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

Christina Märzhäuser (LMU München) & Enrique Rodrigues-Moura (Universität Bamberg)

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

**Historical background & Peixoto’s 18th century manuscripts**

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

**Gender issues in Peixoto’s work**

Peixoto’s glossary is not only linguistically, but also socioculturally relevant: dialogues reflect contradicting interests of male and female social agents, their complex interactions, including power struggles and cooperative behaviours. The paraphrase explicitly mentions female informants. Several dialogues allow us to perceive voices of black women renegotiating power with white men, including conversations apparently inspired by Peixoto’s personal experiences and regard to their social position (Araujo 2013, Stanton 1992, Farias 2019, Gonçalves 2011, Stolze Lima 2018, 2020, 2021).

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

**Analysis of gender-relevant dialogues**

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

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

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

*Nhi matim aqhúdimhá = eu naô – tenho agora uouro*

[«At this moment, I don’t have gold»]

*mémátim aqhu má hóhay há = q.”naô – tem uouro, naô – fode*

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

*name ayo dim, berê sü ná nauhé aqhu = dame agora o cono, eq.’q. día te darey o uouro*

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

But the woman reinforces her business policies:

*nhimá ná ayoê acho há = eu naô – dou o meu cono fiado*

[«I won’t give my cunt on credit»]

*Peixoto 1741: 41*

**Results**

Some of Peixoto’s dialogues show African women who – despite being black and female and therefore usually associated with double subaltern status (see Spivak 1994 «The subaltern cannot speak») – successfully renegotiate their power position in trade. Although Peixoto’s efforts to acquire, describe and promote LGM can be interpreted as a «white» colonist’s strategy to secure his position through successful control, his dialogues also stress the importance of winning trust and cultivating good relations with members of the local black community. Several dialogues testify a degree of agency by Africans that undermines conventional representations of colonial relations, including a woman who enforces her «no credit» policy for her services, as shown above.

*Historical research on African and Afro-descendant women in Minas Gerais documents that some did not only manage to free themselves from slavery but even acquired considerable wealth.*