CHAPTER SIX

IMPERIAL POWER THROUGH CULTURE AND RELIGION

The previous two chapters examined two instruments of Portuguese prolongation in the East that have often been overlooked, that is, war and diplomacy, as well as economic issues involved with the survival of the formal Estado da Índia in the first half of the eighteenth century. In contrast, survival in the longer term is customarily attributed, to use a modern-day term, to ‘soft power’—conversions, mixed marriages and the use of the Portuguese language. What is often overlooked is that activities involving ‘soft power’ required state support: On the ground from the viceregal government and from Portugal, in terms of monies and other resources from the King. Also, ‘soft power’, in the contemporary context, is deemed to work best when the political entity-in-question is in hegemony. This chapter will highlight that even a ‘weak and marginalised’ power has its use for this avenue of ‘foreign and colonial policy’. The first two parts of this chapter will demonstrate that the King’s interest had a part to play in seemingly unofficial business where the survival of the Estado da India was concerned. In another unlikely area, the struggle of Portuguese officialdom to consolidate and even extend a foothold in the Dutch-permeated East Indies (i.e., Timor) is examined and reappraised vis-à-vis the workings of ‘soft power’ and its trade linkages to Macao. In terms of the overall thesis and theme, softer instruments of state power and their role in the periphery and as a whole needs to be reaffirmed in the context of the survival of the Estado da Índia.

“Civilising Mission” via Language and Customs

Commenting on the colour question at the Raleigh Lecture in 1961, Boxer pointed out there was never any doubt about the practice of discrimination by the Portuguese from the moment they set foot in Asia. This bias “assumed different forms at different times and places”. For

instance, as pointed out in chapter 4, the Portuguese believed that most eastern peoples were ‘militarily useless’, except for the Japanese. In the first half of the eighteenth century, this observation was repeated by the Count of Ericeira—that Indiaticos were inferior to officers trained in Europe. At times, “political factors intruded on race” along with religious criteria

Blacks, namely Africans and south Indians were hopeless, inferior, incapable of improvement and stuck in superstition; Whites, Japanese and Chinese, on the other hand, met European standards, may even be superior in some areas, were good prospects for conversion.

This seems to bear a striking resemblance to classification by ‘degree of civilisation’ which was the rationale used by the Salazar regime in the twentieth century to justify the retention of its colonies.

Whatever bias the Portuguese might have shown towards the races they came into contact with, or which were under their control, they exhibited idealism, some sensitivity and definitely pragmatism in dealing with them. Boxer felt that “the policy of the Crown towards the colour-bar in the Estado da Índia was not always clear and consistent”; nor was it practised most of the time in reality. It seems that the “Portuguese took [more to] the line that religion and not colour should be the criterion for Portuguese citizenship”. Accordingly, the Portuguese view of superiority, as with the perception of the other Europeans, though perhaps less staunchly so, was tied intimately to the religious status of the individual, although Pearson cautions against stressing this too much. Ideally, the Crown had decreed that all Indian converts be allowed the same privileges as Portuguese (Goan) citizenry. Laws

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2 G.V. Scammell, Ships, Oceans and Empire, 1400–1700 (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), XII, 482.

3 Boxer, “The Colour Question in the Portuguese Empire”, 102, 106.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid. See also C. Young, The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). By the Statute of Indigenous Populations adopted in 1929, the internal classification of indigenous people was made according to the degree of Europeanisation they had undergone. Those who were ‘assimilated’ to some extent were not subjected to for example, paid forced labour; as were the mass of indigenous people.


7 Ibid.