

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND RESISTANCE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC: PALMARES, A MAROON EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

Africans controlled the sheer volume and ethnic origin of captives offered to Europeans, selling the slaves at prices they were able at least to manipulate. Africans involved in the slave trade were equal and un-coerced partners of metropolitan merchants and officials, and that the development of the slave trade enhanced African control and choice.

If we are aware of the unbearable levels of barbarism associated with slavery in the New World, it is easy to understand the importance of runaway settlements. Negro resistance to slavery was the main feature of the history of Africans in the American colonies and slaves responded to exploitation by malingering, by poorly carrying out their tasks, by revolting or by escaping to runaway settlements. Considering that the *lingua franca* of the period was Latin, it was only too natural that they were called in the contemporary documents *res publicae* (polities), soon to be translated into modern languages as *republics*, *repúblicas*, *républiques*. *Maroons*, *palenques*, *mocambos*, *quilombos* were terms introduced somewhat later, usually with derogatory connotations. In documents referring to Palmares the fugitive slave settlement is known as *mocambo*, from the Ambundu *mu-kambo* or hideout. The English term *maroon* comes from the Spanish *cimarrón*, initially applied to runaway feral livestock. Runaway settlements were soon to become a ubiquitous feature of colonial life in the Americas, the most effective way of opposing slavery.

SUGAR PLANTATIONS AND SLAVERY IN SOUTH AMERICA

By 1570 there were already more than fifty mills, or *engenbos*, in the colony and by 1584 there were already some fifteen thousand African slaves working in plantations in Portuguese South America (Brazil). Indians were also enslaved and some authors consider that the *bandeirantes*, or pioneers from São Paulo, in the South of the Portuguese colony, brought about some 350,000 slaves during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one third of all slaves entering the Brazilian economy in these two centuries (Curtin 1990: 203). It is thus probable that plantations combined African and Indian slaves with some free wage labour (Wolf 1990: 150).

MAROON POLITIES

Runaway slaves settled in the hilly forest areas, some fifty miles from the coast in the beginning of the seventeenth century and the first Portuguese expedition to Palmares, in 1612, attested to the importance of the *res publica* early in the century. The polity continued to grow up to the 1640s, when the Dutch consider Palmares as a 'serious dan-

ger'. Bartholomeus Lintz describes the state as formed by two main settlement areas: the capital village at the Serra da Barriga and a smaller hamlet at the left bank of the Gurungumba River. Lintz 'lived among them [and] after staying with them [knew] their places and mode of life' (cited in Barleus 1974: 252; cf. Orser 1994: 14). This seems to indicate that white people lived within the maroon and caused no suspicion, as Barleus refers to Lintz and his 'ancient companions'. Perhaps the persecution of ethnic minorities, Jews, Muslims and others, and the fight against witches, heretics, thieves and criminals could explain the fact that at least some white people decided to settle at Palmares and apparently they were accepted by the runaway community.

Overall, Palmares was a polity comprising nine separate villages. After the Dutch left Brazil, the Portuguese were able to carry out several expeditions against Palmares, from 1654 to 1667. From 1670 the authorities prosecuted a systematic campaign to destroy Palmares, with almost yearly assaults to the villages. Between 1670 and 1687 a Great Lord ruled the polity, or Ganga Zumba, living at the capital *oppidum* of Macaco, founded perhaps in 1642. There were several expeditions from 1667 and the nephew of King Ganga Zumba, Zumbi, first distinguishes himself in a battle in 1674. His own name, Zumbi, refers to his probable spiritual role in the community, *nzumbi* being associated with a Bantu priestly and military title. Fernão Carrilho led an expedition against Palmares in 1676, discovering a fortified village at Subupira, burned and abandoned before he was able to assault it. In 1678 Carrilho claimed to have destroyed the maroon, bringing with him two sons of King Ganga Zumba. The Portuguese and representatives of Palmares met at Recife and a peace treaty was struck. Some maroon leaders did not accept this outcome, King Ganga Zumba was killed and his nephew Zumbi was proclaimed king of Palmares. By 1685 Domingos Jorge Velho, a mercenary *bandeirante*, asked for a license to conquer the native Brazilians in the Pernambuco captaincy and two years later the authorities decided to use him against Palmares. An agreement relating to the use of captives and land was drawn up between the pioneer and the governor for the destruction of the maroon. As commander in chief of the expeditions, Domingos Jorge Velho claimed ownership of most of the booty. In February 1694, after a 42 day siege, Macaco fell, two hundred maroon settlers died, another two hundred perished falling from high precipices, five hundred were captured and sold out of the captaincy. Several rebels, among them Zumbi, managed to flee, but on 20 November 1695, the King was captured, executed and his head put on public display as a frightful *memento*: slaves must obey, not defy the slave system. Today, Zumbi and Palmares are considered important symbols for African-Brazilians and indeed for all those people fighting against oppression and for freedom.

