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«HIERARCHICAL ALTERITY IS A MERE ILLUSION»
Some Reflections on the Creative Power of Women's Expressive Traditions in the Portuguese-Speaking Hindu Diaspora

Despite being dismissed by certain brahmanised sectors of the Hindu diaspora, the idioms through which Hindu women construct their own selves and the alternative conceptions of the social world that they transmit have contributed significantly to the success of their families in migratory contexts in terms of identity. Taking the Hindu diaspora within the Portuguese-speaking space as a case study, we hope to show how the women's expressive traditions constituted a contra-ethnicising logic which helped to consolidate the position of the ethnic minority of traders formed by the Hindu-Gujarati population settled in Mozambique during the colonial period.

In the two main post-colonial migratory contexts, Portugal and England, these traditions continue to provide emerging generations with significant resources for the redefinition of relations between «self» and «other» and for the renegotiation of intra- or inter-ethnic power dynamics.

*«L'altérité hiérarchique est une illusion pure» :
quelques réflexions sur le pouvoir créateur des traditions d'expression
féminine dans la diaspora hindoue de langue portugaise*

Bien qu'ils soient rejetés par certains secteurs brahmanisés de la diaspora hindoue, les idiomes à travers lesquels les femmes hindoues se construisent elles-mêmes, ainsi que les conceptions alternatives du monde social qu'elles transmettent, ont contribué de façon significative à la réussite identitaire de leurs familles dans des contextes de migration. Prenant pour étude de cas la diaspora hindoue au sein de l'espace de la langue portugaise, nous espérons montrer comment les traditions d'expression féminines ont constitué une logique contre-ethnicisante qui a aidé à consolider la position de la minorité ethnique de négociants constituée par la population hindoue-gujarati installée au Mozambique durant la période coloniale.

Dans les deux principaux contextes migratoires post-coloniaux, le Portugal et l'Angleterre, ces traditions continuent de fournir aux générations émergentes des ressources significatives pour la redéfinition des relations entre « soi » et « l'autre » et pour la renégociation des dynamiques de pouvoir intra-ethniques ou inter-ethniques.

*«Alteridade hierárquica é mera ilusão» : Reflexões sobre o poder criativo de
tradições de expressão de mulheres na diáspora dos hindus de língua portuguesa*

Apesar de serem rejeitados por certos sectores bramanizados da diáspora hindu, os idiomas através dos quais as mulheres hindus constroem as suas próprias personalidades e os conceitos alternativos do mundo social que transmitem têm contribuído significativamente para o sucesso de identidade das suas famílias em contextos migratórios. Considerando a diáspora hindu dentro do espaço ocupado pelos falantes da língua portuguesa como um caso de estudo, esperamos mostrar de que forma as tradições de expressão das mulheres têm constituído uma lógica contra-eticizante que ajudou a consolidar a posição da minoria étnica de

negociantes ocupada pela população hindu-gujarátí estabelecida em Moçambique durante o período colonial.

Nos dois principais contextos migratórios pós-coloniais, Portugal e a Inglaterra, estas tradições continuam a fornecer gerações emergentes com recursos significativos para a redefinição de relações entre «ego» e «alter» e para a renegociação de dinâmicas de força intra ou inter étnicas.

In order to legitimate the colonial enterprise as a civilizing mission, the colonial mind was able to transform [...] the figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country as noted by Partha Chatterjee. Despite this «position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India» (Chatterjee 1989: 622), several nineteenth-century colonial authors held indentured Indian women responsible for the major social and moral problems created by the indentured work system in the British, French and Dutch colonial empires, and accused them of deriving material profit from sexual activity and lacking any maternal instinct (Lal 1998: 231). Responding to these colonial representations, Indian nationalist discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mobilised certain «virtues» associated with the Indian woman/mother figure in order to construct their own idea of nation and to stimulate feelings and ideals of national identity (van der Veer 2001).

Taking women's experiences and memories as a starting point we hope to show that Indian women were not just objects in political discourses, but subjects whose expressive practices kept Hindu¹ identity² dynamics [alive?] in the transnational contexts of Portuguese colonialism and post-colonial migration. More specifically, in their main colonial migratory context (Mozambique), they learned to officiate religious performances which were traditionally carried out by male specialists in their homelands. Apart from this ritual specialization, they also recreated «Little traditions»³ that matched «the everyday forms of resistance» (Scott 1985) mobilised

¹ In the anthropological literature about Hinduism, in India or abroad, we find several theoretical stances. A first includes contributions that criticise the use of a single category to account for such diverse practices and representations; the second, includes formulations that, while not denying contextual diversity and change, are concerned with constructing a «unity within diversity» (the construction process may however differ significantly); and the third includes considerations that emphasise the «multiplicity of manifestations of Hinduism», «historicity» and «transformation», attempting to articulate the production and management of meaning with economic and political contexts. We consider our perspective to be part of the last group.

