

Women, colonialism and building sites. Gender experiences in former African territories ruled by the Portuguese through colonial archives

Ana Vaz Milheiro

Dinâmia'CET, Iscte - University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract: Recent studies on the interaction between labor and colonialism have been challenging the claim that "the history of labor in public works construction is generally presented as a male experience" (Jha 2020). Following the still prevalent narratives, previous research that intersected Portuguese colonialism and unskilled labor also followed a male-oriented direction. Research on the hierarchies established on and by the construction site is still scarce, and the gap is even greater when women are involved. Despite the vast international literature, there are no narratives that frame women's roles in public works in the former African territories under Portuguese rule (Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe). This article aims to explore how women filled these gaps, discussing the extent to which they took on logistical roles, incorporated unskilled tasks (quarrying stones; carrying mud), or influenced program and architectural agendas with an impact on design and construction systems, until they achieved greater empowerment during the colonial war/liberation (1961-74).

Introduction

The predominance of male histories within the field of construction studies in formerly colonized territories has mostly followed the pattern of colonial archives, where the presence of women on the building site must be dug deep into the documents, far beyond the surface. Many authors have emphasized to the present day how the history of construction work remains a narrative "presented as a male experience" (Jha 2020, 71-98). By acknowledging the shortcomings and the pitfalls of this background, this paper aims to challenge and break with such a hegemony by gradually unravelling the presence of women on Colonial Public Works (CPW) sites. In particular, it will question female experiences throughout the former African territories under Portuguese rule: Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Angola and Mozambique. Across these geographies, women laborers will be mainly queried as producers of wide-ranging types of infrastructure, from transport networks, basic sanitation and electrification works, to strategic equipment and buildings. The recent and thought-provoking work by the historian Madhavi Jha for the Indian colonial context will be a key epistemological framework for this study (Jha 2020, 71-98).

Chronologically, the analysis pinpoints and explores case studies surveyed between the last hundred years of the so-called "third Portuguese colonial empire" (Clarence-Smith 1990), until 1974-75, with the emergence of the new African nations after the 1974 Portuguese revolution that ended the dictatorship in the country and began the independence processes. The paper uses "documenting" as a verb to pave the way for debating three research avenues: it will question

women's presence "through salary"; "through photography"; "through propaganda".

This research engages with two different approaches to archives and archival work. It first arose from the challenge launched at the beginning of the century by Ann Laura Stoler in one of her most impactful works, entitled "Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense", published in 2009. This ground-breaking critique was previously noted in an article from 2002, in which Stoler identified "colonial archives as 'systems of expectation'" (Stoler 2002, 109); while advocating for studying the archival material not only as a source but also (and mainly) as a subject. Stoler summed: "In turning from an extractive to a more ethnographic project, our readings need to move in new ways through archives both along their fault lines as much as against their grain". Although this article does not aim to look at the "archive as an ethnographic object", Stoler's criticism concerning the "extractivist" use of the archival material remains very meaningful to the research and to our understanding of how to proceed with archival work. Later, the historian Remco Raben pondered Stoler's position, further compounding new perspectives that are also of greatest interest: "Realities remain unclear, or deceptively clear" (Raben 2009, 558). Such an observation becomes even sharper from the point of view of an anonymous subject, like the above-mentioned female workers, who (subtly) show up in the archive through disguised references included among the documentation produced by the colonial apparatus: photographs that are not always captioned, scarce mentions on the margins of reports, or across labor legislation. By looking at past research, Raben pointed out how the archive



Figure 1 Praia's airfield hangar, construction of the concrete floor, Santiago, Cape Verde, 1956-57 (National Archive of Cape Verde).

was used to recurrently "direct" the process of "writing" historiographical analysis.

In Raben's words, "there was a time when colonial historiography was performed by going to archives, reading what colonial administration had to say about the topic.... There was a time when perusing those same archives was an extremely suspect, if inevitable, activity" (Raben 2009, 556).

