

Rita's Voice and Cross: African Women and Communication under the Slave System

A voz e a cruz de Rita: africanas e comunicação na ordem escravista

Ivana Stolze Lima ^{*,**,1}

English version: David Rodgers

RESUMO

A pesquisa que fundamenta este artigo focaliza os dilemas, escolhas e possibilidades de comunicação e interação linguística que se apresentaram aos africanos escravizados. Mais especificamente, focaliza o uso da então chamada “língua mina” (línguas do grupo Gbe) a partir de um registro produzido em Vila Rica, Minas Gerais, por Antônio da Costa Peixoto (*Alguns Apontamentos da Língua Mina com as palavras portuguesas correspondentes*, de 1731 e *Obra Nova da Língua Geral de Mina*, de 1741). A proposta é buscar práticas dialógicas que estiveram na base da elaboração desses documentos e que revelariam, subjacentes ao seu declarado autor, experiências das comunidades linguísticas ali envolvidas. Cotejando a obra com documentação coeva e com a historiografia sobre a escravidão, buscaram-se in-

ABSTRACT

The research on which this article is based focuses on the dilemmas, choices and possibilities of communication and linguistic interaction presented to enslaved Africans. More specifically, it examines the use of what was then called the ‘Mina language’ (encompassing diverse languages of the Gbe group) from records written in Vila Rica, Minas Gerais by Antônio da Costa Peixoto (*Alguns Apontamentos da Língua Mina com as palavras portuguesas correspondentes*, 1731, and *Obra Nova da Língua Geral de Mina*, 1741). The proposal here is to identify the dialogical practices that informed the elaboration of these documents and reveal, subjacent to their declared author, experiences shared by the linguistic communities involved. Pairing the work with contemporary documentation and historiography on slavery and

* Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.

** Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), Departamento de História. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil. ivana@rb.gov.br <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6488-1036>>

dícios sobre as (e os) possíveis informantes de Peixoto, particularmente a experiência feminina, a partir da sua atuação no comércio, sua relação com a escrita, e a questão da intimidade. Busca-se ainda compartilhar procedimentos teóricos e metodológicos, contribuindo para o aprofundamento e a sistematização da dimensão linguística da escravidão de africanos no Brasil. Palavras-chave: línguas africanas; escravidão e comunicação; Minas Gerais; Costa da Mina; mulheres africanas.

Mina Africans, the article seeks clues to Peixoto's possible informants, especially the female experience, based on their commercial activities, their relationship to writing, and the question of intimacy. It also seeks to explain the theoretical and methodological procedures used in the research, thus contributing to deepening and systematizing our knowledge about the linguistic dimensions of the enslavement of Africans in Brazil. Keywords: African languages; slavery and communication; Minas Gerais; Mina Coast; African women.

Rita Dias de Araújo was the name used by an African woman, enslaved and later freed, a resident of the parish of São Bartolomeu, Vila Rica de Ouro Preto, in the mid-eighteenth century. She was one of the innumerable *donas de venda* or female storeowners, an activity in which Mina women were especially prominent. She had a daughter, Maria Dias de Araújo, with the Portuguese clerk and local judge (*juiz da vintena*) Antônio da Costa Peixoto (1703-1763), who authored the manuscripts *Alguns apontamentos da língua mina com as palavras portuguesas correspondentes* [Some notes on the Mina language with the corresponding Portuguese words] (1731) and *Obra nova de língua geral de mina traduzida ao nosso idioma* [New work on the General Mina Language translated into our idiom] (1741). A cross on a credit transaction where she agreed to pay a debt of 63 eighths (*oitavas*) and 2 twentieths (*vinténs*) of gold, used to buy rum, molasses and bacon for her store, is the only record we have in her own hand.² Pursuing these and other traces, Rita will serve as a guiding thread to explore the expression of women who spoke what was then called the Mina language. I shall analyse the two documents in dialogue with the historiography on slavery and contemporary documentation, setting out from the topics of commerce, writing and intimacy.

Although historiography took a decisive theoretical turn when it proposed to conceive the slave as a historical actor, the linguistic dimension of the experience of enslavement has only appeared in isolated studies. As a result, we still lack more systematic proposals for how historians should construct and analyse this object of study. As well as the dialogue with linguistic concepts,

especially those of sociolinguistics and linguistic history – areas that have been examining this question more systematically – contemporary historiography has yet to offer, especially to younger generations of researchers, the tools needed to inspire and shape their response to this challenge. This is a challenge that involves identifying the relevant documentation and proposing analytic questions, while also establishing an interdisciplinary dialogue with linguistics and attending to the specificity of the historical approach. Important ways forward include interlocution with already well-established studies on ethnicity and a re-reading of the classics of historiography and other intellectuals who incorporated the linguistic dimension into their analyses (authors like Francisco Varnhagen, Nina Rodrigues, Joaquim Norberto, Gonçalves Dias, Capistrano de Abreu, João Ribeiro, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and José Honório Rodrigues, among others). Amid a highly fertile area of inquiry for the historian, presenting innumerable possibilities for topics and problematics, this article sets out to share some of the working methods that I have been using to explore what can be conceived as a social history of African languages in Brazil.³

A number of theoretical procedures seem to me pertinent when it comes to considering how the linguistic dimension is incorporated into our reflection on slave society, including the forms of contact, relationship and communication between its agents and actors. The first such procedure is difficult to explore through historical knowledge. Nonetheless, it is worth highlighting as a relevant problem in terms of defining the spectrum of our inquiries. How can we study the experience of the Africans landing in Brazil, being submitted into the slavery system, needing to learn and recreate forms of communication, and suffering the shocks of the new meanings and interruptions imposed on their lives? How did the Africans, speakers of distinct languages, mobilize their listening and perception in order to communicate and survive in slave society? What was the viewpoint of the Africans themselves concerning the other agents who made up the slavery system in different periods and situations?

