

Quilombo dos Palmares:  
Brazil's Lost Nation of Fugitive Slaves

by

Glenn Alan Cheney

P.O. Box 284  
18 Parkwood Rd.  
Hanover, CT 06350  
(860) 822-1270  
[glenn@cheneybooks.com](mailto:glenn@cheneybooks.com)

## Contents

Introduction

Chapter One: A New World

Chapter Two: Sugar and Slaves

Chapter Three: Human Pieces

Chapter Four: Early Palmares

Chapter Five: Thus They Go Without Punishment

Chapter Six: Dutch Brazil

Chapter Seven: Palmares Rising, Pernambuco Falling Apart

Chapter Eight: Palmares Nation

Chapter Nine: A Series of Assaults

Chapter Ten: More assaults

Chapter Eleven: Zumbi's Palmares

Chapter Twelve: Carrilho's Devastating Attack

Chapter Thirteen: Peace with Desperate Fear

Chapter Fourteen: The New Palmares

Chapter Fifteen: Barbarians in the Service of the King

Chapter Sixteen: The Siege of Macaco

Chapter Seventeen: Digging for Palmares

Chapter Eighteen: The Struggle Today

## Introduction

Sometime in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, forty “rebellious negroes” are said to have somehow escaped captivity at a sugar mill near Porto Calvo in the captaincy of Pernambuco in northeast Brazil.<sup>1</sup> Sebastião da Rocha Pita, the Brazilian historian who reported this incident more than a hundred years later, gave no details of the escape, whether it was a violent uprising of slaves armed with no more than the tools of their trade — machetes, axes, hoes, scythes — or a silent slipping away into the dark of night. He did not report whether women and children joined the exodus, whether anyone took food or tools, whether they ran with shackles on their ankles. About all we can surmise is that they ran in bare feet and instinctively headed west, away from the coast — away from the civilization that had enslaved them — and into the dense *mata atlântica* forest.

The forest and terrain worked to the advantage of people who carried little and had no destination. At the same time, nature hindered anyone carrying weapons, ammunition, armor, supplies, and chains. The people fleeing could go in any direction; the people chasing them had any number of directions to choose from, only one of which was correct. Even barefoot people in the remnants of shackles could outrun soldiers lugging the baggage of war and enslavement.

The fugitives, who could have been Africans or Indians, ran until they reached the hills of the interior — steep, long ridges that punched up out of generally level terrain. Like fugitives everywhere, they found security in the higher elevations. They settled in a place of palm trees,

---

<sup>1</sup> Sebastião da Rocha Pita, *Historia da América Portuguesa, Book VIII* (Belo Horizonte: Editora Itatiaia, 1976) 235.

fertile soil, plentiful water, and an abundance of game. Over the years, more fugitives arrived, some quite likely from Bahia, the captaincy to the south. The population grew to hundreds and, by the turn of the century, thousands. Palmares became known to the Africans as a *quilombo*, from a word in the Jaga language of Africa that meant *war camp*. Settlements grew into villages, and more villages took hold on more mountains. Sharing a common purpose, common problems, and a common enemy, the villages — called *mocambos*, a word for *hideout* in the African Mbundu language — villages formed relationships that would evolve toward a common government. The polity became known as Palmares for the region's many palms. Palmares became a refuge for more fugitives, and its men became bold enough to attack farms and sugar mills to steal what they needed and to liberate more slaves. By 1603, Palmares was a problem that the Portuguese colonizers knew they had to resolve. A society dependent on slavery could not survive alongside a society of former slaves.

Palmares thrived while the colony on the coast struggled against disease, corruption, and the inefficiencies of an autocratic, hierarchical government led by a distant king. While Pernambuco depended on slavery, the nation of fugitives proved that free people, even free black people, could sustain themselves without forced labor. Having formed a government and a religion that served its purposes, Palmares proved that the New World did not need the king of Portugal or the pope of Rome. Palmares also became a community of several races, not just blacks and Indians but whites who were fleeing society or the law. Palmares was a viable alternative to slavery and Portuguese society. It was an attractive nuisance that lured slaves away from slavery and gave European plebeians reason to question the status quo. It was also an aggressive enemy that threatened public safety and the colonial economy. It had to be eliminated.