² Identities can be defined (BASTOS & BASTOS 2001) as representations of self and of others (as persons, groups, categories of social beings, etc.) that create images of order, permanence, belonging, unity, distinction and «moral» superiority; identities belong to the process of organization of the world as ordered multiplicity but also to the process of contestation of the hierarchies of the world-system.

³ In the early 1950s, R. Redfield introduced the concepts of Great and Little into anthropological discourse. Four years later, he and Milton Singer used the some terminology to refer to the Great tradition of Sanskrit Hinduism and to the «folk» Little (non-Sanskritic) traditions of Hinduism. Several important anthropological studies produced in the last thirty years criticised the hierarchical premises inherent in this antinomy. The notion of «Little traditions» is evoked in this paper, in quotation marks, to emphasise that women's expressive traditions are often described as «lower» than the scriptural Hinduism, at least by certain brahmanised sectors of the Hindu diaspora.

by their Gujarati non-migrant counterparts against several local systems of dominance. These traditions emphasised the incorporative, metamorphic and porous nature of all beings, as well as the fluid, mutable and reversible relations between them (Daniel 1984; Freeman 1999) – thus proposing a «contra-ethnicising logic» (Mayaram 1999) which proved vital for the identity success of their families during the colonial period. In the two post-colonial migratory contexts (Portugal and the United Kingdom), the reservoir of identity strategies⁴ collected within the women's «Little traditions» continues to provide Portuguese-speaking Hindus with significant resources for the redefinition of relations between «self» and «other» and for the renegotiation of intra- or inter-ethnic power dynamics.

* * *

Since the late seventeenth century, trade in the North of Mozambique was mainly carried out by Hindus from Diu⁵. Since the second half of the nine-teenth century, a significant number of these traders moved to the South of Mozambique, in particular to the provinces of Inhanbane and Lourenço Marques. In the late nineteenth century, changes in the economics of the neighbouring British and Boer territories and the implementation of legislation restricting Indian settlement in Natal, and especially in the Transvaal, influenced the arrival of groups of British Indians, in particular of Gujarati Hindus, the majority of which originated from Porbandar, Rajkot and Surat.

The main strategies for the professional insertion of this group in the Mozambican context lay in trade between the interior regions and urban centres (*cantineiro*: commerce)⁶ and – especially for those who arrived in the 1930s – in high-street commerce, while the castes of Diu masons mostly found employment in the construction industry⁷. A small number of families also took advantage of the economic boom of the 1960s to expand their activities to the industrial sector.

While established in a Portuguese colony, Mozambican Hindus also belonged to a polynuclear spatial organisation. The networks they maintained allowed the circulation of people, material goods, capital, etc., between their regions and groups of origin in Gujarat and Diu, and the various groups of Gujarati Hindus settled in other territories of East and Southern Africa.

⁴ Identity strategies (CAMILLERI *et al.* 1990) can be defined as procedures worked out by a social actor (individual or collective) for the attainment of one, or more than one, conscious or unconscious, objective; these procedures are elaborated as a function of the interactive situation and depend on diverse determinations (socio-historical, cultural, psychological, etc.).

⁵ The island of Diu, located in the Gulf of Cambay, adjacent to the Saurashtra Peninsula, was a Portuguese colony for 450 years. Following Operation Vijay in December 1961, it became a Separate Union Territory of the Indian Union.

⁶ The business of the *cantineiro* included the acquisition and transport of various types of produce (peanuts, cashews, cotton, corn, etc.), harvested by local populations, to the towns. *Cantineiros* also sold *capulanas* – the traditional cloth – and other textiles, basic foodstuffs, «colonial wine» and other basic goods provided by merchants in the cities.

⁷ Despite the frequent occurrence of professional mobility from masons to traders, class stratification within the Hindu population remained significant.

The expulsion of all holders of Indian passports ordered in 1961 by Salazar, as retaliation for the Indian invasion of the Portuguese colonies of Goa, Daman and Diu and, more importantly, the decolonisation of all Portuguese colonies after the revolution of 1974, forced a significant part of the Gujarati Hindus living in Mozambique to migrate once again. The nationalisation process implemented in Mozambique, as well as the high political instability of the country and the civil war that broke out in the mid-1970s led to a peak in emigration in the early 1980s.

Most of these families chose Portugal as their destination. The economic strategies developed in the new migratory context were similar to those deployed in Mozambique. Men from Diu belonging to castes of masons and carpenters soon became active in construction, both in Portuguese firms and in firms owned by same-caste Hindus; they also invested in hawking in street markets across the country. Gujaratis of *lohana* and other castes, on the other hand, became active in traditional commerce, often in the same branch as previously (mostly ready-to-wear and the import and sale of Far Eastern products). Many of those whose activity had extended to industry, banking or various learned professions were also able to resume their previous occupations.