The linguist Emilio Bonvini describes the ruptures experienced by Africans in the Americas as follows:

The semantic rupture, without doubt, made itself felt the most: for the dislocated Africans, the meaning of words became brutally obsolete or began to 'lose its purchase,' since they no longer reflected the African reality, but they were also yet to become rooted in the new reality with its different ideas and new denominations (plants, pharmacopoeia, hunting, animals, new techniques and new

consumer products). The other rupture was dialogical in kind, since these same languages became exposed to unusual linguistic encounters: new languages inhabiting the same space (other African languages brought by the slave trade, Amerindian languages, the Portuguese language spoken by the slaveowners), without forgetting the loss of their value as a source of identity caused by the flattening of the language due to the disappearance of dialectal variants. (Bonvini, 2008, p. 33)

The second theoretical procedure open to exploration in a social history of African languages involves the communication maintained ‘with Africans’ by the different actors and institutions involved in the construction of the slave order. In the case of missionaries who assumed a prominent role in this task, as well as the central or local authorities, it is worth investigating the linguistic policies that may have worked to transform Africans into slaves. Scattered among the historiography and the documentation are potential references to linguistic policies that concerned Africans. These were not necessarily centralized and planned policies, but the diverse actions of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, explicit or implicit, formal or informal, that reveal how the languages of African slaves were treated by them. This includes the construction of a linguistic knowledge decodified in grammars, vocabularies and catechisms, similarly to what was undertaken for indigenous groups and languages (Bessa-Freire, 2004). An important example was the process of constructing a linguistic knowledge of Kimbundo, which spanned both sides of the Atlantic over the seventeenth century in multiple situations, among which the elaboration of *Arte da Língua de Angola* (Art of the Angola Language) by the Jesuit priest Pedro Dias (Dias, 1697) was the tip of the iceberg (Lima, 2017b). Alongside Kimbundo, the Mina language was also a concern of authorities during a period of upsurge in slave trafficking.

In 1700, João de Lencastre, General Governor of Brazil, expressed a preoccupation with the “indoctrination of the Negroes of the Mina Coast,” recognizing “an ignorance about the diversity of their languages, both on that Island [of São Tomé] and in the city [Salvador, Bahia].” The island was a trading hub for Africans originating from different regions and slave trafficking with the Mina Coast (*Costa da Mina*) had intensified since the end of the seventeenth century with the onset of mining. The governor devised a plan to resolve this problem that involved the archbishop, parish priests and residents, asking them “to indoctrinate and catechize through interpreters.” Involving the Missions Council (*Junta das Missões*) and the masters, the proposal distributed

tasks and responsibilities among the various colonial agents. The Bishop of São Tomé was required to catechize the Africans before they embarked for Bahia. The indoctrination of those coming directly from the Portuguese Mina Coast would employ “freed Negroes versed in their own language.” These would be trained as catechists by Jesuit priests from the Colégio da Bahia. The Royal Treasury (*Fazenda Real*) would purchase slaves, choosing those who could “be capable of performing this ministry.”⁴

Besides the texts by lay and religious authorities, the documents of slave-owners, foremen, runaway slave hunters (*capitães do mato*) and agents of order are also extremely important in terms of understanding how communication was established between speakers of different languages – from which derives the idea of a communication “with the Africans” and a linguistic policy to access them.

The third theoretical procedure to which historians might pay attention concerns how the Africans engaged in forms of communication and sociability between themselves. How their maternal languages may have been used, how they made use of common and shared lingua francas, how they used dominant codes in different periods and places – whether these were American, European or African languages. In short, it is a matter of thinking about how communication took place “between Africans.” There was also an African linguistic policy, in the sense of sharing exclusive linguistic communities. The more active this communication was “between Africans,” the more strategic became the communication “with Africans.” It was no coincidence that knowledge of Kimbundo was coterminous with the military confrontation with the community of Palmares, formed by escaped slaves.⁵

In order to construct a social history of African languages, as well as the communication “by Africans,” “with Africans” and “between Africans,” it is also important to detect relevant clues and information from among a diverse range of documental fields. Obviously, the records written by Africans and their descendants are invaluable. But the question is how to formulate ways of reading that enable us to construct the objects of investigation and widen its scope. This fourth theoretical procedure effectively involves the possibility of encountering and distinguishing *records* of African languages in Brazil, as well as *African uses* of the available languages. Some records constitute proposals for knowledge and description of African languages in Brazil, as in the case examined in this text. In other situations, these documents comprise dispersed records of language uses, fragments, for example the word lists or vocabularies created by merchants and slave traders. There are also documents that

indirectly link African slavery to linguistic issues, such as correspondence with authorities, police records, court trials and notices, as well as the fictional literature and artistic production (Lima, 2014). Obviously, in exploring this material, the diverse theoretical viewpoints must always take into account temporal and local specificities.

