

Property Rights, Land and Territory in the European Overseas Empires

Direitos de Propriedade, Terra e Território nos Impérios
Ultramarinos Europeus

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Title: Property Rights, Land and Territory in the European Overseas Empires.

Edited by: José Vicente Serrão, Bárbara Direito, Eugénia Rodrigues, Susana Münch Miranda.

Editorial Assistant: Graça Almeida Borges.

Year of Publication: 2014.

Online Publication Date: April 2015.

Published by: CEHC, ISCTE-IUL. Avenida das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal. Tel.: +351 217903000. E-mail: cehc@iscte.pt.

Type: digital edition (e-book).

ISBN: 978-989-98499-4-5

DOI: [10.15847/cehc.prlteoe.945X000](https://doi.org/10.15847/cehc.prlteoe.945X000)

Cover image: “The home of a ‘Labrador’ in Brazil”, by Frans Post, c. 1650-1655 (Louvre Museum).

This book incorporates the activities of the FCT-funded Research Project (PTDC/HIS-HIS/113654/2009)
“Lands Over Seas: Property Rights in the Early Modern Portuguese Empire”.

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African access to land in early 20th century Portuguese colonial thought

Bárbara Direito¹

Abstract: Part of a broader effort to bring the land question to the fore of scholarship about colonial Mozambique, this study looks at how colonial thought about land and property developed among Portuguese colonialists in the early 20th century, especially with regards to African access to land. Different contributions to this thought are analysed to enquire the role the land question played in the Portuguese colonial project in Africa. The main theories and debates about the land question held in Portugal are then analysed alongside theories and debates about this same topic within an increasingly internationalised field of colonial thought, in which Portuguese colonialists also took part, thus furthering the comparative effort pursued by this international conference.

Resumo: Como parte de um esforço mais vasto para trazer a questão da terra para o centro da investigação sobre Moçambique colonial, este estudo debruça-se sobre a forma como o pensamento colonial acerca da terra e da propriedade se desenvolveu entre os colonialistas portugueses no início do século XX, sobretudo no que diz respeito ao acesso à terra das populações africanas. Diferentes contributos para este pensamento são analisados de forma a identificar o papel da questão da terra no projecto colonial português em África. As principais teorias e debates acerca da questão da terra são depois analisados em diálogo com as teorias e debates a respeito da mesma matéria desenvolvidas no quadro de um campo do pensamento colonial crescentemente internacionalizado, no qual os colonialistas portugueses também participavam, aprofundando assim o esforço comparativo prosseguido nesta conferência internacional.

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José Vicente Serrão, Bárbara Direito, Eugénia Rodrigues, Susana Münch Miranda (eds.). *Property Rights, Land and Territory in the European Overseas Empires*. Lisbon: CEHC-IUL, 2014. ISBN: 978-989-98499-4-5.

© 2014 CEHC-IUL and Bárbara Direito. Chapter DOI:10.15847/cehc.prkteoe.945X021.

Studies on the land question and colonial land policies in Africa have for many decades revealed how the lives and livelihoods of Africans, as well as their access to land, were affected under colonial rule. In this context, and as part of a broader effort to bring the land question to the fore of scholarship about Portuguese colonial rule in Africa, and more specifically in Mozambique, in this study I focus on how colonial thought about land, and especially African access to land, developed among a group of Portuguese colonial thinkers in the beginning of the 20th century. This will allow us to consider how one of the most important questions regarding European colonial rule in Africa was dealt with among thinkers that were part of a growing ‘colonial field’ in Portugal, the premises it was based on, and the policies it originated. To reach this goal different sources could be used. In this brief survey I analyse the arguments on the land question and African access to land put forth by prominent Portuguese legal scholars through printed sources such as colonial law and administration and native policy textbooks published in the early years of the 20th century. Because ideas about colonial problems were often expressed in works that compared the policies and practices of different colonial powers, and because Portuguese colonialists took part in an increasingly internationalised field of colonial thought, the ideas that were debated in Portugal and the dominant perspectives on the land question are subsequently analysed against the perspectives supported in other colonial contexts in scholarly work and debate forums about colonial topics, held since the late 19th century.