It was from in-between these two ends, and by following the scant evidence provided by the archive, that the presence of women in the building sites of the former territories dominated by the Portuguese began to be traced a few years ago. The research aims to add to the ongoing studies about the roles and impact of unskilled labor in construction and the different actors involved in CPW. One of the key goals of this approach is to boost broader narratives that go beyond the (still prevalent) usual canonical actors who have dominated studies on the production of architecture in the last century of Portuguese rule. By focusing on the unskilled worker—and in this particular case, the woman—historiography has opened new ground for fresh perspectives and, ideally, in the future, "hearing the voice [of these people]". However, the analytical category of the "unskilled worker" cannot be narrowed to adult men, white or African, settler or local, prisoner or free, compulsorily recruited or in full exercise of their professional freedom—in fact, there are many other categories that help to shape this profile; and gender is certainly one of them. Despite the recognition of the female role across construction sites, narratives about labor in colonial environments have not (yet) been able to highlight other protagonists, as pointed out by Colonial Legal History (Dayton 1993). Even the pioneering readings by Frederick Cooper since the 1980s have not pinpointed women as one of these actors (Cooper 1994; Cooper 1995; Cooper 1996). And yet, among the profiles of unskilled workers, one could find children or adolescents; particular ethnic groups or those belonging to geographies delimited regionally or nationally, as happened with the "Cape Verdeans" recruited to work throughout the former "Portuguese Empire"; and, manifestly, again, women—the subject of this article. (Fig. 1)

Significantly, the very scarce mentions in Portuguese historiography of the existence of women recruited among the African populations for tasks related to the construction of territorial infrastructure come precisely from colonial inspectors' reports, hinting at the significance of the

administrative documentation. This documentation has been transferred to the Overseas Historical Archive (AHU), where it can be currently accessed. In the field of the so-called "public utility works", for example, Philip Havik has noticed, in a pioneering article from 2006, the presence of "girls (in road works) in competition with men", by quoting official documents (Havik 2006). (Fig. 2) References like Havik's uphold the importance of the archive in unearthing the role of women in public works, while opening up new questions for further research. Most of these questions unsurprisingly have to do with the colonizer's stereotypes in the division of labor on the building site, overall based on gender issues. The work of Boris Bertolt is particularly useful here to understand this mismatch of visions and its impact on the treatment of gender in contemporary African societies (Bertolt 2018). In the Portuguese context, relationships with other agents on the building site shed light on the role of women in the group, which would be recorded as a "family unit", as legislated by the "Labour Code for Indigenous in Portuguese Colonies in Africa" of 1928 (Labour Code 1928).



Figure 2 Farol das Três Pontas. Road works (Angola Hydrographic Mission 1936-1941, IICT).

Substantial gaps in the archives are to be acknowledged beforehand—particularly in the AHU records, on which this research heavily relies. As previously hinted, these gaps have been a source of misunderstandings, by persistently limiting the diversity of agents involved in colonization. Drawing

attention to this recurrence, Stoler had already mentioned the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who earlier described how the Haitian Revolution had been silenced in official documentation (Trouillot 1995 apud Stoler 2002, 93). Unfortunately, in the case of Portuguese colonialism, there have not yet been any approaches to clearly identify the omissions that can consign women to a "spectral existence".

Finally, a few narrower chronological settings have been established to frame this research, since they entail different approaches to female laborers. Within the so-called period of "modern colonization", between an international geopolitical event—the Berlin Conference (1884–85)—and the publication of the Portuguese Colonial Act in 1930—a document that defined the Portuguese policies under the dictatorial Estado Novo rule, which was a fascist-inspired political regime that survived the Second World War and lasted until the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974, by when the independence of the former Portuguese colonies in Africa (Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Angola and Mozambique) also happened—women were referred to in payment lists and their relationship with their male partners. From 1928 onwards, after the publication of the Portuguese Native Labour Code, as already mentioned, women were integrated into "family units", thus being included in "contracts" that linked them to the male member of the family, usually the husband. The law stated: "Women can only contract services outside their place of habitual residence when accompanied by their husband, father, uncles or older brothers..." (Labour Code 1928). As they were not among the legislators' concerns when it came to recruitment, female workers ended up being blurred out in the documents. Later, following the Second World War and the subsequent decades, women reappeared most often in colonies with a lower capacity to attract migrants. Finally, during the colonial/liberation wars (1961–74), they were above all mentioned as agents involved in the consolidation of the Portuguese colonization policies.

