

FINDINGS [ACHAMENTOS] IN THE “LETTER” OF CAMINHA AND THE PORTUGUESE VIEW OF BRAZILIAN WOMEN

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- **ABSTRACT:** The focus of this study is an approach from the sociocultural and literary-historical point of view of the “Carta de Achamento do Brasil”, written by Pero Vaz de Caminha to King D. Manuel I of Portugal. In addition to highlighting the first impressions of the Portuguese with the new place and its inhabitants, the present paper also explores the intentions of the Crown over the territory and the power dynamics announcing the exploratory intention of Brazil, confirmed by the subsequent colonization. Investigating the view of the “Other” and the discourse of Caminha around the views constructed about the female body, this paper addresses the impressions on women, nudity, the reading of the body, and its imbrications in sexuality. The authors, finally, aim to reflect on how the “Letter” may offer elements for understanding the image of Brazilian woman in the male imaginary of the Portuguese.
- **KEYWORDS:** Caminha’s “Letter”. Woman, Female body. Sexuality. Relations of power. Discoveries.

Introduction

Following Vasco da Gama’s return to Portugal after his successful voyage to India via the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope, a second expedition with a fleet of thirteen ships left the Tagus River in Belém, on a Monday March 9th in 1500, under the command of Pedro Álvares Cabral, supposing to follow the same route. The mission of the expedition was the conquest his predecessor had begun, to establish a robust presence in Asia, and to develop a profitable spice trade. This includes the strengthening of commercial ties with the Zamorin of Calicut and the setting up a Portuguese trading post (“Feitoria”). In this fleet there were between 1200 and 1500 men, including some

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Franciscans priests, under the leadership of Henrique de Coimbra, some navigators/military/and men of science (e. g., the physician and astronomer João Faras, and probably Duarte Pacheco Pereira, the author of the Treatise on Geography and Cosmography, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*)¹, fifteen hundred soldiers, twenty convicts, adventurous traders, adventurers, a wide range of goods and coined money revealing that trading was the main purpose of this expedition (ABREU, 1998; DIAS, E., 1992; PEREIRA, 1935; SCHWARTZ, 2010), but interests of developing nautical science may also be present as well as evangelization intentions to spread the Catholic faith through these regions (BETTENCOURT, 1997). This model of spiritual action does not exclude the possibility of fighting enemies of the Christian faith, as described by Fernão Mendes Pinto in his work Pilgrimage (*Peregrinação*) (SOARES, M. L.; SOARES, M. J., 2019, 2020) and by Dom Pedro de Meneses in his Wisdom Prayer, pronounced in 1504: “Oh how many barbaric and savage men, enemies of Jesus Christ, [the Portuguese] did not defeat and eliminate with small forces by land and sea, especially in the last months of the expedition to India”² (MENDES, 1997, p. 335, our translation).

The “Letter” describes the route followed by the fleet from its departure, its passage off the Canary Islands, then Cape Verde, the first signs of a new land nearby, the sighting of Pascual Mount (Easter Mount) in the lands of Vera Cruz (“Terra de Vera Cruz”), on April 22nd of 1500, which was described in the following way:

This same day, at the hour of vespers we sighted land, that is to say, first a very high rounded mountain, then other lower ranges of hills to the south of it, and a plain covered with large trees. The admiral named the mountain Easter Mount and the country the Land of the True Cross. (SCHWARTZ, 2010, p. 1).

[*E neste dia, a horas de vésperas, houvemos vista de terra, isto é, primeiramente de um grande monte, mui redondo e alto, e d’outras serras mais baixas a sul dele e de terra chã com grandes arvoredos, ao qual monte alto o capitão pôs o nome o Monte Pascoal e à terra a Terra de Vera Cruz.* (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 5)].

The Vera Cruz land will be later known as Brazil, and the Pascual Mount (Easter Mount) is in the State of Bahia and can be seen from sixty miles from the sea (ABREU, 1998).

The “Letter” also describes the exploration of the Brazilian coast, including the place where it was signed near where today is the city of “Porto Seguro” (Safe Port) (ABREU, 1998). “I kiss Your Majesty’s hands: From this Porto-Seguro, in Your Majesty’s

¹ George H. T. Kimble, in the introduction of his English translation of the work *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, stated that Duarte Pacheco Pereira in 1500 sailed in Cabral’s fleet, which, by order of King Manuel I, intended to reach and land on the Brazilian coast (which Pacheco had apparently sighted) before going to India (PEREIRA, 1935). Other Portuguese authors share the same opinion (e.g., Damião de Góis, Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, João de Barros, Luciano Pereira da Silva, Damião Peres) but others do not (e. g., Duarte Leite) (PEREIRA, 1988; SILVA, 1921).

² “*Oh quantos homens bárbaros e selvagens, inimigos de Jesus Cristo [os Portugueses], não derrotaram e eliminaram com pequenas forças por terra e por mar, especialmente nos últimos meses da expedição à Índia!*” (MENDES, 1997, p. 335).

island of Vera Cruz, to-day, Friday, 1st May 1500” (SCHWARTZ, 2010, p. 9). [*Beijo as mãos de Vossa Magestade, da vossa ilha de Vera Cruz, hoje, sexta-feira, primeiro dia de Maio de 1500*] (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 30)]. Caminha describes this place in the following way:

On Saturday morning, the admiral ordered the sails to be hoisted. We approached the entrance, which was a very broad, and some six or seven fathoms in depth. All the ships entered it and anchored in five or six fathoms. The anchorage was so good and fine and safe inside that more than two hundred ships and vessels could lie in it. (SCHWARTZ, 2010, p. 4).

