Two Statues and a Living Legend - Reminders of Slavery

by

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Slavery, as conducted from the 16th to 18th centuries, has been replaced in our modern day and age by a different kind of forced labour. The United Nations International Labour Organization (ILO) believes that some 32 billion dollars are generated worldwide every year by forced labour, making it one of the most lucrative criminal activities in the world. But let us go back in time and talk about human beings who were greatly affected by the slave trade both in Africa and in Portugal.

Statue of Queen Njinga in Luanda

Statue to the Marquess de Sá da Bandeira

Two statues draw our attention to the subject of slavery today: one represents a massive woman, Queen Njinga **(1)**, seen standing proudly on a pedestal, in Linaxixe square, in Luanda, Angola. The second, closer to home, represents Bernardo de Sá Nogueira de Figueiredo, the first Marquess de Sá da Bandeira. **(2)** As for the Living Legend, read on and you shall discover more below.

Cultivating Wealth and Power

Before the slave trade came into being, the Portuguese had been intent on taking over from the Arabs the spice route from India. This started with Henry the Navigator's endeavours in 1460. Once the spice and gold trades had been largely lost to new competitors from Holland, England and others, followed by King Sebastian's ill-fated crusade in 1578, the focus for the Portuguese turned to Africa and slave trading. This was seen as a lucrative way of providing revenues, political power and wealth to individuals who would make money by trading the commodities produced by slavery, allowing them to secure social or political positions and to determine the very fate of nations through their trading. After the abolition of slavery by England and Portugal, the slave traders focussed more on "clients" in other countries, where slavery had not yet been abolished, such as Brazil and USA. **(3)**

Trading Human Cargo

History tells us that the first to trade slaves were the Arabs and then the Asians. Prior to transatlantic slavery, Arabs, Africans and Europeans had been trading people across the Mediterranean for centuries. Africans were selling their own people, who were often prisoners of war. Portuguese involvement with transatlantic slavery probably began in 1619 when the São João Bautista sailed across the Atlantic Ocean with a hull full of human cargo: namely captive Africans from Angola. The men, women and children, most likely from the kingdoms of Ndongo and Kongo, endured the horrific journey, bound for a life of enslavement in Mexico. Almost half the captives had died by the time the ship was seized by two English pirate ships that same year; those who had survived were taken to Point Comfort, a port near Jamestown, the capital of the English colony of Virginia, which the Virginia Company of London had established twelve years earlier. There it was reported that in August 1619, a "Dutch Man of War" arrived in the colony and *"brought not anything but 20 and odd Negroes, which the governor and cape merchant bought for victuals.*" The Africans were most likely put to work in the tobacco fields that had recently been established in the area.

Prior to the transatlantic trade enslavement had not been based on race. The transatlantic slave trade introduced a system of slavery that was a commercial enterprise, race-related and based on a hereditary principles (traders handed down the business from father to son; slaves were forced into captivity and were owned in *"family clusters"*). Enslaved people were seen not as people at all but *as commodities* to be bought, sold and exploited. Though people of African descent — free and enslaved — had been present in North America as early as the 1500s, the sale of the "*20 and odd African people*" set the course for what would become slavery as we read about it today.

In the 15th century, the Roman Catholic Church had divided the world in half, granting Portugal a monopoly on trade in West Africa and granting Spain the right to colonize the New World in its quest for land and gold. Pope Nicholas V issued the *Romanus Pontifex* of 1455, which affirmed Portugal's exclusive rights to territories it claimed along the West African coast and the trade from those areas. It granted the right to invade, plunder and *"reduce their persons to perpetual slavery."* Queen Isabella of Spain, on the other hand, invested in exploration by Christopher Columbus to increase her wealth and ultimately rejected the enslavement of the indigenous people, claiming that they were to be Spanish subjects. Spain did, however, authorize the direct shipment of captive Africans to the Spanish colonies in the Americas. Eventually other European nation-states — Holland, France, Denmark and England — seeking similar economic and geopolitical power – joined in the trade, exchanging goods and people along the West African coast.

The Dynamics of the Slave Trade.