1. Documenting through salary scales

The first references to women in Portuguese colonial building sites date back to reports from the end of the nineteenth century. This was the case with a report on Angola, covering a period from 1877 to 1881, which dealt specifically with the "problem of labor in this province" (Rosa 1877-81). The document exposed the difficulties faced by colonial employers due to the resistance of African workers to comply with Western labor standards (attendance, working hours, etc.). Significantly, African women were seen as living in "perfect slavery" compared to men, who were "always indolent" (Rosa 1877-81, 142). These comments denounce the colonial prejudice that led the administration to devise measures to "protect" African women from their own male nationals. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explained this "syndrome" in the allegory "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1985, 93), deeply rooted in colonial tradition, from an inter-imperial perspective.

In the same report and following the observations about the "indolent" profile of the African worker, a table was used to propose wage rates, broken down into ten categories of wage earners. The table was the result of a series of measures adopted to "allure" workers, such as increasing salaries and

implementing a regular weekly payment system. The aim was to prevent absenteeism, which was a cross-cutting concern in the management of large CPW teams of workers. A set of management tasks further was proposed: scorer, foreman, watchmen, "specialized workers" (carpenters, master builders, bricklayers), and "unskilled workers", among which there were men, "maids" and "menial servants" (Rosa 1877-81; Martins, 1997, 498). (Fig. 3) At the building site, the hierarchy was thus highly accentuated and consigned women to the bottom of the unskilled labor pool: not only did they receive 4/5 to 3/5 of the men's wages, but they were treated as minors and received the same amounts (Rosa 1877-81, 93).

The condition of African women on building sites was also a consequence of racial segregation, from which the division of labor steamed and was further reinforced by a solid distinction between "white Europeans" and "black Africans". In 1901, a report by the Directorate of Public Works of Angola stated that "any work other than that of a carpenter, bricklayer, blacksmith and even then (also) for these" always required the imperative guidance of a "white worker" (Peres 1901, 44–45), despite admitting that "laborers and servants (were) generally recruited from among the natives" (Peres 1901, 45). Such an approach left the more skilled construction work in the hands of European "criminals" who were imprisoned in Luanda, Angola's capital. The same report also showed a pay scale in which the presence of women in the CPW was only registered in the region of Moçamedes, now Namibe. Minors were still present in six of the eight regions into which Angola was divided. In this case, the list of tasks was more detailed. There was a clear boundary between skilled and unskilled labor. The former included foremen and watchmen, mechanical and civilian locksmiths; blacksmiths; turners; boilermakers; blacksmiths; tinsmiths; carpenters; painters; bricklayers; joiners; helpers. The latter group was composed of laborers, servants (boys and women), miners, caulkers and plasterers.

Women, always part of undifferentiated contingents, were also absent from recruitment concerns, at least in the legislation consulted for the first years of the twentieth century. The methods and practices of compulsory enlistment (Monteiro 2018, 12-24; Cooper 1996, 28) were largely implicit in many of the administrative reports on "indigenous policies". In this context, the issuing of "recruitment licenses" was strategically used by the colonial government to supervise "inducement" strategies ["aliciamento"] and control clandestine emigration to neighboring territories. These licenses were part of a system of "fees" ["quotas"] based on the official perception of the needs of the different colonies (República 1942, 262). State agents recognized that "indigenous labor (was) somewhat... directed" (Júnior 1942). As women were not included in these calculations, their presence was increasingly marginalized, making them even more "invisible" in the colonial archive. The prevailing recruitment strategies were aimed at the "hired man", even in the issuing of the "native booklet" ["caderneta indígena"] (Monteiro 2018, 300), which instituted a compulsory identity and labor register for men over the age of 18. Women and minors ended up in the legislation as members of the "family unit" (Labour Code 1928). In a later proposed revision of the 1928 Labour Code, concerns about physical integrity were extended, suggesting that women could perform tasks that were not physically demanding, except for work inside