[*Sábado, 25 de Abril*] Ao Sábado, pela manhã, mandou o capitão fazer vela e fomos demandar a entrada, a qual era mui larga e alta de seis, sete braças. E entraram todas as naus dentro e ancoraram-se em cinco, seis braças, a qual ancoragem dentro é tão grande e tão fremeosa e segura que podem fazer dentro nela mais de 200 navios e naus. (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 10)].

After exploring the coast and establishing contacts with the native peoples, during only few days, the main fleet continued the travel to India and one of its ships was sent back to Portugal carrying two letters, one of which is the “Letter” of Pero Vaz de Caminha to the King D. Manuel of Portugal about the discovery of Brazil (“Carta a El-Rei Dom Manuel Sobre o Achamento do Brasil”) (SCHWARTZ, 2010, p. 1).

Pero Vaz de Caminha, a knight of a noble family from Oporto, was born in this city in 1450. He was most likely traveling to India to be the scribe of the Portuguese trading post (“Feitoria”) to be built in Calicut, but he was also the scribe of the fleet (SCHWARTZ, 2010; ABREU, 1998). Calicut is the place where he died on the 16th of December 1500, probably the victim of an attack by the Moors on this trading post (MARTINS; MOTA, [1960]).

The reason for Cabral’s Armada deviation from the newly discovered route to India around the Cape of Good Hope to westward has been the subject of a continuing debate among authors (DIAS, E., 1992).

The “Letter” begins with Caminha writing about the finding (“achamento”) of the Vera Cruz lands, a term he used and that will later be questioned by several authors who wonder whether it was really a finding (“achamento”) or a discovery (“descobrimto”). This intense discussion involves the question of whether the arrival of Cabral’s fleet in this land was intentional or occurred accidentally, and whether the Portuguese Crown had prior knowledge of the existence of this land or not. Controversy also exists in respect to whether the term finding (“achamento”) designates accidental and the term discovery (“descoberta”) designates intentionality (ALEGRIA; DAVEAU; GARCIA; RELAÑO, 2007; DIAS, E., 1992).

According to several authors, numerous questions are raised that lead us to believe in the intentionality of the conquest of this new territory (DIAS, E., 1992; DIAS, M., 2001). In an analysis of the historical process of conquest of the Brazilian lands, Manuel Nunes Dias (2001) pointed out that Brazil had an owner before being discovered, since

it had already been divided between Portugal and Spain by the “Treaty of Tordesillas” (assigned in 1494).

The usual explanation that Cabral’s fleet would have accidentally blown west to the Brazilian coast due to contrary winds is not plausible, because it would be the lack of wind and not its excess that would produce this effect (DIAS, E., 1992). In an interview conducted by Manuel Costa Freire, João Paulo Oliveira e Costa stated that King D. João II of Portugal and his advisors, at the time of the “Treaty of Tordesilhas”, already knew the wind system of the southern hemisphere and that navigators had to sail to the southwest to have favorable winds (FREIRE, 2019).

Moreover, the Portuguese navigators had the experience of almost a century of navigation along the coast of Africa, which makes it unlikely that they made a navigational error regarding the arrival in Brazil (DIAS, E., 1992; DIAS, M., 2001) and more probable that the Portuguese had already known the lands to the west (DIAS, E., 1992).

An additional important issue to be raised is that Portugal would already have knowledge of these lands by the expeditions carried out by Christopher Columbus [e.g., João Paulo Oliveira e Costa in the interview conducted by Freire (2019)] or by Duarte Pacheco Pereira (1935, 1988).

Almost all authors, based on information provided by Duarte Pacheco Pereira in his work *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* and other research resources, postulate that there was an oceanic expedition to the “western region” ordered by the King (apparently in secret), before the discovery of Brazil, which was led by Duarte Pacheco Pereira in 1498 (PEREIRA, 1935; PEREIRA, 1988; SILVA, 1921). In fact, a support of this finding can be found in chapter II of the *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, as follows:

Most fortunate Prince, we have known and seen how in the third year of your reign in the year of Our Lord 1498, in which your Highness ordered us to discover the Western region, a very large landmass with many large islands adjacent, extending 70° North of the Equator, and located beyond the greatness of the Ocean, has been discovered and navigated; this distant land is densely populated and extends 28° on the other side of the Equator towards the Antarctic Pole. Such is its greatness and length that on either side its end has not been seen or known [...]. Thus if from the shores and coast of Portugal or from the Promontory of Finis Terra or from any other point of Europe, Africa or Asia we sail across the Ocean due West and East, through 36 degrees of longitude (though some points are slightly more distant) which at eighteen leagues to the degree are 648 leagues, we find this land [there is a corruption in the text here], along which the ships and subjects of your Highness now coast at your command and permission. Following this coast 28 degrees from the Equator towards the South Pole there is found much excellent Brazil, with which (and with many other things) the ships of these realms return heavily laden.³ (PEREIRA, 1935, p. 12).

