

Translating Esotericism: Portuguese*

José Vieira Leitão

jose.cv.leitao@gmail.com

Being a scholar who is trying to understand what could be called “magic” in the Portuguese modern period has often led me to problematic academic crossroads. Given the sparsity of locally conceived academic studies, it is often necessary to fall back on propositions found in the wider context of international scholarship written in English. Yet, the more research I have done in this domain, the more I have been forced to acknowledge the inadequacy of this approach. If Portugal and the wider Portuguese-speaking world are largely absent from “Western” academic discourse and the overall narrative of modernity (never mind the history of magic), then how much should we care about the opinions and notions put forward by non-Portuguese-speaking scholars? If they never read a Portuguese Inquisition document or an Iberian anti-magical treatise, what could they possibly have to say that is of any use for my local Portuguese problems? This multi-layered issue is perhaps best illustrated by a simple exercise: translating the English word *sorcery* into Portuguese and back again.

At first sight, it might seem that there is no real challenge in translating the word *sorcery* into Portuguese. It will either be *feitiçaria* (as an act or technique), *feitiço* (as an object or product of *feitiçaria*) or the less common *sortilégio*. Etymologically speaking, *sorcery* comes from the Latin *sors*, meaning “lot,” “fate,” or “fortune,”

* The author thanks the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) for the grant SFRH/BD/144983/2019, whose funding was used in the research for the current paper.

and in this sense, *sortilégio*, the least common of the possible translations, is the most accurate one, as it possesses the same Latin root. Yet, should *sortilégio* be translated back into English, it could equally mean “sortilege” or “spell.”

On the other hand, *feitiçaria* and *feitiço*, the most direct “common-tongue” translations available for *sorcery*, derive from the entirely distinct Latin *facticius*, meaning “artificial” or “not natural,” or *facere*, “to make.” In this sense, there is an irreducible manufactural aspect to *feitiço* and *feitiçaria*, and a somewhat implied materiality in their etymological root. Consequently, there is somewhat of a dissonance between the current Portuguese understanding of *feitiçaria/feitiço* as a technique to induce harm and its linguistic root. This dissonance is, however, a historical issue: consultation of early modern accusations and descriptions of magical crimes reveals that until the eighteenth century there was no such dissonance. In this time period, when the word *feitiço* was used, it often referred to a concrete physical object which, when in close proximity to its intended victim, would cause a kind of supernatural illness. As suggested by its Latin root, these objects, often described as bundles of various materials (such as hairs, feathers, and sticks), besides requiring manufacture, were supposed to function by means of an unnatural force. This means that there was no direct relationship between the substances which made up a *feitiço* and its effect, and these effects were not due to natural occult virtues. Rather, the virtue of a *feitiço* was external to it, as it was believed to be rooted in diabolical agencies or an evil intention by the *feiticeiro*, the sorcerer.

This aspect would come to frame the academic conception of *feitiço* as that of a diabolical bundle capable of causing unnatural illness, mostly due to its medical description by the author Manuel de Azevedo in his treatise *Da Fascinação, Olhado, ou Quebranto* (Of Fascination, The Eye or the Breaking), published in 1690.¹ The same notion of *feitiço* was carried into the eighteenth century by the medical author João Curvo Semedo, who in his 1708 *Observações Medicas* mostly

1. Machado, *Bibliotheca Lusitana*, vol. 3, 184–85; Azevedo, *Correçam de Abusos*, Part II, 43.

describes *feitiço* as something that influences its victim when drunk or eaten,² and by Raphael Bluteau, author of the first Portuguese dictionary in 1713.³

When it comes to the relationship and translation of *sorcery* into *feitiço*, or its reverse, this discussion shows that historically there are two distinct meanings to the Portuguese word: the modern one (an object) and the contemporary one (an immaterial harmful force or technique to induce harm), and only the contemporary meaning is an actual synonym of *sorcery*. This immediately spells out an academic problem, as any conscientious historian of magic needs to have this distinction present at all times and be wary of uncritically importing methodological frameworks or definitions from English-speaking scholars. This point is directly alluded to, and extensively discussed, by Francisco Bethencourt in his *O Imaginário da Magia*. While admitting the complex historical baggage that is carried by words related to any “traditional” form of magical practice and its persecution, Bethencourt ultimately fails to identify the modern Portuguese *feitiço* as a reference to a tangible object instead of a technique.⁴ Yet another case can be seen in Laura de Mello e Souza’s *The Devil in the Land of the Holy Cross*, where the local and contextual meaning of *feitiçaria* and *feitiço* is simply disregarded, due to their apparently linear association with the English *sorcery* and a direct importation of the methodologies and definition given by Norman Cohn and Keith Thomas.⁵