While the four procedures described above are complex and wide-ranging, the work of Antônio da Costa Peixoto is a good starting point to face them. In this article, I intend to deconstruct the notion of authorship, evaluating this record as the outcome of dialogical practices.⁶ My hypothesis is that the document in question can be used to think about the communication and expression of African men and women under the slave order. The available work of Antônio da Costa Peixoto consists of two manuscripts. The first is *Alguns apontamentos da língua Mina com as palavras portuguesas correspondentes*, which dates from 1731 and is currently in the safekeeping of the Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal (the National Library) in Lisbon. The second manuscript, an expanded version of the first, is *Obra nova da língua geral de Mina*. This dates from 1741 and now belongs to the Biblioteca Pública e Arquivo Distrital de Évora (the Évora Public Library and District Archive). A printed edition was edited by Luís da Silveira, a librarian at Évora, and published in 1944 by the Agência Geral das Colônias, followed by another edition issued in 1945. The text is organized by entries in the Mina language (words, phrases or dialogues) that are translated into Portuguese and could be described therefore as a vocabulary.

Theorists specializing in the history of linguistic knowledge have emphasized how alterity resides at the basis of every intention to compile lists of words, vocabularies and dictionaries – writing practices not by chance linked to the history of trade, navigations and diverse forms of colonization. Dictionaries were born as instruments to access other languages, with so-called monolingual dictionaries being only a very recent phenomenon (Nunes, 2006; Auroux, 2009). The work of Costa Peixoto both confronts alterity and testifies to an environment of intense linguistic diversity in which different languages circulated, including other African languages and Amerindian languages such as the Tupi-based Paulista Lingua Franca. This diversity, however, was marked by different statuses that varied according to their demographic weight, their political-administrative function, the social and communal ties, and the spaces in which they could potentially circulate (Calvet, 2007). In this complex environment, the manuscripts studied here juxtaposed Portuguese – the language of administration, writing and power, of which the author is a representative

in his capacity as a clerk and local judge (*juiz de vintena*) – and the Mina language. Another central characteristic of linguistic tools like dictionaries – to which historians frequently resort without due caution, seeking supposedly ‘neutral’ definitions for words used in other periods – is that they also comprise discourses and representations about society. Their problematization as a source involves recognizing this characteristic.

DIALOGICAL PRACTICES IN ALTERITY

The dialogues and translations presented by Costa Peixoto in his contact with speakers of the Mina language *represent* social relations under the slavery. Whatever their objectives and their forms of use and circulation, the texts contain a representation and a symbolic elaboration of experience. This explains the power of the dialogues related to the brutal violence and tense negotiations associated with slavery (on this point, see Lara, 2002) with a dramatic content only very rarely made explicit. It is equally important, however, to incorporate into the analysis a vision of the set of everyday experiences that appear there too. The work can provide the material for us to investigate the underlying dialogical practices, a concept inspired by the study of Olabiyi Yai (2000), who defines the notion of dialogical performances in the Atlantic world, active in the production of vocabularies and similar documents on African languages. The author points to a non-essentialist notion of authorship in which the collaboration of Africans comprises an inescapable element. Africans, women in particular, were informants and co-authors, albeit autonomous and strictly speaking unable to be identified with any precision, and possessed a space of negotiation, guiding questions and answers, leaving their marks and worldviews.

The vocabulary entries are in the Mina language with the matching terms provided in Portuguese. Much of the work has small ‘blocks’ of paragraph-like texts, organized by semantic field and thematic association. There are also small phrases and dialogues. As a critical-analytic exercise, I suggest that Rita – representing Mina-speaking women involved in selling food, in different forms of intimacy, sharing spaces of sociability – as well as the set of Africans and non-Africans who shared communication in the Mina language and who lived under the dominance of the Portuguese language, should be considered decisive agents in the elaboration of Peixoto's *Obra nova*.

THE GENERAL MINA LANGUAGE

Rita Dias de Araújo is African. This is what her classification as a *preta forra*, freed black woman, tells us, setting in motion one of the most enduring classifications of the slave order, the distinction between Africans and Creoles, where the linguistic criterion was decisive. Rita was probably Mina. The importance of the slave traffic from the so-called Mina Coast, to the mining areas of Portuguese America, passing through Bahia and Rio de Janeiro en route, is already widely known.⁷ Relations between Bahia and the Bight of Benin involved the convergence of various economic, political and cultural dimensions, such as the production and consumption of tobacco, the political dynamic of the African kingdoms and peoples, and the interests of the businessmen of Bahia, already described in the classic analysis of Pierre Verger (2002). In the 1720s, the construction of the Luso-Bahian fort in Ajudá and the rise to power of the Kingdom of Dahomey marked the process of enslavement of different peoples from the region, categorized by the slave trade as ‘Mina.’ In 1731, the same year as Costa Peixoto’s vocabulary, the Count of Sabugosa, governor of Bahia, argued for total dependency on the African slave market, especially that of Ajudá (Boxer, 1969, p. 175).

