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INVISIBLE TRAVELLERS AND VIRTUAL TRACKS: KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION IN *COLÓQUIOS DOS SIMPLES E DROGAS DE INDIA...* OF GARCIA DE ORTA (GOA, 1563)¹

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Abstract

In 1563 it was published in Goa the first modern book about the Asian natural world. Its author, Garcia de Orta (c.1500-1568), was a Portuguese physician who had lived in Asia for more than thirty years. The Colóquios dos simples contains an accurate description of some of the most important Oriental plants, drugs and spices. The information published by Orta was not only the result of his erudite readings and medical practices, but also of the experience of several field actors.

In fact, Orta was at the centre of a complex network of political elites, administrative officers, apothecaries, merchants, adventurers and other credible informants. These men were particularly able to answer to specific inquiries about the Asian natural resources. Even if their written reports had a limited circulation, they were available to Orta. Some of these informants were clearly referred by Orta in his Colloquies; others were only recently identified.

In this talk, I intend to follow the invisible tracks of some of the informants of Garcia de Orta. These virtual travels will show the different roles played by each field actor in the emerging of a new botanical knowledge about the Asian Portuguese Empire.

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Introductory notes

Colóquios dos simples was the first modern book on plants, spices and fruits from Asia edited by an European. It was published in Goa, in 1563. The text was written by Garcia de Orta, a Portuguese doctor who lived in India from 1534 to 1568. Each chapter of the book describes a virtual conversation between Orta and his interlocutor, a Spanish physician named Ruano. In the first colloquy, Orta presents to his readers his intellectual project. Recently arrived to Goa, the curious Ruano begins the dialogues saying to Orta:

"I came with a great desire to know about the medicinal drugs (such as are called the drugs of pharmacy in Portugal) and other medicines of this country, as well as fruit and spices. I further wish to learn their names in different languages, and the trees and the herbs which they are taken."³

Through the fifty-eight chapters, Orta attempts to reformulate the knowledge about the Asiatic natural world. Aware of the diversity of the printed, manuscript and oral information that circulated in ports, markets and hospitals, both in Europe and in Asia, the physician wants to re-establish coherence to this knowledge.

Starting off from the texts, Orta travels through testimonies which he has reinforced with experience. A new order is thus established through a wide-ranging and patient work of collecting and validating the news he valued as legitimate from each source.

In this article I want to illustrate Orta's *modus operandi* in his appropriation of novelties from the India's natural world. In order to establish himself as an authority, Garcia da Orta uses both his own experience and the testimony of people in whom he trusted.

Texts

Garcia de Orta appears to know profoundly a vast bibliography of medicine and botany⁴. He reveals to the reader his wide medical practice, which in 30 years of living in India has made him well acquainted with the uses of drugs unknown in Europe. If his trust in *bezoars*, *herbs of Malabar*, *teriacas*, *pau-de-cobra*, *pau-de-Malaca* or *raiz-da-China* demonstrates his openness to what is new⁵, it is also remarkable his ease in the therapeutic application of some products from the West Indies, such as the guaiaco which he already took with him in 1534 when he set off to Goa⁶.

The belief in these new products, unknown to the Latin, Greek and Arab authors, opened to Orta the perspective of becoming the new Authority from those faraway places. Nevertheless, if Orta's project did not fulfil the requisites of credibility demanded by such an epistemological change, his work would have resulted in a major failure. Therefore, Orta's methodology had to obey rules that were implicit to the minds of the community of wise men from which he came, and by which he wanted to be recognized.

That is why Orta never dispensed with the texts. Texts were, as often as possible, the departure point for each intervention. It was this knowledge, fixed in words, that Orta wanted to challenge. But Orta did not base himself solely on books. Besides a vast library, the physician had an important collection of precious stones and bezoars, as well as samples of seed, gums, resins, fruits and woods, which he exhibited to his curious visitors. In the same way, he kept an orchard which trees and vegetables which provided him with flavoursome fruits and with the materials for his therapeutic experiments⁷.

Orta only stands for what he has ensured that is true⁸. The novelty that he describes results, first and foremost, from his experience. The drugs which Orta saw or experimented were the ones he described more assuredly⁹.

Orta –who produced the drugs of the King¹⁰, who served in the courts of Cambay and of Deccan, who had close contact with rulers, religious men and civil servants posted to the Orient, who practiced medicine in a hospital in Goa, who

³ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India*, translated by Sir Clements Markham. Indian Medical Science Series n°5, Delhi. 1987, 1-2.

⁴ R. M. Loureiro, *Garcia de Orta e os Colóquios dos Simples: observações de um viajante sedentário*. Colóquio Internacional e interdisciplinar Alexander van Humboldt-Garcia de Orta: errâncias, investigações e diálogo de culturas. Lisboa, 2007, 135-145.

⁵ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 145.

⁶ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 379.

⁷ Teresa N. Carvalho, *Colóquios dos Simples de Garcia de Orta: conversas no interior da Índia*. Colóquio Internacional e interdisciplinar Alexander van Humboldt-Garcia de Orta: errâncias, investigações e diálogo de culturas. Lisboa, 2007, 165-174.

