

Challenging International Relations 'Rationales': Another understanding to Timor Leste and Mozambique

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Understanding contemporary Timor-Leste requires thinking the particularity of being at the crossroads of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and bear in mind the long course interwoven pathways raised by mercantile, colonial, imperial and contemporary of its dynamics. I seek to discuss the *Other* structural spaces of exchange and politics based on commonality and solidarity that exist among People and often discarded by International Relations rationales. Beyond the strict limits imposed by a view of the public sphere as politics, in which wars and international affairs are male-predominant - at the opposite side of the private space of the domestic *rest* within the family managed by subaltern females, I intend to propose a discussion where women are the main engines, remarkable and resilient protagonists of realm's hybridization funded on transgression, careful, intimate and profound recognition of alterity. The disruption between public and private spheres comes from the impossibility to confine women's particular participation in *this* history at one of the sides of the still hegemonic dichotomy.

The arrival Ocean

The so-called *Arrival Ocean* – Indian Ocean - (Hallet, 1998: 115) appeared immediately to the Portuguese as a wonderful world completely strange to their imagination (Pinto, 1995). However, in spite of their enchantment they struggled for the dominance of commercial networks and routes imposing, in one way or in another, a colonial relationship, along the coastline of the Indian Ocean that endured about 450 years. Yet, it is a history of possessions and dispossessions, domination and negotiation, wars and diplomatic manoeuvres, rivalries and blending. The Portuguese territorial possessions and commercial dominance changed regularly and dramatically over the centuries (Bethencourt & Chaudhuri, 1998-2000; Pinto, 1995). Nevertheless, they remained present until the 20th century, when they decided to set up a quite effective colonial administration over Mozambique and Timor-Leste, both at the most far imperial margins of *their vision* of the Indian Ocean.

The Island of Timor was reached by the Portuguese caravels during the year of 1515 of the Christian era. As Geoffrey Gunn argues, in spite of being part of the Asian world's tributary system and commercial network (1999: 28; 56; 117), Timor was almost untouched by foreigners. Even after the implementation of the Portuguese colonial administration over the territory by the 19th century, East Timor stayed as before: remote, peripheral and quite a distant *margin*.

Until the 20th century Mozambique had no permanent, regular and effective Portuguese colonial administration. Companies governed most of the territory, mainly at the north and centre. Lourenço Marques - nowadays Maputo - in the south, became one of the most important ports in the region to respond to the interests of gold traders from Transval (Zamparoni, 2007: 42-43) and was settled as the political capital of Mozambique as late as the 1st December 1898 (Ferreira, 1967/68: 119). In fact, the regional context was determinant to produce Mozambique as a, so-called, Portuguese overseas province.

Nevertheless, one way or another, the fact is that colonial Portuguese regime persisted over Timor-Leste and Mozambique till the last quarter of the XX century. After the independence of Mozambique - 25th June 1975 - and the outbreak of war in Timor-Leste – 7th December 1975, the tragic events that followed gave place to a rhetorical and political nearness between these distant *hems* of the falling *multi-continental Portugal*.

Due to Indonesian occupation and war, a group of Timorese people settled in Matola, Maputo's Province. The choice of Mozambique to install a political resistance base was decided, on the one hand, because both people shared a common colonial history under Portuguese rule, which supported natural solidarity among the oppressed by colonialism, at economic, political and discursive levels. On the other hand, Mozambique was one of the few countries that recognised the Timorese Declaration of Independence on the 28th November of 1975.

FRETILIN¹ members who had the special missions to set up a diplomatic front, study and train themselves to participate in governance of the future independent country, constituted the little community of Timorese in Mozambique². Within this group the women outnumbered the men and shared the same responsibilities as their fellow-companions concerning their common aims in the hosting country (Iko, 2008). They fully participated in the political activities, the decision-making processes on the strategy of condemnation, political diplomacy or culture preservation. They also participated in training and education programs anticipating their preparation to intervene actively when the independent future of East Timor would come through. These women constituted their families and carried out their carriers in Mozambique; they crafted diligently links and relations between Mozambicans and the Timorese by mixing up cultures and visions, integrating different Portuguese languages, distinguishing the capulanas³ produced in Indonesia – kumbatik - from the African ones, and providing new meanings to differences and similarities. After thirty-three years of contacts and common remembrance they are preserving relations a common awareness about the struggles for liberty and international solidarity between these long distant Peoples of the Indian Ocean. One fantastic sign of this memory in action, writing and re-interpreting the present of Timor-Leste can be epitomized in one of the lovely masterpieces of the local project ‘Bonecas de Ataúro’: *A Mozambican family friend visiting Timor-Leste*.⁴

