

Reconstructing Iberian Involvement in the Commerce in People Around Maritime Asia: Between Challenges and Future Possibilities

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Abstract

International scholarly interest in the Portuguese engagement in slavery and slave trade took off in Portugal as well as in several Portuguese-speaking countries around the world in the 1980s and 1990s. This research trend became increasingly visible after the turn of the century. The findings have helped to open a debate about the role of the Portuguese in this horrific commerce, and the profits obtained through the commercialisation of the labour of enslaved people. The main focus of these debates has been on the transatlantic slave trade, while the role of the Portuguese in the commerce of enslaved and bonded peoples in the great Indian Ocean, the Asian Seas and the Pacific has remained absent. This chapter focuses on the Portuguese involvement in the commerce in humans in maritime Asia. It offers an overview of the existing scholarship and its main contributions. It moreover discusses the main limitations and gaps in the available literature. The text reflects on the main constraints imposed by the source materials, collections and archives, and explores methodological challenges. Finally, the chapter puts forward some core ideas for drafting an agenda for future research.

Keywords: Portuguese Empire, Maritime Asia, historiography, methodology, research agenda

1. Introduction

Portugal still has a long way to go in order to come to terms with the least positive legacies of its imperial past. Public discourse and memory remain dominated by narratives that continue to glorify the bravery of Portuguese maritime explorers and conquistadors and their deeds in the building of what is still portrayed and perpetuated as one of the largest and long-lasting European overseas empires. Most of the people that worked to build that empire, being enslaved, exiled, convicted or humble settlers are more often than not absent from collective imaginary. This public narrative of Portuguese Imperial History is also very silent about the role played by seamen, military, merchants, officials of the Crown, and religious men

in the capture, displacement, commercialisation, and exploitation of those people coerced to work in the construction of the 'glorious' Portuguese overseas empire, being they of African, Native American or Asian origin.

Academic research on European involvement in the trade in enslaved people started in the late 1960s and 1970s in the context of the first Independences of African and Asian countries and the pan-movements for Liberation and Self-determination.¹ The interest of international scholars on the Portuguese engagement in these activities can be traced back to these decades, but research about this topic only really took off in Portugal as well as in several Portuguese-speaking countries around the world in the 1980s and 1990s. This trend only became increasingly visible after the turn of the century.² The findings put forward by this scholarship have helped to open a debate about the role of the Portuguese in this horrific commerce, and the profits obtained through the commercialisation of the labour of enslaved people, or the output of their labour, either in the form of raw materials or processed goods.³ In recent years, this wind of change that started in academia back in the 1980s, has finally reached the public scrutiny, leading Portuguese public figures and politicians, including the President of the Republic of Portugal to directly intervene in this discussion.⁴

However, like in most European and American countries involved in these hideous activities, in Portugal the main focus of these debates has been on the

¹ See among many others: Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*; Miller, *Way of Death*; Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555*.

² Carreira, *O Tráfico de Escravos nos Rios de Guiné e Ilhas de Cabo Verde, 1810–1850*; Tinhorão, *Os Negros em Portugal*; Rosário Pimentel, *Viagem Ao Fundo das Consciências*; Marques, *Os Sons do Silêncio*; Lahon, *O Negro no Coração do Império*.

³ Alencastro, *O Trato dos Videntes*; Curto, *Álcool e Escravos*; Acioli Lopes, 'Negócio da Costa da Mina e Comércio Atlântico Tabaco, Açúcar, Ouro e Tráfico de Escravos – Pernambuco (1654–1760)'; Vieira Ribeiro, 'The Transatlantic Slave Trade to Bahia, 1582–1851'; Fonseca, *Escravos e Senhores na Lisboa Quinhentista*; Caldeira, *Escravos e Traficantes no Império Português*; Candido, *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World*; Menz, 'A Companhia de Pernambuco e Paraíba e o Funcionamento do Tráfico de Escravos Em Angola (1759–1775/80)', 45–76; Florentino, *Em Costas Negras*; Fonseca, 'A Historiografia Sobre os Escravos em Portugal', 191–218; Caldeira, *Escravos em Portugal*; Domingues da Silva, *The Atlantic Slave Trade from West Central Africa, 1780–1867*; Ribeiro da Silva, 'The Profits of the Portuguese–Brazilian Transatlantic Slave Trade'.

⁴ In the Portuguese media, see, for example: <https://cnnportugal.iol.pt/colonialismo/passado-colonial/marcelo-pediu-desculpas-pela-colonizacao-portugal-esta-a-assumir-a-sua-historia-imperial-e-violencias-associadas-ou-o-presidente-deixou-se-levar-na-onda/20230428/644aa659d34ef47b87534cd6>; <https://expresso.pt/politica/2024-04-24-marcelo-diz-que-temos-de-pagar-pela-escravatura-em-africa-e-massacres-coloniais-00c34700>; and <https://www.publico.pt/2024/04/24/politica/noticia/portugal-pagar-custos-escravatura-crimes-coloniais-marcelo-2088143>. In the Brazilian media, see for instance: <https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2024/04/24/portugal-tem-que-pagar-custos-de-escravacao-no-brasil-diz-presidente-do-pais.ghtml>; <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/internacional/noticia/2024-04/presidente-de-portugal-reconhece-culpa-por-escravacao-no-brasil>.

transatlantic slave trade carried out by merchants based either in Portugal, or other territories of the so-called Portuguese Atlantic, in particular Brazil, and Angola. The role of the Portuguese in the commerce of enslaved and bonded peoples in the great Indian Ocean, the Asian Seas and the Pacific remains absent from the public eye. The public silence about Portuguese engagement in the trade on enslaved and bonded peoples in maritime Asia contrasts with the efforts of several scholars in Portugal, Portuguese-speaking countries and internationally to unveil multiple facets of these Portuguese activities, which can also be traced back to the 1970s.

