

Stirring the Pot

Nancy Dantas

The journeys and tracks of rice, today considered a staple of the Portuguese diet, serve to lift certain social and cultural connections that might not be immediately available or recognizable to contemporary audiences. Like sugar, coffee, maize, and bananas, rice is a historied crop, and the specific genus *Oryza glaberrima* — the inspiration and seed of this exhibition — was introduced to Europe and the Americas as the result of transoceanic travel, likely to have been cultivated in the surrounding fields of Comporta and the wider region of Alcácer do Sal as early as the fifteenth century. There are deep histories embedded in what we eat, and this side or main is no exception!

Given that the long history of rice remains largely unwritten in the Portuguese annals, a consortium of historians has sought to attend to this gap, occupying itself with the historical study of the genus *Oryza glaberrima*, placing it, through their scholarship, squarely in the line of sight of Portuguese historiography, positing it as an avenue for understanding a long and slow history of cultural transfers.¹ According to their research, *Oryza glaberrima*, with origins in West Africa, is likely to have been purchased by Portuguese sailors who had settled on Cape Verde, sending it to Lisbon where it was used in dishes in noble houses as early as the 16th and 17th centuries, in *manjares*, prepared with milk or served with lamb, chicken or fish.² Today, rice is the second largest of all national crops, after maize, with an average per capita consumption of 17kg/year, the highest in Europe.³

By stirring the proverbial pot, this exhibition poetically lifts the “Black rice” that has settled at the bottom of the *potjie*,⁴ evoking the men, women and children who brought grains in their hair⁵ and knowledge systems to bear on its cultivation in marshes along the Portuguese coast, in South Carolina, Brazil and as far as Suriname. In places like Maranhão, Brazil, the technique of rice cultivation follows those long used in Africa: fields are cleared of bush and burned prior to cultivation, followed by their readying for sowing with a long-handled hoe. Puncturing the ground with a stick, the grains of rice are be dropped into a hole and covered by foot, a method also identified on Carolina rice plantations.⁶ Would this technique also have been adopted in Alcácer do Sal? Are the rice paddies that surround us, the ways they have been cultivated, is this staple of the contemporary Portuguese diet, a legacy of expert African planters and farmers?

* * *

A commemoration of the long African presence in the Vale do Sado, *Stirring the Pot* temporarily transforms the Casa da Cultura, a former rice barn and once cinema, into a staging of scenes and entwinements between the material and the ethereal, the overt and latent, inside and outside, past and present, the historically distant and poetically close.

¹ These historians are Miguel Carmo, Joana Sousa, Pedro Varela, Ricardo Venture and Manuel Bivar, to whom I owe a dept of acknowledgement for their illuminating scholarship of which only an imperfect sliver is reflected here.

² Miguel Carmo, Joana Sousa, Pedro Varela, Ricardo Venture and Manuel Bivar, “African knowledge transfer in Early Modern Portugal: Enslaved people and rice cultivation the Tagus and Sado rivers,” *Diacronie*, 44, 4 (2020), 50.

³ Carlos Manuel Faísca, Dulce Freire and Cláudia M. Viana, “The State of Natural Resources: 250 years of rice production in Portugal, 18th–21st centuries,” *Ler História* 79 (2021), <http://journals.openedition.org/lerhistoria/9542>

⁴ A heavy cast-iron pot used for cooking on open fire.

⁵ This is a reference to an African mother who lost her child to bondage. She placed seeds in her child’s hair so that she would have food to eat once she arrived at her destination. Judith A. Carney, “With grains in her hair: Rice in Colonial Brazil” *Slavery & Abolition* 25:1, 21.

⁶ Carney, “Grains in her hair”, 15.

Interlacing artworks and historical threads from regions across the Atlantic—from Salvador da Bahia, São Paulo, Cape Town and Brooklyn—*Stirring the Pot* evokes the diaspora of enslaved people and their seeds, compelling us to remember and honour those who have toiled the land, fed its people, shared their knowledge systems and held to their aspirations. An ancestral and contemporary convening, *Stirring the Pot*, as cooking, disrupting, interlude and feasting, happens as labour is suspended and tools downed, opening a circle for dance, release and communication across realms and time.

In a cadence of movements or scenes, the exhibition opens with symbols, signs, forms and attributes drawn from **Alberto Pitta's** profound knowledge of the world of Candomblé, a religion, conception of life and philosophy of the universe brought by the enslaved peoples of Africa to Brazil. The three figures that dominate the entrance represent Ogun, the Orixá or god of protection and labour, who stand before us, defiant, ready, and at the vanguard, followed by those who are summoned to this assembly and celebration of Alcácer of Sal's diasporic ancestors.

Carried on the wings of **Efrain Almeida's** magical life-like Lavadeira birds, perched throughout the gallery, the small sculptures of delicate birds, *Fluvicola nengeta*, from the Latin *fluvius* or river, and Tupi, *nheengetá*, also known as "papa arroz", bring their cultural significance to bear to this gathering. Recognized in Africa for their role as messengers, and acknowledged as a visual expression of the link between the intangible and the visible reality, birds are vehicles that allow observers to cross the senses,⁷ carrying with them the presence of forebears and seeds literally sown in the fields outside.

Further gesturing to the outdoors, the painting of **Marina Rheingantz** offers another instance of transportation and transmogrification. Through her use of painterly application to create variations of light, from raking and shimmering to glowing on a flat surface, we are offered an abstract work that is at once flat and surfaced, but also a visual sensation of a blazing day. Her vibrant painting, which changes with the quality of attention and gaze lent to it, presents an abstraction, as well as well as the deeply sensorial: a horizon of fields ready for harvest.

Another cycle of harvest is evoked by **Leonardo Drew**, the practice of burning to revitalize the land. Also known as low-intensity or cultural burns, these are purposely lit and timed to rebalance eco-systems. Banned by settler colonialists in places like Australia in the late 1800s, wildfires have since seen an increase across the territory. Or could *Number 276*, with its mangled anthropomorphic, arm-like and begging branches be a reference to the earlier trade that carried with it the grains of African rice?

In chorus with the summoning, **Igshaan Adams' *Gebedswolke ii*** or Prayer Clouds contain unanswered, suspended prayers that have risen, but not enough, giving form to waiting, and the mystical and credence. Looking at these diaphanous, translucent sculptures, delicately weaved and suspended in space, whose unanswered prayers might we be witnessing? Whose breath has congealed and taken form before our eyes? Could these prayers be directed to us?

⁷ Jaap Gijssberts, "Birds in the AmaXhosa World: An ethno-ornithological exploration of the cultural significance of birds, and its potential for conservation in South Africa" (MA thesis, Wageningen University, 2012).