The colonial anthropology of Timor revisited

Maria Johanna Schouten
University of Beira Interior

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Introduction

António Augusto Mendes Correia, a prominent figure in anthropology (and public life) in Portugal during the Estado Novo dictatorship, had a tendency of praising the "traditional Lusitanian interest in colonial scientific issues" (Correia 1945a: 11). He was referring, specifically, to the era of the Discoveries, the research of Rodrigues Ferreira in Amazonia, and the African expedition of Ivens, Capelo and Serpa Pinto. Undoubtedly, these pioneers left us with works of inestimable value. For instance, the ethnographies of Asia written by the Portuguese during the era of the Discoveries remain an extraordinarily rich source of knowledge to this day. As well as being an interesting read, the works of authors such as Tomé Pires, Duarte Barbosa, Francisco Rodrigues and Mendes Pinto are referred to and analysed internationally on an almost daily basis by anthropologists and historians specialising in Asia (see Reid 1988; 1993). However, in terms of the anthropological study of regions that formed part of Portugal's colonial empire, I find it difficult to agree with Mendes Correia. During the colonial period (from the mid-19th century to 1974), Portuguese works of anthropology were not only scarce, but also failed to keep pace with international developments in this field of science.

In the pages that follow, I will look at some of the anthropological research undertaken in former Portuguese Timor, considering the characteristics of Portuguese anthropology in general, and certain facets of colonial politics. These two factors cannot be separated, each exerting an influence on the other. Knowledge is power, but power also helps, hinders or conditions the acquisition of knowledge, as witnessed during the Portuguese Estado Novo regime, particularly in a field as politically sensitive as colonial anthropology.

Independently of such considerations, the findings of anthropological research in Timor deserve our attention, at a time when East Timor is emerging as a new state. Deep scars have been left by decades of war in Timor, and material culture has suffered from large-scale looting. Fortunately, various initiatives have been launched to recover ethnographic data collected in the past. Among the works published, Australian researcher

Kevin Sherlock (1980) offers an impressively detailed survey, which is complemented by René Pélissier's exploration of the "grey literature" on Timor (Pélissier 1996). We have also seen the release of new editions of works of great ethnographic interest (Cinatti 1996 [1968]; Castro 1996 [1943]), notably a reissue of António de Almeida's studies of Asia in a single volume (Almeida 1994).

The journey of anthropology

During the colonial period, much of the research on the Timorese population focused on physiognomy. There is great physiological diversity between the Timorese, making them an ideal subject for biological anthropology. This was also the dominant focus of Portuguese anthropology within the colonies, an attitude redolent of the early days of anthropology as a scientific discipline. In the 1850s and 60s, when Anthropological societies were founded in various countries, Anthropology was defined as the "Science of the Whole Nature of Man" (in the words of James Hunt, founder of the Anthropological Society of London), and physical features were believed to offer important clues to understanding this "Man" (Stocking 1987: 247; Young 1995: 134-135; Winthrop 1991: 102). Skulls, in particular, were a prime object of study, due to the assumption that "...physical structures, in particular the characteristics of the skull, govern the development of mental capacities" (Dias 1996: 24, citing Elizabeth Williams). It followed that the skull was the meeting point between biology and mental, social and cultural factors, and this is why scientists in the 19th century were so keen to acquire human skulls (Pannell 1992).

In the decades that followed, the principal focus of anthropology varied from country to country. In England and certain other countries, biological anthropology lost its prominence, becoming just one of several branches of anthropology, while in France and Germany it remained central (Stocking 1988: 9; Dias 1996: 26). In 19th-century Germany, the majority of anthropologists were medical doctors, including the eminent scholar Rudolf Virchow, President of the respected *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* for many years. Subjects presented in meetings of the *Gesellschaft* included archaeological finds and ethnographic objects, but the focus was on physiology, physical function and body modification in a wide range

of cultures. These "somatic themes" were also put forward as a justification for denying women membership of the *Gesellschaft* (Pohle 1970: 21).

