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Stefan Halikowsky Smith is a well-known author within Portuguese and European historiography in the field of Portuguese Overseas Expansion in the Indian Ocean during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In his latest works, he has addressed with particular attention the population movements and cultural exchanges in the Portuguese Empire, always emphasizing a comparative dimension with other European colonial powers.

The book in question carries the reader—not necessarily an expert—to a quite interesting and rather unexplored dimension of overseas historiography: the creolization and readaptation of the Portuguese communities in the Indian Ocean at the dawn of the Portuguese Restoration of Independence. During the last two decades of the Iberian Union (1580–1640), the Overseas Empire is shaken by a succession of attacks, mostly carried out by the Dutch and English, a memory that stirs old Portuguese hostilities in Asia. In the case of the Portuguese possessions in Asia, there is a state of constant war. Although the Portuguese State of India continues to be a profitable enterprise—the result of the reorientation of several routes—the loss of the Portuguese commercial hegemony is a certainty. With the taking of Malacca (1641), Colombo (1653), Kochi and Cranganore (1662), and several other possessions in India, Makassar (1667), and with the expulsion of the Portuguese from Japan, the once thriving Portuguese India is reduced to Goa, Daman, Bassein, and a few forts in India, China, and Macau.
It is in this particularly challenging context that the author, through a well-constructed narrative, portrays the (re)establishment of these displaced populations (particularly from Makassar) in Ayutthaya, today's Thailand, between 1640 and 1720. However, the distinctive feature of this book lies not in the mere description of the development of the Portuguese community in this territory. Ayutthaya, and its microcosm, is used here as a case study of the vast migration movements and of the reorganization of large communities of Portuguese and assimilated peoples who suddenly were forced to evacuate their settlements and find new areas.

Stefan Halikowsky Smith thus explains the context of the Indian Ocean in the seventeenth century and the complexity of these “hidden population movements.” Using a remarkable range of Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French sources, but also various travelers’ reports, the author manages to give an account of the many factors affecting the Portuguese diaspora in the Indian Ocean and creolization, topics which are, in reality, rather unexplored. While it is true that there are quality studies on Ayutthaya—notably by Maria da Conceição Flores and Rita Bernardes de Carvalho—and on other communities from the Indian Ocean (see, for example, the studies conducted by Mariana Marques Guedes), the novelty of this study consists mainly in its global approach. Halikowsky Smith understands and explores the political dissent in Europe, the complex political panorama of the Indian Ocean, the institutional network of the Portuguese power and the “Informal Empire,” as well as the intricate game of different interests in the spheres of trade, religion, and diplomacy.

Based on the discussion of the concept of creolization, Halikowsky Smith (ch. 1) adopts a clear narrative, from the general to the particular, allowing the reader to follow the various dimensions of the Makassar Portuguese community’s diaspora to Ayutthaya in the 1660s. The population movements in the Portuguese Indian ocean (ch. 2), the Portuguese “tribe’s” migration to Ayutthaya (ch. 3 and 4), and a very detailed characterization of the “campo português,” which was settled there (ch. 5, perhaps one of the best chapters) were appropriately contextualized in the eleven chapters of the book.

From a reading of various sources and thus a multifaceted view of the Portuguese presence in Ayutthaya in terms of its social composition, formal structures of political and religious power, and the various dimensions of everyday life, Halikowsky Smith gives prominence to various aspects of social, ethnographic, and artistic life. This complexity is particularly visible in chapter 5.
(“O campo português’. The Portuguese Quarter in Ayutthaya in the Wake of the Makassarese Diaspora”), chapter 7 (“Those Who Occupy the Lowest Category Here” The social relegation, but survival of the Portuguese ‘tribe’) and chapter 9 (“Unpublished Depictions of the Portuguese in Neighboring Kingdoms”). This systemic approach of the Portuguese community and its intersections with other European and local peoples allows the reader to understand more clearly the uniqueness of the “Portuguese” in the cosmopolitan society of Ayutthaya. It is this approach that ultimately helps the author to better penetrate the lower strata of society and compare the Portuguese “tribe” from Ayutthaya with other established communities in neighboring kingdoms, as in today’s Cambodia. However, it is also this thorough approach that allows the author to better understand the complex interplay of political alliances. If in Siam the political and diplomatic key sat in union between the Portuguese and the Japanese against the Dutch, in Cambodia the diplomatic connections were, however, consolidated between the Japanese and the Dutch (219–20).