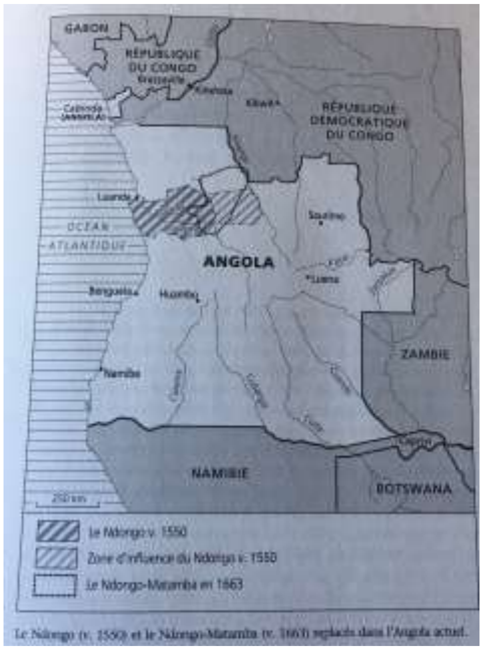
So, put in a nutshell, as land could not be legally owned in Africa, slaves were the only "private-wealth commodity" that could be bought, captured, sold, or bartered. The slaves required by Europeans or Americans altered social interactions within Africa itself, even though intra-African slavery had previously existed. Merchandise such as alcohol, guns, trinkets and horses supplied to tribal leaders intensified local wars as tribes competed to make sure that they had enough slaves to maintain their status and serve as *"bargaining-chips"*. Raids to capture slaves created ever-growing insecurity within Africa and the slave trade reduced the number of inhabitants available work the land. Many Africans who were not *"deported"* often moved tothe coast under the protection of the Europeans, working for them as agents or slave-drivers on local plantations held by these same foreigners who were both Church and lay people **(4).**

For the Portuguese sea captains and invaders in West Africa who had not found the gold and silver mines that they had promised to requisition for the Portuguese crown, it became a vital necessity to centre their activities around lucrative slave trading. At that time there were no commodities such as cocoa, which was not grown in the region until the 19th century. So, slave trading it had to be.

Slavery had its own language, "a *crioulo português"*, a kind of lingua franca used for commerce in all the areas where investors, traders, slaves and new owners and, subsequently, governments interacted. *Lançados* or *tangomaus* (Portuguese men gone native, which was forbidden by the Catholic Church) played an important role in keeping this coded communication alive for centuries.

The Life and Myth of Queen Njinga

Between 1575 and 1578, some 50,000 Africans were deported from Ndongo in Angola to Brazil. Queen Njinga of Ndongo played her role in this ignominious trade. She was a totally intrepid character who fought wars as fearlessly as any man, out of keeping with most African women of her time. But at the same time, she traded slaves, drank the blood of her enemies, was a self-confessed cannibal and kept harems of men and women. And, while professing to be a fervent Christian, she nevertheless took part in the feasts and festivals of the Mbundu pagan tradition. In Queen Njinga's world, there was certainly the well-known notion of “us” and “them” - as defined by the European codes of the times – but, more important still, for this amazing woman and for those involved in the slave trade, the key division was between “being free” and “being enslaved”.



Le Ndongo (v. 1550) et le Ndongo-Matamba (v. 1663) replacés dans l'Angola actuel.

Map of Angola showing the areas controlled by the Ndongo

In 2002, a statue of Queen Njinga (1582 -1663) was unveiled in Luanda, the capital of Angola, where she is seen as an emblem of resistance and courage. But she did not oppose slavery: she used the need of the Portuguese for slaves to better her own lot when ruling her kingdom as an absolute monarch, protected more often than not by the Portuguese invaders and/or by the Jesuits or other Priests who came to Africa to bring the “True Faith” to the pagan nations that they had invaded and overrun for commercial reasons.

By the time of her death in 1663, she had made peace with Portugal. Matamba - her new kingdom - traded slaves with Portugal on an equal, even *amicable* - if such a word dare be used - footing. The story of Queen Njinga **(5)** therefore invites us to reassess our understanding of political power, sovereignty, war and resistance in 17th century Africa. Hers was a struggle for power not unlike European monarchic power struggles of the time, in which she used slavery as a trading commodity that endeared her to her fellow tribesmen, to the Portuguese and, later, to the Dutch. Adopting the Christian faith, calling herself Njinga-Ana and befriending those with access to slaves, she would, if threatened, turn to bloody resistance to keep her power. She was truly an exceptional woman.

Queen Njinga's biographies, the first written in 1669 by Antonio de Gaeta, followed by one by Antonio Cavazzi, both Capuchin monks who gave praise to themselves for having brought “barbaric Queen Njinga” into the True Faith, Catholicism, tell us much about slavery practised both as a *“way-of-life”* between tribes in Africa itself and a “*commodity*” much in demand by Europeans. A third book by the soldier-historian, Antonio de Oliveira de Cadornega, written as a first-hand witness between 1670-1681, was only published in 1940. This reckless Queen has always fascinated authors including, in 1795, the Marquess de Sade who used “Black Queen Zinga's” life “*to illustrate the terrible things that can happen when under the influence of sex!”* **(6)**

A Brazilian charm trinket with the black, defiant hand of Queen Njinga

In the early 1600s, the Portuguese exported each year between 10,000 and 13,000 slaves from Angola alone. The number increased when they allied themselves with the flesh-eating Imbangala warriors, a tribe to which Queen Njinga had ingratiated herself. In 1617, despite the Ndongo Kingdom being in a sorry state and the slave trade figures being down by half, the new Portuguese governor decided to link together Angola and Mozambique to create the all-too-famous *"cor de rosa"* map of Portuguese possessions in Africa. He successfully rounded up 55,000 Mbundu within a few weeks, with Queen Njinga's help, and herded them off to the Americas, simply to finance his enterprise in Africa.

