

Alencastro, Luiz Filipe de, *O trato dos viventes. Formação do Brasil no Atlântico Sul. Séculos XVI e XVII*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2000, 525 pp.

Ângela Domingues
Centre for African and Asian Studies
of the Institute for Tropical Scientific Research
adomingues@mail.netcabo.pt

The most recent historiographical trends with regard to slavery in the modern age consider it to be one of the most important elements that enabled the incorporation of the New World into the international economy. Based on the principle that the vast and extremely fertile agricultural tracts of land in America were worth very little in themselves, this theory opines that America's assimilation into the world economy came about on account of the regular introduction of African slaves. It was this forced black labour that enabled the European nations to fully reap the benefits of their conquests in the New World, both when one considers the case of the sugar industry in Brazil, the Caribbean and the Antilles, the fishing, tanning and lumber trades in New England or the mining industries in Brazil and the Spanish Americas.¹ Slavery and its associated mechanisms thus unified North and South America, Europe and Africa, with the Atlantic Ocean as the medium that brought these three continents together enabling the circulation of people, products, capital, services and ideas, giving rise to a triangular economy between the European kingdoms, the American colonies and the slave ports of Africa.²

The book in question, *O trato dos viventes. Formação do Brasil no Atlântico Sul. Séculos XVI e XVII*, is set within this framework while studying the formation of Brazil against the backdrop of the Southern Atlantic region, more specifically, that of Angola, which was viewed as an area known for the supply and generation of the slaves who sustained the plantations and mills on the other side of the Atlantic. Although economic history predominates in this work, what we find, in fact, is a study of comparative history that, in many cases, extrapolates the previously defined geographical boundaries and predetermined chronological limits. The book reflects upon the inevitable issues with regard to the Spanish colonies, whose markets were deemed to merit priority in the placement

¹ This perspective can be found, for example, in the studies that constitute the anthology co-ordinated by Barbara L. Solow, *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*, Cambridge, New York and Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1991, where, in fact, a version of the first chapter of Alencastro's work was published, entitled "The Apprenticeship of Colonization".

² This triangular colonial economy in the case of the Portuguese in the South Atlantic was superbly brought to the fore by Frédéric Mauro, *Le Portugal, le Brésil et l'Atlantique au XVIIe siècle (1570-1670). Etude économique*, Paris, Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Centre Culturel Portugais, 1983.

of slaves despatched from Portuguese ports, acquired in exchange for a significant volume of gold, silver, Venezuelan cocoa and other American products; the relations and power games between the courts of Madrid and Lisbon and the Dutch republic; the decline of the sugar production of the islands of Madeira and São Tomé, as well as the rise of competing markets in the Caribbean islands and the Antilles; an understanding of the internal political, diplomatic and economic relations of the African kingdoms and territories and the networks of authority and influence that governors, missionaries and adventurers endeavoured to obtain with the African monarchs and local rulers.

This work is based on the premise that, during the period under study, Brazil was a discontinuous colonial space, consisting of maritime enclaves, of which the most important ones were those of Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro or Bahia, and 'continental' spaces, consisting of Maranhão and São Paulo. In contrast to the 'Brazil' of the estate owners and African slave agriculture, who not only produced sugar but also manioc, sugarcane brandy and tobacco and raised cattle, and tended to give priority to this African trade, one can find another kind of 'Brazil': that of the expeditions and the *bandeirantes*, who used the Amerindians as a labour force and the hinterland as an area for expansion and economic development. This internal Brazilian market would be integrated into the circuit of Atlantic exchanges only in the 18th century, with the discovery of gold in the mines located in the interior.

For Alencastro, the colonial identity of the Brazilian maritime spaces, which was formed over the course of the 17th century, was thus based on complementary relations established with their counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic: Rio de Janeiro and Pernambuco with Angola and Bahia with Cacheu and Mina. It is important to stress that these connections were unequal, the continuous construction of Brazil being carried out at the cost of the constant destruction of the western and central coasts of Africa, which supplied the slave labour that was so essential for the functioning of the plantations and mills in America.

