the east coast of Africa, women seem to have had important roles as agents of wealth and the transmission of power – for example, through their dowries. Among many other examples, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Portuguese access to the Monomotapa gold area depended on such intermediation, in which women acted as essential players. Similarly, women in the Zambeze region enjoyed similar roles as property-holders. The *prazos do Zambeze* ('Zambeze leases') have already been the subject of several historical studies in the Portuguese literature.<sup>39</sup> The Zambeze came under Portuguese influence and was ruled by the captain of the Island of Mozambique. The intention was to integrate the extensive properties granted by the Bantu chiefs under Portuguese rule, administration and agrarian exploitation.<sup>40</sup> These grants involved not only the transfer of the use 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 representatives of the Portuguese Crown granted them only to women, daughters of the Portuguese and local women. The sons from these marriages were excluded from the succession since the properties were only transmitted through the female line.<sup>41</sup>

However, the rule was that these women only obtained and retained these leases on the condition that they married white Portuguese men. The meaning of this is twofold. First, it recognized and dignified the role of women, including women of mixed descent, in empire-building processes, following patterns of land transmission that had a matrilineal orientation, although this was not exclusive to the Zambeze region. Second, the condition of marrying white Portuguese men indicates a clear intention of 'whitening' the land and the owners of power.

In the East, the number of Portuguese widows acting on behalf of their deceased husbands also illustrates their role as active economic agents. The records repeatedly refer to this, including the classic example of Dona Luisa da Silveira, the widow of the former governor of Hormuz, who was authorized by the Portuguese Crown in 1622 to

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39. José Capela, *Donas, senhores e escravos* (Porto, 1995); Allen Isaacman, *Mozambique: The Africanization of a European Institution: The Zambezi Prazos, 1750–1902* (Madison, WI, 1972); Alexandre Lobato, *Colonização senhorial da Zambézia e outros estudos* (Lisbon, 1962); M. D. D. Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement on the Zambesi* (London, 1973); Eugénia Rodrigues, 'Portugueses e Africanos nos Rios de Sena: Os prazos da coroa nos séculos XVII e XVIII' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Lisbon, 2002).

40. These were latifundia, which were transformed into royal Portuguese properties and granted by the Crown for three successive generations, in return for an annual fee paid by the holders of the rental contract in gold dust. This territory became relevant after the 1607 and 1629 treaties with the Monomotapa, which acknowledged the Portuguese Crown's ownership of vast areas in exchange for military support.

41. This is nothing exceptional according to Portuguese law, which allowed inheritance through daughters and followed, after all, the local prevalence of matrilineal lines of succession. This had previously been the practice in India with the 'villages in the North', from Chaul to Daman, a region administered from Bassein.

act as a shipping manager – a position dispensed by the Portuguese Crown.<sup>42</sup> In the eastern context, this was not uncommon, considering the roles of autochthone women.

If we orient our research towards Fernão Mendes Pinto and his testimony in *Peregrinação*,<sup>43</sup> the ultimate expression of informal and self-organized entrepreneurship, women emerge as intermediaries, as well as protectors and saviours of the Portuguese. It is no wonder that they also appear as translators, as *línguas*, elements of communication between the different worlds, mastering diverse languages. According to Pinto, women played a crucial role as interpreters long before the Portuguese arrived. He recounts how, when he first arrived in Japan,

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.<sup>44</sup>

The same trend is acknowledged within the scope of the Dutch colonial presence in the East. The first Dutch mission to Cochín-China was received 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 husband, had been the principal translator for the Cochín-China court for 30 years.<sup>45</sup>

There are other cases of mediation by women in what one could categorize as ‘economies of knowledge’. Since European expansion and dominium depended on knowledge of the climate, geography, production and consumption markets, as well as maritime circuits, languages, cultures, trade products and trade hubs, information was a most valuable asset. Women were part of the chain of information transmission and crucial elements of networks in which acquaintance and kinship consolidated patterns of cooperation. Those fluxes of information were not, however, unilateral, and the same women could be equally valuable for their societies, communities and native families, using the money, power and influence of the newcomers. They even performed as elements of contact and communication between European settlers. We should stress that, in Macao, many Chinese women were the partners of Portuguese men first and, later, of other

42. Germano da Silva Correia, *História da colonização portuguesa na Índia* (Lisbon, 1948–1956); quoted in Boxer, *A mulher*, 98.

43. Pinto, *Peregrinação*. Pinto (1509–1583) sailed from Portugal on 11 March 1537, bound for India. According to his own testimony in *Peregrinação*, he claimed to have been shipwrecked, captured and sold into slavery 16 or 17 times. The accuracy of his record is somewhat doubtful; reality is frequently mixed with fantastic and heroic narratives in his biography. “Fernão Mendes Pinto”, in Luis de Albuquerque, ed., *Dicionário da expansão portuguesa*, vol. 2 (Lisbon, 1994), 904–6.

44. Pinto, *Peregrinação*, 158v; our translation.

45. Letter from Tachem (Tatchim, Cochín-China), 5 April 1602; quoted in Reid, ‘Female Roles’, 636.

Europeans living there – namely, Scandinavian supercargoes in Canton –, spending a great deal of time in Macao.<sup>46</sup> The autochthone wives of Portuguese settlers operated within the scope of the British settlement of Madras on the Coromandel Coast, as we learn from the work of Radhika Seshan.<sup>47</sup> They became natural brokers between worlds, not only connecting European and non-European universes, but also establishing contacts among the Europeans themselves.

There are other levels on which women acted as intermediaries, since they were also agents of linguistic, cultural and knowledge transfers. The overall content of this article points to an unavoidable conclusion: women were, by necessity, elements of cultural transfer between worlds. As partners and spouses, they would inevitably transmit language, practices of hygiene, diet and food preparation rules, and an aesthetic sensibility. As mothers, they were educators, so their capacity to transfer to the next generation codes of conduct, ethical behaviour and values – beyond religious rites – would have been paramount.

The large number of mestizas, resulting from a variety of mixed contacts, both licit and illicit, formal and informal, constituted an even more impressive driving force. In addition to their central role in genetics, material culture and daily life, their economic role appears to have been significant, as well as their actions as political intermediaries and channels of information. As important as their performances in these domains were, their role as translators, in the widest sense of the word, and as agents of knowledge transference was paramount.

This article has attempted to provide empirical evidence of previous assumptions in selected fields. As impressive as these accounts might be, they cannot be considered a paradigm: comparative perspectives must be used to check the interactions of the Portuguese within other colonial settlements, particularly in Africa and Brazil, and the interaction of other European agents in the territories of the East and Far East. Furthermore, these findings, which are valid for the period of the first contacts mostly in the sixteenth century in the East, do not necessarily apply to the same extent to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – a time when European colonial models were quite different and the European players quite diverse.

Summing up, time, space and models of colonization matter. They are central variables in a historical equation in which the role of women has proven to be essential. The differential nature of their historical performances can only be assessed by promoting comparative studies that depart from a common model of analysis and are applied to different times, spaces and colonial settlements.

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46. Lisa Helmann, 'Navigating the Foreign Quarters: Everyday Life of the Swedish East India Company Employees in Canton and Macao 1730–1830' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Stockholm, 2015).

47. Radhika Seshan, 'Trans-Nation and Informal Networks in the Seventeenth Century Coromandel Coast', in Amélia Polónia and Cátia Antune, eds., *Seaports in the First Global Age: Portuguese Agents, Networks and Interactions, 1500–1800* (Porto, 2017), 347–56.

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