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DONAS DA TERRA. HER-STORY ON FEMALE POWER AND AUTHORITY IN THE ZAMBEZI VALLEY, MOZAMBIQUE

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Abstract

The Zambezi Valley, in Mozambique has been considered a sociological construct, more than geographical space. Portuguese colonial rule over this area, enacted initially from Goa, instituted the prazo system which was a system by which Crown land was leased to settlers for a fixed period. To attract more settlers, some prazos were given as dowry to girls who married Portuguese vassals; to be inherited through the female line, for at least three generations. These women became known as the Donas.

Indigenous women in the region were also reportedly powerful and had administrative authority. Among the Maravi, the wife of the karonga had jurisdiction over part of the territory. Female chiefs were also reported to have existed. Among the Shona, the wives of the mutapa had their own territory and at times served as ambassadors of the empire.

Despite their notoriety, historical texts mention these women marginally or as surrogates to male dominance. This is not a coincidence, but stems from a male perception of female roles. By constructing a text which generally ignores women's role in history or relegates it to a secondary plane by comparison to their male counterparts, historians may have not made justice to the social, political and economic structures and inner workings of the Zambezi Valley complex, to borrow Mathews (1981) term.

The research I propose to undergo intends to bring forth the ways in which current women of this sociological space, historically connected to this array of powerful female ancestors have been (re)constructing the perception of their power and authority. I will use the feminist discussion to argue for the relevance of a history about women and based on women's accounts. The concept of power will be central and overarching, as the women under analysis past and present are viewed as powerful and with authority. However, this essay will focus more on historical context and knowledge production, than on the conceptual discussion on power.

Keywords: Women, power, Mozambique, anthropology, history

History as it has been constructed

The term Zambezi Valley is broadly used by historians to designate the area surrounding the great Zambezi River, which flows from as far as Angola, through Zambia and Zimbabwe all the way to the Indian Ocean in Mozambique. According to Pelissier (1994) and Capela (1995), this is in fact a sociological construct, more than a geographical, spatial or ethnic reality. And in Mozambique this construct includes what are now the provinces of Zambezia, Sofala, Manica and part of Tete.

To the north of the river the most notable political organization influencing the history of this region was that of the Marave. There is some dispute about the inception of this state. Newitt (1982) in his article about the Early History of the Maravi states that the most popular assumption about their settlement is based on the work of Alpers, which dates from 1966 and sustains that they were long established in northern Zambezia when the Portuguese arrived in the 16th century. This position is also held by Mozambican historians such as Serra and Rocha (Rocha, 2006). Newitt, however contends that settled Maravi states did not occur until the first half of the 17th century (Newitt, 1982: 162), sometime after the first Portuguese settlers were established in the region and already engaging in the ivory trade, so central to the Maravi peoples.

Of less contention is that these peoples originated from the Katanga, in the Congo. In the end of the 16th century a split seems to have occurred in the lineage that was settled in the region, giving rise to three independent groups; the Caronga in Southeast Malawi, The Undi in Northern Tete and the Lundo in Zambezia. The lineage was established through the maternal line and, at least according to Rodrigues (2002: 581) ‘the power of the mother’s lineage translated into the ascension of their female members’. Among them the wife of the *karonga* emperor had

jurisdiction over part of the territory and there were women chiefs, named 'fumo-acaze'¹. She bases this on information from a travelogue from the 19th century by a Antonio Candido Pedroso Gamitto and a mention by anthropologists Jorge Dias of a report from a Colonel Dionizio de Mello e Castro published in the 18th century.

To the south of the Zambezi River existed the famous empire of the Muwenemutapa. This empire was created around the 15th century by a Shona people called the Karanga (Rocha, 2006: 21). Contrary to the Marave, who according to Rocha extended their influence through marital allegiances and assimilation of religious cults (Rocha, 2006: 24)², the Muwenemutapas expanded through political allegiances, military conquests and annexations (Rocha, 2006: 22). The empire's most important asset was gold, which were of particular interest to Arab and Swahili traders of the eastern coast of Africa, and later on the Portuguese. Its area of jurisdiction from the Limpopo River to the South, to the Zambezi River to the North, and from the Indian Ocean to parts of what is today Zimbabwe. The capital was located in Bárúè, present day Tete province in Mozambique.

Lineage among the Shona is established through the paternal line. However, according to Rodrigues (2002) even among this patrilineal peoples the wives of the *mutapa* emperor had their own territory and could serve as ambassadors. Her source is Zimbabwean historian Mudenge, who wrote about the political history of the Mutapa Empire.