The integration of Portugal in the European Community in 1986 and the numerous opportunities for professional and status ascension available in the United Kingdom led many Portuguese-speaking Hindus to emigrate for a first, a second or a third time. The most significant movement (after 1998) was determined by the global context of economic crisis (more acutely felt in Portugal than in other EU countries) and by the increased competition observed in the Portuguese construction market, resulting from the arrival of thousands of immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Can the «Other» not be a Source of Power for the Hindu «We»? Recreating Women's «Little Traditions»

According to a significant number of informants, the recreation of the Gujarati Hindu religious calendar was only possible after the arrival in Mozambique, in the early twentieth century, of the first women, usually as wives. Many women began to officiate, within the home, rituals which had traditionally been carried out by male specialists, including *havans*⁸ (e.g. those dedicated to the ancestors of their husbands, or to the Hindu Goddess), and took it upon themselves to transmit the basic oral texts of popular Hinduism, which included the *Satyanarayan Katha*, the *Bhagavata Gita*, and the *Ramayana*. They also maintained specific traditions (linked to caste and lineage) for rites of passage, reconstructed the *vrata Kathá*⁹

⁸ *Havan* is an invocation of fire, a traditional Vedic rite, popularised and currently performed by Hindus of different castes.

⁹ *Vrata* (vow) *Katha* (story) are female ritualisations connected with the realization of a desire; they require the cyclic telling (or reading) of a *katha*, together with the observance of several ascetic practices (specific food fastings, abstinence from sexual intercourse, etc.) and the performance of some ritual sequences (varying from *vrata* to *vrata*).

practice and, independently of their caste and socio-economic status, recreated direct means of communication with the Hindu goddess through possession:

(Darsha, 19) – Who created the *vrata Katha*? I never thought about this, but it must have been a woman, a very intelligent lady to know so many things . . .

(Darsha's mother, 42) – Most probably these *katha* are inspired by women's common experiences. Even when they seem inspired by the Ramayana or Mahabharata, they were, little by little, modified by women.

(Darsha's aunt, 59) – You may think that these stories only serve to inculcate principles. I think it's more than that. But we need to believe. That is the power.

(Jaya, 35) – Only women have the secret of life. (general laughter)¹⁰.

Refusing Binary and Hierarchising Distinctions: Vratkatha Secrets

Hindu traditions reconstructed in Mozambique after family reunification became a significant symbolic strategy against excessive and irreversible hierarchical identity processes. For instance, some of the most popular narratives evoked in *vrata* ritualisations justified anomalous situations in the cyclical movements between life and death of humans as a result of an excessive desire for upward social mobility. The reparation of these anomalies was assigned to subalternised figures (belittled daughters-in-law, members of pollutant castes, figures marked by sacrificial violence, etc.). Another popular series of narratives attributed critical socio-cosmological situations to an abusive use of hierarchising distinctions. Overcoming these also implied the restoration of interdependence among asymmetrical positions and an open stance towards apparently repulsive figures («foreigners», untouchables, etc.). In a last set of ritual tales, the crisis was caused by impermeable and binary boundaries between times, spaces, concepts, etc. and overcome through the acknowledgement that these divisions were mere illusion, dependent on the *maya* (the divine power to delude).

Somavati amavas Katha, to cite only one example, makes the solution of a micro-family crisis depend on an attitude that subverts the caste hierarchy: two Brahman children thus adopt the identity of the untouchable in order to secure the magic help of a character of a very low social rank:

«Every moonless Monday, my mother awoke us at four o'clock in the morning and told us the *Katha* [. . .]. There was a Brahman family who had a single young daughter. One day, a *sannyasi* [an ascetic] appeared begging *bhiksha* [ritual alms]. The daughter gave him *bhiksha* and he told her to take religious vows, because she would become a widow very early, on the very day of her wedding. The daughter started weeping and the *sannyasi* said that only a woman of the washers' caste could help her. [. . .] The girl and her youngest brother went through lots of difficulties until they reached the village where that woman lived. Without anyone knowing, they cleaned, swept and put cow excrements in her house during a whole year. One day, she discovered them and said: "So, is it Brahman children who clean the house of a washer woman? Leave it. I'm going to help you". At the wedding, the husband of the daughter suddenly died, but the washerwoman begged: "God, make this man sit"; immediately after, the girl's husband sat up, alive. [. . .]. Afterwards, we went to make *puja* near

¹⁰ Quotation from field diary, Lisbon.

the *pipal* [fig tree] and the banana tree. We wound the cotton thread a hundred and eight times around the two trees. As if they were husband and wife [. . .]. Every woman who heard this *Katha* and wound the *pipal*, would be *saubhagya* [wifehood]¹¹».