THE EARLY HISTORICAL LITERATURE ABOUT PALMARES

Since the end of the seventeenth century the Palmares has been narrated based on written documentation considered official, in other words, it has been based on political, military or religious documents. Historiography was marked by the creation of broad dual categories: good versus evil, the black man versus the captain of the woods, black people against colonial authority, among others. Six authors can be mentioned, in more or less chronological order, as important figures of this historiography until the 1980s and, because of this, are essential to the understanding of the interpretative changes about the political organization of Palmares: Ernesto Ennes, Arthur Ramos, Edison Carneiro, Clóvis Moura, Décio Freitas and Abdias do Nascimento.

THE HISTORICAL LITERATURE OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY.

Ernesto Ennes, a librarian and archivist contemporary of Arthur Ramos and Edison Carneiro – he wrote during the 1930s and 1940s –, used official sources about Palmares to prove the heroic aspect of the *bandeirantes* from São Paulo in opposition to the barbaric side of the inhabitants of the maroon, the *quilombolas*. Linked to the Paulista Museum his book *The Wars against Palmares*, published in 1938 was dedicated to Afonso E. Taunay, director of the institution – and to the elites of southeast Brazil. Ennes organized countless documents in an epic narrative with the clear intention of reconstructing «the true history of Palmares» and giving value to the image of Domingos Jorge Velho, the *bandeirante* who commanded the last attack expedition against Palmares. The hero, in this history, was a «brave *paulista* (man from São Paulo)».

Ennes believed that the advent of Palmares happened due to the impossibility of rebellion by the black slaves against their white masters. Since they could not revolt – because of a probable «incapacity» – these black slaves escaped to a place that was distant from the sugar mills and formed the maroon. Initially these runaway slaves

lived of the pillage and theft of the slave farms. Organized, the maroon constituted itself as a political confederation: the Palmares Confederation. The settlement then divided itself into many villages that had autonomous productions and decisions. Each one of these units had a specific military and political commander. Despite the autonomy of the villages, the Palmares Confederation had a capital – Macaco – and a chief military leader, Zumbi being the last and most well known of them. The answer to Ennes's position of not seeing the escapes as a form of rebellion or resistance and of valuing the *bandeirante* as a hero of Colonial Brazil came from anthropologist Arthur Ramos (1946) and historian Edison Carneiro (1958). Both scholars defended that Palmares was a lasting example and, therefore, «more expressive» of the persistence of African culture. In their studies, Ramos and Carneiro stated that the black slaves escaped to the maroon in order to preserve the culture they had brought from Africa, keeping it free from the threats of white culture (such as the Catholic religion, the clothes, food, among others). This way, the maroon could be an alternative to keeping black identity away from a supposed deformation, a type of contamination by the white culture. It's interesting to observe here a preliminary idea of pure culture: the white men would be always and essentially white and the black man inevitably black.

The studies about Palmares from the 1930s and 1940s that emphasized the «incapacity of the black people» in rebelling or a «slave docility» in trying to maintain «African culture» in America were broadly criticized by the historians of the 1960s. Clóvis Moura (1959) and Décio Freitas (1978) are good examples of this criticism.

THE HISTORICAL LITERATURE OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Clóvis Moura and Décio Freitas discuss the rebellious character of slaves and the existence of Palmares based on Marxist theories. Within an analytical context of class struggle, Moura and Freitas defended that Palmares was inherent to slavery, in other words, that it only existed because there was class exploration. On the other hand, in an ambivalent relationship, the appearance of runaway settlements is perceived as responsible for making the slave system more dynamic and specially for wearing it out. The slave revolts, and particularly maroons, start to be considered as ways through which black people could recover their human dignity (lost in the process of slavery). The authors involve their large public with the description of punishments suffered by the slaves, the difficulties faced by the *quilombolas* in their escapes from captivity, and the free life that existed inside maroons. They constructed heroes worthy of admiration, such as Zumbi, the warrior.