It was these ties established between the coastal 'Brazils' and the ports of Africa that, in our opinion, gave rise to one of the most alluring questions dealt with by Alencastro in this work: that of the construction of a bi-polar Brazilian trade and, particularly, commercial relations between 17th century Rio de Janeiro, a port that was increasingly growing in stature, and Angola³. Generating its own dynamics, this trade was established and flourished outside the boundaries of continental Portugal and the 'classic' triangular trade between Portugal, its American colony and the African ports, fed by slaves and other products that the slaves, who themselves were considered to be merchandise, could transport or consume.

The notion that the commercial ports on both sides of the Portuguese Atlantic were joint targets was a strategic element that was easily perceived by the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch⁴. Likewise, it was also the origin of the opening of the Luso-Brazilian military front that dislodged the Dutch *West-Indische Compagnie* from Angola and that sought, by means of wars against the Angolan *sobas*, contraband and pillages, to supply black slaves to the Hispanic American markets during the

³ On this subject cf. Maria Fernanda Bicalho, *A cidade e o Império: o Rio de Janeiro na dinâmica colonial portuguesa*, Ph.D. thesis presented at the University of São Paulo, 1997.

⁴ For the Dutch case see Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815*, Cambridge, New York and Victoria, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

governments of Salvador de Sá (1648-1652) and Rodrigo do Miranda (1652-1653) and, in a subsequent phase, to the sugar mills of the Brazilian Nordeste region.

It is within this 17th century understanding of the complementary relationship between the American ports and African enclaves that Alencastro explains the conquest of Angola by the Sás in 1648: as an enterprise that was aimed at sustaining the maritime commerce between Rio de Janeiro and the River Plate estuary, driven by the slave trade and silver from the Potosí mines. Alencastro uses a biography of Salvador Correia de Sá, his networks of influence, family ties with the aristocracy of the River Plate region and the disquietude manifested in Europe about a possible defection on the part of the Governor to the cause of the House of Bragança as an indispensable element for the study of economic and political phenomena in order to understand both this mercantile process as well as the political, administrative, religious, social and economic hegemony of Rio de Janeiro.

The same methodology is also utilised to approach the presence of the veterans of the war to restore Portuguese rule over Pernambuco during the re-conquest of Angola, with celebrated individuals such as João Fernandes Vieira or André Vidal de Negreiros at the forefront.⁵ For the expansionist desires of a political and agrarian aristocracy that considered Brazil (their Brazil) to be too small to satisfy their social, political and economic ambitions, Angola then appeared as a site of small recompense, albeit with a flourishing trade in contraband and profitable pillages of Africans, who were transformed into slaves to enable the economic growth and prosperity of the mills of the Nordeste region. When used in this perspective, the biographical studies of the Sás or the veterans of the Pernambucan restoration afford a better understanding of the formative process of a new colonial nobility that appeared after the Restoration. It was precisely this nobility that the Bragança dynasty considered indispensable for the defence and preservation of Portugal's colonial conquests.

At the beginning of this review, we mentioned that the historiographical trend within which *O trato dos viventes* is integrated views the Atlantic as a unifying link. Alencastro expresses this position while reflecting that, intrinsically, Brazil was formed and extended itself in Angola: the oceanic winds and currents naturally linked the Brazilian ports to the African ones and facilitated the transfer of slaves from Africa to the detriment of transporting Amerindians between captaincies. In order to further substantiate this opinion, the author of this work thus mentions the flow of individuals on this circuit, not just limited to Africans, such as Brazilian *conquistadores*, settlers from continental Portugal, deportees and outlaws, vendors of sugarcane brandy and "hordes of common people". Likewise, he refers to the presence of the Dutch who, after conquering the Brazilian Nordeste region, recognised the need to occupy enclaves in Africa. He notes that, parallel to this traffic in slaves, a trade in commodities, that were connected or not with this commerce in humans, but predominantly aimed at the African market, also developed. Likewise, he emphasises the migration of plant species that not only afforded greater chances of survival while crossing this *middle passage*, but also nourished a substantial number of individuals in the trading ports while they awaited transport, consequently facilitating the rise of Luanda as a great slave port. Similarly, Alencastro mentions the transmission of diseases, albeit only in one direction: from Africa and Europe to America. The ocean was a medium for the circulation of individuals and the