What was the meaning of these narratives for their female listeners? How were they useful to them? How much did they overlap with their daily lives? In the words of a number of grandmothers and great-grandmothers: «these stories have a special power, if we listen to them with devotion, and observe the fast, it works [. . .]. When our wish doesn't come true, it's because we did not have enough faith»¹². The success of *vrata Katha* rituals therefore implied the belief in the creative power of the narrative itself, in a sort of magic inherent to the word, whose incorporation (through listening) could truly transform its listener. Mere hearing was not however sufficient. Only a prolonged hyper-identification (at times, for years) with the main character of the *Katha* (which required her imitation in multiple performances) and a rigorous self-control of corporal orifices (including the observation of specific fasts and sexual abstinence on the day of the *vrata*) could fulfill the desires of the faithful (just as had happened to the main character of the *Katha*).

Materialising Respect for the «Foreigner»

It is not simple to evaluate the impact of such ritualisations upon the daily life of Hindus. However, several memories allow us to emphasise «the creative power of women's discourse» (Raheja & Gold 1994: 24) in multiple processes through which intra- and interethnic relationships were constructed and contested.

For example, oral recollections of the process that led to the foundation of the Salamanga Mandir, still considered the main Hindu temple in Mozambique, show that various symbolic organisers of the female narratives were mobilised in contexts outside the *vrata Katha* practice:

«My *nana* [mother's father] had a salt business, he exploited salt-works various kilometres away from Salamanga. He also owned a *cantina* where he sold all kinds of things. [. . .]. He was a rich man and, because of this, became very proud. One day, as he was coming back from the river, he met an old man, with dark skin¹³ and a white loincloth. And that man told him: "I am a special person". Instead of respecting him, my *nana* asked for proof. Immediately, Mahatma Bapa shook a tree, and gold fell from it. *Nana* was not impressed. [. . .]. When they reached the *cantina*, my *nanima* was giving out water and sugar to people. Mahatma Bapa took the bowl from her and gave to everyone. That water never ran out. It was then that my *nana* knelt down before him and said: "I am no longer going to be proud. I don't want any more money. I want to help others". So Mahatma Bapa gave him two magic words. One to help pregnant ladies who cannot give birth; the other, to take away snake poison. But he also told him: "You cannot keep this to yourself, you must give to others". [. . .]. Before he left, Mahatma Bapa told my *nana*: "I want to sit here"¹⁴».

¹¹ M . . . , housewife, *khania* caste, interviewed in Lisbon.

¹² L . . . , housewife, *fudamia* caste, interviewed in Lisbon.

¹³ According to several informants, Mahatma Bapa appeared in Salamanga as an African to test Hindu devotees.

¹⁴ A . . . , housewife, *fudamia* caste, interviewed in Lisbon.

By insisting upon the respect for the «foreigner», this and other versions of the same narrative accentuate a symbolic organiser which is frequently used in female narratives: a deity takes human appearance and uses cunning to test its devotees. At the same time, and in a similar way to multiple *vrata Katha*, they question impermeable power relations (in this case, those based on skin colour and economic power) and condemn the closure of the Hindu «we», underscoring that an opening to the «other» may be an accumulative source of power (the magic power to interfere in certain irregularities between life and death, for instance).

This belief in the divine power to delude facilitated the encounter with the ethnic «other», who was only illusorily seen as alien, and encouraged many Hindus to adopt a «less arrogant»¹⁵ posture towards the African population than that of the small trader of Portuguese origin. In practice, the different posture worked as a «marketing strategy»¹⁶, since it led Mozambican miners and farmers to prefer the Hindu traders to ask for credit or barter cashew nuts, cotton and other farm products for basic goods, *capulanas* and wine.

Hierarchical Alterity is a Mere Illusion

No quantitative data exist on the gender distribution of possessive phenomena in the regions of origin of these migrants. However, many informants recall that, in Mozambique, the people in whom «the goddess and the spirits of the *pitru* [ancestors] descended» were mainly women (of various castes and socio-economic statuses). Most men explained this by stating that «the ladies were more religious, purer than men»¹⁷; however, a number of men (displaying ambivalence rather than scepticism) also added that possession is a mere human emotional state, to which women, «warmer» and «less-self controlled»¹⁸, are particularly prone. On their part, most migrant women emphasised the superhuman aspect: «we cannot do anything for Her to come or not to come. It is only *Mataji* (general name of the Hindu mother goddess) who may decide»¹⁹.

«To enter someone's body», «to descend», «to go through», «to unite with», «to mount», etc., were expressions frequently used to refer to possession. Being possessed generally includes shaking, swaying, and losing one's balance, all of which conveys the idea of instability and identity loss. The shaking was the first expression that the possessing power had already been incorporated, that subsequent actions and words no longer belonged to the subject, that they would be inaccessible to her conscience after the possession spell. Disjointed gestures, falling to the floor, brusque head movements, certain dance steps, the expression of excitement, anger, affliction, torment, etc., were codified signs that elicited from the audience equally codified reactions to «help open the body» (for instance, untying the hair), so that the being could «emerge» and «speak». Possession performances therefore implied the body as a permeable site where the «other» could take over the «self» for the duration of trance.