³ “[...] *Bem aventurado Príncipe, temos sabido e visto como no terceiro ano do vosso reinado do ano de Nosso Senhor de mil quatrocentos e noventa e oito, donde nos Vossa Alteza mandou descobrir a parte oucidental, passando além a grandeza do mar oceano, onde é achada e navegada ũa tão grande terra firme, com muitas e grandes ilhas adjacentes a ela, que se estende a satenta graus de ladeza da linha equinocial contra o polo ártico, e, posto que seja assaz fora, é*

There is some disagreement among the authors in respect to the land that was discovered. Considering the information transcribed above, George H. T. Kimble (PEREIRA, 1935, p. 12) observed that the land that can likely be found at the distance referred from the west of Portugal is the Bermudas, but if the point of longitude given is considered it may well correspond to the north-east salient part of Brazil (but this is by no means by sailing “across the Ocean towards the west” from “the shores and coast of Portugal”). The most prevalent opinion among Portuguese authors is that it was Brazil (SILVA, 1921; PEREIRA, 1988), but some of them argue that it could be Greenland, Florida or Newfoundland (PEREIRA, 1988).

The secrecy imposed by the King D. Manuel I involving discoveries in order to prevent the export of maps, nautical instructions and pilots’ observations, especially after the return of Cabral from India⁴, makes it difficult to clarify some doubtful aspects related to them (DIAS, E., 1992; PEREIRA, 1935).

The controversy over whether the discovery/ finding (“achamento”) of the lands of Vera Cruz was intentional or accidental has been ongoing to the present day, but the dominant thesis is that the discovery of the land of Vera Cruz was intentional, irrespective of the term used to describe it is discovery or finding (ALEGRIA; DAVEAU; GARCIA; RELAÑO, 2007).

The “Letter” of Pero Vaz de Caminha has come to be regarded as the foundational document of Brazilian history, the “birth certificate” of the nation. His report offers accurate details about the geography, nature, climate, the Tupi indigenous people’s habits and customs, the conditions in the new territory, and also suggested the interests and intentions of the Portuguese Crown over it.

The purposes of the present paper are to explore the first impressions of the Portuguese with the new place and its inhabitants, the view of the “Other” and of the female body, the established relations of power and the intentions of the Crown over this new territory.

grandemente povorada, e do mesmo círculo equinocial torna outra vez e vai além em [além de] vinte e oito graus e meo de ladeza contra o polo antártico, e tanto se dilata sua grandeza e corre com muita longura, que de ãa parte nem de outra não foi visto nem sabido o fim e cabo dela [...]; assim que temos sabido que das praias e costa do mar destes Reinos de Portugal, e do promontório de Finis Terra e de qualquer outro lugar da Europa e da África [d’África] e da Ásia [d’Ásia], atravessando além todo o oceano diretamente a ocidente, ou a loeste segundo ordem de marinbaria, por trinta e seis graus de longura, que serão seiscentas e quarenta e oito léguas de caminho, contando a dezoito léguas por grau, e a lugares algum tanto mais longe, é achada esta terra não navegada pelos navios de Vossa Alteza e, por vosso mandado e licença, os dos vossos naturais. E, indo por esta costa sobredita, do mesmo círculo equinocial em diante, por vinte e oito graus de ladeza contra o polo antártico, é achada nela munto e fino brasil com outras muitas cousas de que os navios nestes reinos vem grandemente carregados”. (PEREIRA, 1988, p. 20-21).

⁴ According to Kimble, it has been shown by several authors that, in the pursuit of the goal of maintaining the monopoly of trade in Guinea and the adjacent coasts of Africa, successive kings of Portugal decided on the suppression of all information that aroused the interest of other powers. King D. John II (reigned from 1481-1495) had already made efforts to “prevent leakage of information either from printed or manuscript sources”. These efforts also included the silence of his official chroniclers, Ruy de Pina and Zurara, on matters of discoveries. During the reign of Manuel I this vigilance was intensified, particularly after Cabral’s return from India. Inclusive, the king decreed the death penalty for anyone sending information, maps, nautical instructions and pilot observations abroad (PEREIRA, 1935).

The first encounters with Brazil and native peoples: the crown intentions and relations of power

In the “Letter” to King D. Manuel about the discovery of Brazil, written in 1500 [found in the “Torre do Tombo” archive in 1773 (MARTINS; MOTA, [1960]), and first published in 1817 (CASTIGAN, 2008)], the indigenous people are seen as exotic beings, like Adam and Eve before the Fall, and the local luxurious nature is referred to as a paradise. In fact, the “Other”, when speaking of the indigenous, is regarded with interest, respect, and is sometimes associated with the state of original purity. It is his image of the indigenous, as representative of the “Golden Age”, that is expressed by missionaries and men with a high humanistic sense (SOARES, M. L., 2009). Similarly, the image of Pero Vaz de Caminha of the indigenous women (which he describes in contrastive comparison with the Guinean women) reveals some attraction on the part of the Portuguese man, because – as he states – they have “[...] their hair very black, long down to the shoulders”⁵ (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 11, our translation) and walk naked, as well as men. This objective description of the first sixteenth-century reporter is also a distanced image of the “Other” (SOARES, M. L., 2009), but distancing does not necessarily imply rejection. Instead, in Caminha’s description, we perceive a certain attachment, a sexual inclination for the indigenous woman, a woman who would cause, in whole or in part, envy to many Portuguese women (SOARES, M. L., 2009).