West Africa is an area of considerable linguistic diversity with various linguistic families. The Gbe dialectal complex, belonging to the Kwa family, forms the basis of what Peixoto and other contemporary agents identified as the Mina language. This dialectal complex is of significant demographic importance with millions of speakers in the present-day countries of Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria, evincing a high degree of intercomprehension (Capo, 1988).⁸ It is also widely known that historical use of the Mina category encompassed different African peoples and ethnic groups. To interpret its meaning in a specific situation, then, we need to look for information on the particularities of the slave trafficking involved (Soares, 2004; Law, 2006). Hence the Mina category should not be automatically associated with the Mina language, since it may involve a speaker of Yoruba, for example. Traditionally called Nagô in Brazil, the latter language is from a distinct linguistic family, Benue-Congo, which was highly concentrated in Bahia and Pernambuco in the first decades of the nineteenth century and even comprised a Nagô Lingua Franca (Petter, 2006; Mamigonian; Reis, 2004; Rodrigues, 1977, p. 165). The lexicon recorded in Peixoto’s work is identified as predominantly Fon but with terms also derived from Mahi, Gun and Ewe, all languages from the Gbe complex (Castro, 2002; Rodrigues, 2003; Yai, 2000).

Studies of Mina sociabilities have benefitted from the abundant records held in the Minas Gerais archives. One of the bonds of ethnic sociability was the fact that the godfather and the baptized slave would often belong to the same Mina nation (Maia, 2007, p. 58). Another important space of interaction for Mina men and women were the slave brotherhoods. Different works have shown more specific designations under the Mina category, such as Cobu, Coura, Ajá, Nagô, Ardra, Fon, Sabaru and Ladano, among others (Maia, 2013, p. 110; Rezende, 2006). All these designations are probably related to speakers from the Gbe group, save for the Nagô.

The concept of a *língua geral*, a 'general language,' employed by Peixoto in the title of his work from 1741, has a number of contemporary equivalents and is understood here as a widely-spoken language (Rodrigues, 1996) that allowed communication between peoples who saw themselves as mutually distinct.⁹ The contemporary discourse of a 'native' on this point is very precise:

In 1748 when I arrived at this Capital coming from the city of Bahia, I immediately encountered this Congregation or Corporation of *black Minas of various nations* from that coast, namely Dagomé, Maqui, Iano, Agolin, Sabaru, *all of them using the general language* and closely united... and as time passed the black Nations began to fight with each other...¹⁰

The perception of a Maqui man concerning a *língua geral* that simultaneously allowed associations but did not negate the sense of particular identities matches the definition of Gbe languages formulated by Hounkpati Capo (1988). Along these same lines, the analysis of Mariza Soares (2000) on the diverse groups of origin, showing how the Mina category, although created by the slave trade, acquired a new meaning, is pertinent to understanding the common language used in the mining area. Another contemporary record is the baptism of 11 slaves belonging to the same owner by the parish priest Pedro Leão de Sá, who baptized "João, Vitorino, André, Domingos, Bernardo, Manuel, Jerônimo, Tomás, Pedro and Matheus, the slaves of João Pereira Pinto ... all of them of general Mina Language nation."¹¹

The Mina language was also perceived and identified as an issue by authorities like Pedro de Almeida Portugal, the Count of Assumar, wary of the potential for resistance and communication among the Africans. As governor of the Captaincy of Minas Gerais, in 1719, he officially informed the king about the "disorder experienced throughout this realm in the teaching of the Negroes,"

identifying two reasons for the problem. The first was that the masters failed to take care of the slaves' indoctrination. The second was the more essential: "because most of them were already adults when they arrived from Angola and the Mina Coast, it is difficult for them to learn to speak the Portuguese language."¹²

COMMERCE AND COMMUNICATION BETWEEN DIFFERENT LANGUAGE SPEAKERS

- Sácouculourupou námeachô (Sell me a chicken on credit)
- Nhimásácouculouhé achóhã (I'm not selling my chickens on credit)
- Aquhé nábi ná sárupou? (And how much would you sell one for?)
- Vnásá aquhé cou. (I'm selling one for half an oitava)
- Aquhé cou hé sú. (Half an oitava is a lot) (Peixoto, 1741, f. 27)¹³

Historiography has long emphasized the experiences of African and Afrodescendant women, both enslaved and freed, in small-scale commerce (Antonil, 1967; Figueiredo; Magaldi, 1985). These women possessed 75% of the stores in the districts of Vila Rica in 1746. In São Bartolomeu, the three existing stores belonged to women, one of them to the freed black woman Rita Dias (Pereira, 2008, pp. 93-101). Debora Camilo (2015) presents a significant number of wills left by women traders who declared the Mina Coast as their place of origin, suggesting a commercial knowhow derived from their cultural and economic experiences in West Africa. Narratives like Angela de Souza Ferreira's will conserve this memory: "I declare that I am a native of the Mina Coast from where they brought me as a captive still at a tender age" (cited by Camilo, 2015, p. 58). During the period of slavery, her mistress had also been a *preta mina*, a black Mina woman.

Stores and taverns were spaces where ideas could circulate, words were exchanged and people expressed themselves. We can explore the volume of studies on Mina traders to evaluate just how much interaction existed in these spaces, both among Africans speaking Mina and between them and speakers of Portuguese. Documents containing linguistic records can be investigated for their traces of African expression, taking into account that the very act of speaking involves a subjective performance and a potential for challenge. The constant repressive actions taken against stores, taverns and black female street

vendors (*negras de tabuleiro*) suggest that the associative bonds were significant, as analysed by Figueiredo & Magaldi (1985) and recorded in various documents. These include, for example, the complaint made by residents about such spaces being occupied by slaves who drank spirits and, adding insult to injury, “sat on the counters.”¹⁴ Not by chance, the lexicon of the 1731 and 1741 manuscripts largely refers to commercial activities, including numerical equivalences, sums of gold and forms of negotiation.