The most precious possession of the *Gesellschaft* was its collection of skulls, which included examples from Timor (Pohle 1970: 26). Skulls from Timor were also present in scientific collections in Portugal, notably a set of 35 examples in Coimbra University Museum, catalogued as early as 1893-4, which served as the basis for several anthropological studies on Timor over the course of half a century (Cunha 1893-4; 1937; 1944). A controversy about the provenance of the skulls in the 1930s only goes to show their perceived significance. In Timor, the Portuguese had a ready supply of skulls, due to the prominence of headhunting rituals in the island cultures. The indigenous military forces that helped the Portuguese establish colonial hegemony on the island were motivated, in part, by the opportunity to decapitate their adversaries. These skulls were then offered to Portuguese officials in exchange for cloths or jewellery. The traditional "skull festivals" that followed these military campaigns were tolerated, or perhaps even encouraged, by the Portuguese (Pélissier 1996: 48, 52, 294, 295; Schlicher 1996: 177-178).

Anthropological research in the Portuguese overseas territories consisted mainly of the observation of human biology and the collection of cultural artefacts (Areia 1985: 139). Jorge Dias' fieldwork in Mozambique, in the late 1950s, in which he aimed to document Makonde culture, was long overdue, and, until 1974, remained an outlying example of such efforts (Pereira 1986).

Regarding Portuguese Timor, a series of Research Missions was undertaken, beginning in 1953, an initiative by the *Junta das Missões Geográficas e de Investigações do Ultramar* (Committee for Geographical Missions and Overseas Research). Its proposed work in the field of anthropology centred around biological anthropology and pre-history, where it aimed to gather data on "diet, a record of ethnic mutilations, the number of children, living and dead, some of their habits and customs, and linguistic data, etc". (Almeida 1954: 352, also in 1994: 26.) Such an encyclopaedical and not sharply-defined aim is reminiscent of the broad fields of interest of European anthropology in the latter half of the 19th century, which were ".. largely ... biological anthropology, material culture, demography, and linguistics of the word-list variety" (Stocking 1991: 63), an approach that Portugal was slow to update.

The Peoples of Timor

For a scientist interested in human phenotypes, an encounter with the diversity of the population of Timor and the surrounding islands is fascinating. This physiological diversity goes hand in hand with a complex linguistic situation. Most of the many languages spoken belong to the Austronesian family, but some non-Austronesian languages are also present. In the areas of Timor formerly governed by the Portuguese, all of the Timorese indigenous languages (with the exception of Helong) are spoken, while in Indonesian Timor only four indigenous languages exist. Indeed, Western observers since the mid-19th century, and in particular the explorations by Alfred Russel Wallace, have long classified the inhabitants of the large archipelago of Insulinde into the two broad categories of Malay (in the western part) and Melanesian (or Papua) (Wallace 1962: 446-458). In those times, these physiological categorisations were easily extended to encompass mental characteristics, based on the assumption that appearance was indicative of character, intelligence and culture. Ethnographic research sometimes classified the (groups of) peoples studied according to physiological, rather than cultural, characteristics, as the titles of some authoritative anthropological works on eastern Indonesia attest, for example Riedel (1886) and Bijlmer (1930).

Alfred Russel Wallace was one of those who linked the differences observed between Malays and Papuans, regarding behaviour and "moral character", to their physical differences (Wallace 1962: 15). In his opinion these populations were "two of the most distinct and strongly marked races that the earth contains", "... being distinguished by physical, mental and moral characteristics, all of the most marked and striking kind." (Wallace 1962: 317-318; 332). In his reports he depicts the groups categorised as Papuans as active, noisy, and extroverted, whereas the Malays were calm, indolent and concealed their feelings.

In his scientific expeditions to the archipelago, Wallace spent a few periods in western (Dutch) and eastern (Portuguese) Timor, around 1860. He concluded that the inhabitants of this island did not belong to the "Malay race", in appearance or in behaviour. As to the women of Kupang (western Timor) he remarked: "The way in which the women talk to each other and to the men, their loud voices and laughter, and general character of self-assertion, would enable an experienced observer to decide, even without seeing them, that they were not Malays." (Wallace 1962: 142).

The conclusion that Malay features were not prominent in this region was reiterated sixty years later by Hendrik Bijlmer, who conducted research in the field of biological anthropology while serving as a doctor in the Dutch army: “In Timor and East Flores, one feels one is absolutely no longer among Malays” (Bijlmer 1929: 189). However, he found the situation complex. Bijlmer showed an awareness of the difficulty of establishing boundaries between peoples or groups of peoples – an issue familiar to anthropologists today, who generally admit to the idea of fluidity of demarcations between ethnic groups, whether studying their culture, physiology, or language .