The narrative about women is done through a specific view. The first record about Brazil must be understood considering that it was written in the last year of the 15th century, by a man, who was European and Catholic. Thus, in the perspective or focus of Pero Vaz de Caminha’s “Letter” we find the cultural tendency of that 15th and 16th century profile. We considered – like Saussure – that “[...] far from saying that the object precedes the point of view, we would say that it is the point of view that creates the object”⁶ (SAUSSURE, 1997, p. 15, our translation).

Certain peculiarities in the writing of Pero Vaz de Caminha allow the understanding of the prevailing thought in the Portugal of the fifteen hundreds (SOARES, M. L., 2016). The “Letter” shows us the intentions of the Portuguese Crown with the territory and what were the first impressions regarding the new place and its inhabitants. In line with Max Weber (2004), who seeks to understand the meaning of the so-called social actions and find the causal links that determine them, we can see in Caminha’s “Letter” what Weber calls “social goal-oriented rational action” / “social-purposeful action”. In fact, the action is rational if there is an end of action that is logically sought, and there is the choice of the best means to achieve this end. In the “Letter”, the social power relations (the action) are effectively drawn under the perspective of domination of the “Other” (the end), a fact that will be confirmed with the subsequent colonization.

⁵ “[...] cabelos muito pretos, compridos, pelas espáduas” (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 11).

⁶ “[...] bem longe de dizer que o objeto precede o ponto de vista, diríamos que é o ponto de vista que cria o objeto” (SAUSSURE, 1997, p. 15).

From the impressions taken and registered in the “Letter”, we can recognize the construction of an image of those inhabitants in records full of visualism and taste for detail.

However, it is necessary to consider the conditions of production of this image from another one: the image that was constructed by those who arrived there. As a civilization, Portugal, at the time, was experiencing “[...] a period of change: the ‘hundred glorious years’ that represent a time of artistic and cultural boom”⁷ (SOARES, M. L., 2007, p. 9, our translation), a renewal, in part, arising from humanism. Portugal became, in fact, a Renaissance state, with new social, political, and legal systems and the progressive affirmation of a mentality that reflected the modern worldview, centered on the “transoceanic naval experience”⁸ (SOARES, M. L., 2007, p. 11, our translation).

It is in this context of voyages that the navigators of the fleet commanded by Pedro Álvares Cabral encountered a civilization whose apparent simplicity represented everything they were not, and therefore meant liberation, but also contradiction, as explained by Limberti (2012, p. 16, our translation):

A subject perceives the other from the viewpoint of himself. Respect or contempt, appreciation or indifference, among other passions and value judgments, can be aroused from the levels of congruence and incongruence between the senses, which, in turn, determine how the values will be apprehended (positively or negatively). The subjects act as mirrors, with varying degrees of optical effects. If they belong to the same community, the effects tend to reflect images of identity; if they belong to different communities (here included different cultures and civilizations), the effects tend to reflect images of contradictoriness, contrariness, opposition, and incongruence.⁹

Besides reporting an important part of the history of Brazil’s foundation, Caminha’s writing brings the discovery of new territories, the paradise, the nudity, as well as the attempt to return to the ideals of Antiquity. The description of the indigenous social behaviors that, in the author’s view, are sometimes considered naïve/pure and sometimes bestialized, lead us back to the manuals of civility existing in Portugal, that serve as a model of reference. Thus he describes the first contacts with the indigenous in this way:

⁷ “[...] *um período de mudança: os ‘cem anos gloriosos’ que representam um tempo de auge artístico e cultural*” (SOARES, M. L., 2007, p. 9, emphases in the original).

⁸ “[...] *“experiência naval transoceânica”*” (SOARES, M. L., 2007, p. 11).

⁹ *“Um sujeito vê o outro a partir do olhar de si mesmo. O respeito ou o desprezo, o apreço ou a indiferença, entre outras paixões e juízos de valores, podem ser suscitados a partir dos níveis de congruências e incongruências entre os sentidos, os quais, por sua vez, determinam como os valores vão ser apreendidos (positiva ou negativamente). Os sujeitos atuam como espelhos, com graus de efeitos óticos diversos. Se pertencem à mesma comunidade, os efeitos tendem a refletir imagens de identidade; se pertencem a comunidades diferentes (aqui incluídas culturas e civilizações diferentes), os efeitos tendem a refletir imagens de contraditoriedade, contrariedade, oposição e incongruência”* (LIMBERTI, 2012, p. 16).

They were dark brown and naked, and had no covering for their private parts, and they carried bows and arrows in their hands. They all came determinedly towards the boat. Nicolau Coelho made a sign to them to put down their bows, and they put them down. (SCHWARTZ, 2010, p. 2).

