Colonial or indigenous rule? The black Portuguese of Timor in the 17th and 18th centuries

From the late 16th 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 mestizo groups constituted a ubiquitous and important presence in Portuguese Asia for hundreds of years, as they became instrumental in maintaining relations with indigenous Asian peoples. 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.

Portuguese society contained an element of racial thinking, but it was 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 mestizos, whites and mestizos both were seen as Portuguese, not least in the eyes of their Asian neighbours. In what is conventional 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, it is important to use this means to establish a loyal Catholic community in Portuguese posts.

Timmer was economically attractive to external powers owing to the trade in sandalwood and beeswax. It was also known for its relative political stability, as it had no strong centralised authority, which made the means of subsistence and even access by sea cumbersome. The island’s multi-ethnic society possessed native 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 1621 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, the Portuguese who had remained in Timor had to contend with Dutch rule, which was important when the main Timorese weapon was still the assegai. A 1675 Fransiscan 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 knew the Topasses as ‘hangbroeken’, meaning ‘hanging trousers’). All this, again, accords well with the flexible Southeast Asian way of alternating between ethnic identities.

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. VOC servants in these faraway places were often miserable, which made desertion a dangerous but attractive alternative. Such desertsions are known to have taken place both in times of war and peace until 1750. 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 1667 Dutch colonial report characterised these third-class inhabitants of Timor and Caran- nome, most of whom were presumably Indian Christians or of mixed blood, who ended up in Lifu. It is apparent that precisely in these areas, dominated by the Dutch, local influence was wanted out of the way were sometimes sent to the Timor area.

However, locals from Timor and the surrounding islands were able to join the Topasses. A 1639 report by a Dutch official notes some 500 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 1675 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 knew the Topasses as ‘hangbroeken’, meaning ‘hanging trousers’). All this, again, accords well with the flexible Southeast Asian way of alternating between ethnic identities.

Pedanes, 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 Timor society that was not restricted to religious service, demonstrated 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 state that they were referred to as ‘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 Timorese sphere of influence through their missionary activities. In the 1623s, 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 and later, the Topasses had a strong system of submission. By the late 17th century, these two families ruled in turns up to modern times in the Oecussa area in north-western Timor. Their genealogies are insufficiently known, but it’s clear that they regularly intermarried among themselves. From the mid-17th century onward, however, they intermarried with the Da Cruz royal dynasty of Ambeno on whose traditional domain they then ruled. A 1713 report notes that the Hornays and Da Costas, apart from a few brief periods, were not violent rulers, 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 prin- cipalities from around the mid-17th century. In 1750, they undertook expedi- tions 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 Solor and Linau areas. An important aspect of this was their mar- tial culture, which was even able to include members of Timorese aristocracy. This martial culture worked to the advantage of the Topasses and their ability to act as wife-givers and wife-takers. The Topass leader Matres da Costa (d. 1752) married a princess from the principality of Ambeno, and through this alliance the Timorese system placed him into a strategic position vis-a-vis his in-laws; as a wife-taker he was expected to support the latter, but he also found an important base in Amanihan for fighting his rivals.

For the Topasses, the 18th century was filled with conflicts with the Estado da Índia, which imposed Goa-appointed governors who settled in Lifau begin- ning in 1792. Although the Hornays and Da Costas managed to expel the white governor from Lifau in 1759, 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 Ambeno-Ambeno enclave and Lar- antuka, and the Hornays and Da Costas emerged as local petty kings of Oecussa rather than just colonial officers.

Was, then, Topass rule on Timor coloni- sal in any meaningful sense, or is it more ludicrous to regard it as a basically indig- enous power? Arguments support either position. Documents from the heyday of Topass rule, from the 1613s to 1792, reveal a rather loosely structured tribute system, the tuahis, 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 subordina- tion 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 other local communities and for the most part they were of course of Timorese or East Flores blood.

On the other hand, it is also true that there was a close relationship between Topass governance and the colonial sys- tem managed by Portuguese traders, particularly from Macau. The rationale for external interference on Timor – the sandalwood trade – demanded coopera- tion between a polity able to secure reg- ular 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 Timorese were something of a political and economic power. In general, the Topasses may not have been terribly different from other local communities and for the most part they were of course of Timorese or East Flores blood.

Part of the external question of how the Portuguese managed to hang on to Timor we find in the rather surprising history of the island itself. The Timorese history is well known, particularly since the mid-19th century, and it is not our aim to repeat it here. The Timorese history is well known, particularly since the mid-19th century, and it is not our aim to repeat it here.