[illegible]

Figure 3 Payrolls of the Public Works, Angola, 1877-1881. Report by Henrique dos Santos Rosa (AHU, OP13914).

mines, which was then unequivocally prohibited: "Women are forbidden to work underground" (Labour Code 1928). Once again, the judgement of females' abilities was based on the colonial government's assessment of the status of women.

2. Documenting through photography

After the Second World War, colonial reports with photographs became also substantial proof of women's presence in construction sites. This section questions a set of images from a 1948 report signed by inspector António de Almeida, which illustrated the situation of women in the CPW building sites in Cape Verde (Almeida 1948). Remarkably, the report opened with a general description of Cape Verdean women as laborers and literate, in contrast to Portuguese women with the same socio-economic status. The document was structured in two parts: a first section describing the "services of the colony" (concerning data on civil administration, education, catholic missions, the national press, statistics, assistance, commerce, industry and agriculture, roads, forest repopulation and hydraulic works, and health services); and a second segment where references to women appeared on the margins as a more personal note (Almeida 1948). Yet, the photographs were the most striking evidence of Almeida's vision of women's participation in unskilled labor. Among the 35 images, ten depicted women working in typically male roles: carrying stones, paving

roads, acting as dockworkers in the harbor or transporting building materials such as wooden beams. Others illustrated everyday situations, such as old ladies sitting on doorsteps, or young girls looking after other children in domestic activities more appropriate to their condition and age, as was accepted in the social standards of the time (and which Bertolt would classify as evidence of the "patriarchal" system of assessment). There were also controversial images, such as those of young prostitutes on newly opened roads. These images were emblematic because they evoked works that represented the more "progressive" infrastructure programs promoted by the colonial government. (Fig. 4)

Cape Verdean women, although present throughout the report, were relegated to the end, in a specific sub-chapter (Almeida 1948, 100–104). Referring directly to the photographs, Almeida was convinced that they would speak louder than the "tip of his pen" (Almeida 1948, 101). Construction work was predominant, particularly when compared to the near absence of descriptions of domestic labor or agriculture. Among the criticisms was the lack of supervision by the colonial authorities, who were complicit in the exploitation carried out by most of the foremen. According to Almeida, they forced women to perform actions that were contrary to their feminine condition, such as carrying stones and sand, "burdening them with labor that fatigued, wore them out and killed them" (Almeida 1948, 101). Some of them were the same women he photographed, alone or in groups (probably in teams with family affinities).