1. Land tenure in scholarship about 19th and 20th century colonial Africa

For many decades now, the topic of land tenure in Africa and the access of African populations to land has considerably interested scholars studying colonial rule. Perhaps better than other equally important subjects, it provided an opportunity to investigate how colonial rule, the settlement of European populations, and economic exploitation projects like vast plantations had changed the lives of Africans on the ground. It also proved useful to help explain patterns of land use, economic activities, human mobility across space and environmental change, among other elements, in contemporary, post-colonial Africa. Mostly focused on cases in former British Africa, many of the studies produced by scholars working on land tenure have underlined the extent to which land policies helped define colonial power, how these policies affected the lives of local populations, mostly African, and how they generated different forms of resistance. As has been shown, most colonial administrations solved the competition for access to land and land-based resources in favour of settlers and companies, thus affecting the lives and livelihoods of Africans in profound ways. Colonial land policies, designed in the metropole and in colonial spaces, but also their practice on the ground, were the product of different criteria and debates, and were shaped namely by racial ideologies, economic goals, environmental conditions, settler presence, and labour demands. Importantly, they were also shaped by African strategies in the face of policies that mostly limited their freedom and activities and of different social, economic and environmental constraints.

Sara Berry, in an important work on this topic, argued that colonial regimes in Africa had an impact on African peoples’ relation with the land at least through physical displacement, through the demarcation of territorial and social boundaries and through the invention or reinterpretation of the rules on land access, transfer and use (Berry 2002: 643). In another work on agrarian questions in Africa, two main periods in British and French colonial policies regarding African land tenure systems were identified.

Between the late 19th century and 1930, in a context of conquest, occupation and setting up of colonial rule, colonial States were not particularly concerned with defining a clear land tenure system for African populations. Hence their tolerance regarding local land custom and what was simply regarded as ‘communal land tenure’, as well the maintenance of the political structures on which these land tenure systems rested upon (Bassett 1993: 6-7). Later on, in a second phase (1930-1960), however, events such as the Great Depression and World War II, as well as new strategies aimed at increasing agricultural production led authorities to try to promote the stabilisation of land tenure systems. When ‘traditional’ land tenure systems started to be seen as obstacles to production and ‘development’, the evolution towards individual property was inevitable (Bassett 1993: 8).

To the fundamental distinction between the European and the African from the cognitive and ‘civilizational’ points of view, between their respective polities and social orders, but also respective farming and livestock practices, elements that were used to justify different aspects of colonial domination, was thus added the dichotomy between individual/communal property. Among colonial administrations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the idea that in African societies the concept of individual property not only did not exist, but that local populations did not have the ability to understand it, was dominant. The land, a communal and inalienable resource, was seen to be ruled by chiefs, which distributed it among various individuals according to different principles. Importantly, a number of studies have demonstrated that this dominant perspective about customary practices amounted to an oversimplification, to a Eurocentric and biased interpretation, and often to an actual creation of the rules existing in different African polities, who, far from static, had evolved over time and transformed due to different circumstances (ecological, social, political, economic, etc.) (Biebuyck 1963).

2. The Portuguese colonial field

Public debate about the colonial question in Portugal was particularly active in the last decades of the 19th century, as international disputes for African territories, which culminated in the Berlin Conference and subsequent negotiations and agreements between different European countries, brought the matter into the centre of the national debate (Alexandre 2000). Even though this has rarely been reflected in the historiography, unlike in the scholarship about British and French Africa mentioned above, source materials from the 19th and 20th centuries have a lot to tell us specifically about the Portuguese case concerning colonial thought on the land question that helps compare it to the literature mentioned above concerning British and French Africa. In a recent study, by choosing to look for instance at relevant debates in Portuguese parliament about Portuguese colonial land laws, and later at how specific land policies affected African populations in a region of the province of Inhambane, in Mozambique, I tried to find the links between discourse and practice in a specific case. Furthermore, I discussed how land and labour policies combined to limit the autonomy of Africans (Direito 2013a).