WRITING

- Mahiclehuhema. (I'm going to read)
- Mahigulamhuhema. (I'm going to write)
- huhema (paper) (Peixoto, 1741, f. 23 and 10)

In the context of slavery in the Americas, Africans established relations with the prevailing linguistic systems, learning and appropriating the language of the masters and the slave order, maintaining and adapting their maternal languages, suffering ruptures to their possibilities for contact. The relation to written language was imposed on their lives, given that writing was one of the systematic instruments of power and authority used in slavery and colonization, as well as the formation of the State. Just as Africans became *ladinos*, learning to speak Portuguese, some also acquired the ability to read and write to varying degrees. Although rare, examples of slaves and freed people (*libertos*) who learned how to write are important evidence of how different forms of language, communication and registration became appropriated. In a social context in which access to writing was clearly verticalized, mostly dominated by immigrants who had already been taught basic literacy in Portugal, plus an almost invisible number of literate released slaves (Venancio, 2001), the desire for instruction for oneself or for one's children was evident among Africans and descendants in diverse situations. Moreover, it seems that the mobility of the colonial mining region amplified this possibility, at least for certain occupations and economic activities, like artisans, tailors, carpenters and others (Fonseca, 2006; Paiva, 2003; Villalta, 2007, p. 256).¹⁵

Some written records can be read as an expression of slaves and freed people, containing their own views of slavery and freedom, even if not written by themselves. Of course, those rare examples of texts written by them are extremely valuable (Wissenbach, 2002; Mamigonian, 2017, chap. 8). Besides, although

there were few literate slaves, with literate freed slaves perhaps a little more frequent, writing was still part of their lives, irrespective of whether they knew how to read and write. The moment when Rita drew a cross in her own hand, stating that “not knowing how to read or write, I asked Bento da Costa Sampaio to make this document for me and hereby sign it as a witness with my symbol in the form of a cross,” she too became involved in a ritual of power.¹⁶

In the official inquiries undertaken in the region, in which the officials rounded up witnesses to investigate crimes, the statements of slaves and freedmen could be accepted in the absence witnesses from higher social strata. Leafing through these records, amid firm and elaborate signatures, my attention was drawn to a name in block letters and shaky handwriting: “Anna Corriea.” Different to the cross drawn by Rita, she testified to a crime that had taken place and left her signature in the court records.¹⁷ A *preta forra*, or freed black woman, who “lives by her own means,” she resided next to the bridge of São José, a central area of Vila Rica, which must have increased the chance of her having access to literacy.

Silveira (1997) located evidence of the importance of the written word, not only as a monopolization of power, but as a form appropriated by different groups, which made intense use of letters and notes as a way of protecting a right, collecting a debt, or achieving some kind of stability in the tense social relations. African merchant women took great care over the management of their business, administrating their income, listing debts and finally, in their wills, stipulating the destination of their legacies. In these activities, writing – whether or not the women themselves were able to read and write – performed a central role (Camilo, 2015, p. 91).

In order to distinguish between a slave who was circulating in the service of an owner and another who was a *calhambola* – a quilombola, an inhabitant of a community formed by escaped slaves (*quilombo*) – the authorities attempted to introduce measures like making it compulsory to carry a written letter (Silva, 2004, p. 179). Scenes and dialogues of tense negotiations include knowing how to speak and understand the Mina phrase *guacheguimatim huhema, ná blauhê*, “if you don’t have a writ, I’ll have to tie you up.”

- Sôhá huhema mapom (Show me the writ)
- Huhema hehunihé (Here is the writ)
- Huhema matim (I don’t have a writ)
- Huhema hébū (I lost the writ) (Peixoto, 1741, f. 17)

The term *huhema* covers a semantic field including 'paper,' letter, 'writ,' and to read and write. Situations like these indicate how much the communication by Africans was a strategic dimension for them. Seen from this viewpoint, we can venture the hypothesis that the Mina-Portuguese translation, written by Peixoto, had African interests in mind and contained an African expression.

INTIMACY

- Da su cam? (Do you have a friend?)
- Vm zim a sù (I have a friend)
- Matima su hã (I have no friends)
- Guigueroy nhihô? (Do you want me?)
- Vm geroy (I want) / Má geru he hã (No I don't want you)
- Vnà na numpoupoume (Give me everything [illegible word])
- Mâsógamhã (I cannot give you anything)
- Huhameno hame (I am poor) (Peixoto, 1731, f. 11v and 12)

Using the original manuscript rather than the printed editions of 1944 and 1945 (which cut some sections, or omitted their translation into Portuguese), it is crucial to perceive the logic underlying the work, especially where intimate relations are concerned. Peixoto, the declared author, and the anonymous authors – informants, speakers of Mina whose voice can be heard beneath the documents – dealt with the body and intimate experiences in detail. At the same time, there are sections that Peixoto himself seems to have preferred to leave opaque, untranslated phrases, which leads us to wonder why they were included given that they would only be understood by those who knew the Mina language. Furthermore, the contents-recorded take the form of somewhat coded messages, mixed with apologies for failing to comply with “our policy” and the injunctions of Christianity.

The translation begins by addressing the theme of the body (*ehutu*). Both the 1731 and 1741 books open with this topic. From the head to the feet, we can *imagine* the dialogue in the two languages.