This chapter focuses, precisely, on the Portuguese involvement in the commerce of peoples (enslaved, bonded, coerced, dependent) in maritime Asia. Its goals are four-fold. Firstly, it aims to offer the readers an overview of the existing scholarship and its main contributions to the advancement of the study of this topic. Secondly, it discusses the main limitations and gaps in the available literature. Thirdly, it reflects on the main constraints imposed by the source materials, collections and archives. And to conclude, it explores some of the methodological challenges faced by researchers working on the study of this topic and puts forward some core ideas in an attempt to draft an agenda for future research.

2. Portuguese Trade in People in Maritime Asia: Taking Stock of the Scholarship

From as early as the 1970s, several scholars began to unveil the circumstances of Portuguese involvement in the procurement, transportation, commercialisation and exploitation of people, their labour power, and their labour output in the great Indian Ocean Rim, the East Asian seas and the Pacific.⁵ The first studies exploring this topic tended to focus on the connection between the Indian Ocean trade, to slave trade within the African continent, and to the transatlantic slave trade. Soon after, however, researchers started to gather evidence that attested to Portuguese involvement in commerce of enslaved peoples not only directed to the Atlantic, but also to the Indian Ocean, in particular the Islands, where cash-crop production took off in the 18th century, and the capitalist-American-like plantation model of exploitation based on colonial slavery societies first developed in this part of the world.⁶

⁵ Alpers, 'The Role of the Yao in the Development of Trade in East-Central Africa, 1698–c.1850'; Alpers, 'The French Slave Trade in East Africa (1721–1810)', pp. 80–124; Isaacman, *Mozambique*; Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement on the Zambesi*; Capela, *Escravidura*; Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves*; Capela, *As Burguesias Portuguesas e a Abolição do Tráfico da Escravidura, 1810–1842*; Alpers and Historical Association of Tanzania, *The East African Slave Trade*.

⁶ José Capela and Eduardo Medeiros, *O Tráfico de Escravos de Moçambique para as Ilhas do Índico, 1720–1902*; Campbell, 'Madagascar and Mozambique in the Slave Trade of the Western Indian Ocean 1800–1861'.

In the 1990s, research began to sketch a broader and more complex image of the Portuguese participation in the commerce of enslaved peoples in the Indian Ocean Rim, and further eastwards.⁷ This emerging body of literature started to put forward a couple of ideas that remain central to present-day studies of trade on enslaved and bonded peoples around maritime Asia. Firstly, some of these early studies pointed out that the Portuguese encountered pre-existent maritime commerce in enslaved peoples that preceded their arrival and their slaving activities in this vast region – with trade being controlled by different groups of merchants. Secondly, other works showed that the trading operations of the Portuguese involving enslaved peoples had to be carried out in pre-existing labour markets, using existing infra-structures and adjusting to pre-existing cultures of exchange. Thirdly, this early research offered evidence of the multiplicity of routes, their interconnect-edness and multi-directionality. Fourthly, several researchers emphasised that in the Indian Ocean Rim and eastwards, the Portuguese (as well as other Europeans) came across a wide variety of forms of coerced labour, which more often than not they labelled as ‘slavery’, ‘slaveries’ or ‘captivities’, using the European Roman Law-based legal framework, and social definitions of ‘slave’.⁸

If we consider several of the aspects listed above, there are some important differences in slaving operations in maritime Asia and the Atlantic Ocean. Firstly, the former was home to a web of maritime commerce that was far more complex than the Atlantic World. Secondly, in Asia, maritime slave trade, slave sea routes and markets existed prior to the arrival of the Europeans. This means that the Portuguese (as well as all other Europeans) had to face competition from merchants operating in local, regional and inter-regional sea-routes, as well as in the local slave markets to gain access to enslaved and bonded workers. In the Atlantic, in contrast, in the initial period of the developing slave trade, the Portuguese faced no competition in their maritime operations. Competition existed only in the access to African markets supplying enslaved people, which were also catering labour power to the inter-African and Saharan trade, heading to the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Middle East. These differences in terms of competition to access enslaved and coerced labour markets must have had an impact on the way the Portuguese (and other Europeans) developed their slaving operations in maritime Asia and the Atlantic. However, this is a question that has not been sufficiently explored by the scholarship, yet. Another important difference is the fact that the transatlantic slave trade deals only with transport of enslaved Africans, whereas

⁷ See for example: Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*.

