# Blackness and Heathenism. Color, Theology, and Race in the Portuguese World, c. 1450-1600

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## Negrura y gentilidad. Color, teología y raza en el mundo portugués, c. 1450-1600

## *Negrura e gentilidade. Cor, teologia e raça no mundo português, c. 1450-1600*

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**ABSTRACT**

The coexistence of a process of hierarchy and discrimination among human groups alongside dynamics of cultural and social hybridization in the Portuguese world in the early modern age has led to an intense historiographical debate. This article aims to contribute to extending our perspectives, focusing on the circulation of two global categories of classification: *negro* (Black) and *gentio* (Heathen) between the mid-fifteenth and late-sixteenth century. In particular, it explores the intersections between the perception of skin color and the reworking of theological concepts in a biologizing direction, which ran parallel to the development of an anti-Jewish theory based on blood purity. The line of enquiry leads from the coasts of West Africa, where it immediately meets the problem of slavery, to Brazil, via South Asia. The intense cross-fertilization of the categories of *negro* and *gentio* in the Portuguese world provides us with an alternative geography and institutional process of racialization to that of the Spanish Empire.

**Keywords:** (Author) Black Africans, heathens, *conversos*, Portuguese Empire; (Thesaurus) Jews, slavery, race.

**RESUMEN**

La coexistencia de un proceso de jerarquización y discriminación entre grupos humanos, junto a dinámicas de hibridación cultural y social en el mundo portugués de la Edad Moderna, ha llevado a un intenso debate historiográfico. Este artículo pretende contribuir a la ampliación de nuestras perspectivas, enfocándose en la circulación de dos categorías globales de clasificación: *negro* y *gentio* (pagano) entre mediados del siglo XV y finales del XVI. En particular, explora las intersecciones entre la percepción del color de la piel y la reformulación de conceptos teológicos en una dirección biologizante, hechos paralelos al desarrollo de una teoría anti-judía basada en la pureza de la sangre. La línea de investigación nos lleva de las costas occidentales de África, donde inmediatamente se encuentra con el problema de la esclavitud, hasta Brasil, pasando por el sur de Asia. El intenso intercambio de las categorías *negro* y *gentio* en el mundo portugués nos provee una geografía y un proceso institucional de racialización alternativo al del Imperio Español.

**Palabras clave:** (Autor) africanos negros, paganos, conversos, Imperio portugués; (Thesaurus) judíos, esclavitud, raza.



**RESUMO**

A coexistência de um processo de hierarquização e discriminação entre grupos humanos, junto a dinâmicas de hibridação cultural e social no mundo português da Idade Moderna, tem levado a um intenso debate historiográfico. Este artigo pretende contribuir para a ampliação de nossas perspectivas, enfocando-se na circulação de duas categorias globais de classificação: *negros* e *gentios* (pagãos) entre meados do século XV e finais do XVI. Em particular, explora as intersecções entre a percepção da cor da pele e a reformulação de conceitos teológicos numa direção biologizante, fatos paralelos ao desenvolvimento de uma teoria antijudaica baseada na pureza do sangue. A linha de pesquisa nos leva da costa oeste da África, onde imediatamente se encontra com o problema da escravidão, até o Brasil, passando pelo sul da Ásia. O intenso intercâmbio das categorias *negro* e *gentio* no mundo português nos fornece uma geografia e um processo institucional de racialização alternativo ao do Império espanhol.

**Palavras-chave:** (Autor) africanos negros, pagãos, convertidos, Império português; (Thesaurus) judeus, escravidão, raça.

## Introduction

When historians discuss race and processes of racialization, early modern Iberian explorations tend to emerge as a turning point. The violence of overseas conquests, the formation of colonial societies, the exploitation of native populations, and the massive use of enslaved Black Africans are all ingredients of a complex mix, which left its mark on the history of the transoceanic possessions of Portugal and Spain. We should always bear this in mind, particularly today, when we have an increasing literature that shows to what extent the Iberian world also promoted constant cross-cultural exchanges and the circulation of individuals, objects and ideas.[1]

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Possible contradictions derive from rigid interpretations for processes that were extremely fluent and not unambiguous.[2] One of the ways to escape such a risk is to attenuate any excessive empiricism that social history may entail by not dismissing cultural factors as mere representations or abstractions disconnected from the historical reality. This is particularly true for the Portuguese world, its specific but vast context, on which this article focuses. It ran from Northern and West Africa to the Atlantic archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira islands, from South and Southeast Asia to Brazil. In the last thirty years, historiography about groups living on its margins, whether runaways, renegades or non-native Portuguese speakers, has confirmed and reinforced the image of the undeniable tendency to cultural and social hybridization, which this composite and heterogeneous world showed.[3] However, though this world was certainly not a closed, self-sufficient space, we should not take the importance of the so-called "informal empire" for the centrality of the body of discontinuous territories that were under the direct

