Introduction to the Year of the Portuguese Speaking World at Kennesaw State

By

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Marking the 32nd anniversary of KSU’s award-winning Annual Country Study Program, the Year of the Portuguese Speaking World (YPSW) is truly a unique undertaking. This is due to the tremendous diversity the constellation of countries within this community represents. Formally, it includes the following countries on four continents: Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, East Timor, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, and São Tomé and Príncipe. Our study will focus on the relationships that have developed among these countries over the past 500 years, as well as other Portuguese speaking communities and their role in the wider world.

Chief among the issues for these countries are the historical and cultural connections they share, their desire to protect the environment, the need for better food security, and the nature of resource governance. For example, Brazil, with a population of over 200 million is home of the Amazon rainforest and vast off-shore oil reserves; the small island nation of Cape Verde faces desertification and is susceptible to flooding due to rising seas. These reflect merely two points on this fascinating spectrum of interests and concerns.

Another overarching goal of the program is to understand the complex histories and dynamics of this relatively undiscovered world at KSU. Such a project is borne from the growth and collapse of the Portuguese Empire and the ever-changing post/neo-colonial conditions that continues to shape the national and cultural identities, worldviews, and relationships of these countries and their people. Portugal, the first modern nation-state in Europe, took advantage of advanced seafaring techniques learned from its earlier Arab conquerors to become a nation of global traders and explorers. They first established colonies in the Atlantic Islands of Madeira, the Azores and Cape Verde archipelago, then developed a network of factories/fortifications along the Atlantic coast of Africa (for example to trade for gold at the Elmina castle in Ghana) and then along the Indian Ocean. The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas fixed a boundary among the competing Portuguese and Spanish empires, incorporating Brazil and much of Africa into Portugal’s domain. Three years later, Vasco da Gama led the first European seaborne
expedition to make landfall in Asia, at Calicut in India, returning with precious cargoes of spices. Notably, upon arrival, da Gama encountered Christian communities already present in India (Fernández-Armesto, 178). The Portuguese would continue their expansion developing trading entrepôts in places such as Macau, China and Nagasaki, Japan, virtually monopolizing the sea routes from Europe to Asia for 100 years. Indeed, the Portuguese were instrumental to the development of highly decentralized, social networks of global trade that have endured and continue to shape such relationships today. David Hancock, in *Oceans of Wine* (2009), traced these extensive networks related to the Madeira wine trade especially in North America. In the United States, today, large communities of Portuguese speakers live in the Boston area. For example, New Bedford’s Feast of the Blessed Sacrament attracts over 100,000 people and claims to be the largest Portuguese feast in the world.

Understanding differences in concepts of hybridity, creolization, and race and race relations (as well as gender) in the Portuguese Speaking World are other critical recurring themes in this year’s study. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Portuguese colonial empire was its reliance on marriage and miscegenation to expand its influence and deny claims of racism. “Linking expansionist impulse to sexual desire,” we have come to know this as “Lusotropicalism,” a term that encompasses many other aspects of colonial cultural re-shaping (Owen and Klubocka, 1). Encouraged by government and church in part due to Portugal’s small population and increasing European competition for global conquests, such unions – ranging from genuine voluntary companionship to coercive rape and abuse and resulting in both wanted and unwanted children – had significant consequences for both colonizer and colonized (Reid, 31).

The advent of Early Modern slavery and the Atlantic slave trade also corresponded with the Portuguese colonial legacy and, ironically, from what we may characterize as an early variant of Globalization. One of the most devastating impacts of the contact between Europeans and Native Americans was that of diseases such as smallpox which caused widespread epidemics and loss of life. In the Brazilian colonies, because of these decimating illnesses, and the desire to exploit labor for economic gain, the loss of native populations lead the Portuguese to begin importing enslaved Africans from the regions around the Angolan colony to work on sugarcane plantations. Slavery was the key institution to the development of the sugar industry as well as other areas (gold, tobacco, coffee, cotton, indigo, rubber, brasilwood, etc.). Because of these lucrative industries, Brazil became the jewel in the crown of the Portuguese empire. The trade saw more enslaved Africans forced to Brazil (4 million) and over a longer period of time than any other country. As a result, the impact of African cultures on Brazil
is ever-present. Beyond influences on the Portuguese language itself, it is most obviously evidenced
through traditions such as Capoeira, Candomblé, and certain Carnival performances. Yet, it also
permeates numerous aspects of daily life especially in the northern states of Bahia and Pernambuco.
Due to the shorter distance between Africa and Brazil, it was also the only territory in the Americas that
regularly exported goods directly back to Africa. Direct trade between Brazil and Southern Africa
remains a vital economic and social driver of change in the Portuguese Speaking World. These on-going
“South-South” relationships have begun to take on new meaning to embrace alternative views of social
justice and the solidarity economy, the theme of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries
(CPLP) Executive Secretary Ambassador Murade Murargy’s opening YPSW keynote address.