¹⁵ K . . . , economist, *vanja* caste, interviewed in Maputo.

¹⁶ M . . . , judicial consultant, *fidamia* caste, interviewed in Maputo.

¹⁷ T . . . , businessman, *suthar* caste, interviewed in Lisbon.

¹⁸ V . . . , businessman, *lohana* caste, interviewed in Lisbon.

¹⁹ J . . . , housewife, *lohana* caste, interviewed in Lisbon.

One of the most interesting aspects of female possession in Mozambique was the way in which it renegotiated the taken-for-grantedness of certain power relations. The experience of possession interfered with virtually every relationship of the women involved: husbands, family members, other people of the same or different castes, ancestors, demons, goddesses, etc. By abstaining from sexual intercourse, imposing rigorous fasts and expecting of all those present (including hierarchically «superior» family members) respectful and subordinated behaviour during the trance, a repeated possession experience transformed the relationships with both «near» and «distant» family members. In parallel, when used for therapeutic reasons or performed at several Hindu rituals, possession fashioned ongoing relationships between the possessed women and their clients that cut across gender, caste, economic class, and intra-religious differences and hierarchies.

«Our life began going badly, and I was praying the *Ma* a lot. One day, I noticed that someone had placed an earring, like this one, in the *mandir*. [. . .]. When we performed the *havan*, Ambá *Ma* came into my body and said that I was responsible for the miracle of the earring. [. . .]. I began suffering very much. The *Ma* asked me to stop eating meat, forbade alcoholic drinks from entering my home. My husband and family did not believe, they called me a liar and worse. They said I had another man, because when *Ma* comes, you cannot have intercourse. He drank alcohol in the home, ate meat, forced me to cook meat, he even dragged the gas cooker in our bedroom and cooked in there [. . .]. When we came to Portugal, he forbade me from performing *arti* in the house because many came to ask for help, each time more people would show up, [. . .] from here, from other places. But I couldn't avoid it. When you have *Ma* in you, you cannot deny your help»²⁰.

«My husband forced me to have intercourse, *Mataji* did not like it, and I ended up suffering. [. . .] My mother-in-law put those things into his head. Who has ever heard of a husband kneeling before his wife? But at those times, it's not me. It's the *Ma*. [. . .] One day, the wife of my husband's boss, a rich *lohana* who owned various warehouses, called me. She had much faith in the *Ma*, and she was healed. [. . .]. Only after that my mother-in-law and my sisters-in-law believed»²¹.

On the other hand, by admitting the possibility that Hindus could be possessed by Muslim, Catholic and even African spirits and/or deities, and at the same time the possibility that Hindu spirits and/or deities may manifest themselves in «whites» and «blacks», possession devotees do not merely reject the existence of a relation of discontinuity between past and present, between the space that is perceived by the senses and that which cannot be perceived; they also insist upon the statement that human alterity is a mere illusion. By redefining the otherness of the other, also in Mozambique, possession suggested an alternative to the binary paradigm for the representation of inter-ethnic relations.

«Many Indians went to an African healer, asked him to see, in shells, in little bones, to know why something bad happened to them. He begins trembling too, moving this and that way, it is no longer him, it is someone else speaking. [. . .]. Many times,

²⁰ M. . . , housewife, *fudamia* caste, *pujari* of Ambá Mandir, interviewed in Lisbon and Diu.

²¹ L. . . , housewife, *fudamiá* caste, interviewed in Lisbon and Maputo.

the healer spoke the name of the *pitrus* [Hindu ancestors], said that they were dissatisfied with something or other, or that a black spirit entered the body of an Indian to cause suffering . . . »²².

As dramatic resources for the redefinition and renegotiation of identity boundaries and hierarchisations, *vrata Katha* rituals and possession are not totally independent of many other practices central to the Hindu-Gujarati repertoire, namely, those that involve magic. The very *vrata Katha* repertory chosen denoted a degree of tension between the miraculous powers obtained through the devotion and powers acquired by the way of black magic. Not infrequently, some of the possessed women were also accused of witchcraft (*jadu*). It is not therefore surprising that some of the idioms of Indian witchcraft were recreated in migratory context.

Inter-ethnic Managements of Witchcraft

In Mozambique, as in many other areas of Southern Africa (Niehaus 2001), envy was believed to be a significant driving force behind processes of malignant influence. The recognition, on the part of Hindus, of the role that this had in local witchcraft contributed to the strengthening of certain bases of *jadu*, namely, the explanation of inexplicable suffering as magical aggression resulting from situations of inequality in which the sufferers themselves had hurt the dignity of others.

Together with the holy message transmitted by Mahatma Bapa, this belief imposed the observance of certain rules of reciprocity in the relationship with the «other», and indeed appears to have been successful in avoiding processes of rejection and humiliation of Mozambican miners and farmers. Despite its defensive dimension, in practice, it allowed Hindu migrants to draw local customers and, as a consequence, to improve their own economic welfare.