[*Eram [...] pardos, todos nus, sem nenhuma coisa que lhes cobrisse suas vergonhas. Traziam arcos nas mãos e suas setas. Vinham todos rijos [rijamente, correndo] para o batel e Nicolau Coelho lhes fez sinal que pusessem [depusessem, pousassem] os arcos; e eles os puseram* (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 6)].

For many theorizers, this first contact was extremely symbolic, because the small (non-verbal) dialogue between the two civilizations already represents a subjugation of the Indians. In the first moment, the natives showed confidence and grandeur. They were described carrying bows and arrows and as having a firm posture. After only one orderly gesture from the Portuguese sailor, their warrior image got deconstructed.

Analyzed from the standpoint of otherness, the native could have only practiced an act of cordiality and goodwill. Caminha certainly perceived it differently, as demonstrated by the discourse of his “Letter”. He shows his first look of superiority when he perceives the obedience of the “Other” in face of just a sign/ an order

Pero Vaz de Caminha, as the scribe of the Portuguese fleet, was the official eyewitness of the event (ABREU, 1998). The structure of the text written to D. Manuel is clear and, although it shows an intentional intimacy, is a text of great erudition. With a detailed narrative, in respect to both the sea and land, Caminha also describes his impressions concerning the native people, their habits and customs as a Portuguese man, having the intention to not turn the reality more beautiful or uglier than it really is or seems to him [“creia (Vossa Alteza) que por afremosentar nem afeiar haja aqui de pôr mais que aquilo que vi e me pareceu”] (SCHWARTZ, 2020, p. 1; CAMINHA, 2000, p. 4). Brazil belongs to the so-called “New World”, being, as such, a very young territory compared to Europe.

Despite the enduring controversy over whether the discovery of Brazil was intentional or accidental, was a discovery or a finding (“achamento”), the ignorance or previous knowledge of the lands does not invalidate the fact that there were indigenous populations there, the local inhabitants. It is important to point out that the historiography for a long period acknowledged the Lusitanian achievement of great deeds while discarding the presence of the native peoples. It is clear that the Portuguese were, in fact, looking for new lands in order to explore it, and the search for precious metals and other riches was an unquestionable fact. Portugal’s mercantilist interests are already clearly evidenced in Caminha’s “Letter”.

In the perspective of Enrique Dussel (1993), presented in the work *1492: O Encobrimento do outro: a origem do mito da modernidade*, discoveries are an invention of Western Europe and are part of the myth of modernity, where the victim becomes guilty and the invader, paradoxically, is innocent. For the author, indigenous history has been affected, in every way, by colonization and natives are the first victims of modernity, as they had to survive inhuman oppression (DUSSEL, 1993).

Caminha reports the efforts to communicate with the indigenous people in an attempt to identify if there is gold and silver in lands of Vera Cruz. Their exploratory intention is visible, since contact with the “primitive” peoples, as Caminha reports in his missive, is made gradually and through barter.

The ingenuity of the natives is seen as primitivism, but without negative moral intentions. The discourse present in the “Letter” refers to the values of antiquity related to the “Golden Age”, an era known as a period of stability, peace and harmony, according to Hesiod.

The nakedness found in the tropics is further related to the Biblical allegory of Adam and Eve and their innocence in relation to what was around them. For Jacques Revel (2009), the original sin is directly associated with nudity. Clothing obeyed religious norms and, once the body was covered, the sin could not be passed on to another person. The modes of civility were socially adjusted and all bodily and gestural expressions should be revised, in order to not relapse into or repeat less appropriate or unacceptable attitudes.

In his book *The Renaissance*, Nicolau Sevcenko (1994) refers that, at that time, the Humanists were all Christians and interpreted the Gospel according to ancient ideals. Since anthropocentrism gives man capacity to know more and more and to dominate the world he is getting to know – which partly explains the reason for the great navigations – as man is the supreme work of nature, he believes he can exploit it¹⁰. In fact, at the time of the great navigations, the mentality centered on anthropological optimism and on the cult of reason dictated the idea of the possibility of dominating nature to the European Man. Moreover, the purpose of the voyages was not only to explore the territory, but also to dominate the people of the lands encountered, instilling the idea of the “supremacy of the old world” of Europe (SOARES, M. L., 2009), which was considered the standard model. In the modern view, the world was open and possessed infinite riches and the Portuguese through observation and experience, broadened the knowledge of the world and of mankind (SOARES, M. L., 2016; SOARES, M. L.; SOARES, M. J., 2020)¹¹. As Caminha explained in his “Letter” to the King, this group, when getting off the boats, did not enter into the territory by force, but with care and caution not to cause conflict with those who lived there.

The imagery of the Modern Age is linked to Antiquity, the paradise of Adam and Eve was lost. When the caravels sighted the mount named Pascoal, the link with this place is immediately perceived. In many passages, Caminha describes Brazil as a flat land

¹⁰ For the essayist, the world in the Middle Ages was based on the figure of God and on the idea that the earth was finite, with the economy polarized in few regions, according to the structure of the feudal system. Human actions were all subordinated to religious dogmas, and everything was explained according to the divine will, with reason being synthesized in faith.

