Garcia de Orta
And Alexander von Humboldt
Across the East and the West

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Were those the actual lands where Orta lived?

Anabela Mendes

“Se tiveres de escolher um reino
escolhe o relento
a noite tem a brancura do alabastro
ou mais extraordinária ainda

Ao que vem depois de ti
cede o instante
sem pronunciar
seu nome”
José Tolentino Mendonça, Versões do mundo

I.

We have just airported in Lisbon, Paris, Cologne, Washington. We have just collected ourselves in Goa, Bangalore, Allahabad, Trichur, Mumbai, Gandhinagar. All together we held an international transdisciplinary conference we named Garcia de Orta and Alexander von Humboldt – Across the East and the West. It took place by the rivers Mandovi and Zuari, we were then on November, 26-27th of the year 2008.

Hosted by the splendid city of Goa and its generous people, we felt as if we had been assembled under the shield of a symbolic privilege – a privilege which concedes that one of the parts is willing to step back for the other (a likely sign of a future evidence, who knows) when someone ventures to become-with-the other(s) a multiple completeness.

Vivified by this overwhelming energy, which saw no limits to accede to the contemplation and the fruition of such awe-inspiring landscapes, we were able to communicate freely what had joined the remote with the remote. We also came

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1 José Tolentino Mendonça, 2009, O viajante sem sono, Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, p. 49.

“If you have to choose a reign/ choose the dew/ the night is white as alabaster/ or even more extraordinary// To the one who comes after you/ grant the moment/ without pronouncing/ its name” José Tolentino Mendonça, World versions
to understand how far the dialogue between two men of Science – Garcia de Orta and Alexander von Humboldt – stemmed out of the pursuing of the diverse within a space of heterogeneous contamination, and therefore, while all along it does not put an end to the non-permanent character of a cartography of the places indexed to their geographical perennial nature, it does presume that we listen in our own selves to what once were Orta’s and Humboldt’s domains.

In Panjim/Goa we found a city inviting us to travel in time as it echoed a period of common history between the Indians and the Portuguese. As for those of us who had on this occasion exchanged Europe for Asia, we also felt the transformation of that mysterious undividable body, received by Garcia da Orta as a land of irresistible opportunity, which he later passed on to us in his *Colóquios dos Simples e Drogas e Coisas Medicinais da Índia* (Colloquies on the Simple and Drugs of India) into a modern swift metropolis, structured by the multiple stimuli provided by territoriality and diversity of cultures and speech.

By means of this between-oneself-and-oneselves and our own living between this remoteness and that distance, we are sent back to an old platonic text about the creation of something in ourselves which refuses to give in and simultaneously pulls you out, acting like a connection ritual and a natural bridge complementing between what is your own and what is alien to you. It is the passage in Plato’s *Symposium* when Aristophanes is summoned to pronounce himself about *eros*, and does so by narrating the mythical story of the round men.

Borrowed from Plato, the narrative of the round men divided in two by the gods so that this new condition of theirs might usefully multiply, nonetheless losing their arrogance towards the Olympus, not only does it bring to our mind the infinite cruelty used by men when they showed the gods how to act – a major event in this ancient philosophical version of dividing and ruling –, but it also reveals to us that beyond the mutilation of the body, this terrible act unbefitted the gods (!) and it eventually hides that urging need to create and keep a distance within or outside ourselves and thus become aware of our own limits, which we push forward by fixing another one, other ones, the other.

The distance between oneself and oneself, that misguiding, squabbling, and suspending distance, when we experience the conviction that we are always promising to overcome that fault, all the more so because we long for the exalting experience of the re-union with that undivided body (a symbolic body as well) we once were, that distance must have been born on that same exact moment when man became his own beholder.

In the dimness of a cavern, when he traced a line on one of his hands and then filled it with pigments, the human being gained awareness of himself as he saw the
first image of his painted hand. Without a separation, without a fault, we can make neither manifest our predisposition to union, nor our dissatisfaction for not being able to actualize it. We know that this way of being always distant from oneself and one’s parts, in disquietness and restlessness, generates prodigious and infinitive affections capable of enhancing within ourselves, to the nearest, an inability to recall and to re-assess what once must have been the joyful harmony between the inner and the outer.

