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Ethiopian Walks | 2017 | [Cristina Ataíde](#) (courtesy of the artist)

BLACK PEOPLE IN PORTUGAL

Bruno Sena Martins

Originally published in 1988, the book *Os Negros em Portugal* [Black People in Portugal], by José Ramos Tinhorão, has recently been re-issued in a third edition by the publishing house *Caminho*. Tinhorão's work gives an overview of different aspects of the presence of a significant black African population in Portugal, established as a result of the slave trade which began in the 15th century. The persistent dominance of a kind of lusotropicalist reticence as regards the colonial past has been one of a number of factors that have meant that Portuguese historiography has been slow to give adequate weight to the subject of slavery. *Os Negros em Portugal* has, therefore, provided some necessary relief. In it the

role of slavery in Portuguese territory is carefully placed within an analysis of the politics of oceanic expansion. This takes us from Infante D. Henrique to the Marquis of Pombal (himself a descendent of a black slave), who brought to an end the arrival of enslaved people into Portugal.

In this sense, as well as recognizing the Portuguese as protagonists in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the European colonization of the Americas, the book focuses on the scale and permanence of slavery in Portuguese territory itself. In fact, from the second half of the 15th century, the forced transportation of black Africans into Portugal to meet the demands of a transforming economy was crucial to creating the conditions of possibility for the formation and maintenance of the overseas empire:

Portugal was the first country to export a slave labour force. It did so within a mixed economy that was the result of the coalescence of the interests of the State, the landed aristocracy and the administrative, commercial bourgeoisie. Portugal, moreover, was the first country to employ captives in their territory, in practically all the functions that slaves had performed since Antiquity (Tinhorão, 2019: 95).

Given its objective, and thanks to the sources that it uses, Tinhorão's book has a clear limitation: it gives scant access to the subjective dimension of the experience of the black women and men who, as slaves, were part of Portuguese social life for centuries. This history, which began in the first half of the 15th century, led to 10% of the population of Lisbon and the Algarve being black slaves by the 16th century. The figures in the Alentejo and in Porto were similar. Hence the subtitle of the 1988 edition of the book, "A silent presence". Or rather, we should say, a *silenced* presence.

There is a wealth of evidence, here, of a time when slavery constituted the foundations of Portuguese identity. Stories of the effusive presence of the black population during festivals in the late 16th century – singing, drinking and dancing whenever the possibility arose – contrast with the stern behaviour of the Portuguese, firmly under the sway of the Inquisition. Evidence shows slaves working in all kinds of roles and functions (often as 'slaves for hire'), as well as the macabre punishments at the stake and in public squares, where the most base, racist and feudal violence was unleashed, under the guise of example-setting. The features of this history, and its centrality to Portuguese life, cannot be obscured by the putative touristic vision of an ingenuous *Museum of Discoveries*. Slavery presents us with an ontology devoid of human dignity, with extremes of inequality and destruction, whether in the constant violence of labour exploitation, or in punishments and humiliations. Nevertheless, one of

the most interesting aspects of this book is the way in which it recounts the innumerable strategies of resistance by which black populations identified themselves as subjects, and as part of a diasporic and subaltern community. In this light, the participation of black women and men in the spaces of religious festivals, principally in the brotherhoods of Our Lady of Rosario, are significant. They speak of the inventive syncretism by which Catholic traditions were strategically appropriated and Africanized.

In this account, the story of black people descended from slavery ends with the writings of the archaeologist Leite de Vasconcelos on the identification of groups of black people living at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries in places such as Alter do Chão, Alcácer do Sal and São Romão do Sado. In spite of this, the re-edition of this book in 2019 comes with a distinct contemporary relevance when we consider the social context in which scholarship on the presence of black people in the Portuguese context is received today. It is strange to think that, in spite of a process of whitening that has, across many centuries, diluted the genealogical traces of the black slave population, this is nevertheless a significant ancestral presence in the contemporary Portuguese population. However, the genealogy which, for me, is more important to emphasize, is that which links the history of slavery with contemporary racism. It is precisely because of oceanic expansion and the trans-Atlantic slave trade that black people arrived in the modern world with the mark of sub-humanity on their skin. Indeed, as inheritors of historical racism, black people who came to Portugal in the 20th century from former African colonies are the symbolic descendents of the black men and women who lived in Portugal under the institution of slavery.

The increasing centrality of the voices of black and Afro-descendent people in Portugal, speaking out against racism and the inequality of opportunity that it generates, is the best guide to how to reconfigure an ancestry that deserves to be revived and reinvented. The silencing of the presence of black men and women continues in contemporary Portugal. It is legitimated through policies such as [refusing to include ethnic-racial origin in the census](#). It is anchored in a structural elision of black bodies in politics, academia, the media and central urban space. This silencing will continue to provide enormous amounts of work for future historians who come to study Portugal in the 21st century. Though still subsumed within the weighty empires of Eurocentric amnesia, fortunately there are more and more black people making their own history and recognizing themselves as descendants of incessant racism and remembering enslaved ancestors.

José Ramos Tinhorão (2019), *Os Negros em Portugal*. Lisboa: Caminho.

Translated by Archie Davies

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