1. Serge Gruzinski, *Les quatre parties du monde. Histoire d'une mondialisation* (Paris: Éditions de La Martinière, 2004). But see also A. J. R. Russell-Wood, *A World on the Move: The Portuguese in Africa, Asia and America, 1415-1808* (Manchester: Carcanet / Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1992).
2. A prime example is the recent book by Joanne Rappaport, *The Disappearing Mestizo: Configuring Difference in the Colonial New Kingdom of Granada* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
3. The literature on this aspect is abundant. See for instance Maria Augusta Lima Cruz, "Exiles and Renegades in Early Sixteenth Century Portuguese India", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 23 (1986): 249-262; Robert Nelson Anderson, "The *Quilombo* of Palmares: A New Overview of a Maroon State in Seventeenth-Century Brazil", *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28 (1996): 545-566; *Creole Societies in the Portuguese Colonial Empire*, eds. Philip J. Havik and Malyn Newitt (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

rule of the crown and formed the Portuguese Empire.[4] Indeed, a certain degree of dissolution of the difference was inherent in the strategies of civil inclusion of the converted natives, as was to be expected from an empire that founded its justification on the duty to evangelize peoples all over the world.[5] However, all this occurred within a political and legal framework that contributed to make the Portuguese Empire a space of subjugation and discrimination for the natives.



The tension between an official culture shared by many Portuguese settlers, which was based on a strong sense of distinction and hierarchy, and the inevitable reality of coexistence among individuals and groups of different origin, language, religion and complexion in colonial societies, has provoked a debate about the real nature of the Portuguese Empire, which is still intense.[6] Of course, the same can be said of the Spanish Empire, with which the Portuguese one was closely intertwined, often sharing ideological values and interpretations. This does not mean, however, that there is no room for discussion of particular aspects typical of the Portuguese world, partly due to its peculiar geographic configuration. In this article I will try to broaden the perspective by restoring the importance of theology and the development of some of its categories in relation to the Iberian explorations. The contribution of the theological debates to the shaping of judgments and opinions about the Native Americans is well known in the case of the

4. Malyn Newitt, "Formal and Informal Empire in the History of Portuguese Expansion", *Portuguese Studies* 17 (2001): 1-21.

5. Ângela Barreto Xavier, "Dissolver a diferença. Mestiçagem e conversão no império português", *Itinerários. A investigação nos 25 anos do ICS*, eds. Manuel Villaverde Cabral, Karin Wall, Sofia Aboim and Filipe Carreira da Silva (Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2008) 709-727.

6. The classic reference is Charles Ralph Boxer, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415-1825* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), which was a response to the luso-tropicalist theory maintained by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre in his book *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, trans. Samuel Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), originally published in Portuguese in 1933. For a recent discussion of Freyre's contribution, see the collected articles with an introduction by Maria Lúcia Pallares-Burke, published in *Portuguese Studies* 27 (2011): 5-77. An attempt to question Boxer's analysis can be found in J. S. Cummins and Luís Rebelo de Sousa, "The Controversy over Charles Boxer's *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415-1825*", *Portuguese Studies* 17 (2001): 233-246.

Spanish Empire.[7] In recent times, some literature has also shed light on the Portuguese Empire, which has traditionally been less studied in this field.[8] Spaniards and Portuguese shared the same theological culture, rooted in the teaching of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) that was brought back by the Second Scholasticism. In any case, the divergent answers they gave about the condition of the native populations living in their transoceanic possessions affected significantly the formation of colonial law in the respective empires, contributing to explain their differences.

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A case in point are the *indios* (Indians), as Native Americans as a whole became known in the context of the Spanish Empire during the sixteenth century. This gave rise to a process of self-representation across the world, which helped hundreds of them to escape enslavement by appealing to legal courts in Castile well after the famous New Laws (1542), which forbade the enslavement of Native Americans.[9] Things reached the point that in 1575 a slave called Diego, whose master was a Portuguese cleric who claimed to have bought him in Goa, was able to gain freedom from a court in Seville that recognized him as *indio*, although he testified that he was born in China.[10] Diego persuaded the judges that he was from a land in China that was under the rule of King Philip II of Spain and, consequently, he had to be considered an *indio*. This trick rested on some geographic uncertainty, as well as on the identification of any native from the transoceanic possessions of the Spanish crown as *indio*. Thus, a category that originated from a

7. Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
8. A pioneering work is José Sebastião da Silva Dias, *Os Descobrimentos e a problemática cultural do século XVI* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 1973). More recently, innovative research has focused on the debates about natives, Africans and slavery in colonial Brazil: Carlos Alberto de Moura Ribeiro Zeron, *Ligne de foi. La Compagnie de Jésus et l'esclavage dans le processus de formation de la société coloniale en Amérique portugaise, XVI^e^-XVII^e^ siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2009). Personally, I have also tried to show to what extent theological sources matter in order to penetrate the genuine nature of Portuguese imperial thought in my book *A consciência de um império. Portugal e o seu mundo, sécs. XV-XVII* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2012).
9. This phenomenon has been reconstructed by Nancy E. van Deusen, *Global Indios: The Indigenous Struggle for Justice in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
10. Nancy E. van Deusen, "Indios on the Move in the Sixteenth-Century Iberian World", *Journal of Global History* 10 (2015): 387-409.

mistake about the real identity of Native Americans confused with Asians became truly global. By contrast, in the very same period, the designation of Native Brazilians as *indios* competed with that of *negros* (Blacks) and, even more, of *gentios* (Gentiles, or Heathens), two other global categories spreading across the Portuguese Empire that applied, to a different degree, to natives both from coastal Africa and South Asia. Interestingly, the master of Diego maintained that he was not an *indio*, but a *gentio*, and therefore had no right to lay claim to freedom, since there was no legislation that prohibited the keeping of an enslaved *gentio*, if his subjugation had not occurred in illicit ways. As I will try to show, one of the possible reasons there was nothing similar to the New Laws for Brazil, nor a consistent "Indian law" in the Portuguese Empire, is precisely the problematic implications of the global spread of the category of *gentio* in this institutional context. This article explores the backgrounds for what we could define as an embryonic taxonomy of natives predominating in the early modern Portuguese world and its meanings in relation to Portuguese imperial thought.

