

Book Review

Medicine, Trade and Empire: Garcia de Orta's Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India (1563) in Context

Palmira Fontes da Costa (ed.), Ashgate, Publishing Limited, Wey Court East, Union Road, Farnham, Surrey, GU97PT, pages XXIII+279.

Garcia de Orta (1501-1568) was a famous Portuguese Renaissance Sephardic Jewish physician who renounced Judaism to become a Christian. He was also a herbalist and naturalist and born in Castelo de Vide as the son of Fernao de Orta, a merchant.

Garcia de Orta was one of the pioneers (according to western view) of tropical medicine, pharmacognosy and ethnobotany. de Orta's parents who migrated from Spain as Jewish refugees were forcibly converted to Christianity in 1497 though there was a doubt that they practiced Judaism secretly. de Orta studied medicine in Portugal and fearing the infamous Portuguese inquisition where neochristians were persecuted for working against Catholicism, he migrated to Goa then a Portuguese colony. In 1538, he settled in Goa and developed a good medical practice.

Garcia de Orta developed an experimental approach to the identification and use of herbal medicine. He wrote his magnum opus, a book on the use of single (simples) drugs for the treatment of diseases. The book, in a dialogic form entitled *Colloquies dos simples e drogas da India* is the earliest treatise on the medicinal plants of India by a westerner. The book, translated into Latin was widely used as a standard text on medicinal plants. Apart from medical practice, de Orta also traded in spices, drugs and precious stones. He secretly practiced Judaism, escaped the Goan inquisition for he died in 1568 a year before the inquisition began. But in 1569 his sister was burnt

alive at the stake for remaining a secret Jew. Based on her confession, his remains were exhumed and burnt along with his effigy!!.

The present book for review '*Medicine, Trade and Empire, Garcia de Orta's Colloquies on the Simples and drugs of India (1563) in the context*' is edited by Palmira Fontes da Costa, a historian of science working at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa. It is published by Ashgate a reputed publisher of history of science. The title of the book is aptly termed '*Medicine, Trade and Empire....*' Because it relates to the three interrelated manifestations of de Orta- as a medical man, a trader of spices and his stormy relationship with the Portuguese Empire.

The book is the result of a symposium of a small group of scholars who gathered at the Calouste Gulbunkian Foundation between 10th and 11th of April 2013 and discussed the man (de Orta), the book and the influences on both. According to the Editor, the contributors have concentrated on three aspects-the man, the book and the environment of the Empire. The views on the person 'show clearly the importance of his family's origin and the travels that marked his life and career. Those on the book (Colloquies) show the universal character of the content, the innovative nature of their format and the revolutionary way they made the world aware of natural products with medical and commercial value from a scientific perspective. The third aspect of the central character of the book (de Orta) is about circumstances, wittingly or unwittingly he had to face, like those surrounding de Orta and

his posthumous conviction. It also deals with the book as to how it was suppressed as a result of his inquisition by the empire. The delay in recognizing the value of the book and its resurgence in the nineteenth Century as a valuable source of knowledge of traditional medicinal plants of the Indian sub-continent in general and Malabar coast in particular was also for political reasons.

The Director of Gulbenkian Foundation, in his foreword points out that the book of de Orta “provoked a wave of interest among the 20th Century academics in the fields of botany and pharmacology as well as the history of science and medicine.

The present book consists of twelve chapters apart from a foreword by Jorge Soares, the Director of Innovation of the Calouste, Gulbenkian Foundation and an exhaustive introduction by the editor.

Introducing the book, the editor remarks, the book of de Orta’ was the first printed work to epitomize the inter connections between medicine, trade and the Portuguese empire. de Orta’s book was first printed in Goa by Joannes de Enden in 1563 “to present a comprehensive, systematic and evaluative view of Eastern *materia medica*, traded for profit in Asia and increasingly in Europe”.

The introduction by the editor provides a bird’s eye view of the life, career and experiences of the man and his exploits in Goa. The editor provides succinct details about all aspects of de Orta in an unbiased manner and is eminently readable.

The opening chapter by Jon Arrizabalaga, “Garcia de Orta in the context of Sephardic diaspora” presents the consequences of de Orta’s Jewish roots for his life and career. The author also provides a detailed stimulating analysis as to how the revelation in 1934 by Augusto Da Silva Carvalho was received with strong opposition by Portuguese historians who had “a nationalistic and orthodox Catholic agenda”. In a nutshell,

Portuguese historians were disappointed that de Orta was a Jew.

