

## Renegotiating the subaltern – Female voices in Peixoto's *Obra Nova de Língua Geral de Mina* (Brazil, 1731/1741)

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 Basic research & Edition project in Romance Studies (*Bamberger Editionen*)

### Historical background & Peixoto's 18<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts

Out of ~11.000.000 enslaved Africans disembarked in the Americas, ~ 46% were taken to Brazil, where transatlantic slave trade only ended in 1850 (official abolition of slavery in 1888). In the Brazilian inland *capitania* Minas Gerais, slave numbers exploded due to gold mining in the first half of 18<sup>th</sup> century from 30.000 to nearly 300.000 black inhabitants out of a total ~350.000 in 1786. Due to **gender demographics**, intimate relations between African women and European men were frequent during Antonio da Costa Peixoto's lifetime. In 1731/1741, this country clerk in Minas Gerais' colonial administration, originally from Northern Portugal, completed his 42-page manuscript *Obra Nova de Língua Geral de Mina* («New work on

the general language of Mina») documenting a **variety of Gbe** (sub-group of Kwa), one of the many **African languages** thought to have quickly disappeared in oversea slaveholder colonies. 920 lexical entries, complex expressions and dialogues in **Língua Geral de Mina** (LGM) cover semantic domains such as body parts, food, agriculture, gold trade, human interaction incl. family issues such as sex, pregnancy, childbearing and baptism. Vestiges of the LGM can also be found in the vocabulary used today by Afro-Brazilian religious communities (Castro 2002). Peixoto himself had four children, two of them daughters with *negras forras* (free black women), so probably all four had African mothers.

### Gender issues in Peixoto's work

Peixoto's glossary is not only linguistically, but also socioculturally relevant: dialogues reflect contradicting interests of male and female social agents, their complex interactions, including power struggles and cooperative behaviours. The paratext explicitly mentions **female informants**. Several dialogues allow us to perceive **voices of black women renegotiating power with white men**, including conversations apparently inspired by Peixoto's personal experiences (Almeida 2010,

Märzhäuser & Rodrigues-Moura 2022, Paiva 2009, Schwarcz & Gomes 2018, Souza 1982). The content of *Obra Nova* is therefore relevant in face of the significant **gender data gap** (Criado-Perez 2019) regarding Afro-Brazilian women, as **several dialogues in *Obra Nova* depict African female agency in colonial Brazil's gold mining communities**.

### Analysis of gender-relevant dialogues

Research shows that for *minas forras*, in Brazil, prostitution was an (additional) source of income, besides selling agricultural products, food and *cachaça* (brandy) in their (heavily taxed) *vendas* (shops) or in the streets (cf. image *Negra do tabuleiro*). These female businesses followed West African patterns of women-controlled finance in some ways, and allowed their female owners to suc-

ceed both economically and with regard to their social position (Araujo 2013, Stanton 1992, Farias 2019, Gonçalves 2011, Stolze Lima 2018, 2020, 2021).

Our first critical and uncensored edition the 1741 and 1731 manuscripts also analyses **gender relations in the dialogues**, in which Peixoto is sometimes surprisingly explicit about his personal experiences with paid sex:

**Cá melhor praxe de que eu uzo, algumas vezes, hé esta**

[«This is the best strategy, which I sometimes use»]

**Nhi matim aquhédimhã = eu não · tenho agora ouro**

[«At this moment, I don't have gold»]

**mématim aquhé má hóhayò hã = q.<sup>m</sup> não · tem ouro, não · fode**

[«Those who don't have gold won't fuck»]

**name ayo dim, beré sũ ná nauhé aquhé = dame agora o cono, eq.<sup>al</sup> q.<sup>r</sup> dia te darey o ouro**

[«Give me your cunt now, I'll give you the gold another day»] [...].

But the woman reinforces her business policies:

**nhimá ná ayóche achó hã = eu não · dou o meu cono fiado**

[«I won't give my cunt on credit»]

(Peixoto 1741: 41)

### Results

Some of Peixoto's dialogues show **African women** who – despite being black and female and therefore usually associated with double subaltern status (see Spivak 1994 «The subaltern cannot speak») – **successfully renegotiate their power position in trade**. Although Peixoto's efforts to acquire, describe and promote LGM can be interpreted as a «white» colonist's strategy to secure his position through successful control, his dialogues also stress the importance of winning trust and



*Negra do tabuleiro*, Moritz Rugendas, 1827.

cultivating good relations with members of the local black community. Several dialogues testify a degree of **agency by Africans that undermines conventional representations of colonial relations, including a woman** who enforces her «no credit» policy for her services, as shown above. Historical research on African and Afro-descendant women in Minas Gerais documents that some did not only manage to free themselves from slavery but even acquired considerable wealth.