One of the most remarkable facts is always the imposition of the colonizer’s language over territories as the visible epiphany of the administration power and one of the most powerful tools of domination and control. However, Portuguese language was and still used in such way, among the various independent States, that it may seem formally identical but, at the same time, it is another historical memory and another substantive justification of full independence between colonisers and colonised. Poets, writers and their permanent provocative ruptures, as Luandino Vieira enunciates, *inside of the same language, inside the same cultural substrate the differences and the reasons that justify the autonomy and independence are produced* (Amal, 2006: 17), as the long and controversial debate about the adoption of the Portuguese language as one of the national languages of the independent Timor-Leste, proves how complex and crucial is this issue.

I want, briefly, to bring to light the fact that colonialism did not happen over an empty space or without resistance and imagination. In spite of the fractures caused by the colonial experience, Timor-Leste and Mozambique developed a common-based nationalist rhetoric for independence and provided each other with concrete gestures of solidarity. Transcending the separation, distance and differences, the peoples encountered, in their specific struggles against colonialism, sufficient reasons to support each other. Isabel Casimiro, Ximena Andrade e Ruth Jacobson (Cristalis; Scott, 2005: 105) state that:

After the Indonesian invasion, [Mozambique] opened its borders to Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária de Timor Leste Independente – Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor), and many East Timorese militants continued their resistance struggle while living and studying in Mozambique.(...) In 1988, Ana Pessoa Pinto Joined Isabel Casimiro and the lawyers Isabel Chicalia and Noemia Francisco (...) in founding the Women and Law in Southern Africa project.

Challenging International Relations centralities

Beyond the strict separation between the public sphere of International Relations and the private realm of individuals and families I propose a counter-narrative, which is about, articulation, harmonization and solidarity among people where women play a major role. It is important to bring into light other elements that constitute long-last positive contact zones, the realisation of complementarities that persist in spite of domination, colonialism and wars that happened in this particular region over the past five centuries.

I draw my analytical attention from some of the social roles–responsibilities-powers that are normally ensured by women in the communities and are persistently viewed as subaltern and to which international relations and social sciences are blind and deaf. The first one that I want to explore is the cuisine.

¹ Acronym of ‘Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente’ – ‘Revolutionary Front of Independent Timor-Leste’.

² At about 40 people.

³ ‘Capulana’ is the name given in Mozambique to the colourful cloths that women and men wear as dresses or skirts.

⁴ Source: www.bonecasdeatauro.com, February the 9th, 2009

All around the Indian Ocean men and women cook. However, and in spite of the differences between cultures and life styles, women are the ones responsible for delivering food and daily dishes to their families. Far from being mere physical survival, one of the most important functions of food and meals is uniting communities and celebrating critical social events. It is why ceremonial dishes are very important among peoples. The role of food in creating the right atmosphere to pass through an initiation ceremony, marriage, funeral or another symbolic and paramount moment in the community life, is clearly extraordinary. Cynthia Nery Zayas (2008) calls for our attention on the ceremonial dishes as a central category to retrace *an eastern continuum of the Indian Ocean and inter-cultural dialogues*. She refers, for instance, to a dish called *rending*, which is cooked from Sumatra to Java, Borneo to the Philippine Islands, and many other places in the Indian Ocean.

The same can be said about the Timorese lemon *budo* and the lemon *achar* eaten in Mozambique. Both are prepared in the same way and with the same ingredients. The differences are slightly given by the *ruco* (basilicum) and ginger in Timor and by the particular kind of yellow lemon of Southern of Africa, in Mozambique. Both use the heat of the sun to produce the correct texture and taste. It is recommended, in both cuisine *traditions*, to leave marinating the ingredients during about one week before to considerer it ready. It is used every day as a necessary complement to every dish and meal.

The colonial period played a role in the transfer of ideas, practices, and technologies also in cuisine. Re-appropriating, widening or accumulating knowledge, women in Timor-Leste and Mozambique know how to use several traditions and put them together when desired or needed. An important element of integration of the Timorese during the diaspora in Mozambique was mediated by food and cuisine that ironically had, at its core, the common colonial experience. As Iko mentions,

When we arrived in Mozambique they also had western-portuguese cuisine and this did not make a big difference to us.⁵

In this realm the women were and remain the main actresses of these and other *continuums*, found to be a fundamental element that allows living and resisting. I argue against those who interpret kitchen and food just a tool of patriarchal subalternisation of women. From my point of view it is much more than that: it is a power centre from where irradiates another way of binding people and negotiate conflicts and sorrows and women are used to reign without competition.