«My family is still suffering, even now, because of the envy of the blacks. My father and my uncles worked in the bush, in Makuzi, 60 kilometres from Quelimane. [. . .]. And they started making lots of money . . . You cannot cause another's envy»²³.

Mozambican witchcraft was quickly recognised as being «stronger» than Indian *jadu*. This explains why, in situations of crisis, many Hindus resorted to local diviners/healers/witches. According to a considerable number of informants, their power to interfere in the processes of evil influence was mainly due to the fact that they were «nearer» to «impure», «unsatisfied» and/or evil spirits, independently of the race, religion and ethnic group these had belonged to in life. In this sense, their power may be seen as the equivalent of the power of untouchables, to whom Gujarati Hindus also attribute similar magical powers as well as varied abilities in the field of exorcism.

The recourse to African witchcraft was represented as an incorporation of an inferior level (in comparison to the Hindu traditions of reference) and did not result in the elimination of inter-ethnic hierarchies; it did however keep the relation between Indian and African from taking the form of a binary, irreversibly determined opposition.

²² A . . . , housewife, *vanya* caste, living in Inhambane, interviewed in Maputo and Diu.

²³ D . . . , factory worker, *fidamia* caste, interviewed in Wembley, London.

Women's «Little Traditions» as Resistance Strategies against Brahmanisation in Postcolonial Migratory Contexts

After arriving in Portugal, Gujarati Hindus began a gradual reconstruction of their traditions as they had been reconstituted in Mozambique. The *Amba mandir*, dedicated to the Hindu mother goddess, was the first Hindu temple to be built, in the mid-eighties, in the degraded periphery of Lisbon. It resulted from the personal initiative of a woman of *fudamiá* caste who, as had happened in Mozambique, periodically enters into a state of possession. She assigned the *mandir* a number of functions, which it has maintained to this day: it is a general temple for the main celebrations of the «Great tradition» (Vaishnavite and Shaivite, led by a «generic Brahman») and also the preferred site for diagnosis and healing.

Intra-Community Uses of Possession

Since the late nineties, the inauguration of a very large space of worship – the Radha Krishna Mandir, financed by the Portuguese Hindu community – coincided with the emergence of an expansionistic and hierarchising strategy implemented by a subgroup (mainly of *lohana* caste) that tried to refashion collective Hindu performances according to the Brahmanic standard, bringing Brahman specialists from Gujarat, complexifying Brahmanic practices and ritual consumption requirements, while disqualifying certain religious practices associated with popular Hinduism²⁴. Restricting the participation of poorer Hindus in the ceremonies carried out in the large temple and occupying the position of privileged consumers of the new Brahmanic ways, the current direction catalysed intra-group identity tensions.

As a reaction, a number of *lohanas* disassociated themselves from the project of construction of the large temple and allied themselves with a significant part of Diu Hindus in order to resist this expansionistic and hierarchising strategy. The group created a sub-association within the community, led by a more heterogeneous and representative committee that upholds an ideal of «community» whereby all Hindus may receive equal treatment. As a counterpart to the attempt towards vaishnavite brahmanisation carried out by the current leadership, the association has been investing in a complementary religious orientation and raising funds for the construction of a second *mandir*, dedicated to Lord Shiva.

In addition, female possession performances – as a model of the relation between «self» and «other» and, simultaneously, of social relations and power dynamics – have been a crucial obstacle to the consolidation of any rigid and/or irreversible identity oppositions within the Hindu community in Portugal. In fact, when confronted with the very first attempt to brahmanise Portuguese Hindus, which included the repression and de-sacralisation of possession (carried out during the *navaratri*

²⁴ Most recent anthropological studies on the reconstruction of Hinduism outside the Indian subcontinent emphasise that it tends to become homogenised, standardised or to result in a more universal definition, parallel to some kind of brahmanisation. Re-traditionalisation, ritual complexification and conspicuous consumption are also significant trends that emerge from a relevant body of literature.

festival of 1999 by a recently-arrived Brahman theologian), a number of women from the Hindu socio-economic elite organised a strategy of resistance.

During subsequent *navaratri* festivals, they convinced many of the regular worshippers of the Radha-Krishna to attend rival spaces of worship where a number of possessed women (of *lohana*, *vanya*, *khania*, *suthar*, *fudamia* but also of brahman caste) never before seen at the main ceremonies gathered, thus publicly validating the sacred character of possession before an also unprecedented number of worshippers (belonging to all castes and different socio-economic statuses). In the words of one of the leaders of the movement, the Hindu Goddess is related «either with Shiva and Vishnu»; «everybody can touch her, asking for help and receive its fruits»; «as a mother, She places all humans on the same level»²⁵, refusing the existence of any border, distinction and identity valuation that may operate irreversible hierarchical distinctions between her devotees.