Over the next ninety years, the Portuguese and, briefly, the Dutch, sent two dozen military excursions to Palmares with the objective of exterminating it. To say that these militias were “white” or European would not be accurate, though they were defending white European interests. Their ranks included black slaves and regiments of free blacks and free Indians. Judging by race alone, it would be hard to distinguish the defenders of the “black” nation from the defenders of the “white” outpost of Europe. The real battle was not only between an empire and rebels but between the wealthy and the poor, the enslavers and the free, the feudal past and

an enlightened future that no one had even dreamed of yet. Almost all the Dutch and Portuguese excursions failed miserably until 1694, when a massive army, much of it mercenaries of mixed race, surrounded the Palmarian citadel of Macaco. After a month-long siege, they killed, captured, or dispersed its defenders, effectively eliminating Palmares as a nation, effectively erasing it from the face of the earth.

Not one bit of physical evidence remains from Palmares. The precise location of all but one of its villages and cities are unknown. Historical information about Palmares depends entirely on documents produced by the invaders, and their version of reality is suspect. They recorded little about the society they were attempting to render extinct, and their reports were corrupted with ulterior motives. They had no concept of history, culture, or sociology, no interest in Palmares except its elimination. They wanted it not just dead but forgotten.

But Brazil did not forget. The memories of the Quilombo dos Palmares evolved into myths, and the myths fed into the political dialectic. Just as Palmares had offered an alternative to colonial society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it offered an alternative to socioeconomic problems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To people on the losing end of civilization's perpetual struggles, the rebel nation was a useful symbol for people who opposed military rule, capitalism, class division, racism, and injustice. Thus myth became confused with fact, and, true or not, formed a cornerstone of the modern Brazilian culture.

Palmares was the largest and most long-lived quilombo in Brazil but by no means the only one. There were thousands, and thousands remain in Brazil today, far-flung communities of people with complexions darker than average who still share communal land as their ancestors did. Many of these communities are under siege just as Palmares was. The invaders aren't militias but farmers, mining companies, developers, and others claiming land of undocumented ownership. The war that Palmares fought for nearly a century continues in myriad manifestations three centuries later.

This book recounts the struggle between Palmares and the European colonizers on the coast. It depends extensively on the dubious documentation those colonizers left us. Those colonizers had little regard for the Palmarians as people or Palmares as a new and practical culture. The reports of militia commanders and government agents tend to focus on issues of

battles, funding, and the threats Palmares represented. They report precious little about the Palmares way of life, its language and religion, its people and their point of view. The reports are also tainted with political efforts to wrest money and privilege from higher powers. This book reports what they *said* happened.

The book goes on to explore the struggle in modern times. That struggle has evolved with the times, yet it is remarkably similar. And, similarly, the truth is still hard to discern. Archeologists, historians, and sociologists find it hard to detach fact from myth. Political activists struggle to use the symbol of Palmares to justify their positions. People who live in today's quilombos struggle for recognition and respect even as they struggle to hold on to land that has been passed down to them. A similar struggle, in fact, pervades Brazilian society, with its attempts to more equitably share revenues and land, provide justice for all, and, yes, still, end the modern equivalent to slavery. Palmares was real, and its myths have become their own reality. The story and the history of Palmares are over 400 years old, and they have yet to reach their end.

## Chapter 1

### A New World

Modern Brazilians are fond of noting, in a cynical sort of way, that Europeans discovered their country by either error or subterfuge. When a flotilla of thirteen ships left Lisbon on March 9, 1500, everyone expected them to head south along the coast of Africa, around the *Cabo da Boa Esperança* — the Cape of Good Hope — and then northeast to India. But for reasons unrecorded, the fleet swung wide to the west. Maybe a storm pushed them off course for a month. Maybe they already knew the currents of the Atlantic well enough to go west to grab currents circling to the south and east. Maybe they just swung too far west and stumbled onto a continent.

But Pedro Álvares Cabral, commander of the armada, was an accomplished navigator, and with him was Bartolomeu Dias, the first European to round the Cabo da Boa Esperança, though in all honesty he named it the *Cabo das Tormentas*, the Cape of Storms. (Dom João II, the king of Portugal, changed it in hopes of encouraging more trips to India.) Dias's brother, Diogo, an accomplished navigator, was also with the fleet. Cabral and the Dias brothers weren't the type to get lost. They knew about the 1497 voyage of Vasco da Gama, the first European to sail to India.

