

# Women in the Portuguese colonial empire

This miscellaneous collection is most welcome, for it makes available to anglophone scholars recent and very challenging feminist work on the position of women in the Portuguese colonial empire. The editor, Clara Sarmiento, claims that women have been generally neglected in writings on the Lusitanian empire.

Michael Pearson



Fig. 1 (left)  
Old Portuguese canon  
at Dili harbour, East  
Timor. Photograph  
by Kok Leng Yeo

Fig. 2 (inset top)  
Cathedral of St. Paul,  
Macao, China.

Fig. 3 (inset below)  
Se Cathedral, Old Goa,  
India. Photograph  
by Danny Burke.

Sarmiento, Clara, ed. 2008.  
*Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire:  
the Theatre of Shadows.*  
Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.  
xxi + 304 pages, ISBN 978 184 718718 5.

CLARA SARMENTO WRITES THAT THE AIM is to remedy the 'absence of women in Portuguese historiography' especially such 'socially marginalised and destitute' examples as slaves, orphans and nuns (p. xi). This complaint of neglect of women seems to apply mostly to non-Portuguese scholarship, for the 16-page bibliography shows how much has been done in Portuguese. The absence of women in anglophone work was recently made apparent with the publication of a very comprehensive collection edited by Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Ramada Curto, *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400-1800*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007. (I must disclose here that I contributed to this volume.) Already well reviewed, and apparently fast becoming the standard text on the empire for an English-reading audience, it is regrettable that while most of the major themes are covered, there is no separate discussion of women, and nor are they mentioned in any detail in any of the chapters. The value of Sarmiento's collection is that it makes available to a wider public feminist work based on Portuguese sources but presented in English.

## Women as witches and slaves

There are a total of 21 chapters in the book, some very short and speculative, others more substantial. Of the authors, ten come from Brazil, nine, including the editor, from Portugal, while there is one each from the US and from Macao. They come from a wide range of disciplines, though a cultural studies approach certainly underpins many of the essays. Overall, the book 'is an attempt to reclaim the position to which women were entitled, jointly with men, in social spaces in general and in colonial spaces in particular...' (p. xix)

A brief summary of each of the chapters will reveal the diversity of this collection. The editor's introduction opens with a plea to take seriously the role of women in the empire, and concludes with a brief discussion of each contribution. The first seven chapters deal with slavery. It will be remembered that in Brazil the slave trade was prohibited only in 1850, while slavery itself

continued until its abolition in 1888. Readers will also recollect that Brazil became independent from Portugal in 1822, Maria Ângela de Faria Grillo writes on memories of slavery in Brazil. It is notable that children born of a slave were also ranked as servile, thus making children very valuable. Like any other possession, slaves were merely commodities. Using newspaper advertisements, she sketches appalling conditions, and also resistance. This took various forms, including suicide and attacks on owners. Daniela Buono Calainho uses Inquisition documents to write on witchcraft and slavery in the metropole. Showing a mixture of Christian and 'African' ideas, witchcraft was very widespread, and should be seen as a means of survival in a hostile world. Unlike some of the other contributors, Calainho locates her data in a wider framework. She demonstrates an excellent knowledge of the copious European literature on witchcraft in other areas.

## Women as slave owners

Eugénia Rodrigues' chapter is one of two on Portuguese Africa. She is concerned with slavery in the *prazos* of the Zambezi river valley in the 18th century. Many of the female *prazo* holders were of mixed race, and owned vast numbers of male domestic slaves, this being important for status reasons. There is excellent detail on their food and clothing. The most valued were those who could cook according to European methods. There follows an analysis of parts of the '*Anais de Vila Bela*,' relating to Mato Grosso in Brazil. The author, Leny Caselli Anzai, provides a sample of information concerning slavery from this very valuable source, and especially the *quilombos*, or settlements, established by escaped slaves. Margarida Seixas gives a detailed legalistic study of the position of slave women's children. The central concept is the rather daunting notion of 'freedom of the womb,' which was accepted only in 1856, though even then any such 'free' child still had to work for the owner for 20 years.