More generally, my aim is to better locate the place of the Portuguese world, roughly from 1450 to 1600, in the framework of the lively debate on the Iberian roots of modern racist thought, while avoiding any teleological approach.[11] Indeed, I stress that there was not a smooth continuity between the early stage of the Portuguese Empire, when it largely relied on improvisation and experimentation, and later times, in which more established patterns were challenged, among other things, by its interconnection with other overseas powers, especially after the dynastic union between Castile and Portugal. My purpose is just to look at the fluid relations between complexion and theology during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, by analyzing the global spread of two intertwined concepts: blackness and heathenism. The former is clearly related to skin color, but it did not lead automatically to hierarchical discrimination based on physical appearance. At the same time, although the latter refers to the sphere of religion, it underwent a process that conveyed some biological character to the category of *gentio*. I will consider also if and to what extent the latter intersected with the emergence of processes of subjugation and exclusion, as in the case of slavery or the entrance into public offices and other activities.

11. For an example of such an approach, see James H. Sweet, "The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought", *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997): 143-166.

The article is divided into four sections. In the first, I discuss the sudden appearance of a systematic connection between violence and conversion in the late medieval Iberian world and its effect on both intellectual traditions and social landscapes. In the second, I focus on the place of skin color in the first interactions of the Portuguese with Native Africans. The third section deals with the immediate and determined application of the concept of *gentio* to the peoples of South Asia, while in the last one I elaborate on the way in which the oscillations in the definition of Native Brazilians shaped the consideration of African slaves in Portuguese America. My concluding remarks try to address the point of the relationship between this embryonic taxonomy, which was based on generalization, and evidence about the ability of the agents of the Portuguese Empire to distinguish in greater detail the cultural and bodily features of the natives they dealt with.



**Religious Violence in Late Medieval Iberia and Beyond**

In a recent book, David Nirenberg has defended the view that questions about anti-Judaism are inculcated into the habits of thought with which people make sense of the world.[12] This is not a prerogative of anti-Judaism, since the same can also be said for the forms of prejudice, stereotyping and, finally, subjugation and discrimination that shaped the relations between the Iberians and the peoples of the world in the age of exploration. In a previous article, Nirenberg had shown to what extent the intense debate about the big issue of Jewish blood in late medieval Aragon and Castile matters for our historical understanding of the origins of racism in the West.[13] In that context, already in the early fifteenth century the words *raza* (race), *casta* (caste) and *linaje* (lineage) were part of a complex of closely associated terms, which linked both behavior and appearance to nature and reproduction with reference to the animal as well as to the human world. Of course, their usage

12. David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2013).
13. David Nirenberg, "Was There Race Before Modernity? The Example of 'Jewish' Blood in Late Medieval Spain", *The Origins of Racism in the West*, eds. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 232-264. See also *Race and Blood in the Iberian World*, eds. Max S. Hering Torres, María Elena Martínez and David Nirenberg (Zürich-Berlin: LIT, 2012). The importance of early modern Iberian anti-Judaism and the concept of blood purity is highlighted by Jean-Frédéric Schaub, *Pour une histoire politique de la race* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

did not represent a consistent theory. It related more to genealogy than to the classification of human beings and was largely independent of Jewish questions, although it could easily be extended to them.

These biological concerns played a fundamental role in the discrimination of both Jewish and Muslim minorities in late medieval Iberia. They had a clear effect on the shaping of the anti-*converso* ideology, which matured in an atmosphere of increasing violence in the period between the anti-Jewish pogroms in 1391 and the notorious decree of expulsion of the Jews in 1492, following the introduction of the first discrimination acts based on blood purity in 1449 and the reorganization of a modern Inquisition in 1478. An extreme point was reached in the treatise *De Puritate* (1623) by the Spanish theologian and jurist Juan Escobar del Corro, who maintained that the *conversos* inherited their impurity and inclination to heresy at the moment of their conception.[14] My point is that the opportunity to bring the specificity of the Portuguese case into the picture is not related to the necessity to consider slight differences in the chronology and order of similar events that have led some historians to maintain the wrong conclusion that anti-Judaism was imported from Castile to Portugal.[15] Rather, I stress that we can only gain by connecting peninsular events with what was going on along the coasts of West Africa in the same period. We should remember that, from the start, slave raiding also involved expeditions organized with the patronage of the Castilian crown and that even after 1455, when the Portuguese, in the context of the Atlantic competition between the two Iberian powers, obtained from the papacy the exclusive right to trade African slaves to Europe, many of them were sold in Castilian and Aragon markets.[16]