Whether it is taken as a political representation or a symbolic representation, the history of the round men might mirror, one way or another, the feeling of passion and scientific restiveness that seized Garcia da Orta and Alexander von Humboldt on embracing unknown worlds - respectively India and the Americas -, as they lived distance in powerful variables, alienating themselves whenever possible from all that could undermine parasitically the relation with other peoples and other places they both were by then inhabiting.

Not one of the two scientists rejected his own original culture, but they eventually lost that typical egocentrical gaze of vigilant and hegemonic Europeans; when confronted with all sorts of local experiences which push forward the learning of new languages (Humboldt spoke twenty three languages, Garcia de Orta was a born polyglot), other customs and socializing with the indigenous peoples. The understanding places and peoples and a more immediate seizing of the essence of things gradually came out of common need and experience, often quite irrationally and instinctively, as if reality had invaded Orta and Humboldt under the form of a capillary phenomenon. The physical and mental absorption of other worlds and subjectivities fitted them even though they had to amplify their bodies by making them suitable to the exercising of a mutually expectant capillary action.

Scientists and travelers, Orta and Humboldt, held on to the identities of their beings which dwelled in them on and on like an unbreakable shadow, and gave them a concurrent will to get to build up the diverse by applying the diverse and the other way around.

2.

The route we followed in this third moment of our project dedicated to Garcia de Orta and Alexander von Humboldt actually made us choose a location for the 2008 Conference out of inspiration coming from the affinities we developed and kept alive by recollecting them all together in the hope of prospective occasions.
Our choice is a daring meaningful salute to a Portuguese who, having kept in the 16th century his wisdom until the end of his days, let himself become one with the lands of India to the point that he met his death there. His option managed to build itself a dialogue towards our collective identity as Europeans and as Portuguese, and towards everything which than ever before is an evident testimonial of the identity of India – its ramping modernization without the suspension of history. In a way, we were able to detach ourselves from the panel we had assembled with our multiple sensibilities and knowledge in order to get to know from one another what we had in common, what made us different, and most of all we had decided to take this path as a group.

Orta did not take the route of migratory birds following their own biological cycles. The self-imposed distance to Portugal, which made of him a compulsive traveler towards the East, grew out of his determination not to abjure the religious belief he had obliged to all his life, though he could not prevent the imposition of a post-mortem punishment. The devastating and excruciating hand of the Inquisition did not erase from the memory of those who belonged to Orta’s circle from his admiring and devotional dedication to many languages and beliefs.

Searching for an inner order, Garcia de Orta soon found joy in mingling the strangeness of a new world into what he had chosen as destination and destiny – one where making science meant first and foremost observing and comparing, the game of questioning, but above all the infinite interplay with places, peoples, the sunrise and the sunset he lavishly enjoyed, the nights when he would lovingly smell in the scent of his garden the flowers of the sad aruote (nyctanthes arbor-tristis) doomed to perish right after blooming, mentioned in his sixth dialogue, that queen of the night the Germans talk about and Humboldt knew so well.

In Orta, we paid tribute to the values and principles that we still hold as dear to us: tolerance, intellectual integrity, cosmopolitanism, love for freedom, devotion to scientific learning, humanism. These were also the paths that Humboldt chose to be his own, and that his work as a scientist or a philanthropist could never have ignored. In what concerns ontological and ethical matters, they joined together in a brotherhood of arms as if they were a non-mutilated body.

As we headed towards East Garcia de Orta settled the inspiring tone for most of the papers that now are published. No sooner had we stepped the host soil for the botanic and doctor of the 1500’s, did we meet enthusiastic researchers who did not hesitate to share with their European colleagues the knowledge we were unacquainted with. The fault which unbalanced Orta and Humboldt was eventually filled with essays on topics akin, full of appeal and liveliness in the space of a transcurricular Conference.
Thanks to the empowering project of Ines G. Županov, *Botanizing in Portuguese India: Between Errors and Certainties* (16th – 17th c.), we managed to recall the old quarrel between the Old and the Modern in its less known version – with the Attics taking the Asians for opponents in Philosophy and Rhetoric. Fostered by the Portuguese doctor and botanist a certain foundering view for the History of Science was coming to life, taking a practical dramatic form. Orta’s own writing and his mistakes brought about the discussion of past eras, their times and future times, since it backed the importance of holding strong to in loco research practices and empirical knowledge. Learning by doing deflates canonical book knowledge which might never render the necessary plural interpretations to the object of research. The travelling lecturing on the practice of different kinds of Medicine and the emerging Botany inserted Orta in the ranks of modernity.