⁸ See among others: Pinto, *Slavery in Portuguese India, 1510–1842*; Thomaz, *A Escravidão em Malaca no Século XVI*; Pinto, *Trade and Finance in Portuguese India*; Shirodkar, ‘Slavery in Coastal India’, pp. 30–41.

maritime Asian trade in people involved not only enslaved, but also people bonded, coerced and dependent in different and multiple ways.

The seeds planted by these first waves of scholarship on the Portuguese involvement in the maritime Asia trade in people started to be harvested in the first decades of the 21st century. The last two decades have witnessed the publication of a growing body of scholarship that explores some of the ideas mentioned earlier but has also raised new questions. This most recent wave of scholarly production has therefore brought to the fore a handful of core issues.

Some scholars began to explore the trans-regional and trans-oceanic dimension of the Portuguese (as well as Spanish) slaving activities in maritime Asia, namely by examining the transport of enslaved peoples in two of the major trans-oceanic routes operated by the Iberian Crowns (either directly or under concessions to private merchants): the Manila Galeon crossing the Pacific to connect Spanish colonial possessions in the Philippines and New Spain (present-day Mexico), and the Portuguese Indiaman sailing around the Cape of Good Hope, between Goa and Lisbon.⁹

Other researchers took preliminary steps to further reveal the complexity of slaving operations by expanding the chronological and geographical scope of the study of this topic. While some moved beyond the 18th century, others explored new areas beyond the Western Indian Ocean, and started to look in further detail into operations on both shores of the Indian sub-continent, as well as in the Southeast Asian and the East Asian Seas in the 16th and 17th century.¹⁰

Some of the studies that have come to light in recent years also clearly showed the multitude of actors involved in the Portuguese slave trade in maritime Asia. Like in the Iberian Atlantic, the slaving activities carried out by the Portuguese in this vast region involved people from all walks of life, including not only big, medium and small merchants, but also officials of the Portuguese Crown serving in local colonial governments and fleets, missionaries, regular clergymen, military, members of sailing crews, big, medium and small landowners, among others. Portuguese commercial operations at large (as well as from other Europeans merchants) appeared to have also counted on the collaboration of local merchants,

⁹ See among others: Seijas, 'The Portuguese Slave Trade to Spanish Manila: 1580–1640'; Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico*; Ribeiro da Silva, 'La traite des esclaves à Lisbonne durant la première moitié du XVIIIe siècle' pp. 303–339.

¹⁰ See among others: Hägerdal, 'The Slaves of Timor'; Fujitani, 'Sino-Portuguese Trafficking of Children during the Ming Dynasty', pp. 311–322; Manso and Sousa, 'Os Portugueses e o Comércio de Escravos nas Filipinas (1580–1600)', pp. 7–21; Harries, 'Middle Passages of the Southwest Indian Ocean', pp. 173–190; Harries, 'Slavery, Indenture and Migrant Labour'; Harries, 'Mozambique Island, Cape Town and the Organisation of the Slave Trade in the South-West Indian Ocean, c.1797–1807', pp. 409–427; Sousa, *The Portuguese Slave Trade in Early Modern Japan*; Hägerdal, 'Slaves and Slave Trade in the Timor Area', pp. 15–33.

credit providers, local crew members, and local authorities, from Arabs, to Indians, to Armenians, to Javanese, and Arakanese.¹¹

In this respect, there is a visible difference between slaving in maritime Asia and the Atlantic World. Research has certainly shown that local authorities and merchants (both big, and small) in Atlantic Africa collaborated with the Portuguese (and other European slave traders). There is equally evidence that Africans (enslaved, freed and free) were found serving in the Atlantic vessels engaged in slave trading. However, most of the operations concerning credit and the safeguarding of risks were in the hands of Europe-based merchants and entrepreneurs. Evidence suggests that this might have not always been the case in maritime Asia. This is, certainly, a question that needs to be further researched in direct connection with slaving operations (being carried out by the Portuguese or other Europeans).

Additionally, this new wave of scholarship on Portuguese participation in the commerce of enslaved and coerced peoples in maritime Asia is showing that this involvement was not only carried out by multiple historical actors, but also that these actors engaged in slaving operations in different ways and capacities. While some might have been involved solely with the out-fitting of ships or with the transportation of enslaved and bonded peoples, others might have been engaged in the commercialisation of their labour power. Whereas other individuals might have been more active in the commercialisation of the raw materials or processed goods extracted and/or produced by enslaved and bonded peoples.

This most recent historiography is also pointing out two other rather important aspects: i) the trans-imperial or cross-imperial character of Portuguese slave trading activities, and ii) the capacity to cater to the needs of local authorities and polities. This means that the Portuguese were not only procuring, transporting and commercialising enslaved and bonded people to cater to the labour demands of their own settlements and outposts in the *Estado da Índia*, but also to provide manpower to other European empires, in particular the Spanish, although there is also evidence of Portuguese trading people to Dutch and French territories. Equally important is the fact that the Portuguese were also transporting enslaved and bonded people for local rulers in the context of trade as well as in the context of warfare, like in the case of Arakan or in the context of the Imjin War.¹²

¹¹ See for instance: Machado, 'A Forgotten Corner of the Indian Ocean', pp. 17–32; Souza, *The Survival*; Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao*; Miyata, *Portuguese Intervention in the Manila Galleon Trade*; Van Dyke, 'Ambiguous Faces of the Canton Trade', pp. 21–42; Villamar, *Portuguese Merchants in the Manila Galleon System: 1565–1600*; Souza, *Portuguese, Dutch and Chinese in Maritime Asia, c.1585–1800*; Carreira, *Globalising Goa (1660–1820)*; Mukherjee, 'Portuguese Slave Ports in Bengal, 1500–1700,' pp. 215–236.