Rita points and says: — *Dâ*. Antônio responds: — hair. Rita says — *tâ* and Antônio translates — head. — *Vtou?* — Ears. — *Ahótím?* — Nose. And so they

continue: *num* is mouth, *adú*, teeth, *èdê*, tongue, *atam*, beard, *cô*, neck, *anô*, breasts, *choume*, belly. Below *vgom*, the navel, there are the *vfum*, pube, *doz*, penis, *cam*, balls, *assoquhê*, legs. This atmosphere evocative of an amorous seduction is soon interrupted, though: *afovi*, fingers, *efem*, nail, *alô*, arms and hands, followed by an association of punishment: *alòpà*, spanking paddle...

In the 1741 version this vocabulary was more detailed. Among the terms cited are guts (*adô*), heart (*tum*), back (*nébé*), cunt (*ayó*), asshole (*migoume*), people's filth (excrement) (*mi*), urine (*adidô*).

In the context in question, family relations, conjugality and maternity were multifaceted and very distant from the concept of the patriarchal family. Marriages formalized in the church were rare and the so-called concubinage predominated. The number of women was much lower than the number of men. Illegitimate or natural children were the norm. In the records of the baptisms, a common combination was: the name of the young child, "of unknown father," followed by the name of the mother, who was identified by her master. If the name of the father was rarely mentioned, the name of the mother's proprietor was always included. The latter thereby became owner of the offspring too. An example is found in this record from 1740, which may or may not refer to Rita Dias, though it concerns a Rita of Mina origin, living in the same parish, whose proprietor also had the surname Dias: "The innocent José, son of an unknown father and Rita Mina, slave of Antonio Dias Soares."¹⁸

Figueiredo (1997) and Furtado (2007) seek to overcome the interpretative frame of 'disorder,' produced by state and ecclesiastical attempts to control. They observe a variety of family and conjugal arrangements, experiences that did not correspond to models per se, potential stabilities amid the constitutive instabilities of a slave-based and unequal society. The case of Peixoto was common: unmarried, three daughters and a son, fathered with four different women. Rita, Ana Maria, Luzia Gomes and Marcela Pires, mentioned in Peixoto's will only by their names, the parishes in which they resided and the names of their children, without mention of their status. Marcella was a *parda forra*, a freed 'brown' woman, living in the parish of Santo Antônio da Casa Branca. She appears in the list of payments made to the municipal council, but her occupation was not identified.¹⁹ Nothing more is known about Ana Maria and Luzia Gomes. But historical research, even taking into account the scarcity of information, shows us that the enslaved and freed women built up their own wealth and affective bonds, enabling the continuity of matrifocal African traditions with their own ethics, despite the surrounding misogyny (Furtado, 2007, p. 495).

Father (*thohê*), mother (*nóhê*) and brother (*novy*) appear in the vocabulary, but also half-brother (*thovi*), showing diverse family practices. Married (*alogulitô*), “is not married” (*magulialôhâ*), “where did you marry?” (*fiá hegulialô*), “I married in the Kingdom” (*vmgulialô touboume*), “I married in this land” (*vmgulialô toume fi*), “does she have children?” (*hetim vy*), “she has no children” (*matim vihã*) (Peixoto, 1731, f. 5 and 5v). The document from 1741 includes in this same thematic block “prostitute or whore” (*josi*).

Prostitution was especially widespread in the Captaincy of Minas Gerais, an area with a predominantly male population, a high degree of spatial mobility and an intense and dynamic circulation of gold. This situation was exacerbated by the interests of male and female slaveowners who profited from the sexual services provided by slaves, as well as the harsh living conditions experienced by freed and poor women, subject to different taxes, fees and duties on their economic activities. Even so, their consensual and affective relations do not merit the label ‘disorder’ or being associated with a slight and superficial informality. In the face of the harsh ecclesiastical condemnation of practices deemed “offensive to God,” they formed couples and families, forging a legitimate practice of care and mutual assistance that left traces in the inquiries and other forms of state control, as Figueiredo (1997) analysed. Furthermore the accusation of prostitution was also used by masters against women with whom they had engaged in sexual relations (Furtado, 2007, p. 494), making it necessary to problematize and deconstruct this view.

The sexual and/or affective content appears at different moments. Highly explicit expressions were included in the text, preceded by an enigmatic *mea culpa* from Antônio da Costa Peixoto, evoking the sixth commandment (do not sin against chastity), perhaps in an attempt to evade the various denunciations to which he would be subject, especially from the frequent episcopal visits which were common in the region.

Continuing the line of analysis proposed here, though, my interest is to identify the female perspective in these dialogical practices. An additional challenge is to consider these affective and sexual relations from the viewpoint of a female negotiation in which ‘no’ – today a symbol of the fight against sexual harassment – is present. Practices defined, objectified and supposedly regulated by the colonial order as prostitution appear in blurred form where the female voice finds expression.

— No hé name ayo parê (But give me a bit of cunt)

— Fihá náhina nauhê (Where am I going to have to give it you?)