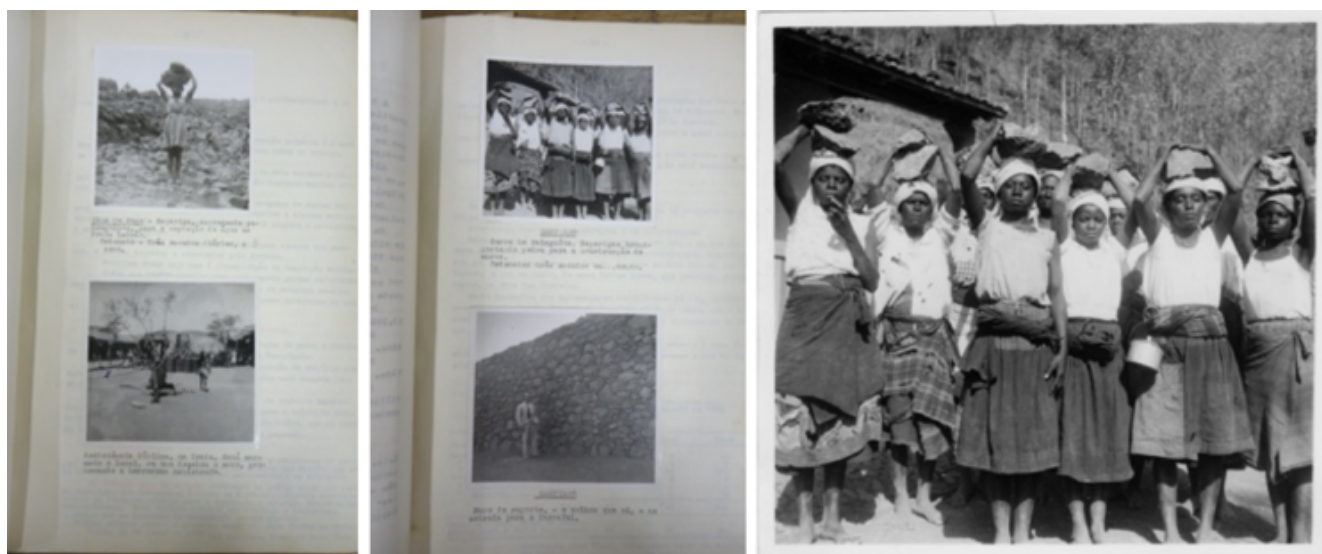


Figure 4 António de Almeida, No Arquipélago da Sede e da Fome. Report by the Senior Inspector, Inspection Mission to Cape Verde 3, 1948 (AHU. A2.01.02.009/00045).

on the island of Fogo, "carrying stones to collect water at Praia do Ladrão", or in Santiago in the Serra da Malagueta, "carrying stones to build walls", all paid three escudos (Portuguese currency at the time)—"...or less" (Almeida 1948). These figures were half of those recommended in the official pay slips, which set the minimum wage for a "woman laborer" at 6\$00 a day, in contrast to the 10\$00 paid to male colleagues. While wage differences certainly reinforced the inequality between genders, they also generalized poverty in the archipelago, as reflected in the high prices of food, which was worth two-thirds of the monthly salary, at least in the legislator's mind (Almeida 1948, 56; Monteiro 2018, 64).

3. Documenting through propaganda

Two decades after António de Almeida's report, the Portuguese colonial context faced a different reality that also changed the approach regarding women's role and impact on construction. During the colonial/liberation wars in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique between the early 1960s and 1975, African communities were called upon to build an anachronistically perpetuated Portuguese colonial society—increasingly in contrast to a Western political context that rejected and tackled colonialism. Propaganda was then key. The African women of the Regedoria do Tengué, in the Colonato da Cela (Cela's Settlement), in the middle of

agendas and labor requests" as Beatriz Serrazina explains about the work of Companhia de Diamantes de Angola (Angola Diamond Company, Diamang) in the early 1960s (Serrazina 2023, 137). Even when away from the building site, these women often imposed programs and technical solutions with an impact on the project itself—thus challenging the power and dominance of the designer-specialist. The latter left the offices of CPW departments and local councils to support projects and people on site, in rural redevelopment processes designed to abruptly alter the pre-colonial landscape and win over "minds and hearts". This process of territorial infrastructure would definitively convey a division of labor and a Western family model to the interior of Africa. While African women were encouraged to "relearn" domestic duties (looking after children, dressing, cooking), men were "instructed on how best to cultivate the land, build their houses and improve the village" (Araújo 1967, 116). This endeavor, triggered by the context of the war, accelerated the acculturation processes and their impact on women as the main actors, obeying complex and even contradictory strategies. Yet, amid this unsettled context, women's resistance is highly plausible, especially given their subordinate status, which allowed them to challenge the dominant system on the building site. However, testimonies from survivors and family members are still needed to make this narrative more nuanced and balanced.