¹² See for instance: Charney, 'Arakan, Min Yazagyi, and the Portuguese'; Charney, 'Crisis and Reformation in a Maritime Kingdom of Southeast Asia', pp. 185–219; Yimprasert, 'The Portuguese in

The new body of scholarship on the Portuguese participation in the commerce of enslaved and bonded peoples in maritime Asia has also started to sketch a profile of the individuals that ended up enslaved, displaced, sold and exploited at the hands of the Portuguese merchants, either serving the interests of the Portuguese Crown, their own private interests, or the interests of third parties (being Europeans or not). This preliminary sketch is quite revealing pointing out not only the diverse geographical origin of peoples trapped in the Portuguese commercial webs in maritime Asia, but also their diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.¹³ More importantly, this scholarship is revealing that these people ended up being labelled as enslaved and entered the Portuguese maritime circuits in rather different circumstances. Some were captured at war, others were pawns for debts, many ended up in the slaving markets and trading circuits as punishment for a crime, others were tribute slaves, and there were also cases of free people that ended up being kidnapped or abducted and sold into slavery.¹⁴ Here, there are many parallels that can be established with the ways through which Africans also entered the Atlantic slave routes, and how Native Americans ended up enslaved at the hands of the Europeans in the Americas. But at the same time, there are also significant differences between commerce in people in the Atlantic and maritime Asia. While the former tends to be dominated mainly by enslaved Africans, in the latter not all people traded were enslaved (as in the Western definition), many were bonded to a debt, a Lord, or a land. Additionally, enslavement, bondage and coercion appear to have been more transitory juridical and social statuses, with people being able to enter slavery and change their status more frequently than in the Atlantic, where those enslaved had very few prospects of being freed.

Scholarship on the commerce and exploitation of people in the Indian Ocean, the East Asian Seas and the Pacific has come a long way not only in terms of content, but also in terms of approaches. The first studies in the 1970s and 1980s were very much influenced by the Dependency Theory. Consequently, the core goal of their research was to understand how European activities contributed to the underdevelopment of this region of the world. The focus of these studies ended up being the Europeans, their economic activities and the consequences of their operations.

Arakan in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', pp. 66–82; Yimprasert, 'Portuguese Lançados in Asia in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries'; van Galen, 'The Changing Nature of the Seventeenth Century Slave Trade in Arakan and Eastern Bengal'; Marino and Clements, 'Iberian Sources on the Imjin War', pp. 27–48; Ehalt, 'Suspicion and Repression'.

¹³ Souza de Faria, 'From Asia to Lisbon', pp. 83–98; Souza de Faria, 'Enslaved Children in Portuguese India, 1550–1760', pp. 159–180; Fujitani, 'The Concubine Slaves of the Portuguese in the China Sea Region'.

¹⁴ See, for instance: Ehalt, 'Geninka and Slavery', pp. 342–356; Fujitani, 'Government Slavery in Portuguese Melaka, 1511–1523'.

Thus, these earliest studies paid attention to the reconstruction of trade patterns. Their efforts allow them to explore routes and interconnections between regions in an attempt to reconstruct a web of multiple circuits across these water surfaces.

In the 1990s, studies started to explore the inter-connections between European slaving operations and local forms of slavery, enslavement and coercion. In that sense, we could argue that in terms of approach there was a refocus on maritime Asia and East Africa, and on the impact of local aspects on European operations. This shift progressively allowed for the exploration of Arab and Asian merchants and merchant diasporas and their role in these commercial circuits.

The 'global turn' in the early 1990s and the influence of globalisation theory led scholars to pay closer attention to inter-connectedness, not only between regions of supply and demand, but also between European and non-European merchants, and their connections with local polities. Simultaneously, there was a clear decentring from the coloniser to a recentring on the colonised, with more attention being paid to workers, whether free, enslaved, or coerced in any other form. Hence, we could argue that in terms of approaches, we see three main moments: the first dedicated mainly to European routes and trade settlements, and consequently dominated by 'national approaches focusing on the different European powers in Asia'; a second devoted to the study of non-European routes and commerce in connection to the Europeans, and a third, where we see a clear shift in the focus to the local authorities and the local merchants, and more recently to the local enslaved, bonded and coerced peoples, and the study of their activities, and living experiences.