In Timor, Bijlmer was unable to define any criteria for accurately distinguishing between the two phenotypes he had in mind, and not even the distinctive eye shape, or “Mongol fold”, served this purpose: “I indeed often found the most perfect Mongol fold on the most Negroid face!” (Bijlmer 1929: 85). Similarly, he found no correlation between straight hair and the “Mongol fold”. A conclusion that Bijlmer felt correct was that, of the peoples observed in the area, the Atoni people in western Timor as well as the inhabitants of the Eastern end of the island of Flores, Larantuka, were the most “Melanesian” (Bijlmer 1929: 190).

Mendes Correia and António de Almeida - contributions to the anthropology of Timor

António Augusto Mendes Correia was among the Portuguese anthropologists who carried out anthropological studies of Timor, although mainly from a distance. A doctor by training, a professor of anthropology, geography and ethnography in Porto and Lisbon for many years, and President of the above-mentioned *Junta das Missões Geográficas e de Investigações do Ultramar* (JMGIC), Mendes Correia’s principal interest was biological anthropology.

In the first years of his career, he published an article on Timor based on manuscripts and notes made by soldier and anthropologist Arthur Augusto Fonseca Cardoso, who observed hundreds of individuals in Timor (Correia 1916a). The paper shows that Mendes Correia was familiar with the works of scientists who had previously visited the island, notably Wallace, Scottish biologist Henry Forbes and Dutch doctor and anthropologist Herman ten Kate. The latter exchanged

correspondence with Mendes Correia, as did Wenceslau de Morais, an expert on Japan (Correia 1932).

Also in 1916, Mendes Correia published the article *Antropologia Timorense*; behind this title lay a treatise on the anatomical and physiological characteristics of Timorese people. For a later article, with a similar title, *Antropologia de Timor*, the scientist observed Timorese people present in the Colonial Exhibition in Porto, in 1934 (Greenhalgh 1988: 82-111).

Mendes Correia believed that the description and measurement of these Timorese people "on display" in Portugal, as well as those present at the Exhibition of the Portuguese World in 1940, were essential research activities. His findings provided important information for his main work on Timor, *Timor Português: Contribuições para o seu estudo antropológico* (Portuguese Timor: Contributions to its anthropological study), published in 1944 and classified by Kevin Sherlock (1980: XII) as a "standard item".

Another source for this work was a collection of hundreds of photos of Timorese people from different regions. This visual material was commissioned by Colonel Álvaro da Fontoura, Governor from 1937 to 1940, and held in the archives of the JMGIC, which also funded the resulting publications (Correia 1945a: 12) In 1953, Mendes Correia spent a month in East Timor, where a team of anthropologists sent by the Research Committee were beginning a research project.

This research was coordinated by António de Almeida (1900-1984), a man who went on to become an extremely prolific author about Timor. He had already coordinated five anthropological and archaeological expeditions in Angola, and in 1954 he was deputy head of the Scientific Mission in São Tomé. As Head of the Anthropological Mission in Timor, he worked on various projects alongside Mendes Correia, Ruy Cinatti and others (See Cinatti 1987; 1996). He conducted research into the 31 Timorese ethno-linguistic groups he had identified (M.E. Almeida 1982), as well as Chinese people from Macau living in Timor. Within the field of ethnography, he covered themes such as naming taboo, material culture, ethnozoology and ethnobotany. However, his handling of these subjects rarely went beyond simple description.

The oldest work on Timor by Almeida that I have been able to access, dated 1946 and based on accounts by various authors (see Almeida 1946, also in 1994: 321-378), deals with a corporeal subject matter: mutilation customs. This topic aligns with research interests he had already expressed, notably in the paper written in a competitive

exam for the role of lecturer at the Escola Superior Colonial, in 1937. It is also worth noting that what seems to be his final article on Timor (from 1977, co-written with his daughter, Maria Emília de Castro e Almeida, see Almeida 1994: 669-678) also concerns mutilations, more specifically those of the teeth. This article is, in my opinion, a good example of his approach to ethnography: it draws attention to somatic aspects and details, but the context is lacking. With his characteristically detailed descriptions, he catalogues every ethno-linguistic group in East Timor, and their dental mutilation customs.