Parliament, of course, was not the only available forum of discussion for colonial matters in Portugal in this period. Like elsewhere in Europe, an increasingly specialised ‘colonial field’ was forming in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Administrative, political, military and academic elites, for example, were often called on to contribute to debates on issues such as how Portugal would make its presence in the African continent effective, what resources needed to be exploited, how local populations and

colonisers were to relate on the ground, how local populations would be administered, or how land would be distributed and regulated. Their contributions had different goals and different conditions of production, and some of them were actually transformed into policies and laws, or were used as discourse to justify and legitimate specific choices. Contributions also came from legal scholars from the main law schools of the period (Lisbon and Coimbra), where many of the political and administrative elites of the period were trained. A key role was also played over time by scholars at the *Escola Colonial* (Colonial School), created in 1906 with the goal of providing specific training for future colonial administrators. It is on this group of colonial thinkers that this brief paper focuses on.

Like other experts contributing in this period to what has been termed a ‘colonial science of administration’ (Silva 2010: 91-93), legal scholars did not constitute a completely autonomous field of knowledge. Indeed, although they employed a specific language and used concepts developed within the field of law, they were influenced by the political atmosphere of their time and were active in other fields. Certainly, they did not merely confine themselves to the construction of a legal thought on colonialism. They had particular interests and views, shaped by their previous and current experiences in public and private life, and produced their scholarly work in the context of a strong nationalistic upheaval in Portuguese society and a dominant pro-colonial stance². Several of them took on different positions during their careers. Marnoco e Sousa was a professor at the Law School of the University of Coimbra, where he would come to teach the first colonial law course in Portugal (instituted in 1901), and he was also, briefly, Navy and Overseas minister (Silva 2004-2005: 910). Ruy Ulrich, also a law professor, would become Portuguese ambassador in London and member of the board of administration of the *Companhia de Moçambique* (Mozambique Company), one of the chartered companies created in the 1890s to rule specific regions of Portuguese East Africa with a relative leeway but under the watchful eye of Lisbon³.

Increasingly dynamic, this growing colonial thought field was for instance behind the organisation of several colonial conferences in Portugal, first under the aegis of the Lisbon Geographical Society and later of the Colonial Ministry. Abroad, similar conferences attracting delegates from different countries became spaces of debate and circulation of ideas, but sometimes also of negotiation of common positions (Tilley 2011: 7-10). Portuguese experts, as well as their French, British or Belgian counterparts, for instance, took part in growingly important networks of experts, where different approaches and policies, as well as theories justifying them, were open for debate. The 1900 Colonial Sociology Conference, held in Paris, as well as different sessions of the International Colonial Institute (ICI), a learned society founded in Brussels in 1894 by prominent colonialists like the French Joseph Chailley-Bert, were some of the forums relevant for a genealogy of theses on the land question in colonial Africa⁴. At the turn of

² Dissonant voices certainly existed in the late 19th century, but more often on specific key options regarding the Portuguese colonial project rather than questioning the colonial project in itself. For an influential example of criticism on the possibility of finding a much promised ‘Eldorado’ in Africa and the option to turn Mozambique into a settlement colony, see for instance the arguments put forth by historian and politician Oliveira Martins in his famous work *O Brasil e as Colónias Portuguesas* (Brazil and the Portuguese Colonies) (Martins 1978 [1st ed. 1880]).

³ For more on Ulrich’s tenure on the Mozambique Company’s board of administration and the specific policies he supported, see Direito 2013b: 175-6, 206.

⁴ On the goals and functions of the ICI, see Institut Colonial International (1921). For more on the Institute, later to be renamed *Institut International des Civilisations Différentes*, and its history, see Poncelet 2008: 78-82, 302-304 and Saada 2009: 106.

the century, one of the main topics debated during ICI sessions, attended by delegates of different countries, including Portugal, focused on labour mobilization, namely the question of indentured labour (Daviron 2010: 486-487). But several sessions of the ICI would later be dedicated to debating land issues, and between 1899 and 1905 it published a compilation of land tenure regimes of different colonial territories, a sign that this topic had also gained prominence⁵.