14. Gérard Delille, "The Shed Blood of Christ: From Blood as Metaphor to Blood as Bearer of Identity", *Blood and Kinship: Matter for Metaphor from Ancient Rome to the Present*, eds. Christopher H. Johnson et al. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013) 125-143. For the Spanish debate on blood purity see Juan Hernández Franco, *Sangre limpia, sangre española. El debate sobre los estatutos de limpieza, siglos XV-XVII* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2011); their effect on the New World is explored in María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
15. For a critical reconstruction see François Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal: King Manuel I and the End of Religious Tolerance, 1496-7* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007).
16. A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1444-1555* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Ivana Elbl, "The Volume

The topic of conversion was clearly central in the justification of African slavery in the mid-fifteenth-century papal bulls that regulated the controversy over transoceanic navigation between Castile and Portugal, since they presented physical captivity as a possibility to be instructed in the Christian faith and gain eternal salvation. We may wonder if and how the process of subjugation and discrimination of West Africans relates to the parallel religious violence that affected Jews and *conversos* in the Iberian Peninsula. This [42] is particularly intriguing if we look at the ambiguous role Muslims played in this context, since the Portuguese sources that generally considered Jews and Muslims together, often deliberately depicted African slaves as "Moors," though they were not.[17] Medieval theories about complexion and prejudices against black skin could have provided a strong argument for subjugating them.[18] However, it was not on the basis of chromatic difference that the Portuguese justified the enslavement of Africans, nor is there any insistence in the early sources about the slave trade on the vocabulary of lineage, race and caste, comparable to that of the anti-*converso* campaign.Or, to be more precise, there is, but it intersects with the key point of the so-called heathenism of Africans, a concept that entailed a clear acknowledgement of their rationality and human nature, unlike the case with Native Americans one century later.

The Portuguese case shows that since the mid-fifteenth century there was a telling reconfiguration of the traditional tri-partition of unbelievers that we can connect with Iberian anti-Judaism and the emergence of an anti-*converso* ideology.[19] In his highly authoritative and influential *Summa*

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of the Early Atlantic Slave Trade, 1450-1521", *Journal of African History* 38 (1997): 31-75.

17. Kenneth B. Wolf, "The 'Moors' of West Africa and the Beginnings of the Portuguese Slave Trade", *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24 (2003): 449-469.
18. Valentin Groebner, "Complexio/Complexion: Categorizing Individual Natures, 1250-1600", *The Moral Authority of Nature*, eds. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003) 364-383; Valentin Groebner, "Haben Hautfarben eine Geschichte? Personenbeschreibungen und ihre Kategorien zwischen dem 13. und dem 16. Jahrhundert", *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 30 (2003): 1-18; Maaike Van Der Lugt, "La peau noire dans la science médiévale", *Micrologus* 13 (2005): 439-475.
19. Evidence of a widespread anti-Judaic attitude in mid-fifteenth-century Portugal is provided by Humberto Baquero Moreno, "Movimentos sociais antijudaicos em Portugal no século XV", *Marginalidade e conflitos sociais em Portugal nos séculos XIV e XV. Estudos de História* (Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 1985) 79-88.

*Theologiae*, a late-thirteenth century treatise, Thomas Aquinas, who also wrote a *Summa contra Gentiles*, distinguishes between Heathens, Jews and heretics ("Secunda Secundae," question 10). Notably, less than two centuries later, in the same period in which the category of "Heathen" (which had been originally used for translating biblical expressions indicating the non-Jews into Latin) was recovered to justify the enslavement of non-Christians (that is, Africans who were also described as "Pagans" in the mid-century papal bulls), in hopes of a future conversion that would not have involved any liberation, Jews were forced to become Christians, or, rather, "New Christians", as the *conversos* were also labeled with clearly disparaging intentions. This passage was at the beginning of a new tri-partition that was typical of the Iberian world, in which there was no more room for formal Jews. Then, a new distinction emerged between Heathens, Muslims and heretics, among whom the most feared ones became the so-called apostate Judaizers, an accusation that was typically made against the New Christians and brought harsh persecution from the Inquisition.[20] The discrimination that put descendants of *conversos* under a cloud of suspicion was different but connected in more than one way to the one that had made conversion the argument to justify the enslavement of Africans, but not their freedom.

**Slaves and Kings: Black Skin and Human Quality**

While the enslavement of *indios* was officially prohibited in the Spanish Empire in 1542, in the context of an intense debate about their human nature, this did not happen to Native Brazilians, who were the object of fragmentary legislation. One of the possible reasons for this was that the Portuguese developed a legal theory of their empire that relied on the justification of slavery. This occurred in the mid-fifteenth century, as is narrated in detail by the chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zurara, who around 1460 provided his readers with the official version of the Portuguese exploration of West African

20. Much literature exists on *conversos* and their persecution. Recent works include: David L. Graizbord, *Souls in Dispute: Converso Identities and the Jewish Diaspora, 1580-1700* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Nathan Wachtel, *The Faith of Remembrance: Marrano Labyrinths*, trans. Nikki Halpern (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); French original edition: *La foi du souvenir. Labyrinthes marranes* (Paris: Seuil, 2001); Natalia Muchnik, *De paroles et de gestes. Construction marranes en terre d'Inquisition* (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2014).

coasts.[21] In Zurara's account, the first slave raids took place in the region of Cape Arguin in the mid-1440s and continued in the second half of the decade, just when the first statutes of blood purity were introduced in Castile.