Michael Pearson, in the chapter locating de Orta in Goa, argues that he was a cosmopolitan man, having both tolerance and prudence indicating pragmatism of the man. It is these characters perhaps which protected him from inquisition though he was subjected to it posthumously. The dilemma that de Orta faced is clearly indicated by Pearson’s observation “de Orta chose to exercise a difficult balance between tolerance and prudence”.

The third chapter authored by Ines G Zupanov, analyses the reasons as to the balanced nature and the dialogue format chosen by de Orta in his book. She, in a way, disagrees that de Orta’s book “colloquies...” is an innovative work and argues that the format chosen by de Orta was “a sort of camouflage for his lack of superior knowledge”.

Inés de Ornellas e Castro’s essay highlights the elucidation of therapeutic and alimentary uses of many exotic plants and fruits listed in the Colloquies. She also suggests that some of the hygienic habits mentioned in the book traces the Jewish ritualistic practices. The author of this article hits the nail on the head when she points out “the originality of the work lies not so much in its innovative nature but the manner in which it transmitted novelty”.

The authors of “Taxonomy of errors in Colloquies” point out the importance of the dialogic format which provided the author a robust way of creating an epistemological strategy to identify the accurate knowledge. The burden of this entire chapter was to show that the focus of attention of de Orta was to “correct” the errors of the transmitted knowledge. The authors of this article also point out to various sources of these errors.

Hugh Cagle, the author of “...Natural history in colonial Goa” points out that the

Colloquies should be considered more as a natural history to reach the widest audience and also provide a reasonably accurate knowledge. Cagle observes that de Orta participated in exchanges with many communities in helping him to arrive at a specific opinion regarding identification of plants. In order to arrive at a conclusion, de Orta according to Cagle, adopted a combined eclectic approach, which is the main methodology in Colloquies.

Harold J Cook presents de Orta as “someone who was truly revolutionary in both natural history and medicine”. Cook believes that de Orta was well ahead of his period as he believed that a particular kind of disease could be cured by a particular remedy. Curiously, Cook hints that, Colloquies is a path-breaking and subversive work that had negative implications for de Orta and his family.

Antonio Manuel Lopez Andrade gives a comparative account of de Orta and another physician Amato Lusitano, who was his contemporary. Andrade finds it puzzling that de Orta makes only a brief reference to Amato.

Florike Egmond, writing about the Dutch connection, points out the reconfiguration of de Orta’s book by Carolus Clusius, in which he emphasizes on the reliability of the textual information.

Jose Pardo Tomas points out, in his essay, to the “appropriation” of the work of de Orta by Nicolas Monardes and others and opines the initial interest on exotic *materia medica* had to end due perhaps to the unification of Portuguese and Spanish crowns.

Timothy D Walker, in his article, “Enduring echoes of Garcia de Orta” opines that, Colloquies had an enduring impact and resulted in a hybrid medical culture. He emphasizes that de Orta’s book brought out the benefits of indigenous healing systems to the western world.

Writing the last chapter on memorials to de Orta, the Editor of the book says that initial neglect and subsequent elevation of de Orta as a hero later has been made to serve the interest of Portugal as a nation. Perhaps the Portuguese felt that the Spanish and Latin translations were getting more publicity than the original work of a Portuguese national.

Overall the book is very well written and ably edited. The contents contributed by experts have captured all aspects of de Orta’s Colloquies. Facts presented are vivid and close to the truth and the authors are unsparing in their criticism of the inhuman inquisition and its cruelty. While there is no doubt that the book with its twelve essays fairly covers all the aspects, I feel the book should have had one or two chapters on the actual scientific contents of the colloquies and an account of the original Indian sources from which de Orta obtained the material. However the essay ‘A pleasant banquet of words...’ does include some information.

The book covers wide ranging sources as reference material mainly given as foot notes. The work however is not India centric in the sense there has been no mention as to the appreciation of the value of the original material collected from India. The book does not contain any information as to the contribution of India to the world heritage of plant science and medicine. However it has to be pointed out the focus of the book was different. From the Indian context, especially with reference to the historical value of science and technology, it is only of peripheral interest. As to the fact which is a better method – the ‘combination’ method of the Indian system or ‘simples’ method emphasized by de Orta, I must say the jury is yet to be out.

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