On that trip, da Gama had swung south and west to grab the South Atlantic westerly current.

Noticing seaweed in the water and birds in the air, he deduced land not much farther to the west.<sup>2</sup>

Dom João hastily assembled Cabral's armada not long after da Gama's return to Portugal in the second half of 1499. He was in a hurry to show some force at Calcutta. But the armada may have had another mission: to go look for the lands that had been given to Portugal in the Treaty of Tordesilhas. The treaty gave Portugal all lands anywhere up to 370 leagues (2,220 km, 1,375 miles) west of Cabo Verde, a small group of islands off the western bulge of Africa. (Spain was entitled to all lands west of that line.) But no one had ever seen most of the lands granted under Tordesilhas, or even knew for sure they were there, or even had the technical ability to find an imaginary longitudinal line drawn north to south across an ocean. On land they might, but even then they wouldn't be able to get to the line because it ran down the middle of an unexplored continent well defended by mosquitoes, snakes, swamps, thorns, jungles, diseases, and people, many of whom believed that the best way to honor enemies was to eat them.<sup>3</sup> But before Portugal could find the Tordesilhas line, it had to find the land it ran through.

So we don't know whether Cabral was looking for something or just bumped into it while sailing west on his way to the East. If he was looking for something, apparently it was something other than what he found, a place he called an island, the Ilha da Vera Cruz, the Isle of the True Cross.

But of course he didn't discover it. Millions of people already lived there. (And, for the record, they were by no means all cannibals.) The tribes along the coast, of the Tupi-Guarani

---

<sup>2</sup> Eduardo Bueno, *A Viagem do Descobrimento*, (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Objetiva, 2006), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Boris Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10.

language group, included the Potiguar, Temembé, Tabajara, Caeté, Kairi, Tupinambá, Aimoré, Tememino, Goitaca, Tamoio, Carijó, and, in the area where Cabral came to land, the Tupiniquim, who had migrated to the area a millennium and a half earlier in search of a mythical place devoid of evil.<sup>4</sup> Whether they had found that place of no evil or just stopped at the edge of the ocean, we do not know. They called the place where they lived Pindorama. But if Pindorama lacked evil, something at least a little suspicious arrived in 13 ships on April 22, 1500. On the next day, men from the ships met men on the shore to exchange gifts and, no doubt, a raft of misunderstandings. Then the ships sailed on, poking along the coast until they came to a cozy little harbor they named Porto Seguro. Safe Harbor. All twelve ships (one had been lost at sea) tucked into the protective embrace of land and dropped anchor. Then the crew went ashore to get to know the Tupiniquim a little better. On April 26, the crew built an altar, raised a cross, and celebrated the mass that established their possession of Vera Cruz.<sup>5</sup> This is the date on which Brazil considers itself born.

They danced with the natives, exchanged trinkets, and erected a cross that blessed the heathens with their first intimations of the goodness of Christianity. A writer described a girl as “dyed from top to toe with that red paint of theirs, and she was so well-made and rounded...that many women in our country would be ashamed at being somewhat less well-endowed.”<sup>6</sup> On May 2 they dispatched a ship back to Portugal to report the discovery of the new lands, and the

---

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Bueno, *Brasil: Uma História* (São Paulo: Editora Ática, 2003), 28.

<sup>5</sup> João Capistrano de Abreu, *Chapters of Brazil's colonial History 1500 – 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23-26.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Schwartz, *The Economy and Society of Colonial Brazil: A Brief Overview* The James Ford Bell Lectures #12 (1974), the Association of the James Ford Bell Library, Univ. of Minn., 5

others sailed off for India. They left behind a couple of Jews or criminals (the record is unclear which, or whether they were, by definition, one and the same), five deserting cabin boys, and a handful of volunteers who apparently knew a good thing when they saw it: terra firma, tropical sun, lots of fruit, friendly folks who slept in hammocks, lived off the fat of the land, and for some reason dressed a young woman in red paint. Why go anywhere else?