While this initial translation issue is not confined to the Portuguese language (with other Latin-based languages having similar words, such as the Spanish *hechicería/hechizo* or the somewhat uncommon Italian *fattucchieria/fattura*), the Portuguese case offers several unique problems due to the fact that it is a language used by several cultures. As a result of the Portuguese expansion into Africa, several terms and notions that had their origin in Portuguese European culture were projected upon non-Europeans. As demonstrated in the 1980s by William

2. Curvo Semmedo, *Observações Medicas*, 566.

3. Bluteau, *Vocabulário Português e Latino*, vol. 4, 65.

4. Bethencourt, *O Imaginário da Magia*, 46–54.

5. Souza, *The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross*, 90.

Pietz, in three fundamental papers about “The Problem of the Fetish,” the immediate result for the word *feitiço* was that it quickly became associated with a number of West-African religious practices and their cultic objects. In Portuguese Africa, local religious expressions were not marginalized as a result of being identified as idolatry, but rather due to what was perceived as the “manufactured” and material nature of the local deities. Hence, they were excluded from the category of “religion” altogether, and identified rather as *feitiço*, meaning artificial bundles of material with demonic connotations. The eventual result was the Afro-European pidgin *fetisso*,⁶ which was then apprehended by northern European travelers as *fetish*⁷ – a word that now signified a particular form of primitive African religion – and introduced into the mainstream academic discourse of the history of religion by Charles de Brosses in his 1760 work *Du culte des dieux fétiches ou Parallèle de l’ancienne religion de l’Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie*.⁸

Importantly, on par with the difficulties identified in the works of the Portuguese-speaking scholars mentioned above, Pietz’s articles exemplarily illustrate the problem of misunderstanding the meaning of *feitiço* from the opposite side of the linguistic divide. While this criticism does not jeopardize Pietz’s most important conclusions, his claim that “[t]he basic components of the idea of the fetish were not present in the medieval notion of the feitiço”⁹ is a direct result of him simply not knowing the meaning of *feitiço* in the Portuguese modern period. On yet another level, the identification of the Afro-Portuguese *feitiço* brings forth a new problem for the translation of this word to and from English. In Angola, the word *feitiço* is currently associated with pre-Christian or not strictly Christian folk practices, whether they are accepted and understood as religious or otherwise.

Still in the West-African context, another concept close to Pietz’s definition of *fetish*, and culturally close to *feitiço* in the Portuguese trans-Atlantic world, is

6. Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” 5.

7. Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa,” 108.

8. For an overview of the rich history of the words *fetish* and *fetishism* see Endres (ed.), *Fetichismus*.

9. Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, II,” 35.

mandinga. This word primarily refers to the inhabitants of the Mali Empire,¹⁰ reputed to be great *feiticeiros* (as mentioned by Bluteau)¹¹ and later associated with various forms of talismanic pouches. In Portuguese Inquisitorial sources, these are referred to as *bolsas de mandinga* (*mandinga* pouches), or just *mandingas*. During the height of the Portuguese Empire, *mandingas* became popular items among soldiers and slaves. While traversing ethnic lines, it would seem that they were exclusively male talismans meant for physical protection. They were openly used in Lisbon¹² and any remote fortress within the Empire, such as in Mazagão (El Jadida),¹³ thus becoming an exemplary multicultural nexus of trans-Atlantic magico-religious practices and ideas.

In this trans-Atlantic context, the word *mandinga* can also be found as a synonym of *feitico*, both in its modern and contemporary meanings. Alternatively, *mandinga* can also mean “trickery” or “deceit,” particularly in Portugal and Brazil, a meaning it shares with the modern Portuguese *feitico*.¹⁴ In the Brazilian case, *mandinga* can finally be used as a depreciative term for a food offering used in an Afro-Brazilian religion, echoing the diabolical and non-religious artificiality of the modern Portuguese and West-African *feitico*.