In many of his publications, António de Almeida makes a point of listing the names and traits of the ethnolinguistic groups that, according to his classification system, make up the indigenous population of Portuguese Timor. The cultural diversity of the Timorese people is evident in the varied languages and in material culture, particularly architecture, well described by Ruy Cinatti (1987). However, the taxonomy set out by Almeida seems too refined and static, presenting tens of categories of Timorese and non-Timorese peoples, but ignoring the statistical and cultural significance of Timorese people who belong to various groups simultaneously, by descent or lived experience. In reality, the "boundaries" between different groups were not as fixed as his works would imply. A detailed diagram in an Almeida work from 1966-67 (pages 23-24, also in Almeida 1994: 99-100) contains the category "People of mixed descent", subdivided into "People of Portuguese descent" and "Others", but this category is not further explained. The same diagram can also lead to misunderstanding, equating "Indonesian Timorese people" with "Moors", though Islam is not the dominant religion in Indonesian Timor (West Timor). This category, devised by Almeida, probably includes Muslims from other Indonesian islands.

Almeida's classification makes no reference to people of African origin, even though there were a considerable number of Mozambicans and Angolans among the lower ranking troops who participated in the Portuguese "pacification" of the territory half a century earlier (Pélissier 1996: 91-94; 105; Forbes 1887: 232). Their numbers, and their visible traces, had since decreased. According to the 1936 census, "Black Africans" made up just 157 of a total population of 463 996 (Correia 1945b: 16), while in 1970, of a population of 606 477, only 22 individuals were classified as black and 42 as Indian (Suparlan 1980: 41-42).

With his taxonomy of the indigenous population, Almeida adhered to the general trend among colonial powers of emphasising the ethnic diversity of the populations

under their control. Each ethnic group was viewed and treated differently, according to ideas (sometimes based on anthropological research), about their social and cultural lives, physiology and character. The assumption of a correlation between physical and mental dimensions is an old one, particularly prominent in 19th-century anthropology, as already mentioned. However, António de Almeida does not appear to attribute character traits to specific groups within the Timorese population. The Portuguese colonial regime took advantage of the anthropological interest in physiology. Biological anthropological research seemed to offer a means of assessing the usefulness and skills of indigenous peoples. In his 1935 article *Valor psico-social comparado das raças coloniais* (Compared psychosocial value of the colonial races), Mendes Correia considered factors such as "ability to work", "impulsiveness", "overall intelligence" and "teachability" (particularly among Africans). To this end, he sought clues in their physical traits.

This approach rarely considered the potential influence of contact between groups, or social change. Almeida (1961: 39, also in 1994: 461) explicitly denies any cultural influence from people of Chinese or Filipino origin living in Portuguese Timor. However, he believed that one people exerted great cultural influence: the Portuguese. Today, following the Indonesian occupation and in light of "nation building" efforts in which East Timor seeks to highlight elements of its unique identity, the following observation, made by Almeida in around 1960, is interesting: "[The] Portuguese culture in Timor has a tendency to supplant the Indonesian-Malay culture with growing success" (Almeida 1961: 39, also in 1994: 461). This imagined or real "Portuguesification", and the ideas that underpin it are the subject of the next section.

A civilising mission

The transformation of Timorese society under the influence of the Portuguese is a recurring theme in the works of Almeida: "Over the course of more than four centuries, the civilising actions of the Portuguese left a profound and lasting impression on the natives of Timor" (Almeida 1961: 36, also in 1994: 458). With these words, he used his authority as an anthropologist to lend weight to an idea already widespread in Portugal, which aligned with the discourse of the Estado Novo regime. The introduction of

Portuguese civilisation, considered superior, was a holy mission, and the Portuguese presence was therefore justified.

Almeida gives examples of this so-called civilising activity. He reminds us that, in addition to schools, healthcare and police services, the Portuguese introduced the hoe and other tools, matches and nylon and elastic products. They taught the Timorese how to make cheese and butter and improve their housing (Almeida 1961: 37, also in 1994: 458-459). Today, we know that these items were only introduced in certain geographical areas, and even there, they were not universally accessible.