Queen Njinga again took centre stage in 1627. *"Humour her, we must* **-** *All means are good",* writes Fernão de Sousa to his King in Lisbon "*to limit any damage to the Portuguese Crown and to safeguard the slave trade"***(7).** The decline in dues paid by local warlords **-** paid in slaves **-** created a very crippling financial situation for the Portuguese, at a time when Queen Njinga had decided to sign a treaty with the Dutch **(8)** to supply them with slaves to be exported to North-East Brazil, a land that the Dutch had seized from the Portuguese in 1630. **(9)** The alliance with the Dutch didn't last any longer than the treaties that Queen Njinga had signed with the Portuguese but Salvador Correia de Sá, the new Portuguese governor posted to Luanda in 1648 from Rio de Janeiro, was wise enough to encourage her, as she grew old, to distance herself from the Dutch, to think of her succession (she was determined to keep royal power within her family and to get her sister onto her throne), to think of her soul and to listen to the preaching of the Italian Capuchin monks and the Vatican. This, Queen Njinga-Ana did, conversing in Portuguese and in Latin in her letters to Rome, languages, we are told, that she had mastered to perfection. **(10)**

The abolition of slavery

Talking first and foremost about the abolition of the slave trade gives a false impression - it gives the Europeans a rather simplistic "moral" role. While some English-speakers (mainly the Quakers in England and America) did push for the full abolition of slavery, the topic is infinitely more complex than might be first thought. There were many different slave routes and many different types of slavery, all based on economic, cultural, political and racial interests.

Between 1761 and 1773 the Marquess of Pombal put an end to forced labour in Portugal. Regarding the Azores and Madeira, Sá da Bandeira, in a document dated 1840 titled *"O Trafico de Escravos e o bill de Lord Palmerston",* tells us that King D. José in 1773, *de facto* put an end to slavery in the islands, by then Portuguese possessions **(11)**.

The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was created in 1787 in London and the Slave Trade Act was passed in 1807. The British Parliament passed several Bills giving the Royal Navy the right to board and inspect all slave ships. Two treaties were signed between England and Portugal, on Commerce and Navigation and on Alliance and Friendship. The Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) played no small part in putting pressure on the European nations involved in the ignominious trade, England taking on the role of "*policeman of the world"*. And, in 1815, a bilateral agreement gave Portugal 300 thousand pounds sterling for loss of revenues from the slave trade. In 1817, an additional Convention gave the Royal Navy the right to search all ships sailing under the Portuguese flag. However, the Portuguese, on their own admission being champions of the famous *"para Inglês ver"*, buying time, duping their oldest ally, and procrastinating, refused to put an end to slavery. The first attempts to curb slavery legally actually created a massive increase in traffic from 1830 onwards because the powerful plantation owners in the New World feared an impending scarcity of cheap labour, the days of slavery being obviously numbered. **(12)**

In 1836 Sá da Bandeira promulgated a new law putting a stop to forced labour in the whole of the Portuguese territories, convinced - and trying to convince others - that the Colonies could still continue to develop and prosper with free labour instead of forced labour. Several newspapers (e.g. *O National* in Brazil) **(13**) got involved in this heated debate. Truth to tell, because of the vested interests of so many parties, slavery just continued. By law, the owners of plantations in Brazil were still allowed to import slaves from Angola. In 1845, the Aberdeen Bill was passed in London pertaining to the specific situation in Brazil. However, the slave trade was still creating vast fortunes in the 1850s and 1860s and it was only in 1888 that Brazil put a stop to slave labour imported from Africa. Waves of Portuguese, other European and Asian immigrants fleeing poverty and hoping for a better life in Brazil were now available to take on many of the tasks done previously by forced slave labour, mechanisation having taken over other tasks previously done by the slaves.

Figures of the Past

If we stand today in the Praça Dom Luís, in Lisbon, which has been restored to look like it was when designed in 1870, we find ourselves in front of the statue of the Marquês de Sá da Bandeira. Looking at the statue, we see that the bronze image at its foot represents a woman (Freedom) with a child. We are told that she is known as 'Preta Fernanda' / Black Fernanda, a former slave who arrived in Lisbon from Angola. Her eventful life included marrying the heir to the Jansen beer fortune, having an illegitimate child with D. Miguel, and running a brothel near Caís de Sodré. As for the Marquess himself, he was born in 1795 in Santarém, served as Prime Minister of Portugal five times and died in 1876, in Lisbon. He supported the Liberal party during the Liberal Wars (1828–1834). Briefly exiled in England in 1832-33, he returned to take part in the landing at Mindelo in July 1832, losing his right arm in the Siege of Porto. He never married but he had a legitimised daughter born out of wedlock. The city of Lubango, in Angola, was called Sá da Bandeira when the Angolan territory was under Portuguese rule.