⁸ As Orta said to his interlocutor: "Do not try to frighten me with Dioscorides or Galen because I merely speak the truth and say what I know." Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 60.

⁹ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 125.

debated knowledge with apothecaries and physicians, who talked with merchants, travellers and *men worthy of faith*—validated a wide diversity of knowledge.

The merchant routes, the main ports of supply, the origin and destination of the drugs, prices, weights or measurements were information to which Orta attributed as great a value as to the names of the drugs, the description of the plants, their qualities or ways of application.

News that Pliny, Dioscorides or Avicenna had gathered and, since the arrival of the Portuguese to the East, were complemented and sometimes put in question, by reports like those of Duarte Barbosa or Tomé Pires, whose manuscripts had a wide circulation.

These Portuguese travellers were pragmatic observers. They witnessed, to a Europe *deprived* of novelties, an empiric approach to the Asian natural world. And yet, myth continued to be a part of the language they used. The possibility of the existence of the wonders of Pliny, Polo, Conti, Mandeville or Varthema remained in those lands that these men could not reach.

Orta tried to denounce some of their excesses, maintaining nevertheless the possibility of survival of some of the myths. His amazement, faced with the unexplained behaviour of the *árvore-triste*, of the *erva-mimosa* or of the tamarind leaves, lead him to simply register the mysterious, without searching for a justification.

On the other hand, the myth around the magical properties of the unicorn horn or of the *coco-das-maldivas* leaded him to caution. He promised in these instances to keep his readers informed on the progress of investigations. We find the same prudent approach on the disclosure of therapeutic virtues of some bezoars or of the hedgehog stone.

Context

The practices of a whole group are then gathered in *Colóquios dos Simples*. In his text Garcia da Orta includes reports of merchants, physicians, apothecaries, sovereigns or administrative officers. As I will show below, the type of information that each professional gives to the doctor depends on his own practical competence. In order to validate each testimony, Garcia da Orta associates the content of the news to the technical ability of his informants. He does not ask a merchant for his medical views, as he does not interrogate a lapidary on horses' prices.

The credibility of Orta's speech depends therefore on his judgement in analysing the news that are brought to him, as well as on the way in which he describes his own experience. He aims at confronting the past at every opportunity. His knowledge emerges not from a whim, nor from odd observations, not even from a simple pragmatic interest, but from a dialogue with Antiquity.

The Courts at Cambay and Deccan

Orta divulges in his work the information collected at the Courts of these exceptional interlocutors. He relates the veracity of the information to the high standard of their provenance.

At the Court at Cambay, Orta associates the strategic importance of the alliance established between the Sovereign and the Portuguese elites with the trust in the information brought by his Persian, Turkish and Arab doctors. The news about the *raiz-da-China*, secretly entrusted to him by a nobleman¹⁰; on the effects of the bangle, which Orta collected from Bahadur's secretary, or the confidences from the Sultan to Martim Afonso de Sousa¹², all this gathers greater relevance for being associated to the elites of Cambay. The success of the assault of the Capitan-General Martim Afonso de Sousa to Diu—an important achievement of the Portuguese political and commercial strategy—seems to go beyond the tactical value of the Portuguese presence at that fortress. The relationship that was established between the two politicians or between the Portuguese elites and the local courtiers manifested its richness also in the construction of a new knowledge.

The same mechanism was used to divulge the news collected at the court of the Deccan. Nizamoxa, the powerful and wise king, is introduced to us as our doctor's personal friend. The friendship between the two men is presented as an opportunity to reveal confidences.

¹⁰ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 152.

¹¹ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 379.

¹² Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 55.

But even if it seems that Orta might have cured Nizamoxa several times, who rewarded him with much wealth and amazing offers¹³, he still could not manage to get the sovereign to entrust him with the secret composition of *teriaca*¹⁴. The physician insistently questioned the king on the list of components of that magical medicine, and yet never managed to get more than an evasive reply.

Informants

Administrative officers and merchants

Information gathered from administrative officers seems to equally dispense with proof. Coje Percolim¹⁵, Jorge Gonçalves¹⁶, Diogo Pereira¹⁷, António Pessoa, António Galvão, Simão Alvares or Bastião Lobato are characters whose technical expertise or professional abilities seem sufficient to validate the information which they provide to Orta. The reliability of the novelty is therefore ensured by the credibility of these agents. The fact that this empirical information was shared with Orta by the King's officers reveals that the physician was close to the Portuguese elites in Goa and attests to the fact that Orta was part of the decision-making circles. In a two-way relationship, these men bring him information, expecting from Orta the validation of their knowledge as well as the eventual establishment of commercial networks.