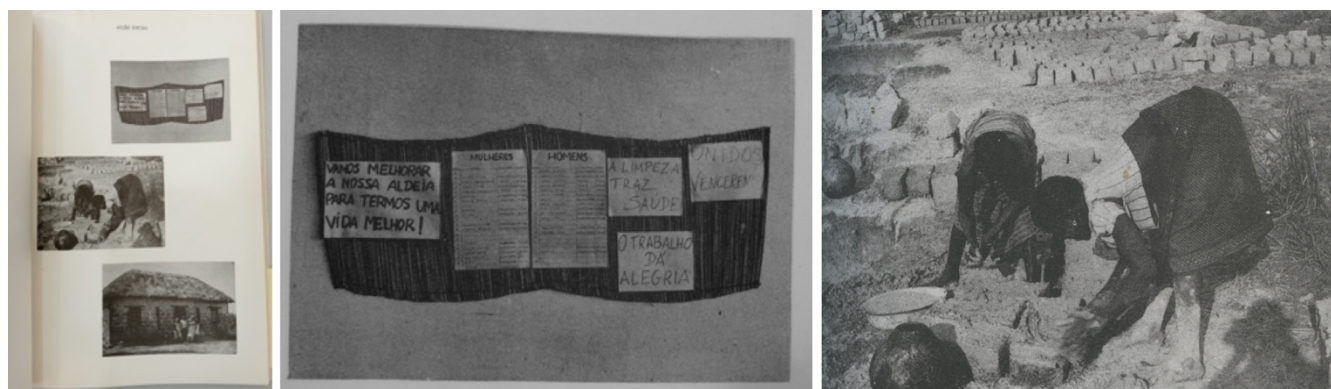


Figure 5 Women making bricks at Regedoria do Tengué, Colonato da Cela. Campaign: "Women and Men. Let's improve our village for a better life!", Angola (AHU, ISAU A2.49.002/38.00241).

Angola's Central Plateau, were portrayed making adobe bricks as "evidence" of the colonial project's "progressive" and modernizing agendas. (Fig. 5) However, they were no longer people who faced the camera in their poverty and abandonment, but agents who were supposed to be active and focused on building the new colonial territory that was emerging from the minds of the colonial bureaucrats from the teams of the Provincial Settlement Boards. Houses, schools and health posts, fountains and other facilities would come from the hands of these "new Africans" who even had more "civilization" than the settlers of Portuguese origin, as the author of another later report stated. In his words: "The promotion of the African man has been attempted and that of the European settlers has been quite neglected... More should be done for them" (Araújo 1967, 117).

On another hand, in the north of Angola, women became "key agents in defining the layout and materiality of the houses, since the company often had to accommodate their

Conclusion

This article ends as it began, i.e. aware that the archives are still predominantly "male" contexts and that the presence of women on building sites needs to be gradually grasped and re-established. Female workers appear timidly in salary scales, lists of tasks or marginal comments (on the behavior of male workers; as food providers; as part of the family unit). However, women had a greater impact than the documents seem to convey, even taking on key roles or occupying jobs left vacant by men, as the Cape Verdean report by António de Almeida and other inspections of Portuguese CPWs attest. Their visibility was also directly linked to the attractiveness of the colony where they worked, both in terms of migration and investment. Settlement colonies, such as Angola and Mozambique, recruited skilled European laborers, giving rise

to hierarchies on construction sites based mainly on race and politics.