Another analytical element I want to deal with in this essay is textiles and cloths with which women have an intimate an acknowledged relation. Indian textiles, especially from Gujarat, were one of the most important treasures within the trade of the Indian Ocean. They were very valuable in several senses: as outfits and fashionable covering of the human bodies, as central elements in producing group identities, to seal alliances and fulfil ceremonies as a sign of loyalty. They were used, and still are, as gifts for special people during remarkable occasions (Sacchetti, 2003; Barnes, 1998) and those had not a commodity value; on contrary, they could never be alienated by money. Finally, textiles made of fine cotton or silk were used as well as currency to trade commodities or manufactured products within the region until the modern capitalism took place.

Researchers found a great deal of evidence that the famous Indian textiles travelled all around the Indian Ocean and beyond. Fragments, influences in patterns or in technology can be found from Egypt to the Swahili coast of Africa, passing through India, Bengal Gulf, Sulawesi or the Maluku Islands (Barnes, 1998). It becomes clear that their influence in trade, culture and art was paramount. To underline this textile nomadism within the Indian Ocean world economy and cultural life, it is interesting to note, for example, the Indonesian *sarong* was adopted by the Hadrami People as *surani* functioning as Swahili version of the Malay word (Sheriff, 1998: 92). The Timorese also adopted the Malay word *selendang*, a special piece of cloth to be worn over the shoulders, as *salenda* in Tetum language (Sacchetti, 2003), or the colourful *kambatik* – the Timorese version of the malay *printed cloth* - that every woman in Timor-Leste wears in everyday life.

Observing textiles closely, how they were and remain crucial for cultures, we may point out their intimate relationship with human bodies. Human bodies are like maps where societies inscribe their

⁵ Iko is a Timorese woman who lived in Mozambique between 1976 and 1997 as a FRTELIN member in the Diaspora. Recorded in Góis, Portugal the 29th of May 2008. Excerpt from 00.17 – 00. 24 ; 4.32 – 4.42. Translated from Portuguese by the author.

visions, concepts and idiosyncrasies about social status, gender, social behaviour, welfare or misery. It is not a detail without importance to note what a cloth covers or shows of a woman or man's body. The way of wearing a *Tais fetu* or a *Tais mane* – a female or male sarong in Tetum language- their colours and designs as a central elements of a sacrate ritual or, instead, the pragmatic use of the Mozambican *capulana* insinuating women's bodies or wearied to pass political messages, statements and ideas (Meneses, 2003), are concrete features of art, social status and social roles performed by textiles. The women know that what they wear it is for their own identification or can be used as a tool of transgression (Penrad, 1998).

The centrality of textiles and cloths in cultures and their incredible ability to bind peoples and imaginaries around the Indian Ocean can be perceived in their persistent presence during ceremonies in Timor-Leste (Amal, 2002: 110), as in many other places in the region. In the same way, the ancient competence of women to recognise the differences or similarities among them can be considered as a particular way to retrace the history of human movements and its significance to the societies that came into contact with one another.

For instance, Mozambican women know very well when their *capulanas* are made in Indonesia or come from Congo or Southern Africa; if they are from the Ilha, E-makwa or from the south. Like the Timorese, they master the details, the use of the colours, dyes and patterns and its remote origins. When they make the decision of getting one or another *piece of cloth* they know why and what they are using to illustrate the representation of their identities (Meneses, 2003).

The women normally did not travel as crewmembers within the dhows or the European caravels. The women on board the caravels were servants and prostitutes. In fact, the sea was considered a men's world from where 'fair' women should be separated. The Chinese were probably an exception, because they were used to travel with their wives and families, whether they wanted to navigate or settle.