===

The name of Brazil came about in either of two ways. The least likely is that its discoverers thought they had found a place long rumored to have lain far to the west, an island known as Hy Brazil (or Ho Brazil or Ho Bresil or Ho Brasil or O’Brazil or O’ Bresil or O’Brasil), supposedly discovered by a fifth-century Irish monk who was 105 years old when he sailed off in search of lands to Christianize (181 when he died), a land which had never been seen again, though once in a while sailors reported an oceanic oasis that evaporated as soon as they came near. According to Brazilian historian Pedro Paulo Funari, Hy Brazil means Island of Happiness or Promised Land — arguably a land without evil.<sup>7</sup> Explorers were still looking for Hy Brazil in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, well after Brazil had been found, and Hy Brazil’s hypothetical location still appeared on maps in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> A large island of the Azores archipelago has also been referred to as Hy Brasil. William Butler Yates wrote that he had talked with Irish

---

<sup>7</sup> Claims that the word “Bresil” comes from a Celtic word, *bress*, from which the English *bless* is supposedly derived, have been discredited. There is no such Celtic word, and *bless* comes from a Germanic word meaning “sprinkled with blood.” Modern Brazilians who know of the derivation rarely argue with the appropriateness of the name.

<sup>8</sup> Bueno, *Brasil*, 36

fishermen who had seen the place and described it as an island without labor, care, or cynical laughter.<sup>9</sup> The Portuguese may have thought they had discovered Hy Brazil, though that doesn't jibe very well with their naming the place Ilha de Vera Cruz.

The more widely accepted explanation is that the land was named after the natural resource of primary interest to the Portuguese, a tree they called *pau brasil* or brazilwood. The question, then, is whether they named the place for the tree or the tree for the place. The pau brasil's red wood resembles embers – *brasas*. It also resembles a species of Asian tree — the *Caesalpinia echinata* — that had a vernacular name that sounded like *brasil*.<sup>10</sup> In any event, the wood of this tree produced a lovely dye that had a special use. Europe had just begun an age of factory-made textiles. The sudden variety of clothes gave birth to the concept of fashion, and the mode of the day demanded the royal purplish-red that came from the brazilwood tree.<sup>11</sup>

The crown of Portugal held a monopoly on brazilwood. The king owned each and every tree. His traders hired Indians — they called them *gentio da terra*, or gentiles of the land — to find and fell the trees, saw them up, and haul them to the coast. The traders paid in trinkets, textiles, knives, and tools. The gentiles could work independently, without supervision, instruction, or coercion. They could hustle or they could take their time. Those who delivered the wood took home a nice pair of pants or the head of an ax. Those who preferred to fish and hunt continued to walk around naked. It was a good system, the freest of free enterprise, forced on no one and blessed by a priest. Indians made pretty good lumberjacks and pack animals if left to

---

<sup>9</sup> Schwartz, 5

<sup>10</sup> Oxford English Dictionary

<sup>11</sup> Bueno, *Brasil*, 34.

their own time and devices.<sup>12</sup>

For a while, Brazil didn't seem to have much else to offer. No gold, silver, or spices. Nonetheless, by 1532 Dom João III knew that he had not an island but a good part of a continent, and he wanted it tapped for whatever it might be of value. Other European powers were ready to grab his land. The Treaty of Tordesilhas was all but meaningless, and the French didn't respect it, probably because it neglected to mention France. Dom João knew that forts and trading posts alone would not protect his colony. He needed to settle it. He decided to impose a modified feudalism that had worked during medieval times and was still working on the islands of Madeira and the Azores. He would divide the land into twelve *capitanias*. They would extend from the Amazon River at the northern end to today's Santa Catarina state, down near today's Uruguay — some 735 leagues (4,410 km, 2,735 miles) of beach bordered by palm groves and *mata atlântica* forest. Each captaincy would be a slice between east-west lines that were ridiculously straight, reaching from the beach to the undeterminable line set by the Treaty of Tordesilhas.<sup>13</sup> Dom João gave each captaincy to a nobleman. These grantees would serve as governors with almost absolute power over their captaincies' settlement and exploitation.

The Portuguese nobility, however, showed no interest in exchanging the comforts of Lisbon for the rigors of Brazil. Dom João therefore moved the necessary qualifications down a notch, granting the captaincies to twelve trustworthy men whose professions ranged from business to bureaucracy, shipping to soldiering. Of those twelve, four would never bother going to see what the king had given them. Three others went but either showed no interest or made no progress. Three others died not long after arriving. One other, accused of heresy, came home in

---

<sup>12</sup> Fausto, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Abreu, 38.

chains to face inquisition.