⁵ Cf. José António Gonsalves de Mello, *João Fernandes Vieira, mestre de campo do terço de infantaria de Pernambuco*, Lisbon, Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 2000; Evaldo Cabral de Mello, *Olinda restaurada. Guerra e açúcar no Nordeste, 1630-1654*, Rio de Janeiro, Topbooks, 2nd edition, 1998.

transportation of goods, the transferral of economic inducements and political ambitions, the transplantation of techniques of war and destruction, the acclimatisation of crops that altered alimentary habits, men in Brazil who were enamoured by the adverse African climes and adapted their colonising experiences.

One of the most alluring aspects of this book is the way it reconsiders Brazilian colonial history, clearly evident in its reinterpretation and re-utilisation of well-known facts of traditional historiography to substantiate the theses presented therein. For example, we have mentioned that the author works on the premise that, in the 17th century, there were various ‘Brazils’ and, consequently, different policies of colonial exploitation. One of the arguments used to prove this is that of the simultaneous occurrence and contrast between “the two longest expeditions of the New World”, or rather the Portuguese New World: the campaigns of Salvador de Sá in Angola, demonstrating Rio de Janeiro’s interest in harnessing African labour and in territorial expansion in Angola; and the ‘frontier *bandeira* expedition’ by António Raposo Tavares, as an expression of São Paulo’s desire to procure slaves from amongst the Amerindians who inhabited the hinterland. Until now, this relationship had not been suitably evaluated.

One can also consider another case: that of the participation of the *bandeirante* Domingos Jorge Velho in the destruction of Palmares. The *quilombo*, or hideout of runaway slaves, in Palmares and the nuclei of resistance to colonial domination have been studied in depth by historians and archaeologists.⁶ What is new in *O trato dos viventes* is the explanation Alencastro finds for the participation of a *paulista* in this enterprise. According to the author, Domingos Velho’s involvement was justified not due to the acquisition of fertile lands (already occupied in São Paulo but abundant to the West) or indigenous labour (which, although increasingly difficult to obtain due to legal interdictions, was not completely inaccessible), but on account of the conquest of direct access to a maritime port that would facilitate the commercialisation of merchandise from São Paulo on the Atlantic circuit. However, we must observe that, for a novice reader, this need to seek a port north of the São Francisco River when access to ocean ports could be achieved through the Sea Route or *Caminho do Mar*, which connected the São Paulo plateau to Santos, utilising Amerindian porters, is not completely clear.⁷

This book also highlights the juridical and theological problems of slavery and the moral, ethical and religious considerations that this question prompted amongst secular and ecclesiastical thinkers. Over the course of various chapters, Alencastro delineates the legal contradictions between

⁶ As an example, see the studies by Pedro Funari, Richard Price, Ronaldo Vainfas and Sílvia Hunold Lara in João José Reis and Flávio dos Santos Gomes (organisers), *Liberdade por um fio. História dos quilombos no Brasil*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1996.

