Les Chroniques

LA CHRONIQUE DES LECTURES
sous la responsabilité de Michel Cahen

Les comptes rendus

Clara CARVALHO & João de Pina CABRAL (eds), *A persistência da história: passado e contemporaneidade em África*, Lisbon, Imprensa das Ciências Sociais, 2004, 393 p., ISBN: 972-671-132-0.

Franz-Wilhelm Heimer is a scholar who richly deserves to be rewarded for his “persistent enthusiasm” with a *festschrift* of high-quality scholarly essays. Clara Carvalho and João de Pina Cabral have done the academic world the singular service of editing such a collection and the Lisbon institute of social sciences is to be congratulated on its publication.

No country can flourish without a history to underpin its identity and self-respect and so a team of scholars met at Brown University in 2002 – the year in which the guns fell silent in Angola – to see how best to piece together the fragments of evidence which survive from the colonial experience in Lusophone Africa¹. The resulting book is divided into three parts, The Fragile Empire, The Precarious Cape Verdes, and The Moulding of Mozambique. Although Cape Verde and Mozambique hold prominent places in the collection let it not be assumed that this book is for regional specialists alone; much of what the authors have to say is richly illuminating of the historical experience throughout Africa.

Wilson Trajano Filho, from Brasília, begins by surveying the self-deprecating attitude to the “fragile empire” which descended on Portugal after the 1822 independence of Brazil, a lethargy out of which the country was not shaken until Lord Salisbury told “poor Portugal” to keep off the lawns belonging to Cecil Rhodes. The chapter ranges through the literature from the statistical volumes of Lopes de Lima to the ironic essays of Eça de Queiroz with an occasional nod towards the modernity of the Commaroffs. The key theme of the chapter, and indeed of the whole book, is ambiguity, the multiple identities of those who lived – and live – in colonies and anciennes colonies, constantly adapting themselves to their circumstances and opportunities. Trajano quotes the romanticised self-image of the son of a Bissau chief who, in 1912, is also an officer in the colonial army:

“Eu como official de 2ª linha do exercito portuguez, patria que tanto amo, defendi e defenderei sempre, porque, apesar de não ter nascido em Portugal sou portuguez d’alma e coração, não posso assim abdicar dos meus direitos nem deixar enxovalhar a nossa venerada bandeira perante os selvagens que riem do nosso presitigio e governo”.

¹ The word Lusophone was coined by me in Dar-es-Salaam in 1973 to embrace both the colonists and the nationalists in the Portuguese-speaking colonies. The term was offered in homage to the scholar-admiral Avelino Teixeira da Mota who adopted it and translated it as *lusófono*.

In another chapter of part one of the book Cristina Bastos finds the imperial ambiguities in a different domain, among the Indian physicians of Christian Goa who were not deemed appropriate to serve in the metropolitan medical services but who could be sent to the African colonies. In the second half of the nineteenth century no less than forty of them were posted to the little Mozambican town of Sofala where Arthur Ignacio da Gama kept fascinating records from his vantage point as a middle-level cadre in contact with both the white officer class and the black subject class. The other two chapters relating to “the vulnerable empire” concern Angola, where Ricardo Roque uses the records of effective occupation to examine Moxico in 1902, and Guiné (stamping ground of the aforementioned scholar-admiral) where Clara Carvalho researched a little essay on colonial imagery, a subject now much in vogue in the footsteps of Elizabeth Edwards and Paul Jenkins who have revolutionised the study of colonial photography.

Turning to part two of the *festschrift* João Vasconcelos has written an article entitled “Espíritos lusófonos numa ilha crioula : língua, poder e identidade em São Vicente de Cabo Verde” which ought to become familiar to anyone struggling to understand the concepts of language, power and identity. In the nineteenth century Oliveira Martins argued that the Cape Verdes almost qualified to be seen as a metropolitan province akin to the Azores and strongly contrasted them to São Tomé, a plantation colony, or Angola, a trading factory. But the situation is more complex and although São Vicente might be conceived of as a European island, Santiago was perceived to be African as the islands sought their place in the changing post-colonial world. More interesting still is the fact that although Angola may have appeared to some to be little more than a trading factory, in practice the old colonial enclaves of Luanda and Benguela appear to bear similarities to some Cape Verdian communities, a thesis which deserves further scholarly scrutiny.

The main preoccupation of Vasconcelos is with language. Portuguese is the language of power, of prestige, of influence, not a language to be used with children, or for jokes, or for affectionate exchanges. Where then does language fit in the religious domain. In the congregations of the “Rational Christian Church” of the Mindelo slums, where most people spoke only Creole, the spirit mediums who interpreted the wishes of the dead spoke in Portuguese and not in Creole. More curiously still the medium who held the microphone and spoke in tongues was often a person who in civilian life did not understand Portuguese, sure proof that it was the spirit and not the medium who was speaking. The spiritual church of the little world of Mindelo, to which shoe-making and tailoring have been transferred off-shore from the villages of northern Portugal and in which the beat rhythms of Bob Marley resonates down the dusty alleys, has developed a worldwide network of Cape Verdian émigrés with a call centre in Rio de Janeiro.