Generally, Zurara's account of the violent captures goes with a detailed description of the complexion of the African slaves, distinguishing between Azenegues and Wolofs, but unlike the reports of eyewitnesses like Diogo Gomes or Alvise Cadamosto, not of their skin color, which is always described (with only one exception) as "black".[22] However, there is room for some embryonic taxonomy, when Zurara presents the target of the first expeditions as some "Blacks", "who do not come from the lineage (*linhagem*) of the Moors (*mouros*), but of the Heathens (*gentios*), and for this reason it would be easier to bring to salvation".[23] This statement is of extreme interest here for at least two reasons: on the one hand it shows the emergence of a biologization of traditionally religious categories, since it describes "Moors" and "Heathens" as a "lineage," in a suggestive parallel with the coeval invention of the theory of a "Jewish blood" in the Iberian Peninsula, which had also infected their converted descendants, inevitably laying them open to the suspicion of apostasy in the inquisitors' opinion. On the other hand, a claim derives in Zurara's chronicle from this telling statement that, despite their beastly lifestyle, these "Heathens" too were "sons of Adam," that is human beings.[24] This passage might relate to the hypothesis, first formulated here, that Black Africans came from the generation of Ham, the son on whom Noah laid his curse and whose descendants, in the words of Zurara, were "subjected to all the other generations of the world".[25]



Zurara constantly qualifies African slaves as *negros* or *guineus* (Guineans), and very rarely as *gentios*. However, his main argument in favor of their enslavement does not depend on medieval prejudices about blackness,

21. Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica de Guiné*, ed. José de Bragança (Porto: Civilização, 1973).
22. The exception is Zurara 122: "A few were among them of reasonable whiteness, adequately good-looking; others were less white, who wanted to look like grayish-brown (*pardo*); and still others as black (*negros*) as Ethiopians".
23. Zurara 86.
24. Zurara 122.
25. Zurara 85. On the recovery of the curse of the generation of Ham in this context, see Benjamin Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods", *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997): 127-129.

but on conversion. This is made clear when he declares that "although their bodies are in some subjugation, this is a small thing in comparison to their souls, which had to experience true freedom for eternity".[26] In the early 1450s, papal bulls had made the same point in order to authorize slave raiding and trade in West Africa, reshaping the traditional concept of heathenism, on which they focused, while barely mentioning the complexion of their victims, called "Guineans and other Blacks".[27] Sometimes the Portuguese sources of the second half of the fifteenth century indicate them as "things" (*cousas*). More usually, however, they refer to them as "Blacks" or "Blacks from Guinea".[28] Some scholars have stressed that this kind of generalization was a consequence of the negative stereotypes surrounding black skin, which the association between blackness and slavery in the Iberian and European world would have reinforced.



The argument is controversial, since in this period blackness did not always imply subjugation and discrimination. Thus, significantly, we can find a Black African in the crowd in a depiction of the *Crucifixion* commissioned by a wealthy donor in Salamanca around 1490 (now at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence), while Portuguese sources provide us with many descriptions of the education and good manners of the Black African noblemen with whom diplomatic contacts were established at the time, including princes from West Africa who visited Portugal and resided at court.[29]

More generally, Renaissance Europe saw a significant presence of Black Africans, not necessarily considered inferior because of their skin color.[30] True, the complexion of the Japanese ("whiter than the Chinese"), whom the Portuguese encountered from the first half of the sixteenth century on,

26. Zurara 80.
27. The quotation is from the bull *Romanus Pontifex*, dated January 8, 1455, published in *Monumenta Henricina*, vol. 12, ed. António Joaquim Dias Dinis (Lisbon: Comissão Executiva das Comemoraões do V Centenário da morte do Infante D. Henrique, 1971) doc. 36.
28. See, for instance, the license granted by Prince Henry to the Order of Christ, dated December 26, 1457, published in *Monumenta Henricina*, vol. 13, ed. António Joaquim Dias Dinis (Lisbon: Comissão Executiva das Comemoraões do V Centenário da morte do Infante D. Henrique, 1972) doc. 68.
29. José Ramos Tinhorão, *Os negros em Portugal. Uma presença silenciosa* (Lisbon: Editorial Caminho, 1988).
30. T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe, eds. *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

following their penetration of Asia, was usually associated with education, culture and trustworthiness, but this did not prevent them from being sold as slaves to some extent.[31] The uncertain relationship between skin color and politeness is clearly at the core of what is allegedly the first autoptic report about an emperor of Ethiopia, Nagus Nagast Dawit II, which finally gave a physical body to Prester John, a legendary sovereign of a Christian empire in the East constantly under Muslim attack, whose alliance the Portuguese eagerly sought. We owe the description of him to the Portuguese priest Francisco Álvares, who visited Ethiopia between 1520 and 1526 and published a mutilated version of his account in 1540. Álvares rejected the opinion of influential Italian humanists, who had written that Prester John was a white king (*candidus*) ruling black subjects, by depicting his skin as "not very black (*preto*), rather chestnut-colored (*de cor castanha*) like the apples from Baiona, not very grayish-brown (*pardo*), the color of a real gentleman".[32] We can see also this literary description transposed in iconography, as in a detail from a map that the Portuguese cartographer Diogo Homem made in 1558 (kept today in the British Library's collection).