Yet another word that can be used as a synonym of *feitico* in the Atlantic Lusophone world is *macumba*.¹⁵ It has an uncertain etymology, as it may be associated with a Bantu word for a religious musical instrument or, alternatively, the name of a runaway slave community.¹⁶ In its Brazilian context, this is historically a derogatory umbrella term for magico-religious practices of low-class urban laborers of African descent,¹⁷ a partial social synonym of the Angolan *feitico*.

10. Santos, *As Bolsas de Mandinga no Espaço Atlântico*, 23.

11. Bluteau, *Vocabulário Português e Latino*, vol. 5, 286.

12. Paiva, *Bruxaria e Superstição*, 144.

13. Calainho, *Metrópole das Mandingas*, 99.

14. Bluteau, *Vocabulário Português e Latino*, vol. 4, 62.

15. Cascudo, *Dicionário do Folclore Brasileiro*, 530.

16. Hayes, “Black Magic and the Academy,” 286.

17. Hayes, “Black Magic and the Academy,” 285.

As a term of social and religious exclusion, *macumba* is not just used by upper-class members of Brazilian society to discriminate against lower-class religious practices, but is also a mechanism of exclusion among African-derived religions.¹⁸ As an accusation, *macumba* typically functions as an antithesis to pure Africanity, and its discourse and propagation has been supported and partially constructed by academically validated religious systems of African descent. This means that the word *macumba* is often taken to signify a degenerated or impure African religion, just like its synonymic *feitiço* – something devoid of value and demonic in nature.

To now wrap up this discussion of the problems in translating between *sorcery* and *feitiço* and back again, we have seen that this Portuguese word can have up to three different meanings. These meanings are linked to its etymological root and modern usage, its evolution in contemporary spoken Portuguese, and its transport to and recontextualization in West Africa. *Feitiço* can be a type of harmful and diabolical object, a technique for the induction of harm, and an umbrella term for a variety of Angolan magico-religious practices. Furthermore, the articulations emerging from the transport of this word to Africa and its propagation throughout the Portuguese Empire intertwined this with other non-European terms, such as *mandinga* and *macumba*. While possible synonyms of *feitiço* within their contexts, these are themselves terms with particular cultural meanings that carry their own histories as terms of exclusion among West-African-based Brazilian religions searching for academic approval and a perceived African racial or spiritual purity.

If pushed towards an English translation, these five words (the modern, contemporary, and Angolan *feitiço*, *mandinga* and *macumba*), will all fall into the singular *sorcery*, thereby losing their full meaning and cultural implications. An argument can then be made that only one of these is in fact translatable as *sorcery*: the contemporary *feitiço*, with all of the others being best left alone as concepts specific to their epochs and geographies. On the other side of the linguistic divide,

18. Hayes, “Black Magic and the Academy,” 287.

if the word *sorcery* is encountered by European, African, or South-American Portuguese speakers, what are they supposed to understand by it?

Is there anything that an academic definition of the English word *sorcery*, or of any other word, can offer for the understanding of Portuguese-language magic or esotericism in general? While this question is largely rhetorical, the conclusion I am constantly led to, and which responds to the opening question of this essay, is that such words and definitions can offer a great deal of benefit, but perhaps only to the history of Anglophone magical practices. More than a criticism of uninformed English-speaking scholars, the variability of *feitico* is a cautionary tale for any Portuguese-speaker who wants to contextualize his culture in the global discourse of magic.