There is no doubt that Orta announces a new view of science, since he created for Botany a first draft of a taxonomic system much earlier than Carl von Linée, thus letting himself be seen as a man in action, doing field work, paying attention to amazing collections of plants and fruits, checking their qualities and properties; it is all the more so remarkable that his scientific scope brings together two antagonic methods – Indutivism and Hypothesism –, as claimed by Koshy Tharakan and Alito Siqueira in their essay *Science of Nature: Garcia de Orta as a Philosopher of Science*.

In what concerns the reception of Orta in Eastern lands, we had the singular contribution born of the partnership between Newman Fernandes and Maria Araujo, with the text *Garcia de Orta and Gelasio Dalgado: two eminent botanists in Goa*; thus we learned how the studies on goan flora evolved in the past 350 years. Gelasio Dalgado, a doctor and botanist of the 19th century, confronted in his research two treatises, *Colóquio dos Simples* by Garcia de Orta and *Hortus Malabaricus* by Hendrik Van Rheede, a treatise on medical plants, published in Amsterdam in the 17th century. We were able to appreciate the value of the passing of both scientific and practical knowledge to a completely new generation in a work which retains its relevance to actuality and still fosters Botanic studies in the State of Panjim/Goa.

It was Sharon Cruz’s turn to enhance the value of Garcia de Orta’s work within the context of medical and scientific history of the 16th century, taking into account the postmodern theories which emphasize the importance of the variance of microcontextualization in deterrence of an analysis by means of great founding systems. *Documenting the ‘Medico-Botanical Traditions of India’: The Colóquios of Garcia de Orta* is an essay, which brings us closer to a vast perception of the work of Orta inside and outside Indian borders.

Kalpana Swaminathan and Ishrat Syed took a medical anthropological stance in *Garcia de Orta’s Cholera morbus*, they have documented themselves very fully on some
of Orta’s dialogues, especially, the XVII dialogue, and have guided their research by the ayurvedic texts of the Indian tradition; at the same time they have established some connections between the designation cholera morbus and some more recent forms of the cholera virus, taking *Vibrio cholera* as a case-study. If we call to mind our modern knowledge on this disease which is still fatal today, we are taken by surprise by Orta’s clear insight and contribution to the medical debate in his day, as it can be seen in his description of an urgent visit to a patient suffering from that disease.

Sebastian Iken dedicated his masterly essay *Linguistic Aspects of the Dialogues in the “Colóquios” from Garcia de Orta* to the study of different languages which lay the foundations of the work of the Portuguese author, and questioned the multiple discursive options used in the *Colóquios*. These reflect the affiliated concern with the use of cultivated and erudite Portuguese, a ‘pure’ use of the language free from Latin and Spanish, but revealing the presence of lively discourses among servants and slaves, though not identified as goan Creole. It is Orta’s speech that the researcher finds to be more authentic in communicative terms, due to the linguistic and cultural diversity that involved him.

One of the most imaginative essays in this volume belongs to Maria de Lourdes Bravo da Costa Rodrigues *Portuguese Discoveries and Plants that changed Goan Gastronomy*. It deals with the exchange of experiences between Portugal, India and nations from other continents made possible by the Portuguese discoveries, from the 16th century onwards. In the lands of Goa, a new world gathered around new flavors, new medicine, new agricultural products and new plants and flowers for home decoration. Experimentation would become the golden rule which influenced the way peoples lived East and West of India and in many other locations.

It was in Goa that the geographer Ana Firmino developed a field study on *The Awakening of ayurvedic wisdom in Portugal: lessons from India*. She identified the millenary roots of ayurvedic knowledge in medical plants, many of them have been of great interest and study in western countries, including Portugal. The geographer underscores the multiuse of ayurvedic wisdom within alternative and complementary medicine, which in our day fully enjoy their own space and acknowledgement; she has also drawn attention to the abuse of consumerism and the less holistic approach faced by ayurvedic medicine in Western societies, thus resulting in a disruption with the philosophical principles of ayurvedic wisdom which sees itself in an intrinsic relation to nature and each person’s identity. In India, the Parliament granted institutional accreditation in 1970 to the schools and universities where research and experimentation on plants, spices, drugs, and minerals had been going on for years, this meaning that ayurvedic medicine has gained the necessary official recognition to sustain a good relationship between urban and rural areas.
Three contributions in this Conference paid tribute to the Portuguese literary writings inspired by the different forms of travelling and the different periods they took place in. Fernão Mendes Pinto was summoned to poetics and science from his 16th century by means of the anthropological essay Notes on the Archeology of Identity in A Peregrinação (The Pilgrimage) by Fernão Mendes Pinto, by Nuno Felix da Costa. The Portuguese psychiatrist and artist talks about the presence, and the consequences for travel literature of the Portuguese 16th century, of the syndrome like specificities which feature and influence Portuguese collective behavior in certain times and places. The confrontation with what travelers carry within themselves does only make sense when that feeling of belonging materializes beyond the idea we formerly had of the world.