This brief overview makes clear that scholars have come a long way since the first studies in the 1970s and what has been accomplished is quite impressive. However, this panoramic view of the scholarship also shows some of its current limitations. In my view, there are a number of issues that scholars should put some effort in addressing in future research. Among these, I would like to highlight five main challenges. The first is geographical fragmentation. Many case studies focus on specific regions, with little dialogue or connection with other spaces. There is a lot of merit in carrying out research at a micro- and meso- level, but once there is a proliferation of studies at these scales, it is important to move forward in an attempt to draw a larger picture. The second problem is the so-called 'methodological nationalism'. Most studies on European engagement in commerce in people in maritime Asia (being Portuguese or others) tend to focus solely on slaving operations within a single empire and often only based on source materials produced by that same imperial power. There is a danger in making European empires the key unit of analysis and source of information. On the one hand, this type of approach overlooks slaving operations across multiple empires, and on the other, obscures activities that were carried out by European historical actors outside of the sphere of European empires. In this respect, it is also rather important that scholars

continue the efforts made earlier by other researchers to disentangle the activities carried out under the guise of the Portuguese Crown and those that were developed by Portuguese subjects on the margins of the Crown, or those that self-identified with the 'Portuguese Tribe'.¹⁵

The third problem is the danger of falling into the trap of European bias. Many case studies depart from and dialogue mainly with European literature, ignoring local scholarship. In addition, studies also often rely heavily on European source materials. It is certainly true that for some regions local sources are scarce or do not have abundant information on trade in people. However, descriptive sources can be rather informative and formative to understand the workings of European trading in people in maritime Asia and its encounters and interactions with local and regional circuits. Language skills are of course a barrier to access local sources and local historiographies, but that is something that can be overcome by working together with local scholars or specialists of Areas Studies. The fourth problem is directly connected precisely with Area Studies on the various regions of the Indian Ocean and East Asia. Historical studies developed within this interdisciplinary academic field have tended to focus solely on local sources and local languages, and only sporadically and reluctantly engage with European materials, because of their implicit colonial biases. Younger scholars are taking steps to bridge this academic disciplinary divide by bringing into dialogue European and local sources and historiographies in their research, but there is a lot of ground to be covered in this respect.¹⁶

The last two major issues I see in the current literature are, on the one hand, the 'tyranny' of the long 18th-century and, on the other, the limited dialogue between the streams of scholarship that look at the procurement, displacement, commercialisation and exploitation of people in maritime Asia over time. The over-focusing on the 18th century leaves earlier periods of European engagement in slave trading in maritime Asia overlooked, with crucial consequences for our understanding of the topic, as those were formative periods. The disconnect between the historiographies that examine the commerce in enslaved and bonded peoples prior as well as during European colonialism in Asia, and its connections with commerce in indentured labourers in the Age of Imperialism, as well as with present-day forms of Human Trafficking is another major problem. Improving the dialogue between these different bodies of scholarship, which are currently still much bounded by

¹⁵ Halikowski, 'No Obvious Home', pp. 1–28.

¹⁶ See, for instance: Zurndorfer, 'Human Trafficking and Piracy in Early Modern East Asia', pp. 908–931; Liu, 'Macao's Moral Maze', pp. 1–18; Ehalt, 'Jesuits and the Problem of Slavery in Early Modern Japan'; see also the Special Issues on Slavery and Bondage in Asia published in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* in 2021: <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/49044/print> and in *Itinerario* in 2023: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/itinerario/article/regimes-of-bondage-the-encounter-between-early-modern-european-and-asian-slaveryes/745B2800D2997461FF06660DC739A39F>.

chronological, geographical and disciplinary constraints, could significantly help our understanding of the trade in people in maritime Asia in a long-term and comparative perspective.¹⁷

These are, however, not the sole challenges ahead of scholars aiming to study Portuguese (and more broadly European) engagement in the commerce of peoples in maritime Asia. In my view, there are three other core hurdles: accessibility and searchability of sources, the biases of colonial sources (in particular concerning definitions of slave and slavery) and the risks of approaches overly focused on European Imperial units of analysis and European activities.

3. Navigating the Wide Sea of Sources

Many of the issues I have raised above are directly connected with a logistical problem faced by researchers aiming to explore this topic in the context of maritime Asia: the issue of the availability and accessibility of the sources. This is certainly not an exclusive problem for the reconstruction of the Portuguese trade in people in maritime Asia. If reconstructing the participation of any European empire in the maritime Asian slave trade is a daunting task, to carry out that kind of research for the Portuguese empire and subjects of the Portuguese Crown is a tough exercise in puzzle making.

Present-day archives and source collections concerning the former 'Estado da Índia' and the activities of the subjects of the Portuguese Crowns operating in maritime Asia are spread over at least four continents, multiple countries and cities, from Macao, to Goa, Maputo, Luanda, and Rio de Janeiro, as well as Lisbon and other port cities in Portugal.¹⁸ In addition, several archives located in former territories of other empires also have source materials that are equally valuable to study this topic, and they too are scattered across the globe, from the Philippines and Indonesia to Mexico, the Netherlands and the Vatican.¹⁹ Careful mapping of

¹⁷ See for instance: Asome, 'The Indentured Coolie Trade from Macao', pp. 157–179; Ginés-Blasi, 'The 'Coolie Trade' via Southeast Asia', pp. 97–118; Gonçalves, 'Pirates, Anamites and Trafficking', pp. 1–22; Gonçalves, 'Operários Chineses em Moçambique'.