3. Portuguese legal scholars and the land question in an international context

Portuguese colonial law and native policy textbooks of the period under study, much like the colonial science of this time, were comparative in nature, and most of their recommendations stemmed from careful examination of the colonial thought and practice of different imperial powers in the *longue durée*. The policies recommended were thought to be the fairest and the best considering how they fit in with key Portuguese options and its underlying principles, as well as its past colonial experiences, particularly in Brazil. Moreover, many of the ideas present in these works and discussed in forums on colonial topics in late 19th and early-20th century Portugal were permeated with representations about the African continent, its nature, its history and its peoples. If the land was generally considered vast, untamed, underexploited and sparsely populated, Africans, partly due to strongly influential racial theories, were seen as lazy, backward and unruly (Matos 2006: 39-43).

Bearing this in mind, one first point that needs to be made is that this generation of colonial thinkers tried to distinguish itself from previous ones at different levels, and this helped shape its views on key policies regarding Africans. They spoke of the ‘empiricism’ of past European colonialism, of a past pragmatism, of the lack of real knowledge of local structures, of an opportunistic spirit (Melo 1910: 10); present and future colonialism was to be based on the recently emerged and ‘extremely important’ ‘doctrine of colonial sociology’, adamant on the study of local structures (Melo 1910: 9); the difference between past colonial experiences and contemporary ones also rested on the ‘civilizational mission’, a better justification for colonialism than amoral profit and opportunism. The very concept of colonization put forth by these thinkers was based on the idea of an advanced, civilized people, intervening over a backward, less civilized population, with a view to transforming it gradually (Souza 1906: 8; Ulrich 1909: 4).

An analysis of the contents of the textbooks used for the teaching of courses on colonial law and administration and native policy in law schools and at the *Escola Colonial*, familiar with the theories that circulated outside Portugal as well as past and contemporary practices in this field, indicates that Portuguese legal scholars agreed on three main ideas about the land question and African access to land in the colonies. The first one was a general principle of so-called respect for the land held by Africans. Authors justified it on grounds of fairness and morals, a dimension of a putative ethics of the colonizer, but also for pragmatic reasons, to avoid conflict and ensure social peace. According to one author this principle stemmed from the alleged abundance of land and the low population densities of the colonies, but also from the ‘civilizing mission’: the civilizational backwardness of colonized populations imposed a ‘duty of

⁵ The six volumes were published under the general title of *Le Régime Foncier aux Colonies: Documents Officiels*. For a summary of how the land question appeared in the agenda of the ICI and was handled internally, see Anton 1899: 534-565.

intervention' on 'civilized States', entrusted with the task of leading them to a more 'advanced' state (Ulrich 1909: 698). While in past colonial experiences European colonizers had often resorted to violent dispossession, argued another author, in the early 20th century respect for 'native property' was essential to avoid rebellions such as those that had led to many deaths among the workforce (Melo 1910: 339-41). This 'respect' for 'native property' would nevertheless need to be balanced against the need to avoid allowing land to remain underused from an economic viewpoint (Cayolla 1913: 147-149; Chailley-Bert 1904: viii).

A second argument commonly accepted in this scholarship contended that in spite of the principle of respect for 'native property', local populations needed further 'protection', for instance in the form of 'native reserves'. This idea had already been argued at the Colonial Sociology Conference held in Paris in 1900, and the clear link between this particular land policy and the availability of a labour force needs to be emphasized. Portuguese scholars had different views specifically on native reserves, but they all favoured some sort of a form of separation between Africans and settlers in terms of land for different purposes, which means they would not be competing freely for the best lands or considered in the same way by colonial officials. Some felt that rather than reserves a solution similar to the *aldeamentos* (settlements) that the Jesuits had created in Brazil, around which 'sufficient' land, owned in common by each community, would be set aside for its subsistence, was preferable (Melo 1910: 345).

Designing special rules for colonised peoples, adapted to their supposed 'state of evolution', and collect, codify and respect local 'custom', is the third element in common in this specific scholarship (Souza 1906: 164-165; Ulrich 1909: 689; Melo 1910: 14). The principle of 'respect' for local custom had been supported by the French colonialist Arthur Girault, author of a classical work on colonial law very popular among Portuguese scholars, and again presented during the 1900 Colonial Sociology Conference (Girault in AAVV 1901: 49; Girault 1929).