¹¹ The Portuguese contribution to the Renaissance was experimental, mechanical, and nautical knowledge. It was proven that the Indian Ocean is navigable; the Torrid Zone is habitable; the world is not flat and has different regions; new climates, faunas, floras, landscapes, customs were unveiled, opening the human horizon to the recognition of the exotic and the relative. The existence of antipodes was proved. The variety of languages and races, in the uniformity of humankind, were recognized. From then on, a new philosophy of knowledge was founded, making possible a quantitative and qualitative advance, namely: to know more in a different way (SOARES, M. L., 2016; SOARES, M. L.; SOARES, M. J., 2020).

of vast forests of great trees. According to the Holy Scriptures, God provides everything necessary for human subsistence, as long as no sin is committed. Caminha sees that the innocence of the natives is genuine, they live in a sin-free state concerning their nakedness, and thus they were not committing any infraction, which enabled them to be converted:

They seem to be such innocent people that if we could understand their speech and they ours, they would immediately become Christians, seeing that, by all appearances, they do not understand about any faith. Therefore, if the exiles who are to remain here learn their speech and understand them, I do not doubt but that they will follow that blessed path Your Majesty is desirous they should and become Christians and believe in our holy religion. May it please God to bring them to a knowledge of it, for truly these people are good and have a fine simplicity. (SCHWARTZ, 2010, p. 6).

[Parece-me gente de tal inocência que, se os homens entendesse e eles a nós, que seriam logo cristãos, porque eles não têm nem entendem em nenhuma crença, segundo parece. E, portanto, se os degradados que aqui háo-de ficar aprenderem bem a sua fala e os entenderem, não duvido, segundo a santa tenção de Vossa Alteza, fazerem-se cristãos e crerem na nossa santa fé, à qual praza a Nosso Senhor que os traga, porque, certo, esta gente é boa e de boa simplicidade. (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 25)].

Domination is something that passes through the acceptance of the interference performed in the individuals' ways of conduct. The contact between the indigenous peoples and the Portuguese occurred through curiosity regarding their habits and customs. Bartering was the first domination mechanism used by the Portuguese, when they realized that the Indians estranged their presence.

The Portuguese brought with them strange goods for this culture and, through the new, the relationship between the dominant and the dominated was legitimized.

Now the admiral ordered Nicolau Coelho and Bartolomeu Dias to go on shore and take the two men and let them go with their bows and arrows. He also ordered each of them to be given a new shirt, a red bonnet, a rosary of white beads of bone, which they put on their arms, a varvel, and a bell. And he sent with them, to remain there, a banished youth of the household of Dom João Telo, named Afonso Ribeiro, who was to stay with them there and learn about their lives and their customs. (SCHWARTZ, 2010, p. 4).

[E daqui [o capitão-mor] mandou o capitão Nicolau Coelho e Bartolomeu Dias que fossem em terra e levassem aqueles dous homens e os deixassem ir com seu arco e setas, a cada um dos quais mandou dar uma camisa nova e uma carapuça vermelha e um rosário de contas brancas d'osso, que eles levavam nos braços, e um cascavél [guizo] e uma campainha. E mandou com eles para ficar lá um mancebo degradado, criado de dom João Telo, a que chamam Afonso Ribeiro, para lá andar com eles e saber de seu viver e maneira [maneiras]. (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 10)].

Caminha's "Letter" is inserted in the testimony literature. The narration is made since the departure from Belém and the official scribe describes his impressions of the

new land and, in his writing, the Portuguese have individual and defined roles, while the Indians are described collectively and always with reference to their “habits”, that are considered “strange” by the narrator.

For Novaes (1999), seeing the “Other” is partly an intellectual act, because the appearance is built through previously constituted notions, that is, the imaginary. In the “Letter”, we can see how strange the Europeans found the natives, as they never tried to find any familiar traits in them. Also according to Caminha:

They are of a dark brown, rather reddish color. They have good well-made faces and noses. They go naked, with no sort of covering. They attach no more importance to covering up their private parts or leaving them uncovered than they do to showing their faces. They are very ingenuous in that matter. They both had holes in their lower lips and a bone in them as broad as the knuckles of a hand and as thick as a cotton spindle and sharp at the end like a bodkin. They put these bones in from inside the lip and the part which is placed between the lip and the teeth is made like a rook in chess. They fit them in such a way that they do not hurt them nor hinder them talking or eating or drinking (SCHWARTZ, 2010, p. 3).

[A feição deles é serem pardos, maneira d’ avermelhados, de bons rostos e bons narizes, bem-feitos. Andam nus, sem nenhuma cobertura, nem estimam [nem se importam com] nenhuma cousa cobrir nem mostrar suas vergonhas. E estão acerca disso com tanta inocência como têm em mostrar o rosto. Traziam ambos os beiços de baixo furados e metido por eles um osso branco de comprimento duma mão travessa e de grossura dum fuso d’ algodão e agudo na ponta como furador. Metem-no pela parte de dentro do beiço e o que lhe fica entre o beiço e os dentes é feito como roque de xadrez; e em tal maneira o trazem ali encaixado, que lhes não dá paixão nem lhes estorva a fala, nem comer, nem beber. (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 7-8)].