But Orta also trusts merchants. He solicits information about the origins and prices of the drugs they trade. Perhaps as evidence of their friendship and appreciation, some offer him valuable gifts¹⁸, others confide him with their secrets¹⁹. We thus learn how to falsify camphor or how to discern true from fake gems. Still others confirm to Orta the whereabouts of cities they know, like Babylon²⁰ or Bukhara²¹. And yet not all of them manage to inspire the physician's trust. In fact he alerts his readers to the lies told by lapidaries²², as well as to the lack of scruples of the merchants in Diu's bazaar²³. The sharing of secrets is a transitional mechanism often used by Orta. Rather than keeping to himself these secrets, liable to be of interest to many, he shares them with his audiences. By teaching the reader to be able to distinguish fake from true, Orta gains the trust of those he addresses.

Apothecaries and doctors

Doctors and apothecaries were also privileged informants. The doctors of Cairo, Aleppo and Damascus with whom Orta has relationships provide him with reliable information resulting from their own experiences²⁴. The Arabs instruct him on the synonymy in the various regional languages. The Gentile doctors explain Orta the efficacy of some of the local folk medicines²⁵.

The apothecaries take a prominent place in the *Colóquios dos Simples*; because they made the drugs of Cambay, they had profound knowledge of their trade and were particularly trustworthy. In two separate chapters they are presented as close interlocutors to the Governors²⁶. Politicians seem to have greater trust on the pragmatism of these men on the ground and on their good sense in the relationship with local chiefs, rather than on the knowledge of academics. Nevertheless, Orta demonstrates that the knowledge of the apothecaries does not surpass his own.

¹³ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 68.

¹⁴ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 30.

¹⁵ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 7, 43.

¹⁶ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 282.

¹⁷ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 27.

¹⁸ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 388.

¹⁹ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 92.

²⁰ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 282.

²¹ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 42.

²² Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 355.

²³ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 433.

²⁴ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 110, 374.

²⁵ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 218, 223.

²⁶ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 108, 374.

'People worthy of faith'

Finally, 'people worthy of faith': this anonymous mass that Orta trusts, brings him samples, information and news from the regions through which they travel. It is through them that the doctor complements his information on the benjuy²⁷, cloves²⁸, camphor²⁹, *coco-das-maldivas*³⁰, *cubebas*³¹, *avacari*³², *coru*, *lacre*³³, incense³⁴ or the metallic aloe.

None of these men and women, pragmatic people and keen observers, bothers with the past of these drugs. Their knowledge focuses on the present and projects itself onto the future. They have little or no interest in comparing the sample with the text or with the drawing, and even less in understanding the intrinsic value that each plant has within the local culture. Taken out of their mystical context, each plant, stone and animal has merely the value of a drug or a panacea. To these pragmatic informants, only the empirical knowledge, the practical use, the price or the strategic potential are of interest.

Orta's credibility

Orta evokes multiple artefacts to affirm himself as an authority. The care he takes in the selection of credible informants and in the divulgation of plausible news makes his text believable.

The arrival of correspondence during the conversations between Orta and his interlocutor and the close vigilance paid to the comings and goings of ships at Goa's harbour reveal a physician who is deeply attentive and informed about all the news which arrive from the four corners of the World to the capital of the Portuguese Overseas Empire.

The doctor also needs to present himself as a witness of facts. Orta demonstrates his insertion in the Portuguese context. The military campaigns in which he accompanied Martim Afonso de Sousa allow him to visit the *Elefanta* Temple³⁵; the news which he collected about the second siege of Diu, or the statements he makes about the betrayal of Magalhães, all these give credibility to Orta before a Portuguese audience. The reliability of his account, and the exactitude of his historic discourse, legitimate the novelty of all that Orta saw, heard, experienced and enquired about the Asian natural world. His importance in the complex and fragile game of political interests is also made clear by the trust that he gained with the rulers of Deccan, Cambay and Cochin.

The news which Orta wants to validate is therefore supported by its clear insertion in the world of the Portuguese political elites... but not only in Goa, since the physician makes a clear reference to the property in Bombay which was given to him by the King³⁶.

To assert his own authority, Garcia de Orta aptly manages both scientific knowledge and personal relationships.

The relationship which Orta establishes with his readers presupposes complicity. By sharing in *Colóquios dos Simples* his secrets, Orta makes the reader his accomplice.

More than cyanide or hemlock, Orta feared the "idle people and the sharp tongues"³⁷. The physician hopes to obtain recognition of his authority through the sharing of his knowledge with his readers.

Final notes

During three decades of living in Asia, Garcia de Orta established invisible links that attached him to each of his informants. Written to legitimize his authority as a physician, *Colóquios dos Simples* is Garcia de Orta's greatest tribute to all those who, through those first decades of Portuguese presence in Asia, travelled through the lands of the Orient, enquiring,

²⁷ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 59.

²⁸ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 217.

²⁹ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 92.

³⁰ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 145.

³¹ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 170.

³² Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 233.

³³ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 241.

³⁴ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 448.

³⁵ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 444.

³⁶ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, 193.

³⁷ Garcia de Orta, *Colloquies*, Carta ao muy ilustre Senhor Martim Afonso de Sousa.

taking samples, taking risks, aiming to build a new body of knowledge about Asia's natural world. A utilitarian and empirical view which completes and corrects the truths for a long time established in text. In 1563, *Colóquios do Simples* relinquishes to Europe a plural knowledge, resulting from a new way of approaching reality.