

## Chapter 5

# What Do Portuguese Proverbs Say About Women?

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### ABSTRACT

*Almost every culture has its unique proverbs or traditional sayings that express a perceived truth based on common sense or experience. Although the wisdom that traditional sayings convey is not necessarily a trustworthy guide to the cultural values of a specific culture, they may, to some extent, reflect those values. If a link between cultural values and proverbs is acknowledged, old proverbs might illustrate past values, while a new proverb repertoire probably reflects the mores and values of modern times. When examining such proverbs and sayings, an underlying cultural portrait may be outlined. Has this cultural portrait changed over time? In order to answer this question, the chapter will present an overview of Portuguese proverbs concerning women as they are presented by dictionaries published from the 17th to the 21st century; the analysis of these sayings allows for an assessment of how the image of the female figure in the Portuguese society has evolved across time.*

### INTRODUCTION

Portuguese lexicography starts in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and it develops for two centuries around bilingual dictionaries that aimed to help their users to read and write in Latin. Later, some encyclopedic works addressed cultural aspects, namely popular traditions. Although Jeronimo Cardoso's *Dictionarium latinolusitanicum* (1569-70) and Agostinho Barbosa's *Dictionarium LusitanicoLatinum* (1611) contain some proverbs, the first two collections of Portuguese proverbs were only published in mid 17<sup>th</sup> century: *Adagios portuguezes reduzidos a lugares communs* by Antonio Delicado, in 1651, and *Florilegio dos modos de fallar, e adagios da lingua portuguesa* by Bento Pereira, in 1655. In 1780, Francisco Rolland published his *Adagios, proverbios, rifões e anexins da lingua portugueza*. The lexicography of that time greatly reflects the structure of society: dictionaries were written by male scholars or clergymen, whereas women of a comparable societal rank were bound to the domestic area. Therefore, those works also reflect the different positions of the sexes in society: women and men were depicted according to

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various sociological and cultural constraints. Over the past century, attitudes towards women's rights strongly changed: do proverbs reflect, in some way, those changes?

This chapter aims to collect a sample of the most relevant proverbs and sayings about women from Portuguese historical and contemporary sources and to ascertain if and how these sources deal with social and cultural changes. Therefore, the analysis will be mainly based on three 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century collections of Portuguese proverbs and the findings will then be compared to equivalents in the modern *Dicionário de Provérbios Porto Editora* (2000). Other important dictionary will be explored: the *Vocabulário português e latino* by Raphael Bluteau (1712-1728), the first monolingual dictionary of the Portuguese language.

## **BACKGROUND**

There is a longstanding debate as to whether proverbs of a particular culture reflect the values of that specific culture. Since proverbs are often borrowed from one language (and culture) into another, they may be reflections of broad human experience, not a certain culture's unique viewpoint (Grauberg 1989). Nevertheless, a study of English proverbs by Unseth (2015) shows a significant increase in proverbs that reflect more casual attitudes toward sex from 1960 onwards, which seems to point to a link between cultural values and proverbs. So, though proverbs should not be trusted as a direct link to the values of a culture, some cultural values may be illustrated by proverbs: "The cultural portrait painted by proverbs may be fragmented, contradictory, or otherwise at variance with reality [...] must be regarded not as accurate renderings but rather as tantalizing shadows of the culture which spawned them" (Webster, 1982, p. 173).

It is not easy to define the notion of proverbiality. Proverbs are generally sentential statements, recognizably lexicalized constructions, whose meanings have crystallized in the linguistic community and it is precisely this crystallization (sentences are repeated over time, without major changes) that gives them formal and semantic stability. Transmitted from generation to generation, they are part of the folklore of a people and, as with superstitions and legends, they become a moral authority by repetition, and are rarely questioned. Apparently, their function is to convey a cultural legacy of advice based on the experience and wisdom of the ancients. Precisely for this reason, the ideology present in proverbs is often judgmental and moralizing, showing models of behaviour that may have already fallen into disuse.

According to Mieder (2004), "proverbs fulfil the human need to summarize experiences and observations into nuggets of wisdom that provide ready-made comments on personal relationships and social affairs" (p.1). Of course, these "nuggets of wisdom" are very difficult to define and many attempts at definition have been made, ranging from philosophical and sociological considerations to linguistic and lexicographical definitions. Scholars (among others, Norrick, 1985) have tried to expand basic definitions by looking for typical proverbial features. Proverbs are short statements that (i) contain generalizations; (ii) are used over a large period; (iii) have common patterns, e.g. bipartite and/or oppositional structure (such as *if X, then Y*). Besides, resources as rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, ellipsis and metaphor are usually to be found in proverbs. The problem with all definitions of proverbs is that they can also apply to sayings. In fact, most dictionaries present both words (proverbs and sayings, *provérbios* and *ditados*) as synonyms. This is, for example, the case of *Infopedia*, the most popular dictionary in Portugal:



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