Nevertheless, I do not considerer that women were out or absent of travelling. On the one hand, unfortunately, women were very often traded as slaves or considered war trophies. In those several statuses they could be found easily on board. In fact, through the intimacy of their bodies and an extreme violence, the women were commonly raped, meaning *invaded*, occupied and subject to profanities by intruders, sailors, merchants, kings or soldiers. Nevertheless this obscene aspect of colonial and patriarchal systems was not the only participation of women bodies onboard and in societies. On the other hand, the persistent flows of people within the Indian Ocean facilitated mixed marriages and different types of families, where women could construct and re-signify their subjectivities, responsibilities and status in society, and where they played a recognized role concerning blending and family relations resulting from their ability to create and maintain social nets, identities, cultural commonalities, and heritages (Amadiume, 1997; Bhopal, 1997; Ufomata, 2000; Arnfred, 2003; Casimiro, 2004, among other).

I hold that the human *cosmopolitanism* present across the Indian Ocean does not result only from the rape and violence perpetrated against women. In fact, they were and remain an embodied fundamental doer of the social tissue that has and still supports this sophisticated world system. The same can be seen in Timor-Leste, as Gunn, 1999, Ramos-Horta, 1994 and Cunha, 2006 note and in Mozambique like is demonstrated by the works of Casimiro, 2004, and Bonate, 2006.

I want to stress very firmly that my feminist reading of these issues does not overlook or neglect all the violence against women inscribed in it. On the contrary, I do not want to dispossess women of their own and real contribution to the emergence of contemporary Timor-Leste or Mozambique, as two separate entities that want to perceive themselves as independent and with their own identification beyond the colonial period and complex regional relationships with other people, states or nations. On the contrary, I want to stress that the transgressions operated on public and private spheres - blurring their limits and boundaries - have had always involved the critical contributions of women. They cooperate regularly within diverse spaces and through times; and in contemporary times they also are active and decisive in designing and setting policies on Women and their Human Rights, Education and Research, Post-Conflict Reconciliation and other areas of common interest (Cristalis; Scott, 2005; Cunha, 2006; Amal, 2007).

I am convinced that this feminist point of view has the great potential to bring freshness, energy and vitality inspiring new theorisations beyond the dominant and mainstream victimisation of women (Fruzzetti, 2006: 90; Mohanty, 1991). In fact and overall women are the main engines of human linkage

based on *other* than war, violence and supremacy. Often women, with whom I have been working⁶, state firmly their vital importance in societies and the crucial role of being mothers, sisters, and companions. From my point of view, social sciences should grasp attentively what is beyond subaltern or a victimising thought within these narratives. Beyond the violence, it is important to discover human binds based upon mutual support and sharing where women are the remarkable protagonists and actresses.

Concluding and challenging mainstream International Relations centres

Where modern, nationalist rhetoric gives privileges to male-dominant discourses (McClintock, 1995; Mama, 1995; Rai, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Gandhi, 1998; Padilha, 2002; Arnfred, 2002; Casimiro, 2004; Cunha, 2006; Amal, 2006), feminist analysis, anchored in female narratives and leavened by the experience of nationalism and post-independency has the potential to fracture the mainstream postcolonial vision, where voicing gender still remains marginal, a subsumed capacity of memory, representation and power (Fruzzetti, 2006). In line with Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (1997), African or Asian nationalism and the independent postcolonial states are neither neutral nor negligent concerning gender, sexuality or representation of maternity and masculinity. This is why women, their knowledge and their identities cannot persist invisibly or simply continue to reproduce an andocentric point of view or social code. In my view, the strong articulation of women's features, words and narratives is critical to achieving a postcolonial knowledge, where deconstructing marginalities as well as re-discovering *other* centre and standpoints which challenges the long lasting sexist coloniality⁷ that is preserved by nationalism and its liberating rhetoric (McClintock, 1995; Mignolo, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Dussel, 2000; Padilha, 2002; Osório, 2002; Ribeiro, 2007; Cunha, 2006).

In this essay, I have proposed to travel across the Indian Ocean, in several ways from the island of Timor to Mozambique. Having in mind the silent and silenced existence of women in this world I have highlighted some of the realms where women cannot be avoided or under-valued. This broadcultural continuum of the Indian Ocean is, fortunately, an immense epistemological territory to develop innovative and polemic feminist perspectives.

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⁶ I have been working with the Timorese women for more than twenty years and with the Mozambican for three years now. I published three books and several articles fed by my extensive and intensive research in Timor-Leste. See the references under the names of Amal and Cunha. Now I am closing a three years extensive research study in Mozambique and Timor-Leste on women's narratives, based on a qualitative methodological approach which findings inspired this essay and will be fully presented during 2010.

⁷ About the concept of coloniality, see, among other, Enrique Dussel, Valter Mignolo, Arturo Escobar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Paula Meneses.

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