- Huhá mi hi zume (Let's go to the woods)
- Zume hemihom (The woods are damp)
- Huhà mi hi zamgi (Let's go to bed)
- Huhà mi hi (Let's go)
- (...)
- Name aquhê (Give me gold)
- Hé nabi na nauhê (How much do I have to give you?)
- Name aquhé carê (Give me an oitava)
- Aquhé carê he su (An oitava is a lot); Guigeroi cou sógam name (Pass me the scale if you want my oitava)
- Gam matim hã (I don't have a scale); Có huhema name (Put it on this paper)
- (...)
- Hum ehibê (I'm bleeding)
- Sôhá màpom (Let me see)
- Humcu hunham (I'm ashamed)
- Humbê (I don't want to)
- He hunihê (Here it is)
- Nhimagerou napom gumtho hé hã (I don't want to see your blood) (Peixoto, 1741, f. 39, 40 and 41)

CONCLUSION. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In every place, period or situation distinct possibilities existed for the dialogical experience of Africans and their descendants and for their participation in linguistic communities. Kittiya Lee (2005, p. 59) suggests an alternative way to understand the relations between the different populations in the colonial period: rather than considering groups and their origins in a watertight and sometimes essentialized form, we should explore how they were articulated around *communities of speech*. Within this multifaceted diversity, difficult to fit into the categories of 'Indians,' 'Europeans' or 'Africans,' there was a common experience of constructing new paths to hear, speak, be understood and

make oneself understood. In the case of the Mina language, mining activities and a particular conjuncture of slave trafficking created a concentration of enslaved Africans coming from a vast region of the Bight of Benin identified as a 'Gbe area' (Silva Jr., 2017, p. 7; Parés, 2016, p. 43; Soares, 2011, p. 14), common to people who saw themselves as mutually distinct, but who could communicate in that language. Other historical contexts generated similar concentrations. Kimbundo was a language present in different regions of Brazil (Mendonça, 1973). Robert Slenes (1992), stressing the need to consider African cultures in the study of slavery in Brazil, identifies how a community of speech was able to emerge in the coffee production of the Paraíba Valley due to the proximities between various languages of the Banto family. Nagô, in the Bahian Recôncavo, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, played an equally important role, also referred to as a *lingua franca* (*língua geral*) in the historical records. The observation of specificities is thus a fundamental premise for investigations involving linguistic history. Various studies (for example Almeida, 2012) have shown the lack of consistency of the famous stereotype of an incommunicability among Africans caused by the diversity of their languages, or of a slaveowner policy of ethnic diversification on their properties, an idea that seems to exist solely in the imagination (Lima, 2017a).

This careful attention to specific requires an adequate periodization and localization of the spread of Portuguese. From the second half of the eighteenth century, in a process that intensified with the formation of the Brazilian nation state after Independence, the Portuguese language became consolidated, leading to already distinct forms of incorporation of the speakers of African languages. The relation with the histories of indigenous groups is equally pertinent, and the Africans also used Tupi *lingua francas* (Bessa-Freire, 2004). The repertoire of languages available for communication depended on their demographic weight, but this did not mean that minority languages were any less decisive. Many people spoke more than one language. The language spoken in the public square might be different to the language spoken in the forests, the language of the manor house different to those spoken in the street. The historiography of slavery over recent decades, produced with the support of a wide range of archives, is filled with examples of these distinct situations. In the quilombo of Piolho, in the Captaincy of Mato Grosso, the indigenous population had learned a little Portuguese alongside the black population, as well as the Christian doctrine, as shown in Gomes's study of quilombos and mocambos in Portuguese America (Gomes, 2005, p. 361).

We can conclude with the voice of Rita, a figure who here symbolizes an African communication beneath Peixoto's text. Here I have proposed a particular reading of a precious and multifaceted document. Beneath the slaveowner domination also manifested in the text (Lara, 2002) and what I defined above as the slaveowner and/or missionary perspective of communication *with* Africans, I have tried to show the 'no' mobilized by African women.

— Name ayó dim beré su nánauhé aquhé (Give me your cunt now and some other day I'll give you gold)

— Nhi maná ayóde aihohã (I don't give my cunt on credit)

— Nhi matim aquhé dim hã (I don't have any gold right now)

— Mé matim aquhé má ho hayô há (No gold, no fuck) (Peixoto, 1741, pp. 39-41)

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NOTES

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² An oitava was a contemporary measure of gold, corresponding to 3.586 g. One vintém corresponded to 1/32 parts of the oitava. Ações cíveis (Crédito). 1754. Caixa 215 documento 3270; Ações cíveis (Alma). 1755. Caixa 272. Documento 5359. (AHMI). Testamento de Costa Peixoto: sala 20, prateleira L, Livro de óbitos de Casa Branca, Óbitos 1758-1816, Livro 03, fls. 40v-42v (AEAM).

³ It is worth emphasizing here that the social history of languages can contribute to the more specialized inquiries undertaken by linguistic historiography, which has specific theoretical-methodological tools for studying the linguistic codes or systems themselves, along with their contacts and changes. See, for example, the studies collected by AVELAR & LÓPEZ (2015), as well as diverse works by Tania Alkmim, Dante Lucchesi, Yeda Pessoa de Castro, Charlotte Galves and others cited in the bibliography.

⁴ “Costa da Mina” is the historical Portuguese term covering a region corresponding to what the historical English tradition calls the Slave Coast (LAW, 2006). Consultation made by the Conselho Ultramarino to King D. Pedro II concerning the recruitment of catechists among the freed black population of Bahia to teach those arriving from the Portuguese Mina Coast. Lisbon, 23 February 1701. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Bahia, Caixa 3, Doc. 314.