For Moura (1978), the lands were probably communal – Moura states that there is little information about land property in Palmares – and the exceeding production was donated to the State. In the political sphere, each *mocambo*, or small village, had a leader who is interpreted as its absolute lord. Only in war situations would the leaders unite themselves to deliberate about the future of the Republic. In this situation, the leaders of the various villages submitted themselves to the command of the supreme leader of the Republic, such as Zumbi. Perhaps the most original interpretive contribution by Moura (1988:174-177) is polyandry, along side polygamy. Moura did not consider polyandry a regression to matriarchy, as proposed others, but as new, maroon-born social relation, empowering women and thus showing the innovative political organization of runaway settlements.

Following an argumentation that is very close to Moura's, Freitas (1978) states that the initial life in Palmares, marked by fishing and harvesting, meant a historical regression to its inhabitants since in Africa «they had been farmers, shepherds, craftsmen, merchants and artists» (Freitas, 1978:42). Running away was the only form of freedom and, in consequence, of recovering their dignity.

As a political organization, each settlement that formed the Palmares Quilombo had a leader chosen for his merits of «strength, intelligence, and dexterity» (Freitas, 1978:45). However, a council whose goal was to maintain the functioning of the polity as a whole controlled these leaders. The inhabitants of the polity participated in the political life of the settlement through assemblies that were gathered to decide about crucial matters. This way, they had total political and civil freedom.

In the same period, Abdias do Nascimento (1980) glorified Palmares as a heroic example of the power of black people in the New World. An African-Brazilian intellectual – as he called himself – he preached the immediate Pan-Africanism (the union of all the «Children of Africa» – descendants of Africans born in other continents), whose inspiring model should be Palmares. With a charming narrative, justified by his experience of being black in Brazil, Nascimento states the existence of social exclusion caused by color, attacking in a direct way the myth of racial democracy, where blacks and whites lived in harmony without racism. Palmares is described as «the first government of free Africans in the lands of the New World» (Nascimento, 1980:46). The six scholars longed to recover «through exhaustive and empirical research» the Palmares as it «really» was, according to historian Célia Marinho Aze-

vedo (Azevedo, 2000). However, they portray a polity full of expectations, doubts, and answers that are dated by the period lived by each scholar. The colonial maroon no longer represented just a historical event but symbolized the struggles of their own times; symbol of «black weakness and inferiority», at first, the political organization images evolve to become a clear example «of African richness and power».

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF PALMARES AS AN INDEPENDENT POLITY

The archaeological study of this large maroon polity has been carried out in relation to a single settlement, the Serra da Barriga or Potbelly Hill, known in seventeenth century documents as ‘Oiteiro da Barriga’ or ‘Hill like an altar in the shape of a belly’, identified by local people and scholars alike as the historical capital of the kingdom, the ‘Royal Stockade’. Today it is located within the rural area of União dos Palmares, being approximately 4,000 m east to west and 500 to 1,000 m north to south, elevated from 150 to 560 above sea level, in the original Forest area. Two field seasons (1992-3) were undertaken in order to confirm that this hill, declared a National Heritage Monument in 1985, was indeed a maroon settlement, and the archaeological evidence recovered during the field seasons resulted in the location of several sites, mostly by pedestrian survey and trial excavations. The ubiquitous presence of pottery could be interpreted as of Native South American, European or mixed styles.

Thanks to the publication of papers and books with explicit analysis of Palmares, even though fieldwork is still in its early stages, it is now the best-known historical site outside of South America and its study has produced theoretical insights. Orser (1996:41-55; 123-129) has integrated the archaeology of Palmares within the overall global perspective he develops in detail in his book on the archaeology of the modern world. Palmaristas maintained strong ties to colonial European networks, bartering with colonists, and, considering the conflicts within the colonial society, it is tempting to suggest that at least some settlers may have felt that they had closer ties to the maroon people than to their rulers, especially the coastal plantation owners. Besides, as there are references in the colonial documents both to persecution of Jews, Muslims, heretics, witches and other outcasts, and to the presence of some of these marginalized people at Palmares, it is difficult to overestimate the contacts between rebels and settlers.