⁷ One possible explanation can be found in John M. Monteiro. This author believes that the Amerindians were an efficient and economical means of transport but adds that, from the end of the 17th century onwards, the reserves of Amerindian labour were exhausted, prices of wheat fell and there were shortages on the market of Santos. Consequently, the economy of São Paulo declined, which was keenly felt from the 1670s onwards. Palmares was destroyed in 1694, although the presence of Domingos Jorge Velho is associated with Pernambuco from 1685 onwards, when he sought to carry out attacks against the Amerindians of the captaincy. The intentions of the governing authorities to use his services to destroy Palmares date from 1687 (cf. *Negros da terra. Índios e bandeirantes nas origens de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1994, pp. 126; and Pedro Funari, “A arqueologia de Palmares. Sua contribuição para o conhecimento da história da cultura afro-americana” in *Liberdade por um fio*, p. 32).

the defence of Amerindian freedom and the apology for African slavery, mentioning how, in an initial phase, the blacks would attenuate social tensions that existed in Brazilian colonial society, divided between a defence of the Amerindians and their utilisation as forced labour. Likewise, he mentions the mechanisms for protection created by Portuguese colonial societies with regard to the Amerindians and Africans and, above all, reveals that, both in Brazil as well as in Africa, there were innumerable infractions and abuses, as well as unending confrontations: between legislation and local or pan-regional interests, between the governors and other elements of colonial societies, between secular and ecclesiastical entities. He also reflects upon the advantages that the alliances established with Amerindians and blacks afforded the Portuguese, as, for example, the latter were able to incorporate fearsome warriors such as the Potiguares or Jagas into Portuguese armies. However, he does not mention the corresponding benefits that the Amerindians and Africans hoped to obtain from these agreements.

What is extremely clear in this work is the process of “de-socialisation” and “depersonalisation” felt by these different ethnic groups on both sides of the Atlantic: between the Amerindians, devastated by recently introduced diseases, who had come down from their ethnic territories and settled in villages near the nuclei of Luso-Brazilian colonisation, serving as a protective shield for the colonisers against attacks from Europeans or other Amerindian groups; and with the Africans, objects of successive commercial transactions who were subjected to an extreme form of geographical uprooting and social and cultural disengagement.

While conceiving the formation of Brazil on the western side of the Atlantic, Alencastro believes that a familiarity with the intricacies of Angolan history is indispensable: not just an awareness of the relationships between the Luso-Brazilian conquerors and the Angolan people or that of the consequences of the slave trade on ethnic African communities. The conception of *O trato dos viventes* presupposes a juxtaposition of areas that, traditionally, are considered as pertaining exclusively to the history of Africa or that of colonial Brazil. In this way, with the same intensity with which he discusses the campaigns of Salvador de Sá, the author speaks of Jinga, the “man-eating” queen, of António I, Mani Mulaza, the King of Congo, a long-standing ally who was annihilated in the Battle of Ambuíla, or the fearsome Jaga warriors. He examines the existence of commercial circuits of trade that were inaccessible to Europeans and commercial fairs where slaves were bought and sold in the African interior where the Portuguese had a privileged position in comparison to the Dutch or English. Likewise, he mentions the image that Europe constructed of these exotic, barbaric and savage worlds at the heart of Africa, through the accounts of Capuchin missionaries or the embassies that the Congolese sovereigns would send to the Pope and to their European “brothers”.

Alencastro has elaborated this work, *O trato dos viventes*, based on a vast and up-to-date bibliography that has enabled him not only to substantiate a solid conceptual apparatus, but also to provide a vast amount of information about specific questions or particular geographical areas. It is necessary to make only one observation with regard to the bibliographical organisation that seems somewhat confused, grouped under the headings *Primary Manuscript Sources* (consulted in Portuguese, Brazilian and French archives), *Primary Published Sources* (collections, nobiliary histories, diaries, miscellanies, sundry transcribed documents, research instruments), *Works of the 15th, 16th and 17th Centuries* (histories, treatises, chronicles, travelogues, treaties, sundry documents), *Other Cited Works* (in which he inserts 18th century sources that, however, are used in the text with the same relevance as primary sources, as is the case of the work *Ethiope resgatado* by

Manuel Ribeiro Rocha, published in 1758 (p. 186)) and *Unpublished Theses and Papers*. There are also formal inaccuracies in the bibliographic references.