The chapter by Selma Pantoja uses travellers' accounts and early photographs, some of which are reproduced in an appendix, to discuss women's work in the fairs and markets of Luanda. She subjects these photographs to a very interesting cultural studies oriented 'unpacking.' They essentially exoticised the market women. As she notes, 'Far from being neutral and innocent images, purely mechanical copies of reality, as was thought in the 19th century, the photograph displays a selected aspect from reality, thus being a determining cultural fact'

(p. 82). The final slavery chapter, by Zélia Bora, is again in the cultural studies vein. It looks at women's role in food and religion in Brazil in the late 19th century, focussing on *angú*, a type of dough, and an African based spiritual expression called *Candomblé*.

## Women as agents and objects of sin

The next section deals with literature and female voices. Betina Ruiz briefly discusses the love letters of a 17th century nun, Mariana da Costa Alcoforado, which have been subjected to various analyses. This is followed by a substantial piece by the editor, Clara Sarmiento, on the vexed topic of St. Francis Xavier's view of women. He found there were four types: European; converted; of another religion; agents and objects of sin. The last could include people from the first three categories. For him women and original sin were inextricably linked. He always saw them through the prism of his two main objectives: to convert people, and expand the Society of Jesus. Sarmiento says she is dubious about the oft-made claim that Xavier was a misogynist, yet I regret to say that the data she presents seems to make a strong case for exactly this criticism. This is followed by two succinct chapters. Cristina Pinto da Silva analyses the diary of a teacher in Macao, and her problems in teaching Portuguese to Chinese students. Dalila Silva Lopes then discusses a well known novel on the fall of the Portuguese empire, '*O Esgendor de Portugal*,' by António Lobo Antunes. She is concerned to foreground female voices in the novel, an example then of the focus of the whole book, which is to bring to our attention the usually neglected role of women in the empire. The contribution of Maria Helena Guimarães is rather similar. It discusses a novel about Swiss migrants to Brazil in the mid 19th century.

The last four chapters in this section are rather diverse. Luisa Langford Correia dos Santos provides a rather discursive but interesting account of Portuguese migration to Brazil after the end of slavery. Most of the incomers were men, and their aim, rather predictably, was to make money and then return to Portugal, marry and build a big house. There follows an analysis by Monica Rector of what she calls a pre-feminist play manuscript of 1898, which uses humour to criticise the position of women in Portuguese society. Finally, Teresinha Gema Lins Brandão Chaves gives us extracts from four female travellers' books about women in Brazil in the 19th century.

## Women as religious observers

The final six chapters are concerned with cultural behaviour. Célia Maia Borges writes on females in the religious sphere. This fine study of ascetic-mystical movements in the 16th and 17th centuries shows that women, whose practices included mortification, prophecies and visions, were often (and I suppose not surprisingly) badly treated by established church authorities, and especially by the Inquisition. The next chapter is by Daniel Schroeter Simião, who writes on education in East Timor. This has been something of a success. Before independence village women were rarely given a role, but now they have done much better, including serving in parliament and even as Cabinet Ministers. Maria de Deus Beites Manso gives us a fascinating case study of a Brazilian woman who was divorced, and then incarcerated by the Misericórdia. She challenged this patriarchal society and finally was released, ironically to the custody of her son-in-law.

Isabel Pinto's chapter runs somewhat against the grain, for her study of female subordination claims that this ostensible discrimination is balanced by the fact that only women can ensure 'the reproduction of the species.' The next chapter returns to 19th century Brazil. Larissa Patron Chaves discusses immigration to Brazil after the end of the slave trade. Much attention has been paid to Italian and German migrants, but as one would expect the majority were Portuguese. She looks at the role of Benevolent Associations, charitable bodies which, unlike the better known Santa Casas de Misericórdia, were funded by its members. Given the social context, they were, with few exceptions, dominated by men. The final chapter is a welcome detailed study of the relationship between women and the Misericórdia in Macao. There is good data on who got charity—mostly women—and how funds were raised.

My succinct notices on these 21 chapters show how diverse this collection is. Theoretical and methodological underpinnings vary greatly. Some are very short and on very specific topics, others quite the reverse. It must also be said that the scholarly quality ranges from excellent to weak. However, the diversity of the book is really one of its strong points, for it gives some impression of the very wide range of feminist scholarship concerned with the position of women in the 'Theatre of Shadows' that is the Portuguese empire. I hope that this publication will bring this important genre to the notice of a wide international audience.

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The most  
valued  
[slaves] were  
those who  
could cook  
according  
to European  
methods.