¹⁸ Macao: <https://www.archives.gov.mo/pt/>; Goa: <https://daa.goa.gov.in/>; Maputo: <https://www.ahm.uem.mz/>; Brasil: Directório Brasil de Arquivos: <https://dibrarq.arquivonacional.gov.br/>; Biblioteca Nacional: <https://dibrarq.arquivonacional.gov.br/>; Luanda: <https://ana.gov.ao/>; Lisbon: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo: <https://antt.dglab.gov.pt/>; Biblioteca da Ajuda: <https://www.palacioajuda.gov.pt/paginas/efbb3cfo-biblioteca-da-ajuda/>; Arquivo Histórico da Marinha: <https://arquivohistorico.marinha.pt/>; Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino: <https://ahu.dglab.gov.pt/>. Please note that this is not, however, a comprehensive list of the relevant archives.

¹⁹ See, for instance: México: <https://www.gob.mx/agn/>; Philippines: National Archives of the Philippines: <https://foi.gov.ph/en/agencies/nap/SUCCESSFUL/>; Netherlands: <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/en/>; Indonesia: National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia: <https://anri.go.id/en/>;

available source materials and assessment of their accessibility is therefore crucial to navigate this wide sea of sources.

In the case of the reconstruction of the trade in people carried out by the Portuguese, either for the Portuguese Crown or privately, being aware of this geographical dispersion is essential, because the reconstruction of routes, the reconstruction of the life of enslaved people, or the study of the processes of identity formation among enslaved and coerced peoples will more often than not require researchers to embark on a periplus through different archives and their collections.

However, the geographical dispersion of archival collections is not the sole problem faced by scholars. Language is a second major obstacle, because documentation to reconstruct the Portuguese slaving activities in maritime Asia (as well as other activities) requires command not only of Portuguese, but also several languages including Spanish, Dutch, French, English, and other European languages, in addition to local languages. After all, the Portuguese and European colonial governments in Asia were not the sole political and administrative units that produced relevant documentation for the study of the topic under scrutiny in this chapter. Being skilled in European and local languages and/or developing close collaboration with local scholars and archivists is paramount to overcome this challenge.

The third main hurdle in terms of source materials for the Portuguese case is the fragmented nature of the collections available. Most of the source collections in the various locations mentioned earlier are incomplete, due to various historical circumstances, such as natural disasters like the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, or due to sea hazard, like the shipwreck of the Indiaman fleet that carried the Goa Inquisition Archive to Lisbon, with most of the documentation that was salvaged ending up in Brazil (currently at the Biblioteca Nacional in Brazil).²⁰ A lot of documentation has also been lost when the archives and collections were relocated between buildings, or simply due to pure theft, or the effects of Asian Monsoon weather.

The fourth main problem is indeed conservation. This is a difficulty that can manifest itself in two rather extreme forms. There are institutions where technicians in charge of conservation are overly zealous, who either keep the documentation inaccessible to scholars, or let researchers examine the documents but not without imposing enormous restrictions. These can go from limiting time for consultation to being physically present during consultation and directly overseeing the handling of the documents by scholars! On the other extreme, there are institutions that due to lack of funding, qualified personnel or simply lack of political will maintain collections with very limited measures to safeguard long-term preservation.

Vatican: <https://www.archivioapostolicovaticano.va/content/aav/it.html>; Spain: <https://pares.cultura.gob.es/inicio.html>. Please note that this is not, however, a comprehensive list of the relevant archives.

²⁰ Biblioteca Nacional Digital, Brazil: <https://bndigital.bn.gov.br/acervodigital>.

Another major issue faced by scholars interested in studying not only slave trade and slavery, but also broader questions concerning Portuguese colonialism in Asia is the limited availability of detailed archival guides for key collections, which can aid scholars in their quest to find pertinent source materials.²¹ For several archives the guides and catalogues were published still during the colonial era and there are even archival collections for which there are no detailed inventories available. Certainly, archival institutions are not entirely responsible for this poor situation in terms of cataloguing and inventories, because more often than not they remain understaffed, and their activities limited due to political decisions and constraints in national budgets.

Despite the difficulties faced by archives, in recent years several institutions containing relevant documentation for the study of the Portuguese empire and the activities of Portuguese subjects in Asia have made an effort to make catalogues available online, to create search engines that allow the use of text mining techniques to search some of the catalogues. Efforts have also been made to digitalise documentation and make it accessible online.²² However, if we compare the accessibility and searchability of key archives and collections for the study of Portuguese activities in maritime Asia, with that of the materials essential to reconstruct the operations of other European countries such as the Netherlands, the difference is staggering in terms of resources available online. Not only have entire catalogues been made available but also digitalised copies of almost complete collections. AI inspired tools have also been developed to allow text searching in the documents, and automated transcriptions. This is a precious tool for bodies of sources that are very large and for which manual search would take too long or would be too complex, as well as for situations where the information researchers are looking for could be anywhere in the entire collection.²³ This type of AI inspired tools also has enormous potential for the fragmented collections of Iberian sources. However, that is an initiative that still needs to be further developed and certainly cannot be done without the collaboration of the archives relevant for the study of the History of the Iberian empires and their subjects' activities in maritime Asia and beyond.

²¹ Herewith some key links to access full or partial inventories in Lisbon: Arquivo Científico Tropical Digital (ACTD): <https://actd.iict.pt>; <https://antt.dglab.gov.pt/pesquisar-na-torre-do-tombo/>.