[46]

### *Gentios* from India: A Multiplicity of Colors and Lineages

Roughly in the same days of 1497, in which all Jews were forcibly baptized in Portugal while Muslims were expelled from the kingdom, Vasco da Gama left Lisbon for the journey that led him to Calicut. The Portuguese penetration of the Indian Ocean during the early sixteenth century went with the first tentative descriptions of the peoples of Eastern Africa and South Asia. Particularly in the case of India, it was not just a matter of ethnographic

31. Rotem Kowner, "Skin as Metaphor: Early European Racial Views on Japan, 1548-1853", *Ethnohistory* 51 (2004): 752-756. The quotation is from the Portuguese chronicler Diogo do Couto (c. 1542-1610). For Japanese slavery see Michio Kitahara, *Portuguese Colonialism and Japanese Slaves* (Tokyo: Kadensha, 2013), and, for an overview of its more general context, Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves to Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

32. See my chapter "Prism of Empire: The Shifting Image of Ethiopia in Renaissance Portugal (1500-1570)", *Portuguese Humanism and the Republic of Letters*, eds. Maria Berbara and Karl A. E. Enenkel (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012) 447-465. The quotation is from *The Prester John of the Indies of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John Being the Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520 Written by Father Francisco Alvares*, eds. G. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford (Cambridge: Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press, 1961) 304.

curiosity, but also involved the initial organization of those natives who lived in the coastal areas occupied by the Portuguese, especially after the passing of the first law discriminating new converts in 1519.[33] The influence of the previous discussion about Black Africans is evident in the constant attention to skin color, which emerges in the earliest attempts to provide a comparative overview of the huge, heterogeneous space that runs from the Cape of Good Hope to Malacca and beyond, partly relying on information collected from natives.



I am not thinking only of the famous treatise written by the scrivener of Cannanore, Duarte Barbosa, in the second decade of the sixteenth century, and partially published for the first time in Italian by Giovanni Battista Ramusio in 1550.[34] A preceding text, claiming to be a letter of King Manuel of Portugal to King Ferdinand of Aragon, of which we have only an Italian version printed in Rome in 1505, presents a description of the Indian Ocean world that is worthy of consideration.[35] This letter includes undeniable but telling inventions. For instance, it represents the inhabitants of Sofala (Mozambique) as "monstrous" Blacks, "who eat human flesh mostly of their enemies," or asserts the existence of "Christians" from a Gangetic region in Eastern India, who "are white men with blonde hair and green eyes".[36] However, it delivers less fantastic information about West India, including notable intuitions of connections between social order and purity, as in the case of dietary prescriptions: "he who eats wrongly, though he is a child, loses

33. Royal decree dated February 18, 1519, published in *Arquivo Portuguez-Oriental*, vol. 2, ed. Joaquim Heliodoro da Cunha Rivara (New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, 1992) doc. 18.

34. *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants*, ed. Mansel Longworth Dames (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1918-1921).

35. There is an English edition: *Copy of a Letter of the King of Portugal Sent to the King of Castile Concerning the Voyage and Success of India*, ed. Sergio J. Pacifici (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1955). However, I translate from the original published as *Carta de El-Rei D. Manuel ao Rei Catholico narrando-lhe as viagens portuguezas à India desde 1500 até 1505*, ed. Prospero Peragallo (Lisbon: Typographia da Academia Real das Sciencias, 1892). The attribution to King Emmanuel I has been contested. For a recent summary of the various hypotheses see Stefan Halikowski-Smith, "Carta de el-Rei D. Manuel", *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, vol. 6, eds. David Thomas, John Chesworth et al (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2014) 297-303.

36. *Carta* 10 and 16, respectively.

his lineage (*linagio*)".[37] A concern about people's complexion is also detectable, once again focusing on skin in a relational chromatic scale that makes reference to blackness: variations tend to associate darkness with lechery and lightness with chastity. A unifying principle, however, is opposed to the multiplicity of colors: if broadly speaking "people are not very black," India is described as a "land inhabited by Heathens (*terra populate de gentili*)".[38]

[48]

A few years later the scrivener Duarte Barbosa shared the main conclusions of the alleged royal letter of 1505. He presents the Indian Ocean world as fundamentally inhabited by Muslims and Heathens and defines the religion of the Indians as the "law of Heathens". His treatise is known for its association of the word "caste" (*sorti* in Ramusio's translation) to a detailed description of social hierarchy in West India.[39] What matters here is that, while Barbosa pays some attention to skin color, he dismisses any causal link between blackness and negative behavior. The final abandonment of the chromatic principle of classification of South Asian peoples to the advantage of the global theological concept of *gentio* is evident in the case of the authoritative official chronicle of the Portuguese Empire, published by the humanist João de Barros from 1550 onwards.[40] In his work, which relies on Zurara for its section on the Portuguese Atlantic exploration, a definitive distinction emerges between Africans, always described as "Blacks", and South Asian non-Muslims, usually called *gentios*. Interestingly, while, as in the letter of 1505, Barros describes social distinctions in West India in terms of "lineage" (*linhagem*), he associates them with blood, purity, and the kind of segregation that existed between Jews and Samaritans in ancient times.[41] In Zurara writing about West Africa, what is still a traditional religious category is undergoing an early process of biologization through the identification of Heathens with a "lineage," while in Barros the unity of this group fragments due to internal subdivision into different "lineages".