A companion and friend of Orta’s, Luís Vaz de Camões, as prodigious as Fernão Mendes Pinto in the 16th century saga of the letters and maritime routes towards East, was chosen by C. J. Davees for his essay Kerala or Portugal? Historical Centralities in The Lusíadas. This professor of Portuguese in Trichur focus on a specific location in India: the State of Querala. In this study, the epic poem by Camões is compared to Indian chronicles of the same period, thus gaining a new reading by means of the relevant input brought about by the lively story telling in the lands of Malabar. As a mnemonic reservoir for a kind of uncompromised experience between those who win (the Portuguese) and those who live there (the Malabars and other peoples), The Lusiads gain a distinct level of meaning in what concerns sharing and miscegenation.

In the 20th century, Fernando Pessoa, by means of his heteronym Bernardo Soares told us of the fruitful experience of travelling in places never seen before and how he de-centered himself and gained new shapes. Alien to domesticating corporalities, this travelling poet trans-placed moods into genetic movement, creating routes between Lisbon and the distant India; this we got to know in a thrilling essay by Raquel Nobre Guerra, From Ganges into Rua dos Douradores - Índia in Fernando Pessoa - Bernardo Soares: The Intersticial Inroad.

The last group of essays comprehends three essays dedicated to great scientists and travelers of the 19th century - Eugene Dubois, Aimé Bonpland e Alexander von Humboldt, whose transcontinental experience has managed to leave us dumb-founded until this day.

In Eugene Dubois: in search of the missing link to ‘Homo sapiens? the professor, doctor and anthropologist António Bracinha Vieira tells us of the fabulous scientific adventures of a Dutch doctor on the service of the Netherlands army who traveled to Java and then to Sumatra, living on these islands between 1887 and 1895. An anatomist by formation, Dubois pursued the idea of coming to the discovery on the region
where now Indonesia is the hominid fossil which might be used as evidence for placing apes as the ancestors of humans. The result of his research and descriptions led him to the discovery of a new being in the chain of the primates: the Pithecanthropus erectus or the Java Man. Not being an ape, or a man, this species already stood and walked on his feet, and provided the missing link in the evolving process of the human species. In his study on Dubois, Antônio Bracinha Vieira highlights the importance of the theories of Alexander von Humboldt and Ernst Haeckel on the Dutch anatomist in what concerns the pursuit of genetic evolution.

Tiago Rocha de Morais wrote a moving fictional and confessional Aimé Bonpland – A Personal Narrative, around the multiple aspects surrounding the friendship and the scientific cooperation between Aimé Bonpland and Alexander von Humboldt during their common travels in America and later when their own projects in life and Geography set them apart. The author uses a subtle but rigorous and well-humoured style, and sets in perspective the personalities of the two scientists who for their dissimilarity contributed decisively to the success of the great scientific endeavor they set themselves to. South America is reborn as we watch it come out of the agitated existence of the French botanist who returned to Argentina in order to make a living out of a life devoted to plants and plantations.

What can an image hide? What can an image provide? Alexander von Humboldt’s travels to the remains from Pre-Hispanic peoples is the title of the essay I wrote to the Goa Conference. Drawing inspiration from Humboldt’s almost impermanent and nomadic discourse on his incursions in South America, I followed my own research while crossing the Andes and getting to see an uncountable number of monuments of the indigenous peoples, based on the exact claim supported by the travelling anthropologist after returning from his American travels – the historical and documental value of objects must be linked to its esthetic validity. The themes of fertility, violence and death stimulated my dialogue with the cultures of the Aztec in Mexico, the Muisc in Colombia and the Moche in Peru, as seen by the light of the methods and exemplification learned in Alexander von Humboldt’s writings.

3.