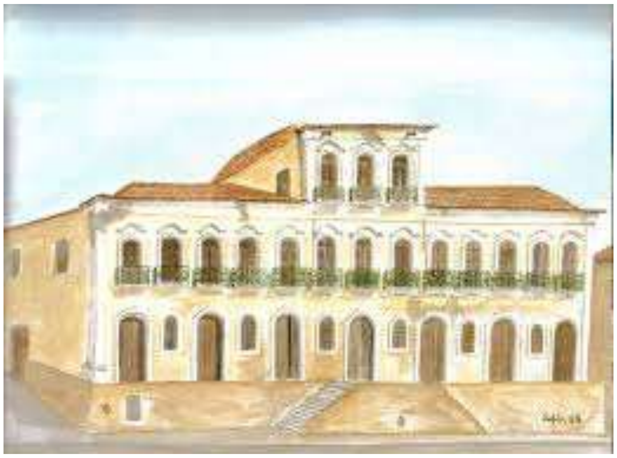
To quote his English contemporary, Lord Lytton de Bulwer who, in 1865, served in Lisbon where he concluded for the English Crown one of the major commercial treaties with Portugal mentioned above: *"The superior energy of Sá da Bandeira (was) necessary in Portugal to defeat the power of harmful interests thriving at the shadow of traffic and slavery (...); on this appreciation was based the respect felt by all for the man…."*. **(14)** At the Lisbon Military Academy, housed in the Palácio da Bemposta and recently visited by the BHS, some 3000 books, his artificial arm, his specially designed knife-and-fork kit, bells, stamps, sword, ear trumpet, documents and decorations are on display. These help us to better understand the motivation of a man hell-bent on putting an end to the notorious human trafficking that spanned centuries and enriched hundreds of families – some still known to us today.

As for Queen Njinga, today, in Luanda, on her pedestal, the statue is located in the actual square where so many slaves were deported across the seas in the 17th century. Previously, in 1937, the square had been adorned with a monument to the dead of WWI put up under Salazar. Then, in 1975, the MPLA government replaced it by an enormous armoured car, to celebrate the "victorious rebellion of the African people against their Portuguese conquerors". Her statue also stands, in our day and age, to promote gender equality but that is a whole different story, to be told another day.

Be it in Luanda or in Lisbon, do stop and have a look at the statues next time that you have a chance to do so. Give thought to the complexity of human relations, the intricacies of historical, political and personal intrigue and the complications of casting a story in stone, for generations to come.

The Legend

And last but not least, after reading the terrifying facts about slavery through the ages, let us stop in front of another building in Luanda: tourists and locals always like to loiter there, lowering their voices, pointing to the facade, half-hoping to see D. Ana Joaquina dos Santos e Silva (1788–1859), a Euro-African Nhara slave known in her time most respectfully and fearfully by Africans and Portuguese alike as *a Senhora dos Dembos*. The loiterers hope that D. Ana Joaquina, a slave trader in her own right, money lender and coffee and sugar plantation owner, will appear at one of the windows. Very successful in the booming clandestine slave trade between Angola and Brazil in the 1830s and 1840s when the ships by law could now only travel south of the Equator **(15)** she then set herself up in a three-story palace residence, a *palacete* in Luanda, as a successful banker, investor and financier and became known henceforth as the self-titled *"Baronesa de Bungo"*. Not as strange as it would seem because a good number of traders - very wealthy men - were given titles by the King or Queen of Portugal for *"services rendered"*. *Baronesa de Bungo* even managed to have a grandson educated in Coimbra and sent back to Africa in 1870 where, as a Canon of the Catholic Church, he became governor of the Bishopric of Angola and Congo.



The *Palacete* of D. Ana Joaquina dos Santos e Silva in Luanda

But maybe there is some justice in this world after all. Today the building has been reassigned to the Luanda Courts of Law - the original building built by D. Ana Joaquina was left in ruin but, by some quirk of fate, a petition signed by the people of Luanda demanded that the building be rebuilt as it was. There were, and still are, it is whispered, without making reference to her unbridled sexuality that evil tongues still wag about, underground passages from the house to the quays where the slaves were put on ships … And many will swear to the fact that the soul of D. Ana Joaquina, *Baronesa de Bungo*, never to be put to rest because her riches were so ill-gotten, will go on haunting the palace and grounds for all eternity.

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