In conclusion, Almeida indicated that "our presence is bringing about the disappearance or diminishment of the old native ergological practices" (Almeida 1961: 36-37, also in 1994: 458-459). Many anthropologists would mourn such a trend, given the respect for, and interest in, diversity of cultural expression inherent to their discipline. However, this was not the case for Almeida, who expressed no regret at the loss of aspects of the old culture. One clear illustration of this is his attitude to traditional *ikat* weaving techniques, used to produce beautifully patterned cloths – cloths that also served symbolic and ritual purposes. In the brief allusion he makes to the technique in his overview of the cotton industry, Almeida admits that "weaving, which flourished in the recent past... is in decline *by virtue* of increasing fabric imports" (Almeida 1959: 446-447, also in 1994: 382-383; my emphasis). Once again, he refers to synthetic fabrics (available thanks to the Portuguese), while elsewhere in his work, he mentions the sewing and embroidery techniques learnt by schoolgirls. As we know, thanks to Francisco Meneses, the Canossian Sisters also taught the Portuguese textile technique of *desfiação*; and according to Portuguese visitors, the lace made in Timor was even more handsome than that produced on the island of Madeira or in the Portuguese coastal town of Peniche (Meneses 1968: 329, citing Teófilo Duarte). This artform was probably intended to replace the equally laborious *ikat* weaving as "women's work". However, other Portuguese scholars, such as Ruy Cinatti and Almeida e Carmo admired *ikat* fabrics; the latter recommending protection and stimuli for handmade production (Carmo 1965: 102) Even to one of the practices Almeida foregrounded in previous research, dental mutilation, he gave scant importance. As he wrote, the practice of painting the teeth black, is "...disappearing, especially among the male sex, *thanks to* Portuguese acculturation" (Almeida and Castro e Almeida 1977: 102, also in Almeida 1994: 672).

He believed one of the most important aspects of the "spread of Westernised culture" in East Timor to be the spiritual dimension, in other words, the introduction of schools and Catholicism (Almeida 1976-77: 145, also in 1994: 665). In the early 1960s, he judged that there was already considerable evidence of "Portugueseness" among the Timorese people due, principally, to the work of missionaries (Almeida 1961: 38, also in 1994: 460). This constituted a success for the great evangelisation effort in the Portuguese colonies, described so accurately by Paulo Valverde (1997: 77) "as a project that simultaneously aims to convert people to Christianity – or more specifically Catholicism – civilise them and make them more Portuguese", or, in the words of the Portuguese Catholic missionary authority Silva Rego, "to imbue the African landscape with Portugueseness" (cited by Valverde 1997: 91), a phrase which can be applied, in this case, to Timor.

Almeida described some traditional customs and techniques in minute detail, aiming to create a comprehensive inventory, before they, as he expected, would dissipate. His publications, aimed at the general public and international audiences, also served to create or substantiate an image of febrile Portuguese scientific activity in the colonies, a "scientific occupation", which followed the military and political occupation, according to Mendes Correia (1945: 3).

The paradox of Almeida resides in the fact that he studied practices that were, in his view, condemned to disappear and be replaced with superior Portuguese practices. This, in turn, would bring about the officially desired "Portuguesification" of the colonies. Under the Estado Novo dictatorship, there was a widespread belief that the cultures of the colonised peoples were poor and inferior (Castelo 1998: 124; Léonard 1997), and therefore not worthy of great attention, which explains the scarcity of anthropological studies focusing on the cultural dimension. The rejection of indigenous culture by the Portuguese was also reflected in official measures. For example, in Timor, the *lipa* (a cloth worn around the waist, known as a *sarung* in Indonesia), was officially banned as an item of male dress in 1954 (Castelo 1998: 122).

Portuguese authorities had a lack of appreciation for traditional cultures, but also a lack of genuine, sincere efforts to fulfil the civilising mission. Throughout most of their contact with Timor, the actions of the Portuguese were characterised by indifference, bloody military campaigns and economic exploitation (Schlicher 1996; Pélissier 1996; Clarence-Smith 1992). In the view of many colonial officials in Timor and other territories,

the most important aspect of the civilising mission was to teach people to work – under the conditions of the Portuguese, obviously (see Castelo 1998: 85-86).

The firm belief that the Portuguese culture was bound, sooner or later, to supplant the indigenous material culture and religion, is sometimes made explicit in the works of Almeida and other authors. Observing the current situation in the country, it seems that this assumption has become a reality, notably in terms of religion. However, it was only during the Indonesian occupation that the majority of the population converted to Christianity, seeking a collective identity that set them apart from their occupiers. On the other hand, several aspects of the traditional culture prevailed. Today, after the period of Indonesian rule, the extent to which traditional, Portuguese, Indonesian or so-called "global" elements are present in East Timor, and the extent to which these influence one another, remains an open question. Despite some potential reservations, discussed in this paper, anthropological works produced during the Portuguese era will continue to play a key role in future study.

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