The first Portuguese settlements in Mozambique date from the early 16th century. Initially they were limited to littoral areas in Sofala and Mozambique Island and oriented towards controlling

¹ Rodrigues also mentions the Makwa people, from the coastal and northern Zambezia, who are also matrilineal and whose women enjoyed some influence in their society too. In relation to these peoples she was referring to Newitt.

² Which seems to contradict some opinions that they were aggressive (M. D. Newitt, 1982).

the gold and ivory trade routes³ used by the *mutapa* and *karonga* of the area. However the Portuguese competed over these resources with Arab, Persian and Swahili traders who had settled in the area as early as the 11th century. As a result the Portuguese decided to penetrate to the interior of the land and instead of controlling the trading routes, access directly the producing areas. They gained influence by supporting militarily the *Mwenemutapa*, against contenders to the throne. This support soon translated into concessions to the gold mines and access to land, which in turn became assets of the Portuguese Crown (Rocha et al., 2000).

To govern over this area the Portuguese Crown instituted the so-called *prazo*⁴ system. Some authors consider that this was in fact the first tangible manifestation of Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique (Rocha et al., 2000). This model was similar to one applied by the Portuguese in India (Pelissier, 1994; Rocha et al., 2000) and by which the Portuguese Crown could 'occupy' the territory by leasing 'Crown land' to 'European' vassals, in exchange for protection of the Crown's commercial interests, administrative forts and from invasion from local chiefs. The areas that came to be the *prazos* were at times received as a result of commercial negotiations as well as in return for services rendered (especially in the protection of the local chiefs and kings) but also as resulting from military conquest (Pelissier, 1994, 2004).

During the 17th century, due to the scarcity of Portuguese settlers in an area of profound economic interest, a regal order stipulated that *prazo* land would be given by the Crown to orphaned girls as dowry, upon marriage to a Portuguese vassal. The reasoning behind this order was that the possibility of accessing land through marriage would attract prospective settlers. The order further stipulated that the land was to be inherited through the female line, with priority to

³ Several sources (e.g. Rocha and Newitt) mention that the Portuguese were more interested in the gold than ivory trade, and effectively disrupted the latter, which may have partially contributed to the decline of the Maravi state.

⁴ 'Prazo' was land leased as a concession for exploration to settlers for a period of time, normally three generations.

the eldest daughter, for at least three generations. The lack of Portuguese women at the time – orphaned or otherwise – meant that the *prazeiros* married indigenous women. In this system, preference was given to daughters of local chiefs⁵ (Capela, 1995; Isaacman & Isaacman, 1975), who could also guarantee allegiances through kinship bonds so fundamental to assert political power and influence.

This new class of women was called the *Donas*⁶. The name is the female equivalent of the honorific title 'Don' used in the Spanish, Portuguese and Italian medieval context. It was a title originally reserved for royalty, select nobles, and high ecclesiastic officials. It was extended to the respective colonies, so that it came into use also in Latin America, Portuguese speaking Africa and even the Philippines. Presently it is still used in these same places as a mark of esteem for a person of social distinction or a person of significant wealth.

Donas first emerged as *prazo* owners in the 17th century. By the end of the 18th century they owned the majority of *prazo* in the Zambezi Valley (Rodrigues, 2002). Their rise to power and influence is said to be related to many issues. For one, they were neither entirely indigenous, nor European but could navigate between both worlds because they spoke the local languages better than Portuguese, and practiced animist practices just as much as the indigenous population. As mentioned above most peoples of the Valley, particularly to the north of the Zambezi River are matrilineal and matriliney is often associated with matrifocality, by which the mother heads the family and fathers play a marginal role in the household, especially due to the woman's strong bond with her male relatives. As such, this new group of female land owners,

⁵ A treaty between the Portuguese Crown and the *mutapa*, dated 1629 specifically forbade marriage between Portuguese and the daughters of African chiefs. Such allegiances had proven to give competitive advantage to the settler, over the interests of the Crown (Rodrigues, 2002).

⁶ The title of this paper translates as 'female land owners'. It is meant to be a pun on the honorific name *Dona* and the fact that descendants of settlers were often called '*filhos da terra*' (children of the soil). *Donas*, by virtue of their double settler and indigenous ancestry had dual claim to the land they owned.

with parentage with the peoples of the land and married to men less influential than them, blended in perfectly with the prevalent local social and cultural practices (Rocha et al., 2000; Rodrigues, 2002).

