

Rewriting the History of Portuguese Empire: Bottom-up, Gendered, and Emotional Perspectives

Filipa Ribeiro da Silva¹

Many Black Women of this Fortress reconstructs the experiences of three enslaved women whose lives were, in one way or another, connected to Portugal and its empire in Atlantic Africa during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Kwasi Konadu does so by retrieving from Portuguese archival records and other European travelogues a series of details that allows him to bring women to the forefront of the process of European empire building. By reconstructing the environments and historical contexts in which they lived and worked, and by exploring their possible thoughts and emotions, the author gives these women, and others like them, their rightful places in the historical narratives of empire. In so doing, this book makes a highly significant contribution to recover the experiences of enslaved women and to assert the role of these women in their home societies and economies, as well as in their host empire and in its colonial and metropolitan spaces. At the same time, Konadu shows their different attitudes and strategies to navigate in-between these different geographical, institutional, and cultural worlds, their policies of exclusion and inclusion, and feelings of belonging and estrangement.

The book is organized in three core chapters, each recreating the life stories and lived experiences of the three main protagonists in Konadu's narrative—Graça, Mónica, and Adwoa. Written in a rather creative and unconventional style for a scholarly study, these chapters and the overall book engage directly with several recent key developments in historical research and scholarship as well as with longer-term transformations, which took place over the last five decades. This book reflects many of these changes in its style, content, approach, and methodology. In this piece, I will explore how this study engages with some of those historiographical changes and how that engagement resulted in a study which opens avenues to rethinking the history of the Portuguese Empire from a bottom-up, more gendered perspective and from the angle of the history of emotions.

¹ International Institute of Social History, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. *E-mail*: filipa.ribeirodasilva@iisg.nl

Gendering Historical Research, African History, and the History of Empire

Descriptions of European early modern maritime expansion and empire building have always been centered around men, in particular important men, and their heroic actions. The first fifteenth-century chronicles of Portuguese overseas conquest and commerce written by Gomes Anes de Zurara (1483), Diogo do Couto (1790), Gaspar Correia (1483–1540), and Fernão Mendes Pinto (1567), among others, are clear examples. These were texts written by men, about men, and often destined for a mainly male audience. Women were only rarely and briefly mentioned in these grand male-centric narratives. When they appeared, they were either “important women,” often members of the royalty or nobility, “vulgar” women, like prostitutes, exiled, or convicted women, or local women, frequently merely portrayed as slaves or servants.

The absence of women in these narratives of empire building were to a great extent a reflection of the dominant ideals of femininity among the men who wrote these grand narratives, which placed women at home, taking care of household shores and child rearing, or managing those responsible for those tasks. The ideal of women’s modesty and domesticity became increasingly more valued by the end of the early modern period and in the nineteenth century (Kerber 1988, among others) as industrialization pushed many women out of their homes and into performing manual labor at factory sites. In the early twentieth century, European national ideologies continued to defend the ideal female image as the housewife. The prevalence of these values and views about the ideal role of women in European societies continued to greatly influence the writings of empire in the modern period. The first modern histories of empire walked on the footsteps of their predecessors, and they also tended to be too male-centric.

The nonappearance of women, either of European, African, American, or Asian descent, in these narratives was for very long regarded as a sign of their insignificant role in European metropolitan as well as colonial societies and economies and, consequently, in the process of empire building and European economic development. The development of feminist studies starting in the 1970s, feminist-oriented approaches to economic and social history in the 1990s, and more recently gender studies have put a lot of effort into changing our understanding of women’s role in Western economies and societies by demonstrating that women worked and that in most cases their work mattered in economic and societal terms (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012; Ägren 2017; among others). The 1970s also witnessed the development of area studies, first in the U.S. and later in Europe. Cross-fertilization

between feminist studies and areas studies, in particular African studies, contributed to the development of a body of scholarship focusing on the role of African, American, and Asian women in their own societies and in the process of European empire building in the early modern as well as in the modern period (Robertson 1983; Sarmiento 2008; among others). The works of Sheldon (2002) and Rodrigues (2015, 2017) on Mozambique and, more recently of Havik on Guinea-Bissau (2004), and Candido (2022) and Oliveira (2018) on Angola are examples of the impact of these developments on the historiography on the Portuguese Atlantic Empire.

Many Black Women of this Fortress is a study that has certainly been inspired by this body of this literature as well as by the broader trend in historical studies that has been pushing for gendering historical analysis and historical narratives. Konadu makes an important intervention in this stream of scholarship specifically concerning the gendering of African economic and social history and the gendering of the history of empire by showing the role of enslaved people as key brokers and go-betweens between the worlds of the colonizer and the colonized, and by giving enslaved women a protagonist role in the historical narrative, which, so far in the context of the Portuguese African empires, has been only given to the so-called African *donas* and/or *signares* (Brooks 1983, 2010; Capela 1996; Pantoja 2004; Havik 1996, 2004, 2012; Candido 2012; Oliveira 2018; among others).