For Portuguese scholars, a special 'native' land law was necessary because of local land tenure systems. In the Portuguese colonies, they argued, landed property had not been subjected to a process of individualisation and was still collectively owned. Like French colonial thinker Beaulieu had argued before them, Melo and his colleagues saw the prevalence of communal property systems as a sign of Africans' backwardness, but nevertheless accepted the possibility of an evolution towards individual property, reliant on a wider evolution process towards African 'majority' (Beaulieu 1874: 174; Souza 1906: 239; Melo 1910: 341-345, 413-414). For Melo, the fact that Africans lacked individual property could not be used as a justification for denying them any sort of rights or 'protection': all groups had at some point evolved from collective to individual property, and that would eventually happen in colonial Africa, too. In fact, one of the goals of 'modern colonization' was the progressive evolution of the idea of property, even if that meant temporarily recognising local land tenure traditions (Melo 1910: 343).

For many Portuguese scholars, however, like foreign experts had also argued for instance at the sessions of the ICI a few years earlier, Africans were not yet 'ready' for individual property, and it would be dangerous to push them too quickly to that state. This was due to concerns about sovereignty and State control over the territory, but also due to the need to 'protect' colonised peoples from the bad faith of those that could try to take advantage of their state (Ulrich 1910: 154; Melo 1910: 346-347; Cayolla 1913: 154).

Conclusion

According to these Portuguese legal scholars, respect for native property, further ‘protection’ measures, respect for local land custom and special land laws for Africans were the principles that needed to be adopted in land policies in colonial territories. What exactly amounted to ‘native property’ was not clearly explained, and Portuguese authors did not recommend Africans to be consulted on what they considered land under use and vacant land, on what they were willing to let go of and adamant on keeping for economic, social, political or even symbolic reasons. The definition of ‘native property’ would be the outcome of a combination of colonial ideologies, economic imperatives, competition for land as well as representations about African custom and practices. The key question when it came to reserves or similar policies of further ‘protection’ for Africans would of course be the quality of the land set aside, as well as its location. The autonomy of most Africans in the rural world, forced by colonial authorities to pay taxes, would depend on the type of land they accessed. But on this matter, as well as on how the increasing settler demand for land and labour would be reconciled with any form of protection of Africans’ interests, Portuguese scholars had little to add, even if by then the experience of South Africa proved that when land set aside for Africans was of poor quality, they were forced to become tenants or squatters in settler land⁶. The clear unfairness of the views expressed both by Portuguese colonial thinkers and their foreign counterparts, which the ‘civilizational mission’ argument could not conceal, was also evident with regards to the question of land custom. Banning the land tenure traditions they found immoral, excluding Africans from individual property because of their alleged intellectual inferiority, and drafting special land laws for Africans were part of yet another step towards a dual and discriminatory order. Codifying what colonial rulers viewed as acceptable traditions helped ‘stabilise’ certain political, social and economic structures, and also allowed them to control them.

Judging from the arguments put forth by Portuguese legal scholars in colonial law and administration and native policy textbooks, which were used to teach at universities and to train future colonial administrators, there are no reasons to exclude the case of Portugal from wider findings on the colonial land question. Though there certainly were disagreements and differences of opinion regarding specific policies, among Portuguese colonialists as well as among colonialists of different nationalities, there is nothing exceptional about the Portuguese techno-scientific discourse expressed by legal scholars in the early 20th century. When it came to the land question and African access to land, economic exploitation of existing resources and the maintenance of sovereignty were the top priorities across colonial empires, and the racial ideologies that permeated legal thought came in hand to justify discriminatory statutes for Africans and non-Africans. There were clearly shared beliefs and methods among colonial administrations and colonial thinkers, even if in practice there were differences.

This study was developed within the framework of the FCT-funded Research Project “Lands Over Seas: Property Rights in the Early Modern Portuguese Empire” (reference PTDC/HIS-HIS/113654/2009).

⁶ For a comparative analysis of the purposes and the consequences of colonial land policies, including reserves, in early-20th century South Africa, Rhodesia and Kenya, see Youé 2002.

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