Challenging the construction

As far as 1985 Clarence-Smith said that there was still a long way to go ‘from a really satisfactory modern history of Mozambique’ (Clarence-Smith, 1985). He was reviewing the Isaacmans’ ‘From Colonialism to Revolution’. According to him their book offered very little new historical material to add to works done earlier. It focused on the liberation struggle and independence and, at least according to Clarence-Smith the material was ‘infused with (...) anti-colonialism’. This suggests to me that the Isaacmans may have been part of an academic trend in the eighties if not of Marxist sympathies, at least leaning left.

The following year Clarence-Smith reviewed yet other two volumes in history. This time the authors were members of the history department and the Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique. Although the volumes were, in his words more textbooks than works of scholarship, they did include ‘exciting new research’ (Clarence-Smith, 1985: 403). This new research he refers to are elements he considers that go beyond the then existing scholarly publications. This was possible through resorting to archaeology and oral sources. Naturally, given the recent independence, these volumes reflected official ideology of the time, focused on the nationalist movement that resisted colonialism and lead to independence, and aimed at reconstructing a past said to have been erased by colonial preconception.

This was not unique to Mozambique. Shortly after the first African independences, African historians were embracing a similar vision of wrong doing by the representation of Africans and their history by colonialism and non-African scholars basing themselves on those

representations, as can be seen by the words of Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of Unesco in 1979:

African societies were regarded as societies without a history; in spite of major studies produced in the early decades of this century by such pioneers as Leo Frobenius, Maurice Delafosse and Arturo Labrlola, many non-African scholars, wedded to preconceptions rooted in their own background, maintained that such societies could not be studied scientifically because sources and written documents were lacking. This amounted to a refusal to see Africans as the creators of original cultures which blossomed and perpetuated themselves for centuries in distinctive ways of their own which historians can only grasp by adopting new methods. (in "Africa and its history A continent viewed from within," 1979: 5)

The issue regarding oral sources is an important one, and one that was discussed at length, particularly in regard to African history. Renowned historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo offered methodological and content insights to what was missing from African historiography. In order to fill the gap, he maintained that a strong interdisciplinary approach was necessary. This includes the use of anthropological and linguistic methods, as the main sources to reconstruct a past with lack of written documents should include archaeological artefacts, oral tradition⁷, in addition to the written sources. According to him only the conjunction of these sources should be able to shun a light on the richness that is the past of the African peoples, and which non-African history had not made due justice⁸. As such in reconstructing the past he urged African scholars to think as follows:

⁷ British historian Penelope Corfield suggests that this was already a trend of the 70s in the general discussion of the historical method. According to her, 'oral history in the later 1970s would return history to the people 'in their own words'', Corfield (1997: 246).

⁸ Nigerian born feminist Oyewumi (1998) considers that Saburi Biobaku was one of the earliest to mention African oral traditions as history, as far back as 1956. Non-African historian and anthropologist Jan Vansina also contributed to this argument with specific body of work in this regard. Notably: Vansina, Jan (1965). *Oral Tradition*.

[T]he main concern will be civilizations, institutions, structures: agrarian and metallurgical techniques, arts and crafts, trade networks, and conception and organization of power, religion and religious and philosophical thought, the problem of nations and pre-nations, techniques of modernization, and so on. (in "Africa and its history, A continent viewed from within," 1979: 70)

The historians from Eduardo Mondlane University did just as per above and were able to add to the history of Mozambique what non-Mozambican (based and compliant with this methodological approach) historians could not. Of course one should be weary of universal categories that isolate African historiography, as a distinct and homogenous entity that it requires differentiated methods and approaches from those used in non-African contexts. One should also not fall into the trap of assuming that African or Africa based historians are more accurate in developing its history than other scholars. Yet, this critical approach to a history based solely on written records did prove fruitful, to enrich the knowledge that otherwise would not be there.

It should be noted that indigenous African societies were described at length by European observers of all walks of life – missionaries, military, administrators, and so on. Their writings constitute the backbone of non-African historians reliant on written accounts. For the case of Mozambique, the major implication for the use of these sources has been the chronology of accounts. But chronologically, most registries have start their accounts from late 15th century, when the first Europeans first arrived to the shores of what was to later become Mozambique. Most often this is the timeframe used for the beginning of the history of Mozambique. This is true for the above mentioned book from the Isaacmans, as well of the more general History of Mozambique, by Malyn Newitt published in 1995. In both these and other scholarly work on the country history is constructed highly centred on European presence and colonialism as the main

A Study in Historical Methodology (Translated from the French by H. M. Wright). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; or Vansina, Jan (1985). *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

shapers of any and all events. Even Arabs, who were in contact with the region and started to write about the same area as far as the 11th century (see Rocha et al., 2000) are usually not used as a source, even if written. Their long standing presence in the area has, by comparison occupied very little of the historiography of the country, even though their presence has also strongly shaped the peoples of the region in regards to religious practices, trade and commerce, and so on. Their presence is usually acknowledged only in competition or conflict with European, specifically Portuguese interests⁹.

