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What happens when a history of colonial law begins with an audio recording rather than a doctrinal book or case file? *Tramas Coloniais* is a seven-episode documentary research podcast on colonial normativities in Africa, produced in Portuguese from interviews, oral histories and archival sound. It starts from a simple wager: that we can do legal history in audio when orality is central to how legal knowledge was produced and transmitted, and that this matters now, when legal debates on colonial reparations are already so deeply rooted in oral traditions.

The podcast grew out of the research group »Mutual Dependencies and Normative Production in Africa«, a cooperation between the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies and the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory. We study how relations of mutual dependency shaped law under colonial rule, and how law in turn reshaped those dependencies, focusing especially on intermediaries, who were not always recognised as full legal subjects in Western law but whose knowledge and resources were indispensable for colonial legal orders to function.

In Mozambique, the main site of our work, the limits of a strictly textual approach to these agents are particularly visible. Portuguese colonial rule produced a dense written archive: decrees, labour regulations, criminal records, court cases, administrative correspondence. These documents are indispensable for understanding how African normativities were translated, distorted or silenced in colonial law. But they are also uneven and deeply shaped by Eurocentrism and the categories of the colonial state. Local conceptions of law and dependency are often only hinted at or flattened into vague references to »indigenous uses and customs«.

At the same time, in Mozambique and in many other African contexts, we find rich oral materials produced after independence in an effort to narrate liberation struggles and the making of new nations. These include life-history interviews, recordings of community meetings, stories and songs, and recordings of rituals. These were not created as »legal« archives, yet they contain detailed reflections on work obligations, tribute, servitude, access to land, ritual authority and sanctions. In much of historiography, written records still sit at the top of the evidentiary hierarchy, while oral sources are treated as illustrative or secondary. Legal history reflects and often deepens this hierarchy: legislation, case law and doctrinal writings tend to be treated as the »real« sources, and oral accounts only gain authority once they have been stabilised in writing.

Tramas Coloniais was conceived as an attempt to unsettle that hierarchy by taking the medium of the sources seriously, without abandoning written materials. The podcast moves between court cases, books, administrative texts, archival sound and new interviews conducted with African academics and non-academic knowledge producers such as healers, traditional leaders, workers and other interlocutors. It grants analytical weight to voices, hesitations and background sounds rather than treating them as mere colour. If part of the archive lives in audio, and if the legal cultures we study have long relied on oral transmission, then producing research in audio is not an accessory choice about communication. It is a way of aligning method with material.

Working in this form changes how research questions are asked and answered. Listening to original recordings rather than only reading transcripts foregrounds elements that rarely survive the move to print: pauses and overlaps, shifts in tone, the negotiation between interviewer and interviewee, the murmur of other people present, the sounds of the locations where conversations take place. These features do not make the material more »authentic«, but they change how we understand legal categories and relations of dependency, by showing how they are spoken about, avoided, translated or circumscribed in practice. Taking these aspects seriously requires a kind of source criticism attuned to sound as form, not only to content.

This brings us back to this *Forum*'s larger questions about epistemology and institutional practice. Do creative methodologies like podcasting disrupt or complement established academic tra-

ditions? In one sense, they are clearly disruptive: they challenge the assumption that serious legal-historical work must culminate in a monograph or article, and they sit uneasily within evaluation systems still built around those genres. At the same time, they owe a great deal to critical and global legal historiography, which has been insisting on diversifying agents, sources and scales of analysis. Seen from this angle, *Tramas Coloniais* simply pushes an existing agenda a step further, by insisting that orality and sound are not marginal topics but central sites of legal knowledge. And this is not only a disciplinary question; it has consequences for how law engages with claims about the colonial past in the present.

Those consequences are particularly visible in current debates on colonial reparations. Whether the issue is enslavement, expropriated land, stolen artefacts or environmental damage, many reparation claims are rooted in oral evidence: testimonies before commissions, community hearings, narratives transmitted across generations. In these arenas, oral history and traditions are treated as legitimate – if contested – legal sources. Patterns of harm, continuity and responsibility are reconstructed not only from official documents but from the ways in which affected communities tell and remember their histories. Legal historians, however, often continue to write as if only written archives count as evidence of the legal past. There is thus a growing gap between the kinds of sources that underpin reparations in practice and the kinds of sources that underpin many histories of colonial law.

An audio-centred methodology can help narrow that gap. Working with oral archives in their own medium makes it easier to see how memories of dependency, expropriation or racialised violence are organised and transmitted. It also sharpens our awareness of the distance between those memories and the categories available in colonial and contemporary law. For instance, a community's narrative about longstanding obligations tied to land and ritual may not map neatly onto any doctrinal notion of property or contract, but it may still be crucial for understanding the normative assumptions that give content to claims for restitution or recognition. Recording and analysing such narratives in a podcast format keeps them closer to the conditions of their production than immediate transcription would, while also making them accessible to a wider audience of scholars, students and practitioners who are engaged in reparations debates.

Of course, creative methodologies come with risks. Audio is affective; it invites identification; editing can easily smooth out tension or complexity. The line between scholarly interpretation and artistic storytelling can blur. Here, again, the solution is methodological rather than moral. Projects like *Tramas Coloniais* need to be explicit about how episodes are built: which sources are used, how interviews are cut, where interpretive voice is inserted. Paratexts – such as websites with sources and bibliographies, short accompanying texts that situate each episode – are crucial for making the work legible within academic norms and for allowing others to evaluate and reuse it.[1]

If institutions take these methods seriously, they also need to adapt how they evaluate scholarship. A documentary podcast based on systematic research, with clear references and a preserved archive of raw material, can and should be acknowledged as a research output, especially when it opens new corpora and questions that are later explored in writing. Peer review will look different – it may involve listening as well as reading, and it may require reviewers from several disciplines – but the criteria need not be less demanding. Rigour, transparency and engagement with existing literature remain central; what changes is the medium through which they are expressed.[2]

1 In *Tramas Coloniais*, this role is played by the project website (www.tramascoloniais.com.br), which provides transcripts of all episodes, the bibliographic references used in writing them, as well as photographs, videos and other visual materials that can be used both to document the research process and to guide teaching activities based on the podcast (last accessed 15 February 2026).

2 This question is already the object of sustained discussion in the emerging literature on scholarly podcasting. See e. g. Lori Beckstead, Ian M. Cook, Hannah McGregor, Podcast or Perish: Peer Review and Knowledge Creation for the 21st Century, London 2024.

Finally, there is the question of democratisation. Audio has obvious advantages: *Tramas Coloniais* is freely accessible on widely used platforms and in a language that connects Mozambique, Brazil, Portugal and other Lusophone contexts. People involved in contemporary struggles over land, labour or archives can listen without needing access to academic journals. This does not automatically make the work democratic, nor does it eliminate inequalities in who gets to speak and be recorded. But it does create possibilities for dialogue that are harder to achieve through text alone, especially when the histories at stake have been transmitted orally for generations.

For legal historians interested in creative methodologies, then, the invitation is not simply to translate existing texts into podcasts. It is to ask what happens when we listen to law, especially in colonial and postcolonial settings where so much normative life has unfolded in spoken form. Projects like *Tramas Coloniais* suggest that when we tune our methods to the sonic dimensions of the archive, we gain more than a new format. We gain access to legal orders that were never fully written down, to dependencies and claims that are still being articulated, and to a set of epistemological questions that can refresh legal history from within. ■