Despite what is maintained by the available bibliography (Assayag & Tarabout 1999), according to which Hindu elites tend to underrate possession in identity terms (in comparison both to Brahmanic «orthopraxy», and reformist movements), the events of the most recent *navaratri* festivals in Portugal clearly show that possession may also be mobilised in processes of redefinition and transformation of the elites themselves.

«Portugal now also Exports Young Hindu Women»: from Devaluation to Veiled Admiration

Portuguese-speaking Hindus who emigrated from Portugal to the United Kingdom tend to concentrate in certain areas of Greater London and in Leicester, where many Gujarati Indians from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, or from India have settled since the late 1960s and 1970s. Many *patels* and some *lohanas* who live in the same areas define themselves as *vaishnava*, followers of the *Sanatan Dharm*, or of a *sampradaya* [religious sect] of vaishnavite orientation, usually *Pushtimargi* or *Swaminarayan* (Tambis-Lyche 1972, Michaelson 1983, Dwyer 1994, Lyon & West 1995, among others); they therefore believe that a «huge gap» separates them from the «Portuguese Indians» or «Portuguesiá»:

«They believe in black magic. [. . .]. Another important difference is that, for them, the Goddess is paramount. They even believe that the Goddess can appear in human form and perform miracles. In this community, the majority of Hindus are devotees of Krishna»²⁶.

As a response to these representations, the majority of Portuguese Hindus offered the counter-argument that «the Goddess is also what matters most to many *patels* and *lohanas*», and that they even know many «*bhuvvi*» (possessed women) of *lohana* and *patel* caste, at the feet of which many kneel during *navaratri*. They add that devotion to earthly forms of the Mother Goddess «has nothing to do with belonging to an inferior caste», or with age, sex, socio-economic position or educational qualifications. This last argument leads many *patels* and *lohanas* to lay an empha-

²⁵ P . . ., housewife, *lohana* caste, interviewed in Lisbon.

²⁶ V . . ., *vania* caste, leader of the Brent Indian Association (Wembley) interviewed in London.

sis on other differences (socio-economic and educational, for example) that separate them from the Portuguese Indians instead. As one of the best-known British Indian businessmen told us: «even those who say they do not believe in the *Mataji ave* [“the Goddess comes”] business, they are Hindus after all, and Hindus believe that any human can be a god, and that any god can have a human form»²⁷.

Similarly, and to counter the accusation that «they believe in black magic», the reaction of Portuguese Hindus is peremptory. «You only have to look and see that even they [British Gujarati Hindus] always use a necklace or a bracelet with an amulet, to avoid the evil eye»²⁸. Ads in the best-selling magazines among British Hindus are also revealing: «If they don’t believe, then why is it that their magazines are full of *Pandits Maharajes* offering their services to guard against black magic and evil spirits, or Professors *Gadhiá* and such, who possess healing powers?»²⁹ The fact that a number of British Hindus spontaneously offered the following statements seems also to confirm the importance of *jadu* in their daily lives: «I avoid speaking to Portuguese Indians. There’s always *najar* [the evil eye]. This is why I avoid bringing luxury goods to the Ealing Road»³⁰ and «when I cross some of them, I begin to say the *Hanuman Chalissa*, they’re very strong words against *jadu*»³¹.

We should not however conclude that in the United Kingdom the women’s expressive traditions recreated in Mozambique and reconstructed in Portugal completely lost their identity effectiveness. If sometimes devalued in certain male and brahmanised sub-groups, they are still seen as an identity «quality», which is sought after by many families of the diasporic network of Gujarati Hindus and, particularly, by those who represent themselves as more Europeanised. As the editor of the most influential Gujarati magazine told us:

«Portugal now doesn’t export only Port wine. Now it also exports young women. And you know why? [. . .]. Because Portuguese Hindu girls are very beautiful [. . .] and more traditional. They respect the elders, observe religious tradition, and don’t just want to go out to dance and drink, like our girls do here. Over the past year alone, I went to several weddings in Portugal»³².

* * *

The idioms through which Portuguese-speaking Hindu women construct their own selves and the alternative conceptions of the social world that they communicate emphasize that identity boundaries and hierarchisations are only apparently intrinsic, fixed or irreversible. In Mozambique, as they remember it, the «black man was discriminated by all social strata. Then came the Indians, who occupied the central stratum. [. . .]. The domination of the whites was a given»³³. Despite this,

²⁷ P . . . , *patel* caste, businessman, interviewed in London.

²⁸ L . . . , *khania* caste, factory worker, interviewed in Alperton, London.

²⁹ H . . . , *khania* caste, factory worker, interviewed in Harrow, London.

³⁰ K . . . , *lohana* caste, housewife, interviewed in Wembley, London.

³¹ G . . . , *lohana* caste, businessman, interviewed in Ealing Road, London.