I find it very likely that if indigenous societies and other peoples present in the area were viewed from the perspective of the European observer, and to re-quote M'Bow 'rooted in their own background' there were bound to be some misconceptions, as well as neglected events and figures. Even if feminists had not objected strongly how male biased history was as a subject, as they did back in the 1980s when 'women's history (...) was poised to throw off the chains of patriarchy' (Corfield, 1997: 246), plenty of African scholars (e.g. Ki-Zerbo, Leclant or Hakem in "Africa and its history, A continent viewed from within," 1979; or e.g. Oyewumi, 1998), have exemplified how women's role and importance had vastly been misunderstood or neglected by non-African scholars.

In the case of Mozambique, and the Zambezi Valley in particular I would argue that women have been neglected in two ways. On one hand by the probable preconceptions of those who observed and wrote about them, and misconceptions therein derived. In relation to the *Donas*, a class that

⁹ Cyril Andrew Hromnik wrote a dissertation in 1977 about the role of Goans 'in Portuguese exploration, penetration, and colonization' (see Hromnik, Cyril Andrew, "Goa and Mozambique: the participation of Goans in Portuguese enterprise in the Rios de Cuama, 1501-1752" (1977). **History - Dissertations.** Paper 57. http://surface.syr.edu/hst_etd/57). Similarly, Sharmila Karnik of the University of Bombay Centre for African Studies has write about the steady flux of Goans to East Africa and particularly to Mozambique and their role in trade and commerce, as well as well as in the development of the then colony (see Karnik, Sharmila S. "Goans in Mozambique" (1998). *Africa Quarterly*, 38(3), 95-118. And finally, all historians who have wrote on the Valley (e.g. Capela, 1995; Isaacman & Isaacman, 1975; M. Newitt, 1995; Pelissier, 1994; Rocha et al., 2000; Rocha, Serra, & Hedges, 1983; Rodrigues, n.d., 2000, 2002) agree that for the most part the 'Portuguese vassals' with whom native women married and who became landowners were in fact Goans.

has been called an European institution, despite its profound African structure (Capela, 1995; Rocha et al., 2000; Rodrigues, 2002), Rodrigues has specifically said:

*The fact that these women had a role identical to men shocked male observers, and led to a representation of 'donas' as invariably powerful, non-compliant with the administration, domineering of their husbands and simultaneously promiscuous.*¹⁰ (Rodrigues, 2002: 583)

She had earlier noted that:

*From the first decades of 1600s women started acquiring a leading role of which, however, the many contemporary memorialists, as well as most of the official documentation did not mirror.*¹¹ (Rodrigues, 2002: 582)

The above certainly explains why scholars writing from the colonial influence perspective would misconstrue women's roles in the region. What of those writing from the African agency perspective? In this case I would argue that as the *Donas* were considered a European institution, in spite of its African traits, they would be analysed critically in relation to authentic African institutions. As for the other women in the Valley's history, perhaps they were 'victims' of what Clarence-Smith (1985) called a pervasive anti-colonial argument that portrayed traditional institutions and leaderships as 'colonial stooges'. Later, the socialist project in Mozambique has further interfered with the representation of women in the country's history, as traditional institutions were considered too much tampered by the 'imperial aggression'¹². The Africanist desire for a reconstruction of a past without interference, which ran parallel with the socialist political project aimed for the recollection of un-tampered social institutions such as patriliney and matriliney. It also aimed for the recollection of some major kings and dynasties. But contrary

¹⁰ Author's translation.

¹¹ Author's translation.

¹² From the title of the Volume II of History of Mozambique by Rocha, Serra, & Hedges (1983).

to West, Central Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia or Sudan (e.g. Ki-Zerbo or Hakem in: "Africa and its history, A continent viewed from within," 1979) no particular woman was granted notoriety safe within the context of the nationalist resistance movement.

What is at stake?

It has been over three decades since the Isaacmans' and Rocha et al.'s publishing of their versions of Mozambique's general history. New publications have come to forth, namely M. Newitt's (1995) own History of Mozambique. Plenty of publications have also revised and added information, but mostly analysis to events and contexts of the country's history. Yet, a satisfactory account of the role of women seems yet to be told. As such, I propose to investigate the construction of the memory of women of the Zambezi Valley, by women descending from them. I am particularly interested to explore the possibility that women's account of history may at best compliment, but at time contradict the version(s) held currently by scholars, generally based in written sources and still with some degree of male bias.