37. *Carta* 26.
38. *Carta* 12.
39. On this point see Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013) 19-25; Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) 117-118; and the article by Ângela Barreto Xavier in this special issue.
40. João de Barros, *Da Ásia… Dos feitos, que os Portuguezes fizeram no descubrimento, e conquista dos mares, e terras do Oriente* (Lisbon: Na Régia Officina Typografica, 1777-1778).
41. Barros vol. 2, 329-330 (dec. 1, bk. 9, ch. 3).

Of course, the application of the concept of heathenism, instead of blackness, to South Asian non-Muslim peoples did not mean the arguments for subjugation and official discrimination disappeared in Portuguese imperial society. Indeed, in the late 1550s increasing pressure emerged for the substitution of Heathens with neophytes in some public offices in Goa as a way of supporting proselytism.[42] In that very period Jesuits had to organize segregated classrooms for students, in order to prevent mestizos with Portuguese fathers from insulting their Indian classmates by saying: "You are black and I am white, you are a slave and I am free".[43] The paradox of such insults is that in those same years it became possible for slaves throughout the Portuguese empire in Asia to obtain emancipation through conversion, an opportunity which many Abyssinians seized, especially in Hormuz, a flourishing center of the Indian Ocean slave trade.[44] But the window did not remain open for long: in 1559, the Crown finally abolished the norms that had made it possible, reaffirming the general rule that had been established more than one century before for Black Africans: "on the basis of divine and canon law he who converts to our holy catholic faith, does not gain temporal freedom for this reason".[45]



### *Gentios Negros*: Native Brazilians and Black Africans

The prevalence of the theological category of *gentios* with respect to South Asian non-Muslim peoples was a fairly well-established fact by the mid-sixteenth century, involving the adoption of a language partly deriving from that of lineage, caste and blood purity, that was also applied to Jews and *conversos* in the Iberian Peninsula. This can be contrasted to the usage of the chromatic-oriented concept of blackness in the case of African slaves (*negros*), which at the time was not much associated with biological concerns. Obviously, these abstractions, which had repercussions on the legal sphere

42. Délio de Mendonça, *Conversions and Citizenry: Goa under Portugal, 1510-1610* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 2002) 161-220.
43. The quotation is from a letter from Niccolò Lancillotti to Ignace of Loyola dated November 5, 1546, published in *Documenta Indica*, vol. 1, ed. Josef Wicki (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1948) doc. 15.
44. See for instance the letter by Kaspar Berzé to the Jesuits in India and Europe, date December 1, 1549, published in *Documenta Indica*, vol. 1, doc. 87 A.
45. Royal law dated March 24, 1559, published in *Arquivo Portuguez-Oriental*, vol. 5, ed. Joaquim Heliodoro da Cunha Rivara (New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, 1992) doc. 291.

and the emergence of a process of classification, did not reflect the complexity and variety of fluid denominations provided by the sources, nor fixed schemes that reproduced themselves identically in the following centuries. The attempt here is just to detect the initial itineraries of two global concepts like *negro* and *gentio* in the early modern Portuguese world.

The slower colonization of Brazil led blackness and heathenism to compete one with another in the period of its early settlement, about the mid-sixteenth century.[46] At the time these concepts met a third category, that of *indio*, which paradoxically had not clearly emerged in the case of India, and did not have the same reach in the Portuguese world as in the Spanish one at that time. First descriptions dating to 1500 reveal that the human nature of Native Brazilians was not questioned. In his famous letter on the discovery of Brazil, Pêro Vaz de Caminha refers to its inhabitants simply as "men" (*homens*).[47] He does not comment on the color of their skin, although he shows hesitation about their moral inclination. Meanwhile, a splendid altarpiece with an *Adoration of the Magi* (today in the Grão Vasco Museum, Viseu), included a Native Brazilian in the scene of the Nativity as early as the first decade of the sixteenth century. As time passed, however, concepts that had been developed elsewhere also had an effect on Brazil.



In the mid sixteenth century, in one of the first printed works mentioning Native Brazilians, João de Barros labels those whom Caminha had just called "men" as "Pagan people" (*povo pagão*), adding that they were "not black (*gente … não preta*) and curly-haired like those from Guinea, but wheat-colored (*de cor baça*) and with long straight hair".[48] In the same years, the humanist Diogo de Sá wrote a treatise about religious plurality in the Portuguese world, in which the global category of *gentio* had a central place, but the Inquisition prohibited its publication.[49] In any case, its use recurs in the letters of the first Jesuits, who arrived in Brazil in 1549. They first described its inhabitants' complexion in greater detail, subdividing them into groups by name, but also relied on the concept of blackness, in-

46. Jorge Couto, *A construção do Brasil. Ameríndios, Portugueses e Africanos do início do povoamento a finais de Quinhentos* (Lisbon: Cosmos, 1997).
47. I quote the letter of Caminha, dated May 1, 1500, from *Descobrimentos Portugueses. Documentos para a sua História*, vol. 3, ed. João Martins da Silva Marques (Lisbon: INIC, 1971) doc. 364.
48. Barros vol. 1, 387 and 390, respectively.
49. José da Silva Horta, "A categoria de gentio em Diogo de Sá: funções e níveis de significação", *Clio* 10 (2004): 135-156.

somuch as at times we find the combined expression *negro gentio*, revealing the uncertainties of the first Jesuits about Native Brazilians.[50]