³² P . . . , *patel* caste, editor of *Gujarat Samachar*, interviewed in London.

³³ M . . . , *fudamia* caste, interviewed in Lisbon and Maputo.

the hierarchic construction that Hindu wives/mothers transmitted to the following generations attributed to Africans «superior» skills, due to their privileged connection both to local spirits, and to the ancestral spirits of Indians and whites. Moreover, they too questioned the «unquestionable» domination of the white stratum. Recognised by the Portuguese authorities, the Hindu power to produce within the dominant stratum the illusion of sameness and subordination, while at the same time retaining the power to preserve an impenetrable and irreducible alterity³⁴, frustrated one of the most significant objectives of Portuguese colonial domination: that of total appropriation of the «other».

The power of these idioms was not merely imaginary; rather, they interacted with everyday realities. The condemnation of mercantile objectivity and opportunism in the relation with Mozambican farmers and miners enabled the Hindu population to become progressively richer. This enabled the preservation of a different identity, an opening towards Portuguese cultural and identity ecology, and the more or less advantageous manipulation of colonial ambivalence regarding the Indian presence in Mozambique.

The effectiveness of women's expressive traditions in the renegotiation of intra-ethnic power dynamics became increasingly visible in the two post-colonial migratory contexts of Portuguese-speaking Hindus. The women's manipulation of divine possession has been a noteworthy resistance strategy against the consolidation of rigid and/or irreversible identity oppositions within the Hindu community in Portugal. In the United Kingdom, the reservoir of identity knowledge accumulated in Mozambique and Portugal is still being mobilised advantageously in the real and imagined dialogue with other networks of the Hindu-Gujarati diaspora. The very «lag» in the europeanization of Portuguese Hindu women³⁵ becomes an admirable identity trait.

As Appadurai has recently argued (1998), ethnic violence produces a sort of «dead certainty», that is, constitutes a mode of resolution of uncertainty with respect to identities created by the flows of weapons, refugees and immigrants, trade, information and modern taxonomies which are characteristic of globalization. However, it may not be conceived as the only cultural strategy to negotiate with the stranger, the «other». Proposing an anti-binarising conception according to which the ethnic «other» cannot be absolutised as a stranger, Hindu women's «Little traditions» suggest alternative solutions to managing identity uncertainty that diverge from ethnic annihilation. It is not surprising that our meetings were also informed by the incorporative, metamorphic and porous nature of «self»/«other» relation:

³⁴ The impossibility of the total assimilation of the Hindu population was referred by the Governor General of Mozambique himself in several speeches, namely at the inauguration of the Hindu Samaj in Lourenço Marques on 31st July 1938 (cf. *Lourenço Marques Guardian*, 2 Aug. 1938).

³⁵ This type of management of Hindu women returns us to the uses that Chatterjee points to colonialist and nationalist discourses. It also structured the colonial identity debates between Hindus settled in the British colonies of East Africa and those established in Mozambique and was used to create a hierarchical differentiation between British colonisers (perceived as «central» and «European») and the Portuguese colonisers (described as «peripheric» and «underdeveloped») (BASTOS & BASTOS 2005).

«The impression I got on reading my field diaries is that Laxmi had exaggerated in the number of *vrats* during that month. She got up early to spill milk and water under the *pipal*, fasted all day along, spent the afternoons praying and singing at the public shrine, organised the pilgrimages and the ritual female baths at the beach in Costa da Caparica, offering me the raw fruits she had to eat. One day, while we were singing the final *arti*, Laxmi started trembling, her face frowned, apparently expressing grief. She started crying very softly. Some women untied her hair, sprinkling her with water. They kneeled down before her and respectfully passed their hands over the edging of her sari. With a tearful face, Laxmi reacted, touching them on their heads with both hands. Some minutes later, she returned to normal, somewhat dizzy. [. . .]. In the days that followed, she kept her fast and sexual abstinence, increased her visits to the temple and just said to me “I cannot remember anything”, “when I get like that, I’m not me”, “it is *Ma* who comes into my body”. Only some months later did she return to this subject. She told me that her devotion «had been fruitful»: “At that time, I was so desperate. I had no money. My husband was unemployed. You wanted to pay for Gujarati lessons. You wanted to know about our religion. But I always refused. I could not receive money for teaching you. *Ma* brought you to test me”. After feeling her reserved acceptance (because of my potential envious evil eye), then being allowed to enter her kitchen in the quality of a daughter-in-law (an ambiguous position within family and lineage groups), the inter-subjectivity with Laxmi gave me a last complementary role of an earthly character acting under *maya* to test Hindu women in critical moments»³⁶.

I cannot predict the future. But I do believe that Hindu women’s expressive traditions will continue to transmit knowledge upon identity and help the emerging generations to deal with new and changeable migratory power dynamics.

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³⁶ Quotation from field diary, Lisbon.

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