⁵ PRICE (1996) suggests the communicative potential of the quilombolas (inhabitants of communities called *quilombos* formed by escaped slaves) by comparing Palmares to the communities of runaway slaves of Suriname, the Saramaca, whose survival over centuries led to the formation of their own language (1996). LARA (2008) also inspires this formulation by showing that the *línguas* (interpreters) were frequent and necessary agents of the peace accords, this being one of the elements involved in recognizing their sovereignty.

⁶ The town councils appointed judges of the twentieth (*juizes da vintena*) in every parish more than one league distant from the seat of municipal government. They were responsible for drawing up wills, deciding minor civil cases, levying fines, and arresting criminals. Other clues to the personal and professional trajectory of Antônio da Costa Peixoto indicate his willingness to share spaces of sociability and communication with Mina-speaking Africans, a topic that I have been researching that that will be the subject of another article. The only work focused specifically on Peixoto is the text by ARAÚJO (2013), which identified his will and a denunciation made by residents accusing him of visiting taverns with black men and women.

⁷ According to the estimates of the Slave Trade Database, selecting the regions of embarkation as the Barlavento Coast, Gold Coast, Bight of Benin and Bight of Biafra, 402,00 Africans disembarked in Brazil between 1701 and 1750. Selecting the Bight of Benin only, the figure is 320,000 (source: www.slavevoyages.org; accessed: May 2017). A substantial portion of this contingent was sent to the mining area (RIBEIRO, 2008). Libby estimates the slave population in the Captaincy of Minas Gerais at 100,000 in the mid-eighteenth century. The towns of Ribeirão do Carmo (Mariana) and Ouro Preto accounted for almost half of this number (LIBBY, 2007, p.412). The size of the free population would have been much smaller, estimated at 40,000. Among the slave population the tendency was for a preponderance of Africans until the 1780s. Among the Africans, those coming from the Mina Coast formed the largest individual group, reaching a large proportion in some localities (LIBBY, 2007, p.413, 416, 431).

⁸ CAPO (1988) explains that the languages of the Gbe group, part of a linguistic continuum with around 50 denominations and variants, are composed of both lexical equivalences and particularities. While linguistic, symbolic and political differences exist, the continuum can be readily discerned with some authors describing it as a single language, though this level is not perceived by the speakers themselves.

⁹ In Portuguese, the expression “*língua geral*” is more common than “*lingua franca*.” I have decided to preserve the Portuguese tradition in historical references. It suggests a widely spread language, not necessarily a *lingua franca*, or a vehicular language between different speakers, nor an intentional language policy. The important point to highlight here are the historical perceptions of the Mina language. The concept of a *língua geral*, a ‘general language’ or *lingua franca*, has various definitions in contemporary linguistics. RODRIGUES

(1996) defines a specific analytic formulation for the indigenous lingua francas in the areas of Portuguese colonization, but observes that in many historical documents, *língua geral* simply means a widely spoken language. In BARROS (2003), the concept of lingua franca is used for languages in intercultural contact, commerce and colonization.

¹⁰ Estatutos da Congregação dos pretos minas Maki no Rio de Janeiro (1786) [Statutes of the Congregation of the Maki black Mina population of Rio de Janeiro (1786)]. BNRJ, seção de Manuscritos, 9, 3, 11. My italics. This document comprises the basis of the work by SOARES (2000).

¹¹ *Registro de Batismo*, 25 July 1756. Códice 493, fl.135v (AENSP). A portion of this record was cited by MAIA, 2013.

¹² Governor Assumar to the King. Vila do Carmo, 4 October 1719. Registro de alvarás, ordens, cartas régias e ofícios dos Governadores ao Rei [Record of charters, orders, royal letters and official letters of the Governors to the King]. SC-04 (APM).

¹³ In order to present the content more clearly, the citations rearrange some of the manuscript's items, sometimes relocating small sections and dialogues without the use of quote marks so as not to clutter the text. References are always indicated.

¹⁴ Solicitação de determinação de horário de funcionamento das tavernas [Request to establish tavern opening hours]. CMOP, Cx. 18, doc. 44, 27 April 1746. (APM).

¹⁵ If we include in this questioning the period of formation of the nation state, marked by urbanization, social complexification and the expansion of written language, and if we also broaden our scope beyond the slaves to include their descendants who succeeded in obtaining their freedom, this figure becomes even more significant. After all, how can we explain that some of the most important lettered men of the nineteenth century, from writers and publicists to less famous figures like teachers, typographers, diverse professionals and custodians, were the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of slaves? (LIMA, 2014, p.243).

¹⁶ Ações cíveis. Subtipo Crédito. 1754. Caixa 215 documento 3270; Ações cíveis. Subtipo Alma. 1755. Caixa 272. Documento 5359 (AHMI).

¹⁷ Devassas [Inquests]. 1º Ofício. Feridas que se dera em Bernarda do Espírito Santo. Códice 449, auto 9471, f. 6 and 6v. (AHMI).

¹⁸ Registros Paroquiais [Parish records]. Livro/Assento de Batismo de Escravos. Códice 491, 60v. (AENSP).

¹⁹ Relação de nomes de moradores de Santo Antônio da Casa Branca, com os respectivos foros devidos [List of names of residents of Santo Antônio da Casa Branca with the respective payments due]. CMOP, Cx. 88, Doc. 74, fl. 1. (APM). The search in the records of baptisms, deaths and inventories has yet to reveal indications of his other wives and children.

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