We tried to make it clear that it is up to us, human beings, to know how to unite and re-unite what distance brings apart. And distance does not only imply being far from places we inhabit and where we spend our lives. This assumption quickly fades today in this time-space crossing all borders where each
reality is potentially a lot of all sorts of convention-made realities amalgamated by technology, which we follow almost naturally without any sign of resistance. Nevertheless, distance very often means what is escaping from us, what our will or our argumentative skills, or our charm (or charisma) cannot supersede because one thing or the other cannot be shared, and as a result, a fault breaks out in us.

In full friendship and respect for our individual work, on behalf of the mutual learning we shared along three years of research and public presentation the results, going from one city to another, from country to country, from culture to culture, we conceived a vast number of scientific travels under the magnum shield of Garcia de Orta and Alexander von Humboldt.

Goa was for us the astounding actualization of the overcoming of a succession of faults, making a winner out of each of us, be it eastwards or westwards.

Thus we overcame many distances that were raised so as to make us give up this project. We were fortunate to have the affection and the complicity of all those who trusted us and made it feasible in terms of the necessary facilities and arrangements to hold a Conference, a photographic exhibition, a drama session, a workshop on movement, two lectures, a book launch, and a poetry reading session – for a few days we became a small trans-national, trans-curricular and trans-cultural community.

The lands where Orta lived still move around within us because the combination of differences brought about complementarities.

We would like to express our warmest and deepest thanks to the entities and institutions which supported and sponsored our activities, and belonged to the boarding committee for the academic, cultural and artistic events:

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My fraternal embrace to all the participants in the Conference Garcia de Orta and Alexander von Humboldt – Across the East and the West.

Jorge Fazenda Lourenço, Peter Hanenberg, Margarida Appleton, Sérgio Mascarenhas, Alito Siqueira, Koshy Tharakan e João Rafael Miguens Mendes stood at the rearguard with wise understanding.

In our hearts we shall keep Dr. Delfim Correia da Silva (Instituto Camões – CLP in Goa and Department of Portuguese in the University of Goa) and Prof. Doutor Paulo Varela Gomes (ex-representative of Fundação Oriente in Goa), to whom we owe the possibility of having once more regained our condition of round beings.

November 2009
Pleasant memories of this unique territory of Goa

Delfim Correia da Silva

The academic and transdisciplinary project Orta & Humboldt, begun at the Geographical Society of Lisbon in May 2007 with the International Conference “Garcia de Orta and Alexander von Humboldt – Errâncias, Investigações e Diálogo entre Culturas”, and later continued at University of Cologne, Germany in September 2007. The conclusion of this project in Goa was of special significance, it being a land geographically distant from the birth place of the two humanists, but in cultural terms ever so close even to this day.

Obstacles experienced by those initially charged with the coordination and execution of the event in Goa, and a change of venue for the two-day Conference and other associated activities, saw the instant formation of an eleventh hour, ‘the crisis committee’ comprising of Fundação Oriente, the Department of Portuguese of Goa University and the CLP/Instituto Camões in Panjim. What might have been perceived by many as a wholly unpropitious undertaking proved ultimately to be a veritable triumph —due to cordial collaboration, competence, and enthusiasm of the parties involved.

From the idyllic Taleigao plateau, site of the blossoming Goa University (marking Silver Jubilee of its Foundation this year), one can see the spot where we are entranced by the vista of the Arabian Sea nurturing two of its most vital and historic rivers, the Mandovi and the Zuari, upon which Garcia de Orta and other western adventurers and world citizens must have so often traversed. For those participating in the fifteen Lectures of the International Conference there was the pleasure to gaze upon the panorama of the Dona Paula Inlet, where verdant green and the two-toned blue of sea and sky meet on Nature’s cosmic canvas.

Garcia de Orta, born in Alentejo, the son of Spanish Jews, spent half his lifetime in Goa and was a pioneering role-model for interracial and intercommunal tolerance. Paradoxically, he was victimized by the most abhorrent of bigotry that found rooted in Religion, and that too after he was no longer living. Orta played a lead role, with his human sensitivity and erudition, in an ongoing cultural drama starring such a diverse cast of philosophical and faith systems that Goa gave birth to a cultural fusion that bridged the conceptual abyss separating East and West.

Garcia de Orta, a towering persona in the of scientific history and one of the most radiant exemplars of Portuguese accomplishments in the Orient, reveals to us in the that “treasured Portuguese document”, Colóquios dos Simples e Drogas da Índia