²² Mexico: <https://memoricamexico.gob.mx/#home>; Spain: <https://pares.cultura.gob.es/inicio.html>; Portugal: <https://digitarq.arquivos.pt>; <https://digitarq.ahu.arquivos.pt>.

²³ For Spain see: <https://pares.cultura.gob.es/pares-htr/>; for the Netherlands, see: <https://www.openarchieven.nl>; <https://transcriptions.globalise.huygens.knaw.nl>.

4. Critical Readings of the Sources

Source materials produced within the framework of the Portuguese Estado da Índia as well as in the context of other European empires in maritime Asia were generated by individuals with an European mindset and European frames of reference in terms of political, legal, social and cultural structures and hierarchies. These obviously also applied to definitions of slave and slavery. This means that those producing the information that historians can access today imprinted their own views and perceptions on the way they categorised and labelled peoples and situations they encountered. In terms of the study of slave trade and slavery this has tremendous consequences, because it implies that the term slave, (slav or slaf) as well as the term slavery, both with a European origin, rooted in Roman Law ended up being transferred and used to define situations where coercion was used over people with the purpose of displacing, commercialising or exploiting their labour power. This entails that different forms of coerced and bonded labour, displacement, trade and exploitation of people in maritime Asia might have been labelled and conflated by the producers of the source materials under the same banners of slave and slavery – and these are the sources that are now available to researchers. This is certainly also true for other parts of the world, where local practices of labour coercion and bondage, the commerce of these people's manpower and exploitation of their labour power have been named and defined using European categories as frames of reference. The multiple forms of slavery and slave trade in Africa are a case in point.²⁴

For scholars aiming to reconstruct the commerce in people and the various forms of enslavement, bondage and coercion they have been subjected to at the hands of the Portuguese (as well as other Europeans) across maritime Asia, it will be paramount to deconstruct the multiple meanings behind the labels of slave, slavery and slave trade attributed by the Portuguese and other Europeans to local relations of dependency and labour coercion, as well as the activities that would emerge around the procurement, displacement and commercialisation, and exploitation of those people. This has been a hurdle faced with success by scholars of African History previously. So, there is no reason why it cannot be done for the different regions of the Indian Ocean Rim, the Southeast and East Asian Seas and the Pacific. Mapping the different types of dependency and coercion, and identifying those involved in those practices seems essential to carry out any reconstruction of the activities of Portuguese (and other Europeans) in terms of procurement of labour (both free and coerced), and its commercialisation and exploitation around

²⁴ See, for instance: Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*.

maritime Asia, either for the construction of their own empires, or on the service and for the benefit of local authorities and polities.

It is equally important to reflect on who produced those sources, for whom and with what purpose. For this is essential to disentangle the activities carried out in the name of the Portuguese Crown, the Catholic Church, the Vatican and specific Religious Orders within the Vatican, and the activities of the subjects of the Portuguese Crown that operated in maritime Asia privately, or those that were not subjects of the Portuguese, but did identity with the 'Portuguese Tribe'. And, finally, there were also individuals that served simultaneously different Lords while safeguarding their own interests. Not all these historical actors produced sources. But those that did, had distinct interests in their production generating reports that were guided by their own aims or the goals of those who they serve. These could be various polities and associated institutions, from the Portuguese Crown and the Catholic Church to rulers of local polities. These questions are crucial to understand what was registered, what was left out, and why? And for whom was this information recorded? If those producing the sources were officials of the Portuguese Crown, they would tend to register what was of interest to this polity. If Portuguese subjects operated on the margins of the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*, their activities in most cases went unregistered because they had no interest in keeping track of them.

The implications of this for the reconstruction of the activities of the Portuguese in connection with the procurement, transportation, commercialisation and exploitation of people and their labour (either being enslaved, bonded, coerced and/or dependent) in maritime Asia are tremendous. Most of the sources available offer the researcher the insights from men that were serving the Portuguese Crown, and the Catholic Church, and therefore reflecting the interests of these institutions. This means that most of the Portuguese source materials will give us information on these activities from the perspective of the Portuguese Crown, and covering mainly the geographical areas, controlled by the Portuguese authorities – the formal Empire.

In contrast, the activities carried out by private subjects of the Portuguese Crown that operated within and outside of the *Estado da Índia* often went unregistered. Only sporadically do the official documents or accounts give the researchers insights into the Portuguese subjects that engaged in the activities privately, either for their own interests or the interests of third parties, being those of European, Asian or African background. This silence of the Portuguese sources about their activities is in part because more often than not those operations fell beyond the sphere of influence of the Portuguese Crown – the often-named Portuguese Shadow

Empire²⁵. The reconstruction of the activities of these Portuguese subjects acting on their own name or on the name of others within or outside the Estado da Índia can only be reconstructed by resorting to the triangulation of source materials produced within the contexts of several European and Asian empires, as well as in different languages.