Bibliography

- Azevedo, Manoel (friar). *Correcçam de Abusos, Introducidos Contra o Verdadeyro Methodo da Medicina, & Farol Medicinal Para Medicos, Cirurgiões, & Boticarios. II. Parte. Em Tres Tratados. O Primeyro da Fascinaçam, Olhado, ou Quebranto, & que he Infirmidade Mortal, Não Só Para os Meninos, Mas Tambem Para os de Mayor Idade, cõ Todos os Sinaes Para Se Conhecer, & os Mais Experimentados, & Selectos Remedios Para se Curar. O Segundo da Mais Breve, e Experimentada Curaçãõ das Bexigas, & Sarampãõ. O Terceyro de Quanto Proveyto Sejam os Pós Purgativos do Ouro Preparado, Cujas Excellencias, & Qualidades Se Veraõ Com as Grandes Experiencias, Que Por Muytos, & Diversos Medicos se Fizeraõ Com os Ditos Pós.* Lisbon: Officina de Manoel & Joseph Lopes Ferreira, 1705.
- Bethencourt, Francisco. *O Imaginário da Magia: Feiticeiras, Adivinhos e Curandeiros em Portugal no Século XVI.* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2004.
- Bluteau, Raphael. *Vocabulario Portuguez e Latino, Aulico, Anatomico, Architectonico, Bellico, Botanico, Brasilico, Comico, Critico, Chimico, Dogmatico, Dialectico, Dendrologico, Ecclesiastico, Etymologico, Economico, Florifero, Forense, Fructifero, Geographico, Geometrico, Gnomonico, Hydrographico, Homonymico, Hierologico, Ictyologico, Indico, Isagogico, Laconico, Liturgico, Lithologico, Medico, Musico, Meteorologico, Nautico, Numerico, Neoterico, Ortographico, Optico, Ornithologico, Poetico, Philologico, Pharmaceutico, Quidditativo, Qualitativo, Quantitativo, Rethorico, Rustico, Romano, Symbolico, Synonymico, Syllabico,*

- Theologico, Therapeutico, Technologico, Uranologico, Xenophonico, Zoologico*, vol. 4. Coimbra: Collegio das Artes da Companhia de Jesu, 1713.
- Bluteau, Raphael. *Vocabulario Portuguez e Latino, Aulico, Anatomico, Architectonico, Bellico, Botanico, Brasilico, Comico, Critico, Chimico, Dogmatico, Dialectico, Dendrologico, Ecclesiastico, Etymologico, Economico, Florifero, Forense, Fructifero, Geographico, Geometrico, Gnomonico, Hydrographico, Homonymico, Hierologico, Ictyologico, Indico, Isagogico, Laconico, Liturgico, Lithologico, Medico, Musico, Meteorologico, Nautico, Numerico, Neoterico, Ortographico, Optico, Ornithologico, Poetico, Philologico, Pharmaceutico, Quidditativo, Qualitativo, Quantitativo, Rethorico, Rustico, Romano, Symbolico, Synonimico, Syllabico, Theologico, Therapeutico, Technologico, Uranologico, Xenophonico, Zoologico*, vol. 5. Coimbra: Collegio das Artes da Companhia de Jesu, 1716.
- Calainho, Daniela Buono. *Metrópole das Mandingas: Religiosidade Negra e Inquisição Portuguesa no Antigo Regime*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Garamond, 2008.
- Cascudo, Luís da Câmara. *Dicionário do Folclore Brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro Publicações, n.d.
- Curvo Semmedo, Joam. *Observações Medicas Doutrinarias: De Cem Casos Gravissimos, Que em Serviço da Patria & das Nações Estranhas Escreve em Lingua Portuguesa, & Latina*. Lisbon: Officina de Antonio Pedrozo Glaram, 1707.
- Endres, Johannes, ed. *Fetischismus: Grundlagentexte vom 18. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017.
- Hayes, Kelly E. “Black Magic and the Academy: Macumba and Afro-Brazilian ‘Orthodoxies’.” *History of Religions* 46, no. 4 (2007): 283–315.
- Machado, Diogo Barbosa. *Bibliotheca Lusitana Historica, Critica, e Cronologica: Na Qual se Comprehende a Noticia dos Autores Portuguezes, que Compuserão Desde o Tempo de Promulgação da Ley da Graça até o Tempo Presente*, vol. 3. Lisbon: Officina de Ignacio Rodrigues, 1752.
- Paiva, José Pedro. *Bruxaria e Superstição num País Sem “Caça às Bruxas” 1600–1774*. Lisbon: Editorial Notícias, 2002.
- Pietz, William. “The Problem of the Fetish, I.” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (1985): 5–17.

- . “The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish.” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (1987): 23–45.
- . “The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa: Bosman’s Guinea and the Enlightenment Theory of Fetishism.” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 16 (1988): 105–24.
- Santos, Vanicléia Silva. “As Bolsas de Mandinga no Espaço Atlântico: Século XVIII.” PhD Dissertation, University of São Paulo (Faculdade de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Departamento de História), 2008.
- Souza, Laura de Mello e. *The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross: Witchcraft, Slavery, and Popular Religion in Colonial Brazil*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.