An important aspect of this book is concerned, as mentioned above, with the concepts of creolization and diaspora in the Portuguese world. The author explicitly states that creolization is a “major point” of his research. According to him, “while a number of historians continue to research the East between 1500–1800 in terms of entities (Portuguese, English or Dutch), they fail to face up to the fact that the vast majority of ‘Portuguese’ were not soldiers, missionaries or officials sent out to Estado da Índia, but dark-skinned mestiços who had never been to Portugal…” (2). Halikowsky Smith uses several studies, including those of Charles Boxer, George Winius, Gilberto Freyre, Glenn Ames, and Teotónio de Souza, for understanding and discussing this concept. He avails himself of an extensive bibliography—mostly Dutch—bringing into light how authorities shaped the views instilled upon these individuals.

As a basis to his discussion, Halikowsky Smith insists that “Portuguese historiography is considerable laggard when compared to recent attempts to understand this issue in the Dutch East Indies…” (3). We follow the author to some extent, particularly because creolization—its shapes and implications—needs further development in the area of the Portuguese Indian ocean. However, some works such as those by Russell-Wood, João Paulo Oliveira e Costa and Teresa Lacerda, and even António Hespanha already brought important contributions to this field. The latter, by developing the concept of “informal empire” had already stressed the great autonomy given to outlying
communities (or poles), although subject to the benchmarks of the king and pope. Despite the high level of autonomy in certain creole communities, the central power was represented by jurists and other officials, in order to prevent the distance from corrupting royal effectiveness.

It is based on the concept of creolization that the author frames his narrative, carrying the reader, in great detail, to the Portuguese community in Ayutthaya, never losing sight of the complex political social, religious, and cultural context. To that extent, this study incorporates new and important contributions to the study of creolization, which is also somehow embodied by the emphasis it gives linguistics, architecture, and education. Halikowsky Smith devotes a significant part of his study to religious structures and to the impressive density of religious missions and several religious organizations in Ayutthaya. However, the institutional apparatus could have been further explored in Community rules and regulations (within chapter 5). Despite the undeniable limitation of sources, the author could have further explored the political and administrative structures in this community, namely the powers of the “Captain General of Bandel” (108–9). Such an analysis could reveal in greater detail the extent to which “creoles” had some leadership role in the administrative apparatus and, therefore, better define their status.

Another relevant aspect of the research is the exploration of the lower strata of society. Chapter 7 examines the “social relegation, but survival, of the Portuguese ‘tribe.’” The author seems to have no hesitation in stating that “it is clear that the Portuguese diaspora did not do well following its re-settlement in Siam” (175). The community’s “extreme poverty” is highlighted, but we must ask if it does comprise all the sectors of the society. Despite strong competition from the Europeans and from Asian communities, there were sectors of the population who were able to benefit from various profitable market niches, as is well shown. The author himself admits that this idea needs further grounds: “… it would be too hasty to suggest the Portuguese tribe had become something approximating a slave population in the late seventeenth and eighteenth-century Siam …” (198).

Despite the remarkable collection of primary sources examined by the author—a true exercise in global history—there are some small bibliographic absences. In addition to the studies mentioned above, in particular those by John Russell-Wood, this research would benefit from the integration of some contributions from Nova História da Expansão Portuguesa, and from Portuguese Oceanic Expansion 1400–1800 by Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Ramada
Curto. Within the linguistic view of creolization, recourse to some more recent works of Hugo Cardoso might prove useful.

Overall, the contribution of Halikowsky Smith for the study of creolization in the Indian Ocean, and in particular of the Portuguese presence in Ayutthaya, is undoubtedly important, not only by the thorough study—and still little explored by Portuguese historiography—but by its own comparative approach, essential to the understanding of the complex population movements in the Indian ocean following the degradation of Portuguese India starting in the 1620s.

Works Cited


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