Among the most interesting episodes in all of World history is the unprecedented move in 1808
of the Portuguese Royal Court and Capital from Lisbon to Brazil with the help of the British Navy in order
to escape Napoleon’s forces. After King João VI returned to Portugal in 1821, his son Pedro claimed
Brazil’s independence from Portugal in 1822. Nonetheless, Portuguese emigration to its colonies and the
sending of remittances back to Portugal became an important aspect of economic development for
Portugal especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. Unfortunately, most of the countries in the Portuguese
Speaking World only gained their independence from Portugal 150 years later in 1974-75 following the
overthrow of authoritarian rule in Portugal (15 years after most African countries gained independence
from British and French colonial powers). This makes this Year of the Portuguese Speaking World also
the year of the 40th anniversary of these countries’ independence. For Angola, Cape Verde,
Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, independence was only achieved after years of guerrilla warfare and
armed struggle. The decolonization of these Portuguese territories also went hand-in-hand with
nationalist movements committed to socialism. Therefore, African decolonization in the Portuguese
Speaking world occurred against the background of supposedly having learned lessons from the
previous British and French colonies, involved extensive military conflict and traumatic violence, was
seen as “the last great hope of Third World socialism,” and occurred simultaneously with the overthrow
of the Salazar-Caetano regime inextricably linking change in Portugal with change in Africa (Chabal, 18-
19). Now Portugal is an important link for the Portuguese Speaking World within the European Union as
well as a highly regarded global center of artistic, musical, and literary culture (“Portugal,” par 1).

A notable consequence of this colonial legacy and the circumstances of its final moments has
been that the so-called periphery (i.e., Portugal’s former colonies in Africa and Asia) was now influencing
the center (i.e., Portugal). It is common knowledge, for example, that many Portuguese are moving to
Angola, Brazil, and Mozambique in search of work; more so, such a movement “back” to the former colonies has been by invitation and with the support of the Portuguese government (Pinto, p3.publico.pt). In this sense, while Portugal has represented this world’s rich and complex past, and Brazil symbolizes the challenges and opportunities of the present, Lusophone Africa is viewed as a vital place for the Portuguese Speaking World’s future potential. Moreover, today, the community of Portuguese speaking countries is working as closely as ever to support each other’s progress in mutually beneficial ways.

The specific and varied circumstances of the colonial pasts, independence movements, and post-colonial developments represent another important theme in our year-long program of study of the Portuguese Speaking World. For example, Angola’s most important export crop, coffee, and the political fights for its control “affected the wars of liberation in the 1970’s, the wars of intervention in the 1980’s, and even the civil wars in the 1990’s (Birmingham, 140). In discussing the development of a large dam in Mozambique, Allen and Barbara Isaacman (4) have observed that

“despite their very different economic agendas and ideological orientations, the Portuguese colonial regime, the postindependence socialist state, and its free-market successor all heralded the development promise of Cahora Bassa. Whether Portuguese or Africans held the reins of state power, the dam symbolized the ability of science and technology to master nature and ensure human progress… [yet], Cahora Bassa has caused very real ecological, economic, and social trauma for Zambezi valley residents.”

As noted at the beginning of this essay, the challenges of balancing economic development with environmental sustainability are critical issues for the Portuguese Speaking World.

Brazil, a unique example of a long-term post-colonial nation in the Portuguese Speaking World, holds an important place within it as well as globally. Born out of Portugal’s economic colonial empire and now almost 190 years post-independence, it is a vital trading partner of the United States and therefore of particular interest to many of our faculty, staff, students, and local community. Georgia’s Governor recently led a trade delegation to Brazil. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Brazil was the sixth largest destination for global Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows in 2013. The country typically receives close to half of South America’s total incoming foreign investment. US trade with Brazil exceeds $100 billion annually. However, not all of the news from Brazil is so positive. The nation also boasts the second most expansive market for cocaine and the second-largest small arms industry in the world, a murder rate higher than that of Mexico, and the fourth largest incarceration rate in the world (Reid, 189-191). To be fair, it should be noted that the United States has the dubious distinction of surpassing Brazil in most of these categories. Nonetheless, and
despite the recent downturn and corruption scandals, overall long-term economic prospects in Brazil remain relatively good due to growing domestic demand, global demand for commodity exports, a growing middle class, increased investments in infrastructure and development of offshore oil reserves, and prudent macroeconomic policies.

It is the goal of the YPSW that a critical understanding of this diverse region will contribute to the development of more nuanced approaches to solving the complex global issues and challenges that our students face as they attempt to interact constructively, responsibly and appropriately across cultures. The YPSW weekly series of lectures and round tables, our many cultural events, and two-week seminar abroad, offer participants a wide range of perspectives on different aspects of the artistic, economic, social, scientific, literary, musical, and cultural life of the region as well as opportunities to engage with people from the region in meaningful dialogue. In this regard, we have initiated a new element to the “Year of” program which, along with our traditional professional academic conference, will be a student conference that will bring together students from several campuses across Georgia and from abroad to discuss issues they identify as intellectually and professionally stimulating. We hope that you will join us for the many valuable, informative, and engaging programs being offered throughout the year.

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