The physical complexion is subject to a detailed analysis by the European scribe who – coming from an extremely conservative society, where the most that can be seen of a woman are her ankles – is shocked and, at the same time, fascinated by the nudity and perfection of the native women’s bodies:

There were three or four girls among them, very young and very gentle, with their hair very black, long down to the shoulders; and their private parts (shames) were so prominent, so neat and so clean from their hairs that, if we looked at them very well, we did not get ashamed at all.¹² (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 11, our translation).

The writer Jaime Cortesão makes the following comment regarding these observations in his adaptation of the “Letter”:

¹² “Ali andavam entre eles três ou quatro moças, bem moças e bem gentis, com cabelos muito pretos, compridos, pelas espáduas; e suas vergonhas tão altas e tão çarradinhas e tão limpas das cabeleiras que de as nós muito bem olharmos não tínhamos nenhuma vergonha” (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 11).

This physical perfection of the natives would have greatly impressed those who dealt with them in those first years of contact. Thus, their nakedness would demonstrate their innocence, so, as they had not been corrupted by civilization, they were naturally good, just as God had created them, still living in the bosom of a healthy and welcoming nature. Thus, they were free from sin and were just only waiting for the Word of God to be brought to become good Christians.¹³ (CORTESÃO, 1999, p. 4-5, our translation).

Caminha looks at the native women, attracted by a mixture of naivety and sensuality. Two biases that are very well constructed by the scribe, by making an intelligent polysemic game with the word *shame* (meaning both shame and private parts). In this way, the innocent aspect attributed to the natives is subtly corrupted when the focus becomes the woman:

There were also among them four or five young women, naked and did not look bad. Among them was one with one thigh, from the knee to the hip and the buttock, all painted with that black dye and the rest of them were all of their own color. Another had both knees with their curves painted like this, and also the tops of their feet. And their private parts (shames) were so naked and so innocently uncovered that there was no shame in it. There was also another young woman with a little boy or girl on her lap, tied with a cloth, which I don't know what it was made of, to her breasts, so that only his/her little legs were showing. But the mother's legs and the rest of her body didn't have any fabric.¹⁴ (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 17, our translation).

The dazzle for the new described by Caminha does not only concern cultural aspects. There is a sexual attraction of the Portuguese man towards the native women. In the "Letter", the clerk of the armada uses the word *shame* (*vergonha*) with different meanings (meaning both shame and private parts). This word is associated with the European and Catholic cultural view of the parts of a woman's body that are sexualized, and also denotes the act of looking at these naked natives without any embarrassment or modesty. Caminha even commits the inelegance of comparing them to European women:

¹³ "Essa perfeição física dos indígenas teria impressionado bastante quem com eles lidou nesses primeiros anos de contacto. Assim, a sua nudez demonstraria a sua inocência, pois, como não tinham sido corrompidos pela civilização, eram naturalmente bons, tal como Deus os tinha criado, vivendo ainda no seio de uma natureza sã e acolhedora. Estavam, então, isentos do pecado, e aguardavam apenas que até eles fosse levada a palavra de Deus para que se tornassem bons cristãos" (CORTESÃO, 1999, p. 4-5).

¹⁴ "Também andavam, entre eles, quatro ou cinco mulheres moças, assim nuas que não pareciam mal, entre as quais andava uma com uma coxa, do joelho até ao quadril e a nádega, toda tinta daquela tintura preta e o resto todo da sua própria cor. Outra trazia ambos os joelhos com as curvas assim tintas e também os colos dos pés. E suas vergonhas tão nuas e com tanta inocência descobertas que não havia aí nenhuma vergonha. Também andava aí outra mulher moça com um menino ou menina ao colo, atado com um pano não sei de quê aos peitos, que não apareciam senão as perninhas, mas as pernas da mãe e o resto não traziam nenhum pano." (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 17).

And the body of one of those girls was all painted, from the bottom to top, with that tincture. And her body was so well-modeled and so rounded, and her shame they had seen her features, would feel ashamed for not having theirs look like hers.¹⁵ (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 12).

When doing this comparison, Caminha makes clear his preference for the native woman that he considers so *graceful*, that – in his view – would cause great embarrassment and envy of the Europeans. One cannot forget that Caminha adheres to a worldview in which “[...] the body was censored and repressed, according to medieval European and Portuguese beliefs”¹⁶ (GONZAGA, 2004, p. 51, our translation).

In the “Letter”, it is possible to find several characteristics that coincide with the thought of the contemporary Portuguese man, a fact that is profitable to the analysis, interpretation, and critical reflection of historical sources. Today (SOARES, M. L.; FONSECA; SOARES, M. J., 2020), as in the past, the Brazilian woman is characterized by Caminha’s stereotype: she is the exotic woman, with a rounded body, comfortable with nudity, brown skin, and long hair:

Only one woman came with those who were with us to-day. She was young and stayed throughout the Mass. We gave her a cloth to cover herself with and put it around her. But she did not pull it down to cover herself when she sat down. Thus, Sire, the innocence of Adam himself was not greater than these people’s, as concerns the shame of the body. (SCHWARTZ, 2010, p. 8).

[Entre todos estes que hoje vieram não veio mais que uma mulher moça, a qual esteve sempre à missa, à qual deram um pano com que se cobrisse e puseram-lho darredor de si. Mas ao assentar não fazia memória de o muito estender para se cobrir. Assim, Senhor, que a inocência desta gente é tal, que a d’Adão não seria mais quanta em vergonha. (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 29)].