Luis Batalha has presented a thought-provoking essay on race and class which, while analysing the Cape Verde élite from the middle of the nineteenth century, has resonances for the whole Lusophone world. The children of the upper class élite which began attending boarding schools in Lisbon from the 1850s left the islands thinking that they were white and arrived in Portugal to find that they were seen as black. Like the doctors of Goa they often gained distinguished academic qualifications but they were barred from the highest offices of both state

and army and had to be content with middle-ranking metropolitan service or with postings overseas. To have complained about racial unfairness would have compounded their plight and so Cape Verdians in Lisbon created their own ultra-conservative dining club where they continued to congregate, wearing formal Edwardian-style suits and shawls, and to which they welcomed the almost-white refugees who left São Vicente in 1975 when the balance of power shifted to the new élite of Santiago with its links to the Bissau mainland. Like the *pieds noirs* in France, the Cape Verdians remembered their old colonial status and preserved their old traditions, most notably the celebration of the spring carnival.

Despite the pride of its élite São Vicente was an island of poverty and Isabel Rodrigues discusses survival strategies on an island that scarcely ever saw rain and on which drinking water for goats, pigs and people was until recently brought from a neighbouring island in a small steamer called the *Tarrafalzinho*. When desalinization became possible rural people moved to town where water was available in the corrugated iron slums that grew up on the outskirts of the old community of traders and smugglers and children skipped through the streets selling cigarettes by the stick and chewing-gum by the piece.

Until recently twentieth-century history in Africa was neatly split between the colonial and the post-colonial with a demarcation in 1960 when France made its colonies into neo-colonies, Lusophone nationalists took up arms against Lusophone settlers, and the British departed from West Africa leaving the Nigerians to fight each other over their oil wealth. Half a century later that dividing line no longer looks very significant and Stephen Lubkemann writes his opening chapter on “the moulding of Mozambique” under the title “reducing colonialism to realistic proportions”. One of the major experiences of life in southern Mozambique throughout the century was labour migration, an economic option which had profound effects on power relations, on gender relations, and on spiritual relations that wholly transcends the almost obsolete dichotomy between colonial and post-colonial history. According to Lubkemann migration, which continued through the years of independence, civil war and civil peace, has less to do with resistance to, or compliance with, Portuguese colonial policy and more to do with the internal social relations of the community which he studied in the buckle of the Save River on the borders of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and South Africa. The essay is particularly focussed on the concept of cross-frontier polygyny in which men have one wife in the waged but violent and corrupt urban environment of South Africa and – unbeknown to each other – another wife in the cheap but disease – and drought-ridden farmlands of Mozambique. As bride wealth rose the freedom of women shrank when family elders could no longer contemplate the option of divorce and the consequent requirement to repay the dowry.

One feature of Lusophone African history that deserves closer study is the role of Zionism, an American sect that operated out of Illinois and greatly influenced the Swiss evangelist Chatelain during his last years on the Angolan plateau. In Mozambique, as Teresa Cruz e Silva points out, Zionist healing, purification, speaking in tongues and advocacy of taboos spread rapidly through the peri-urban communities of Maputo during the stressful decade of the 1980s. The waves of civil-war urbanisation brought vigorous pentacostal evangelism in which the Zionists were paralleled by the Apostolic and Ethiopian growth of churches.

When José Teixeira went to the northern end of Mozambique he asked his peasant informants which had been the best, and which the worst, of the many “tribes” of aid workers who had descended on them from Asia, the Americas and Europe. The worst, they said, had been the Chinese who were not allowed to offer lifts to natives in their pick-up trucks. The best had been the Romanians who visited the villages, drank *aguardente* with our men, and – like the Portuguese of old – shared sexual pleasures with our women. The sexual dimension of Portuguese colonisation went through several stages. In the early years of thinly scattered male colonists social and sexual partnerships were normal and legitimate, but the hard years of brutal colonialism which followed illegitimised sexual fraternisation though without providing any alternative outlets for male desires, thus driving late colonialism, and the subsequent civil wars, towards violence and rape. Peace brought a return to social-sexual harmony and hospitality: “please do me the favour of having my daughter who will carry water for you and cook as well as comforting your libido”. The nostalgic memory of the good old times in the early colony almost reminds one of the old Congolese who had lived through a Belgian era filled with exploitation and violence and yet said “oh, when will this independence ever end?”

Gregório Firmino returns to the subject of language and power. Independent Mozambique chose Portuguese as the national language in order to hold together people of many vernaculars (and also, though he does not spell it out, to proudly mark Mozambique’s national distinctiveness as compared to its Anglophone neighbours among whom so many Mozambicans were accustomed to working.) Language, although constantly changing and adapting, is one of the key features of the continuities that are so striking in Africa a full generation after independence. This is one of the factors that causes João de Pina Cabral, in his concluding remarks, to emphasise once more that the received dichotomy between colonial and post-colonial is profoundly misleading.

Cabral’s conclusion emphasises the persistence of history in the book’s title. Ambiguities, identities, intermediate categories of race, class and language, continuities that persist from the deep past to the colonial half-century, rival continuities that transcend the transition to independence and make the term “post-colonial” almost meaningless, the ultra-fashionable concept of hegemonic domination, all of these are illustrated in a quite splendid book.

1st February 2006, David Birmingham

José Medeiros FERREIRA (ed.), *Política externa e política de defesa do Portugal democrático*, Lisbonne, Edições Colibri/Fundação Mario Soares/ Instituto de História Contemporânea da Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2001, 231 p., ISBN 972-772-221 (« Cursos Livres de História Contemporânea/Coleção Colóquios »).

Depuis le rétablissement de la démocratie au Portugal, les politiques étrangères et de défense nationale ont considérablement changé. Ce sont ces vingt-cinq années de mutation que l’ouvrage coordonné par José Medeiros Ferreira aborde, en appor-