The ‘Civilisation Guild’ and the ‘Engineers of Depression’: The Case of S. Thomé Cocoa

Justificatory memoranda and ‘humanitarian’ acts: civilising through work

A justificatory memorandum from 1906 about the model of native labour employed in the Portuguese colonies – which was designed to respond to the ‘propaganda, lately renewed with insistence’ that was being levelled at the working conditions, particularly in S. Thomé and Príncipe – emphasised the enduring attention the Portuguese authorities devoted to their colonial possessions. The ‘principles of the humanitarian and civilising tutelage’ that governed the actions of the Portuguese colonial administration could be confirmed in the intense torrent of legal acts that provided the framework for Portugal’s presence in the colonies for half a century.¹

In relation to native labour policy, with S. Thomé and Príncipe as a privileged testament, this official document praised the liberalism of the legislation and highlighted, by invoking such foreign figures as the French explorer Auguste Chevalier, its ‘model system of labour’ supported by an extremely effective policy of medical and social assistance which surrounded ‘natives with facilities and comforts from food to hospitals, that are beyond those enjoyed by the working populations in the civilised world’. This allusion to the ‘welfare state’ that characterised the daily life of the ‘labourers in the fields and the workers in the cities’ was frequent in the official arguments that praised the general conditions under which native labourers worked.²

In addition to this, the Portuguese government had the opportunity to ‘favour, in perfect agreement with the ideas and in solidarity with a humanitarian and civilising conviction’, the flow of native workers emigrating to the colonial territories of other powers, such as the British and
the French. This fact was used, as it had been in the past, as a guarantor of the humanitarianism of the Portuguese legal framework in respect of native labour and the efficacy of its supervisory dispositions, while, at the same time, involving other colonial powers in the process. The Portuguese were no exception. The supply of indigenous labour from the Portuguese colonies to the Island of Réunion (Luso-French agreement of 1887) and to the Transvaal mines (intercolonial agreement of 1901) were to be considered as the undeniable truth that ‘the contract of native labour in the Portuguese colonies, [could not be] considered either destructive of the negro’s freedom, nor contrary to the principles proclaimed in the name of humanity and of civilisation’. After all, other colonial powers signed these agreements and its terms ...

Portuguese legislation was in full conformity with the intention to educate the natives in the virtues of work, which would provide them with a ‘better life’; and this without compromising their ‘complete freedom’ to choose the means by which they could comply with this ‘moral and legal obligation’. These were the terms of the decree published on 26 November 1899 by the minister of the colonies, Eduardo Vilaça, which had António Enes as the main inspiration and resurrected the terms of the debates that had taken place during the 1860s in relation to the regularisation of native labour and which chose indigenous labour, compulsory or not, as the basis of the colonial project. Despite the humanitarian rhetoric, actually, the provisions of this regulation legitimated the development of a system of trading native labour that led inexorably to the native working in terms that were defined by the economic interests associated with the Portuguese colonial administration. It facilitated the use of the legal provisions on mandatory and compulsory work by private parts, upon payment of a set amount to the Curator, which also allowed the application of correctional labour which was applied as a punishment to those who refused to comply with the legal obligation to work, establishing conditions of physical punishment. The exception provided in the law referred to natives with sufficient capital to subsist alone, those already with a paid profession and those producing goods for export. It also showed a differentiation regarding gender (exclusion of women, who were exempt in order not to interfere with the production of future labourers), age (people over the age of 60 and under the age of 14 were exempt) and health (the sick and disabled). Years before, in the ‘touchstone of all studies of the modern Portuguese colonial administration’, as Marcelo Caetano wrote about his report Moçambique, Enes had declared that once the system of slavery had been abolished ‘the economic interests