These two categories usually appear separated, overlapping with that of *indios*. Though the missionaries ended up developing a negative opinion of the rational faculties of Native Brazilians, reinforced by the accusation of anthropophagy, thus paving the way for those Portuguese settlers who pressed for massive enslavement, it is noteworthy that the Jesuit Manuel da Nóbrega refers to them as *negros*, a word that at that time was almost a synonym of slave in the Portuguese world, even when he writes in support of their right to freedom. A defender of the full human quality of Native Brazilians, in his famous *Dialogue about the Conversion of the Heathen* (1556), Nóbrega maintains that all descendants of Adam were corrupted in the same way, "nor does nature let one generation (*geração*) off this more than another, provided that it gives better intellect to one particular man than to another".[51] Thus, Nóbrega attributes the difference between "these Blacks (*negros*), [who] are so beastly, and all other generations (*geraçõis*), like Romans, Greeks and Jews," to the fact that Native Brazilians descended from Ham.[52] He contrasts them with the "other Heathens (*gentios*) [who], coming from Shem and Japheth, it was right that, being the blessed sons [of Noah], they had some advantage".[53] Here the idea that there was more than one lineage of *gentios* merged with the powerful fascination of the biblical genealogies, which also gave rise to a lively and long-lasting debate on the origin of the *indios* from Spanish America.[54]



Unlike Zurara with Africans, however, Nóbrega does not use the argument of the descent of Ham to justify the slavery of Native Brazilians. In the subsequent decade he fought against this perspective in a public debate, which led to the first general law (1570) that attempted to limit the

50. See, for instance, the letter from Vicente Rodrigues dated May 17, 1552, published in *Monumenta Brasiliae*, vol. 1, ed. Serafim Leite (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1956) doc. 41.
51. Manuel da Nóbrega, "Diálogo sobre a conversão do gentio", *Cartas do Brasil e mais escritos*, ed. Serafim Leite (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 1955) doc. 27, 236.
52. Nóbrega, "Diálogo…" 237.
53. Nóbrega, "Diálogo…" 240.
54. Giuliano Gliozzi, *Adamo e il Nuovo Mondo. La nascita dell'antropologia come ideologia coloniale dalle genealogie bibliche alle teorie razziali, 1500-1700* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1977).

cases of licit enslavement of men who, both in Nóbrega's writings and the law, are called *gentios*.[55] Gradually, this category applied more and more to non-converted Brazilian Natives living outside the Portuguese jurisdiction (*gentios bravos*).[56] Meanwhile, in the case of neophytes, the denomination of *negros* gave way to that of *indios*, perhaps partly due to the increasing number of African slaves in Brazil in the last decades of the sixteenth century, which encouraged explicit comparisons between the characteristics of the two human groups.[57]

[52]

**Concluding Remarks**

A survey of the effect of denominative categories related to skin color and theology on the Portuguese world between the mid-fifteenth and late-sixteenth centuries conveys a sense of abstract generalization, which clashes with the fairly detailed perception of the physical, cultural and social differences between the peoples provided by some sources. At first glance, the intertwined categories of *negros* and *gentios* seem to overlap confusingly, as if they were interchangeable. But if we carefully analyze their usage, without claiming to extrapolate a coherent theory from them or to consider them as reference frames with an absolute value, it is evident that they met a new demand for subjugation and discrimination in a context of increasing anti-Judaism and aggressive transoceanic exploration. The fluidity with which they related to complexion, skin colors, biology, or biblical genealogy, or connected descriptions of peoples and embryonic taxonomies to legal issues, raises many general questions. Was the relevant difference between natives of both the Americas and South Asia, who were all grouped under the category of *gentios*, a limit for the elaboration of a consistent colonial law in the Portuguese Empire? In other words, does the application of such a category as *gentios* allow us to explain why there was no consistent colonial legislation or a work like the *De Indiarum Iure* (1629-1639) by Juan de Solórzano y Pereira in the Portuguese world? Or why the slavery of the Native Brazilians was not abolished even at the time of the dynastic union between Castile and Portugal? By contrast, did its application prevent any substantial circulation of the

55. See Nóbrega, *Cartas*… docs. 41-42.

56. Beatriz Perrone-Moisés, "Índios livres e índios escravos. Os princípios da legislação indigenista do período colonial (séculos XVI a XVIII)", *História dos índios no Brasil*, ed. Manuel Carneiro da Cunha (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998) 115-132.

57. I have dealt with this point in depth in my article "Escravos ameríndios e negros africanos: uma história conectada. Teorias e modelos de discriminação no império português (ca. 1450-1650)", *Tempo* 30 (2011): 41-70.

Aristotelian theory of natural slavery, which the Portuguese had rejected since their fifteenth-century exploration of West Africa?

The focus on the two different global categories of *negros* and *gentios* in the Portuguese world reveals intense cross-fertilization in their early circulation, providing us with an alternative geography to that of the Spanish Empire running from the pre-Columbian Atlantic world to the Indian Ocean and back, before it reached Portuguese America. This evidence can only emerge from an analysis that considers them simultaneously in a variety of specific contexts and periods. Contrary to what the historiography of intercultural encounters has taught us, we must observe that preexisting categories did not always come first. As the examples provided in this article show, generalizations might also frame reality at a later point in time, following and neutralizing detailed descriptions that relied on experience. All these aspects interplayed in very complex ways, which we still need to explore further, but which certainly matter when we are dealing with race and the process of racialization in colonial societies.



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