

Trailing Capelo and Ivens' 2nd African journey, through their geological samples

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Regarding the geological materials gathered by Capelo and Ivens during the crossing of southern Africa (1884-85), perpetuated in the 19th century travel writing under the title "De Angola à Contracosta" [From Angola to the opposite coast], and considering the purposes of this conference, comes to mind the well-known advertising slogan of an iconic and disappeared brand: "Moments to remember later". This is also the feeling that transpires when contemplating the various engravings that illustrate the two volumes of the book, signed by several renowned artists, from Ivens' sketchbooks and photographs taken by the two explorers, even in their previous work "De Benguella ás Terras de Iácca" [From Benguella to Iácca lands]; a journey through the hinterland of Angola (1877-80).

Although the nature of their missions was geographical and scientific, they did not hide a political agenda imposed by the scramble for Africa by the great European powers. Our explorers were responsible for mapping the blank regions and for recognizing the hydrography of the Cuanza and Zambezi rivers, crucial penetration routes into Angola and Mozambique. At the same time, Capelo and Ivens were asked for information on the local communities, as well as on natural resources and climate, valuable data for the establishment of new settlements, and collect specimens of zoology, botany and geology.

According to the travelers' diaries, while the first expedition barely considered the geological aspects, despite a short aperçu in the end of the book, the narrative of the second "discovery trip" reveals more familiarity with geology: lithologies, mineral resources, geomorphology, and stratigraphy. However, it should be added that these last two issues, essential tools on landscape interpretation, with few exceptions in both books, are not the subject of the illustrations. Most of the engravings relates to ethnography, while others illustrate epic details of the expedition, without framings emphasizing geological details.

The whereabouts of the geological samples collected in the first expedition, is currently unknown. However, it still survives a part of the samples amassed during the crossing from Angola to the coast of the Indian Ocean. Upon their return, these samples were delivered to the "Geological Commission" – an institution established in Lisbon in 1857, – and classified by Nery Delgado, geologist and its director, assisted by Alfredo Bensaúde, mineralogist and Professor at the Industrial Institute. Housed in the museum created by the former "Commission", this collection, as well as the museum's other African collections, was transferred in the 1990s to the LNEG - Alfragide core library (Litoteca).

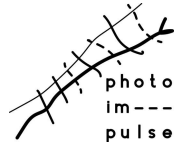
Although the set of samples of rocks, minerals and fossils under consideration is not relevant to the current geological knowledge of Africa, the Capelo and Ivens' Collection has an unquestionable historical value. It is a symbol of a time identified in government jargon as a "scientific occupation", in which the overseas territories were spaces to gather scientific collections and data later processed in the metropole, a concept nowadays politically uncomfortable. It is also a symbol of the perseverance of the two explorers on a mission through lands, most of which have never been trodden by Europeans. Interpreted together with the book, provide a time travel into Capelo and Ivens' adventure, the same purpose of this communication: the attempt at a decolonial view of those natural objects.

Bio

José Manuel Brandão - Geologist, MSc. in Museum studies, Ph.D. in History and Philosophy of Science. Held positions in teaching, as a museum education officer at the National Museum of Natural History, University of Lisbon, and Curator at the Geological Museum, unit of the former Geological Survey (current LNEG). Currently is a researcher of the HTC – History, territories, communities, NOVA FCSH, Centre for Functional Ecology, University of Coimbra. Main research interests: History and museology of the Earth Sciences and mining in Portugal. Author and co-author of several works within the scope of teaching and outstretch of Portuguese Earth Sciences History, and mining heritage.

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