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Colonial or indigenous rule?

The black Portuguese of Timor in the 17th and 18th centuries

From the late 15th century, the Portuguese created a far-flung political, religious and economic network in maritime Asia, where Portuguese men often married Asian or mixed-blood women who were Catholic by birth or conversion. The resulting *mestiço* groups constituted a ubiquitous and important presence in Portuguese Asia for hundreds of years, as they became instrumental in maintaining relations with indigenous Asian societies. One interesting case is the Topasses or black Portuguese population on Timor, which enjoyed a pivotal role on the island in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Hans Hägerdal

The scattered complex occasionally known as the Portuguese ‘seaborne empire’ was directed in Asia by its colonial organisation Estado da Índia, based in Goa, India, but its control over Portuguese activities was less than complete. Rather, it was but the formal aspect of the Portuguese presence. Almost from the beginning of the Portuguese enterprise in Asia, merchants and soldiers acted outside the auspices of the Crown.

Portuguese society contained an element of racist thinking, but it is not enough to look at indigenous Asians using European perceptions of human categorisation. Rather, we must put the Portuguese groups in Asia in a localised context, exploring how they adapted to indigenous conceptions. For while Portuguese newcomers to Asian waters prided themselves on their whiteness and discriminated against *mestiços*, whites and *mestiços* both were seen as Portuguese, not least in the eyes of their Asian neighbours. In what is conventionally called the early modern period, roughly 1500–1800, religious affiliation frequently constituted a more important marker of identity than physical features. Thus the Catholic creed was the fundamental denominator of Portuguese-ness in Asia, and since most people of Portuguese descent retained a marked Portuguese identity, intermarriage was a means to establish a loyal Catholic community in Portuguese posts.

Timor was economically attractive to external powers owing to the trade in sandalwood and beeswax. It was also known for problematic geographical conditions, which made the means of subsistence and even access by sea cumbersome. The island’s multi-ethnic society possessed primitive technology and was divided into innumerable principalities. Still, it was on Timor and some surrounding islands that the name of Portugal was preserved, while its other South-East Asia possessions were knocked off by the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) between 1605 and 1641. This is the more remarkable since the Estado da Índia had few resources to spare for the marginal Timor. The number of whites on the island was never large. Moreover, since 1613, the Portuguese had to contend with Dutch interests in the Timor area, though the Dutch, too, allocated few resources to this far corner of Southeast Asia.

Part of the eternal question of how the Portuguese managed to hang on in Timor for several hundred years lies precisely in the dynamics of the Topasses – a term probably connected to the Indian ‘du-bashi’, meaning ‘bilingual’ or ‘interpreter’. Their *mestiço* community evolved in nearby Solor in the late 16th

century and later moved to Larantuka on East Flores – both places were stepping stones to appropriate sandalwood and other commodities on Timor. In the mid-17th century they began to move to the Lifau area on the north Timor coast. This modestly sized group, which was moreover hostile to the Estado da Índia for long periods, was able to prevail and retain a Portuguese identity owing to four factors: ethnicity, religion, political structures and the group’s place in the early colonial system.

‘Blacks with shotguns’ and ‘hanging trousers’

The ethnic composition of the Topasses was constantly changing, and this relates to the ethnic perceptions prevalent in Southeast Asia until fairly recent times. At this time there was no propagation of a racial hierarchy based on alleged intellectual or other properties. It was entirely possible to alter one’s ethnic belonging, thus it was possible for people of all skin colours to become members of the Topass community. Topass leaders, the Hornay and Da Costa families, descended from a North European and a Pampanger (Filipino), respectively, which exemplifies both the breadth of their ethnic origin and the possibilities of advancement regardless of skin colour. The mixed community that arose in Solor and later Larantuka was thus reinforced during the 17th and 18th centuries. The sources of such demographic reinforcement were several.

One, oddly enough, was the great rival of the Portuguese, the VOC, because numerous defections from VOC outposts and ships took place in East Indonesian waters. Conditions for VOC servants in these faraway places were often miserable, which made desertion a dangerous but attractive alternative. Such desertions are known to have taken place both in times of war and peace until 1730. Very few instances have been found of Portuguese deserting to the VOC side, though suppressed Portuguese clients on Timor sometimes did.

The non-official aspect of the mixed Portuguese community was also underscored by the social position of white Portuguese who joined their ranks. A 1689 Dutch colonial report characterises them as pennyless people and runaways, which implies that they were on the margins of white society. Another Dutch colonial report, from 1665, mentions prisoners from Cochin and Cannanore, most of whom were presumably Indian Christians or of mixed blood, who ended up in Lifau. It is apparent that people who the Estado da Índia wanted out of the way were sometimes sent to the Timor area.

However, locals from Timor and the surrounding islands were able to join



A “Topas” or “Mardick” with his wife.