5. Towards a Future Research Agenda

To conclude this piece, I would like to look towards the future and reflect a bit on how scholars can move forward the scholarship on the study of the formal and informal role of the Iberian in the development of trade in people in maritime Asia. In view of the various aspects discussed earlier in this chapter, I would argue that this movement forward can only be achieved by a concerted effort that will combine: (i) development of infra-structure that will facilitate accessibility and searchability of source materials, including the use of AI tools; (ii) the development of systematic data collection to be made available in open access to all researchers; (iii) the strengthening of collaboration between Western scholars and researchers and archivists in various regions of the Indian Ocean Rim and the Pacific; and (iv) the drafting of a research agenda for the future that will allow scholars to map and reconstruct the workings of the trade in people carried out in maritime Asia, not only by the Portuguese, and other Europeans, but also all other parties involved in these commercial activities.

In terms of research, the core aim would be to start developing a more comprehensive picture of Iberian engagement in the commerce of people in maritime Asia. For this, I think it will be essential to better our knowledge in terms of:

1. Mapping the regions of enslavement and the slave markets where Portuguese and Spanish procured the enslaved and coerced people they transported, commercialised, and exploited.
2. Developing a typology of the modes of enslavement and coercion that the peoples transported, commercialised and exploited by the Iberians had been subjected to.
3. Developing a typology of the modes of procurement employed by the Portuguese and Spanish to obtain the enslaved and coerced people they transported, commercialised and exploited around maritime Asia.

²⁵ Winius, 'The 'Shadow Empire' of Goa in the Bay of Bengal', pp. 83–101; Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire*; Newitt, 'Formal and Informal Empire in the History of Portuguese Expansion', pp. 1–21.

Equally important for a systematic reconstruction of the commerce in people in maritime Asia carried out by the Iberians will be:

4. Mapping the slaving routes operated by the Portuguese and Spanish, either under the guise of the Crowns, or those that were operated in the shadow of the empire, and not only limited to the Estado da Índia or the Spanish East Indies, but also beyond, including activities carried out in connection with other empires and with local polities and merchants.
5. Accounting and/or estimating the number of enslaved and coerced individuals transported by the Iberians in maritime Asia.
6. Mapping the regions that acquired or 'consumed' the labour of enslaved and coerced people transported by the Portuguese and Spanish in maritime Asia.
7. Accounting and/or estimating the number of enslaved and coerced individuals commercialised and exploited by the Iberians in maritime Asia, and
8. Mapping the slave markets where Portuguese and Spanish commercialised, enslaved and coerced people.

Here, researchers should remain attentive in order to avoid falling into the trap of the 'numbers game' that dominated debates in Atlantic slave trade for decades. Which trade was larger, maritime Asian trade or Atlantic? Portuguese, Spanish, British, Dutch, etc.? A second major issue is the risk of getting trade in people in Asia ending tied up to the debate on the profitability of the slave trading. How profitable was the slave trade in maritime Asia comparatively to the transatlantic slave trade? How much did Europeans gain from their involvement? This call for caution does in no way deny the importance of the question of: Who was involved in the maritime Asian trade in people? Equally important is to assess how deeply were the Europeans involved in this commerce, in what ways and capacities? And, what did they gain from carrying out these activities? However, it is fundamental to move beyond the focus on economic profits and start asking broader questions such as what did those involved in the procurement, displacement, commerce and exploitation of people in Asia obtain in terms of political, social and cultural gains?

Also fundamental for the reconstruction of the Iberian commerce in people in maritime Asia will be gathering detailed information on the groups of historical actors involved and their actions, including both those that fell in these webs of human commerce and exploitation, as well as about those that run these networks and sailed the sea-routes that connected the multiple markets of people in maritime Asia. For these purposes, it will be crucial to:

9. Draw the profiles of the different groups of people that entered the Iberian commercial circuits in Asia (including place of origin, ethnic or cultural background, religion, language, etc.).

10. Identity the main activities performed by the peoples displaced by the Portuguese and Spanish, within the Estado da Índia and the Spanish East Indies, and in other destinations within maritime Asia and beyond, with the aims of examining the role of enslaved and coerced people in the building and maintenance of European maritime empires in Asia, and how these people resisted not only exploitation, but also procurement, displacement, commercialisation, and labelling and differentiation within the host societies where they lived and worked.
11. Identify the profiles of the different groups of people involved in the procurement, the financing, the logistics, the shipping, the commerce of the people that were moved around in the webs of the Iberians in maritime Asia and equally the individuals engaged in the exploitation of the labour power of those people.

Here, on the one hand, scholars should remain aware of the danger of replicating the narrative around the experience of enslaved Africans in the Atlantic in maritime Asia, overshadowing the experiences of other population groups also coerced in various ways and that also ended up in the commercial circuits of coerced labour in Asia. On the other hand, scholars should stay alert to the danger of writing a history of commerce of enslaved people in maritime Asia, which is mainly led by Europeans (Portuguese included) and where local actors will end up overshadowed, as African merchants in Atlantic Africa have also been in the transatlantic scholarship, often regarded as second players in the narratives of the Atlantic slave trade – a situation that has lasted until quite recently.

The ultimate goal of such an agenda would be to create the means to further explore the possible adaptations and transformations emerging from the encounter between European, African, Asian and Native American in commercial practices and forms of labour mobilisation, commercialisation, and exploitation, as well as in terms of legal constructs and definitions, and in terms of the social hierarchies that distinguished freedom and unfreedom (in its various shades) in maritime Asia.