The women in whom I am interested seemed to have enjoyed some sort of notoriety or visibility. Whether because of a particular fascination they exerted onto those who left the records that sealed history or because they were viewed as transgressors of the norm, they were somehow recorded into history. And yet, as Rodrigues says justice to their deeds and importance may still not have been made. There have been two ways of portraying the women of the Zambezi Valley. One form is through the 'traditional' social structures, by which they are naturally considered part of the system and the indigenous ways. Though it may seem that this recording is voided of value judgment, it should be noted which women were recorded and which weren't. I have mentioned the wives of the emperors (note that they are not called

queens¹³) and women chiefs. In a matrilineal context, where mothers, sisters and daughters are of extreme importance, not recording their role creates a great question mark. Especially when we hear African like historians Boubou Hama and Joseph Ki-Zerbo say that ‘[t]he importance of women in African history as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters of kings is matched only by their prominence in African mythology’ (in “Africa and its history, A continent viewed from within,” 1979: 9).

The other way to portray women was as an accident and an exception, as was the case with the *Donas*. For example Rodrigues (2002: 581) refers to José Capela’s interpretation of the *Donas* power as stemming from the land entitlement given directly to them. Often widowed early, they were faced with the need to administer the *prazos* themselves. Newitt, however sees it differently and attributes their power to the indigenous customary lineage systems and the centrality of women in them. Rodrigues claims that Newitt possibly exaggerated the importance of the African context, as the succession of the *prazo* owners was determined principally through what she called the ‘Portuguese normative frame’ (ibid.). Instead she proposes that these women benefited from the influence they had through their parentage with indigenous societies over their foreign husbands. She compares their influence to land owning women in India, where a similar law was passed but women did not achieve similar power. The main difference, she claims was that in India the husbands were natives and thus the women did not have any comparative advantage. I believe all three have merits to their arguments. The Portuguese legal system did initiate and determined the structure of the *prazo* system. Women who entered the system did enjoy advantages over their foreign husbands, particularly as a bridge with their indigenous relatives. This advantage also seemed to fit the customary practices, which allowed

¹³ It is only in reference to the patrilineal Mwenemutapa that the wives are called Queens, and the first wife being considered The Queen (Boxer, 1960: 9).

for women's prominence. However, I cannot help but wonder as the system evolved, and as the husbands became less 'foreign'¹⁴ and more familiar with the indigenous customs and language, what would then be the women's comparative advantage. I also question the idea that just because the Portuguese ruling stated that women and their daughters should inherit the land that immediately compliance would follow. There is plenty of evidence, including by Rodrigues, which shows that the *prazo* owners were creative in transmitting and accumulating land and power. And as *prazo* owners' power (women and men alike) increased, so did the law change accordingly, to balance their influence over that of the Crown.

The questions above lead me to believe that, for the most part scholars of the history of the Zambezi Valley have taken a number of issues for granted and reproduced them, to a certain point uncritically. For example, by whose definition is the Zambezi Valley a social construct and what/who is included or excluded from this construct? By using this concept as a given incurs in the risk of reproducing a specific set of assumptions and bias from a set body of knowledge. Perhaps it would serve very little to argue whether these women were indeed powerful. But it would perhaps be possible to enquire if the women (or even category of women) mentioned in written historical accounts were the only women that were powerful and if so, how did they come to such power? For, for long have the historical texts commented on their power, without satisfactorily responding in what way and more importantly by which specific deeds (aside from owning land and owning armed slaves which they could command). Yet history is full of infinite details of the deeds of their male counterparts.

¹⁴ By many accounts the men who married these women have been said to be thoroughly Africanized, especially in the later stages (see Capela, 1995; Isaacman & Isaacman, 1975; Liesegang, 1973; M. Newitt, 1995; Rocha et al., 2000; Rodrigues, 2000). They also spoke the local languages, practiced animism and were often polygamous. Even in fictional accounts such as 'Zambezi' by Emilio de San Bruno, or military reports such as the 'Regime dos Prazos da Zambézia' (De Vilhena, 1916) depict either how *prazo* owners had incorporated indigenous habits and how they held and cast nearly absolute power over the indigenous populations within their territory.

One can combine all the above into a sole objective, which is to uncover how have women descending from the women recorded into the history of the Zambezi Valley, however marginally, have been reconstructing the memory of their foremothers. So far, this is yet her-story in the making.

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