Different ethnic groups settled the backlands of the Portuguese colony, most of them speaking Tupian languages, and in the coastal plantations, the slave-owners used to mix ‘blacks of the land’ (Native South Americans) and ‘Guinean blacks’ (Africans). Considering the presence of pottery of Native South American style at the site, the references in documents to native people maintaining friendly ties with the maroon and living there, and even the fact that three villages of Angola Janga bore Native names (Arotirene, Tabocas, and Subupira), it is natural to suppose that some groups allied themselves with the attacking colonial forces, while others could share common concerns with the rebels. However, most people living in the maroon were presumably of African birth or descent. The slave trade used to bring people from Angola, many of them war captives in Africa itself, embedded in African social networks, even though the double enslavement, as well as the new social environment in the plantations, probably led to rather generic ties with African traditions. A possible good example is the institution of a war camp, known in Angola as ‘kilombo’, and resulting from the European intervention in Africa, for Palmares was also called a ‘quilombo’.

The mutualist approach proposed by Orser tries to put together archaeological and documentary evidence and to explain the importance of both large scale and small scale relationships, de-emphasizing the notion of a ‘culture’ and stressing the connection between the communities in the modern world, so that Africans, Native South Americans and Europeans cannot be disentangled. Palmares can only be properly understood within the context of global colonialism, Eurocentrism, capitalism, and modernity, each one being central to historical archaeology in general and to the understanding of Palmares in particular (Orser 1996:55).

The study of the pottery at the site by Allen (1997a) established the presence of three main wares: Native South American, European, and Palmarino folk manufacture. Rejecting the notion of maintenance of African, Native American or European ‘traits’ in the archaeological record, Allen preferred to emphasize that Palmares people forged a new *syncretic* culture within a specific *context*. Contextual interpretation facilitates an understanding of the role of pottery as it relates to networks of exchange, social organization, settlement patterns, the creation of identity, and so on. The presence of native and European wares underscores the integration of Palmares into a larger, regional system, a society not isolated, but whose escaped slaves were fully cognizant of the colonial situation and constructed a culture and identity which could be used in their interactions with colonists and Native South Americans. Using an ethno-genetic approach, Allen (1997b) proposes that the process of becoming a new cultural group, who identified themselves as Palmarino, provides a challenge to the culture historical search for ethnic markers and

should contribute to the development of new focusing on the construction of cultural identity and ethnic group formation.

Rowlands (1998) goes further and suggests that the site was already occupied by native Indians with whom the first runaway found refuge and that archaeologically the picture indicates neither a multi-ethnic society of fusion and assimilation nor one of ethnic difference. There is thus a possibility of a more pluralist structure with relatively little differentiation in the material culture of much of the site but increasing elite distinction in specific areas of the settlement. Palmares was not a refuge site but owed its growth and survival and final destruction to the role it played in coast/inland trade, as mercantile interests and Palmares opposed those of the nobility and plantation slave owners, which were able to triumph in the end, due to the strength of pre-capitalist groups in both Portugal and in the colony. Furthermore, the ideal of racial mixing, which would be dominant from the end of the seventeenth century, as it was cheaper to locally reproduce than to buy new Africans, was a side effect of this crushing of a tendency towards pluralism in the early history of Brazil.

As Rowlands' interpretive framework suggests, Palmares can also be approached emphasizing continuity over change, as colonialism and Eurocentrism are practices whose origins can be traced back to the Roman world. Furthermore, as the colonial society, especially in the Iberian world, was actively recreating feudal institutions and world views, like the town councils, the cult of the Virgin, the medieval social structure, church presence, administrative and commercial rules, scholasticism, and so on (Funari 2005;2006a). Palmarino society was not only enmeshed with other contemporary groups, like the settlers, the Native South Americans or the Africans, but also with the past. We cannot understand why Muslims are quoted in documents referring to Palmares if we do not pay due attention to the Catholic, crusader outlook of colonial authorities, who were persecuting infidels, as defined within medieval thought. Native South Americans, whose pottery and place names are common features of Palmares, established continuities with the human fashioning of the landscape in the backlands of the North East, as pots, hills, rivers, and the other environmental contexts, were interpreted within their own traditions, rather than African or European.

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