From a sketch by Johan Nieuhof, published in his work

Voyages and Travels in the East Indies 1653–1670. (1682).

the Topasses. A 1659 report by a Dutch official notes some 300 Topasses on Timor, of whom few were white or of mixed race; the great majority were ‘blacks with shotguns’. Thus locals acquired a Portuguese identity and proficiency in European weaponry, which was important when the main Timorese weapon was still the assegai. A 1670 Franciscan report attests that the Portuguese language was spoken in Larantuka by the local population, and that locals educated by the Portuguese community identified themselves as ‘Portuguese’. Even Timorese princes were at times categorised as Topasses and behaved in a fashion that ran contrary to traditional Timorese codes of conduct. It was possible to enter the ethnic category of ‘Portuguese’ by adopting certain markers, such as language, profession (soldier, administrator, trader) and clothing (the Dutch know the Topasses as ‘hangbroeken’, meaning ‘hanging trousers’). All this, again, accords well with the flexible Southeast Asian way of alternating between ethnic identities.

Padres, generals, wife-giving and -taking: consolidating power through religion and politics

More than blood, religion was the more profound identity marker; one is reminded that the very word ‘ethnic’ in early modern European dictionaries referred to something pagan or non-Christian, rather than something related to racial origin or material culture. Dominican priests, who enjoyed a role in Topass society that was not restricted to religious service, demonstrate religion’s role in the reification of Topass identity. Documents contain many hints of the great devotion Topasses exercised toward Dominicans, who sometimes

even headed military expeditions. Dutch reports repeatedly complain about ‘Roomse paapen’, or Catholic padres, who easily influenced local populations to the detriment of Dutch aims.

The rather few priests operating in the Solor-East Flores-Timor area were able to strengthen the Topass sphere of influence through their missionary activities. In the 1620s, 1630s and 1640s, an intense flurry of conversions swept West Timorese rajas into Catholicism. Much of this was obviously superficial, but at the same time conversion implied a political approach to solidifying the Portuguese colonial empire, where the institution of the Portuguese kingship in Lisbon was symbolically important in spite of its obvious distance.

That leads to the third factor in Topass retention of Portuguese identity, the political development of the Topass community. From the late 16th century the mixed group on Solor was led by officers with the title *Capitão Mor*, while the main title-holder in the 18th century became *Tenente General*. Owing to the non-existence of the Estado da Índia in these waters before 1702, the choice of leaders was made locally. A kind of dynastic dynamics evolved after 1664, when the Hornay and Da Costa families ascended to the leadership. These two families ruled in turns up to modern times in the Oecusse area in north-western Timor. Their genealogies are insufficiently known, but it’s clear that they regularly intermarried after 1700. From the second half of the 18th century, moreover, they intermarried with the Da Cruz royal dynasty of Ambeno on whose traditional domain they settled. It is interesting to note that the Hornays and Da Costas, apart from a few brief periods, were not violent rivals, but rather peacefully co-existed. By the early 19th century, they even signed contracts jointly.

The Topasses were able to dominate the most important West Timorese principalities from around the mid-17th century. In 1670, they undertook expeditions to the eastern coastlands and brought them into a superficial state of submission. By the late 17th century they thus had a very strong position on Timor, while the Dutch were confined to the island’s westernmost parts. One important aspect of this was their martial culture, which was even able to include members of Timorese aristocracies. Another aspect was their ability to act as wife-givers and wife-takers. The Topass leader Mateus da Costa (d. 1672) married a princess from the principality of Amanuban, which in the Timorese system placed him into a strategic position vis-à-vis his in-laws; as a wife-taker he was expected to support the latter, but he also found an important base in Amanuban for fighting his rivals.

The fall: from officers to petty kings to ‘Black Foreigners’

For the Topasses, the 18th century was filled with conflicts with the Estado da Índia, which imposed Goa-appointed governors who settled in Lifau beginning in 1702. Although the Hornays and Da Costas managed to expel the white governor from Lifau in 1769, their power had been on the wane since 1749, when they suffered a major defeat against the VOC in western Timor. The conflicts deterred traders from Macau and emboldened Southeast Asian Chinese to increase their economic networks on Timor to the detriment of the old Topass-dominated system. Towards the end of the 18th century their influence was mainly confined to the Oecusse-Ambeno enclave and Larantuka, and the Hornays and Da Costas emerged as local petty kings of Oecusse rather than just colonial officers.

Was, then, Topass rule on Timor colonial in any meaningful sense, or is it more judicious to regard it as a basically indigenous power? Arguments support either position. Documents from the heyday of Topass rule, from the 1650s to 1702, reveal a rather loosely structured tribute system, the *tuthais*, that was adopted from the local Timorese principalities. This may seem more like a pre-colonial, rent-seeking practice than colonial rule (in the sense of a systematic subordination in order to produce economic and other benefits to an external nation or power). In general, the Topasses may not have been terribly different from the majority population, and for the most part they were of course of Timorese or East Florenese blood.

On the other hand, it is also true that there was a close relationship between Topass governance and the colonial system managed by Portuguese traders, particularly from Macau. The rationale for external interference on Timor – the sandalwood trade – demanded cooperation between a polity able to secure regular shipments and traders from other Portuguese-controlled Asian ports who appeared on a likewise regular basis. Timor therefore was included in an early colonial system built on a superficial but often heavy-handed domination over the innumerable Timorese principalities. That the Topasses were something apart is also reinforced by a study of local Timorese traditions recorded over the last two centuries. In spite of being overwhelmingly Timorese in terms of ethnic origins, the Topasses were and remained in the eyes of Timorese posterity *Kase Metan* – the Black Foreigners. ◀

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