It is possible to state that the indigenous people were seen as exotic beings, similar to Adam and Eve, and nature is described as a paradise. The innocence of natives is highlighted in several moments. Throughout his narrative, Caminha intends to dispel the idea of the Tupiniquim Indians as sinners, and states that they are simple and docile, and their conversion is easy. He also states that if they had knowledge of the faith, they would certainly be Christians.

Conversion is used for domination, although the Christian faith is at first strange to the indigenous people. Religion is thoughtfully placed in the native daily life, and natives gradually become converted to the Christian faith and to new habits and customs. The barter can be considered not only a way to establish and solidify social relations, but also

¹⁵ “E uma daquelas moças era toda tinta [tingida], de fundo a cima, daquela tintura, a qual, certo, era tão bem feita e tão redonda e sua vergonha, que ela não tinha, tão graciosa, que a muitas mulheres da nossa terra, vendo-lhe tais feições, fizera vergonha, por não terem a sua como ela.” (CAMINHA, 2000, p. 12).

¹⁶ “[...] o corpo era censurado e reprimido, de acordo com as convicções medievais” (GONZAGA, 2004, p. 51).

to highlight the naivety of the natives, since they would be easily ensnared by European novelties, brought by a people who consider themselves “civilizing and dominant”¹⁷ (SOARES, M. L., 2009, p. 189, our translation).

Conclusions

We highlight the importance of the “Letter” as a report or travel relation about the finding of the lands of Vera Cruz. In detriment of all past indigenous history, of which there is no written record, Caminha recognizes with his “Letter” the foundation of Brazil and his writing reinforces elements of domination, which are an integral part of European culture.

Even today, the recognition that the “Letter” is “the birth certificate of Brazil”¹⁸ (MACHADO, 1996, p. 95, our translation) validates the Eurocentric history and the view of this country from the perspective of domination, therefore, in a one-sided way.

By analyzing the “Letter” written by Pero Vaz de Caminha, it can be said that the approach to this document is dynamic and that it contributes to the understanding of Portuguese mentality and culture. Thus, it contains structural elements of the construction of pre-conceived attributes (which are commonly accepted and characterized by immutability) reflecting a given society and of a stereotypical image of Brazilian women (SOARES, M. L.; FONSECA; SOARES, M. J., 2020).

Caminha’s discourse can be considered the founding matrix of the representation of Brazilian women by the Portuguese. Colonization is the main refractor of the image of the Indian and of women by the Portuguese. It imposes a power structure and a monastic framework, that do not integrate the Indian and where the colonizers themselves are confined, at first, of pursuing the utopian mission of finding, and then establishing relations between the man of the old and the new world (SOARES, M. L., 2009).

Caminha, by seeing the nude natives, does not only have an anthropological view, but also a sexualized one. This view ended up leaving marks in the construction of the “image” of Brazilian women, both in Brazil and abroad. The Brazilian woman is constantly pointed out for the high rates of sexual tourism, and the biotype is still that of rounded shapes, suntanned skin, and well-shaped features. This image of the “Other” is made of commonplaces, revealing reductionism on the part of European men (SOARES, M. L.; FONSECA; SOARES, M. J., 2020).

Considering the temporality of texts, Mikhail Bakhtin (1992, p. 364, our translation) states that “[...] the great works of literature take centuries to be born, and at the moment they appear we harvest only the ripe fruit of a slow and complex gestation”¹⁹. Paraphrasing this author, today, in Brazil, we harvest the ripe fruit of a complex, pain-

¹⁷ “civilizador e dominante” (SOARES, M. L., 2009, p. 189).

¹⁸ “a certidão de nascimento do Brasil” (MACHADO, 1996, p. 95).

¹⁹ “[...] as grandes obras da literatura levam séculos para nascer, e, no momento em que aparecem, colhemos apenas o fruto maduro, oriundo do processo de uma lenta e complexa gestação” (BAKHTIN, 1992, p. 364).

ful, and slow gestation of the history of a colonized country, which is the target of a stereotyped representation, and that establishes with Portugal – despite the common language – a kind of asymmetrical relations.

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- **RESUMO:** *O foco deste estudo é uma abordagem do ponto de vista sociocultural e histórico-literário da “Carta de Achamento do Brasil”, escrita por Pero Vaz de Caminha ao rei D. Manuel I de Portugal. Além de se destacarem as primeiras impressões dos portugueses com o novo lugar e os seus habitantes, evidenciam-se igualmente as intenções da Coroa sobre o território e as relações de poder anunciadoras da intenção exploratória do Brasil, confirmada pela colonização posterior. Perspectivando a visão do “Outro” e analisando o discurso de Caminha em torno dos olhares construídos sobre o corpo feminino, visam-se abordar neste artigo aspectos como as impressões sobre a mulher, a nudez, a leitura do corpo e suas imbricações na sexualidade. Visa-se, enfim, refletir sobre o modo como a “Carta” pode oferecer elementos para a compreensão da imagem da mulher brasileira no imaginário masculino português.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *“Carta” de Caminha. Mulher. Corpo feminino. Sexualidade. Relações de poder. Descobrimientos.*

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