Recovering the Faces, Names, Experiences, and Feelings of Enslaved People

By reconstructing the life stories of Graça, Mónica, and Adwoa, Konadu is engaging with three other important recent developments in historical research. Firstly, it focuses on retrieving the lived experiences of the people subjected to the brutality of the slave trade and enslavement by reconstructing the life stories and writing the biographies of enslaved Africans. On the one hand, this is a recent development in historical research, particularly in slavery studies, which aims to give voice to the experiences of enslaved Africans as means to give human faces and emotions to a historical phenomenon that dehumanized people (see, for example, <http://slavebiographies.org>). On the other hand, this is also a reaction to a scholarly approach to the study of the transatlantic slave trade that for more than thirty to forty years has focused heavily on the reconstruction of the numbers of this trade and the analysis of the economic mechanism of this hideous commerce, without paying sufficient attention to the lived experiences of those enslaved and subjected to forced deportation, violence, and exploitation. It is unquestionable that the research carried out to reconstruct

the volume of the transatlantic slave trade, the patterns and routes of this commerce, and the economics of this activity were crucial to expose the magnitude of this forced displacement of people (Curtin 1969; Eltis, Richardson et al 1999; Eltis and Richardson 2008; among many others), and led to the creation of fundamental research tools, such the slavevoyages.org website, which opened new and multiple avenues for further research in slave trading as well as in other related topics, including the retrieving of the experience of enslaved Africans in the middle passage as well as in various European metropolitan and colonial spaces.

Secondly, *Three Enslaved Women of Portugal's African Empire* is a masterful example of how much more scholars, students, and broader audiences can learn by tracing the life stories of enslaved people, not only in terms of their lived experiences, but also regarding their emotions, feelings, strategies, and attitudes towards the surrounding world. In this respect, Konadu seems to have been highly influenced by two other major developments in historical research in the last decades: the resurgence of biographies as a historical genre, on the one hand, and the emergence of the history of emotions as a subfield of history, on the other. Both proved extremely useful in recapturing not only the life trajectories of Graça, Mónica, and Adwoa, who ended up enslaved in Portuguese colonial and metropolitan spaces, but also in exposing the emotions and feelings they might have gone through while enduring the burdens of colonial violence and exploitation, and in revealing the strategies they developed to cope.

Using the Colonial Archive to Write the History of Colonized People and History from Below

Many Black Women of this Fortress is also a brilliant example of how the colonial archive and its records, once “read again the grain,” can be used as a point of departure to rewrite the history of the Portuguese Empire from below and from the perspective of the people who have been subjected to its domination. Here, Konadu’s approach and method appears to have been influenced by some key works from postcolonial studies and subaltern studies, whose developments date back to the 1970s and 1980s (Stoler 2009; Spivak 1988; among others). The works of several scholars who made use of Inquisition sources to reconstruct African belief and value systems and religious and healing practices in Africa, as well as in the diaspora, seem to have been a source of inspiration for Konadu to trace the stories of Graça, Mónica, and Adwoa (Sweet 2003, 2009, 2011; Kananoja 2021; Havik 2004; Caldeira 2017; Green, Havik, and Ribeiro da Silva 2021; Silva Santos 2012, 2021; among others).

Future studies adopting a somewhat similar approach and methodology would be, in my opinion, most welcome, as the writing of the history of the Portuguese Empire from below and from a gendered perspective is still in its infancy (Cunha 2021).

Final Remarks

Overall, in my view, Kwasi Konadu makes a major intervention on the historiography of the Portuguese Empire in terms of content by making women's roles within the empire more visible, and by placing enslaved Black women center stage in the historical narrative—something crucial as their voices are often unheard and still remain much absent in the history of the Portuguese Atlantic Empire and of the Portuguese involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. But, more importantly, this is, in my view, a pioneering work within the context of the scholarship on the Portuguese Empire, given its novelty in terms of genre, approach, and methodology. By taking inspiration from key long-term transformations and present-day trends in historical research, this book offers a refreshing and new perspective into what the Portuguese African Empire was in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who the people that built and maintained it were, and how they felt and managed their interactions with the colonizers, their imperial institutions, and their dominant beliefs and values. More future studies of this scope and nature are most desired to help rethink and rewrite the history of the Portuguese Empire from a bottom-up, gendered, and emotional perspective!

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Bionote/ Nota Biográfica

FILIPA RIBEIRO DA SILVA obtained her PhD in History from Leiden University. She is currently Senior Researcher at the International Institute of Social History and a member of the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations. Her research interests primarily involve the slave trade, labor migration, and coerced work.

FILIPA RIBEIRO DA SILVA recebeu o seu doutoramento pela Universidade de Leiden. Filipa é actualmente Investigadora Principal no Instituto Internacional de História Social e membro do Colaboratório Global para a História das Relações Laborais. A sua pesquisa incide principalmente em questões relacionadas com o tráfico de escravos, migração laboral e trabalho forçado.