In these territories, women remained more invisible in the colonial archive, in the shadow of their husbands, fathers, or other male family members who were the holders of licenses to work. This research aims to go further in the future by acknowledging and questioning women's presence in colonial building sites through oral history, namely concerning their participation in the construction of local roads and small facilities. On the other hand, in the former colony of Cape Verde, the competition from European laborers was far less and African men were trained to perform specialized tasks. Since males were recruited away from the colony because they were a potential workforce migrating to other African colonies, vacant positions were often left for women, thus allowing them to gain a bigger foothold in the documentation. These dynamics made construction sites places of great diversity of experience, giving women different roles over time and geographies.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Beatriz Serrazina for her careful review. This article was written with funding from FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology (Portugal) & ERC- European Research Council (Advanced 2022).
<http://doi.org/10.54499/PTDC/ART-DAQ/0592/2020>;
<http://doi.org/10.54499/2022.01720.PTDC>;
 ArchLabour - Architecture, Colonialism and Labour. The role and legacy of mass labour in the design, planning and construction of Public Works in former African territories under Portuguese colonial rule.

Bibliography

- Bertolt, Boris. 2018. "Thinking otherwise: theorising the colonial modern gender system in Africa." *African Sociological Review* 22, no. 1.
- Clarence-Smith, Gervase. 1990. *The Third Portuguese Empire (1825-1975)*. Lisbon: Teorema.
- Cooper, Frederick. 1994. "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History." *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5, 1516–45.
- Cooper, Frederick. 1995. "Work, Class and Empire: An African Historian's Retrospective on E. P. Thompson." *Social History* 20, no. 2 (May), 235–241.
- Cooper, Frederick. 1996. *Decolonisation and African Society: The Labour Question in French and British Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dayton, Cornelia Hughes. 1993. "Turning Points and the Relevance of Colonial Legal History." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 1, Law and Society in Early America (January), 7–17.
- Gouda, Frances, Raben, Remco, and Nordholt, Henk Schulte. 2009. Review of *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*, by A. L. Stoler. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 165, no. 4, 552–567, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43817778>.
- Havik, Philip. 2006. "Estradas sem fim: o trabalho forçado e a 'política indígena' na Guiné (1915-1945)" [Endless Roads: Forced Labour and 'Indigenous Politics' in Guinea

- (1915-1945)] in *Trabalho Forçado Africano: experiências coloniais comparadas*. Porto, Campo das Letras, 229–47.
- Jha, Madhavi. 2020. "Men Diggers and Women Carriers: Gendered Work on Famine Public Works in Colonial North India", *International Review of Social History* 65, no. 1, 71–98.
- Martins, Conceição Andrade. 1997. "Trabalho e condições de vida em Portugal (1830-1913)." *Análise Social* 32, 483–535.
- Monteiro, José Pedro. 2018. *Portugal e a questão do trabalho forçado: um império sob escrutínio (1944-1962)*. Lisbon: Edições 70.
- Serrazina, Beatriz. 2023. "Colonial Enterprises and Urban Design: Transnational Knowledge, Local Agency and the Diamond Company of Angola (1917-1975)." *Architectures of Colonialism*. Basel: Swiss Birkhäuser Verlag/de Gruyter [forthcoming].
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1985. "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 93.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance", in *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2, 87–109.

Archival sources

- Henrique dos Santos Rosa. Report, Public Works of Angola, 1877-1881. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino / Overseas Historical Archive (AHU), OP13914.
- Decree of 14 April 1891 and Regulation of 16 March 1893.
- José Joaquim Peres, Relatório da Direção das Obras Públicas de Angola, 1900-1901, 44–45. AHU, OP16600.
- Angola, Repartição Geral dos Negócios Indígenas, Report of 1942, "The problem of labour", 262. AHU, AMU 10434.
- Augusto Cesar da Silva Castro Junior, "Chapter II - The Problem of Labour", 1942. AHU, AMU 10435.
- António de Almeida, No Arquipélago da Sede e da Fome. Report by the Senior Inspector, Inspection Mission to Cape Verde 3, 1948. AHU, A2.01.02.009/00045.
- Daniel Alves de Araújo, "Relatório da Inspeção Ordinária à Administração e Postos do Concelho de Santa Comba", 1967. AHU, ISAU A2.49.002/38.00241.
- Labour Code for indigenous workers in Portuguese colonies in Africa, Decree-Law 16.199 of 6 December 1928.