One other, Duarte Coelho, a military man with experience in India, had the gumption to make it work. His captaincy, called Pernambuco, was a choice cut of land, 60 leagues (360 km, 225 miles) of coastline on the southern side of the bulge that reaches out toward Africa. It would be a long time before anyone could probe the interior to the Tordesilhas line, so the precise depth of the captaincy made little difference. And since no one could walk a straight line through the land obstructed by jungle, mountains, and rivers, the borders had little meaning. The theoretical size of Pernambuco exceeded that of the mother country, but for practical purposes, a century of settlement would fail to move the frontier a hundred miles from the coast.

Coelho had little interest in the brazilwood. The crown had a monopoly on it.<sup>14</sup> There were plenty of coconuts around, but Portugal was already getting coconuts from Africa, just across the Strait of Gibraltar. The search for gold had turned up nothing but rumors and dirt. It was good dirt, though, well watered by rain and warmed under tropical sunlight. Together, these elements produced something just about as good as gold, gold a farmer could grow. Pernambuco was a perfect place to plant sugar cane.

---

<sup>14</sup> Bueno, *Brasil*, 44.

## Chapter 17

### Digging for Palmares

In 1694, the same year that Palmares was overrun, *paulista* pioneers discovered gold in the mountains a couple hundred miles inland from Rio de Janeiro and north from São Paulo. They also found emeralds, aquamarines, topaz, and, in 1714, diamonds. The region would soon be known as Minas Gerais — in English, General Mines. By 1697, the Estrada Real — the Royal Road — was under construction, a 750-mile road system connecting the ports of Rio de Janeiro and Parati to the gold mines of such cities as Mariana, Ouro Preto, and Congonhas, and to the diamond mines farther north in Serro and Diamantina.<sup>15</sup> Minas Gerais became the center of Brazil, the literal jewel of the Portuguese empire. Anyone with greed and gumption went there, and with them went their slaves. Pernambuco became a forgotten backland. The Brazilian sugar industry, unable to compete with Dutch and French plantations in the Caribbean, was all but dead. Had Zumbi held out another year or two, Palmares might have survived by default. With Pernambuco now of little importance to Lisbon, he might well have expanded his kingdom to the sea.

---

<sup>15</sup> Glenn Alan Cheney, *Journey on the Estrada Real: Encounters in the Mountains of Brazil* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 2004), ix.

This is not to say that Pernambuco was of no interest to anyone. Domingos Jorge Velho, his officers, his soldiers, mill owners, land owners, the king, the governor, and the governor-general spent the next two decades arguing over who was entitled to the lands of Palmares. Not long after the last battle, Governor Caetano e Melo e Casto sent the king a letter in which he clearly stated, “I believe it will not be useful to the Royal Service of His Majesty that those people [i.e. the paulistas] remain living in Palmares because the neighboring captaincies will experience greater losses to their cattle and farms than the blacks themselves had caused...”<sup>16</sup> In time, ownership would be determined by whoever had enough power to control a given piece of it. Men with the self-proclaimed title of *coronel* — colonel — used ragtag militias to pounce on land, snatching it from each other and from the many *quilombos* that survived or sprung up in the vast, arid central *sertão*.

But Zumbi was dead. His brave little nation was overrun, his people scattered, his head on a pole in Recife. If anything survived of Macaco and the other mocambos, it was soon washed away in rain or digested into the earth. Today, nothing identifiably Palmarian remains, not one bullet, no scratch of writing, no trifle of art, no shard of pottery, not one bone, not one thing besides a few descriptions written by people who really didn’t care.

The lack of remnants, however, does not mean people aren’t looking for something. *Anything*. The implications of any discovery go beyond the academic domain of history and into Brazil’s national identity and its contentious realm of politics.

No one knows the precise locations of any of the *mocambos* of Palmares except for a mountain that is still called Barriga in today’s state of Alagoas, a few hours inland by car, just

---

<sup>16</sup> Edison Carneiro, *O Quilombo dos Palmares* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1958) p. 151

outside the town of União dos Palmares, hulking above the muddy Rio Mundaú. As far as anybody knows, the *serra* has always been called Barriga, and it fits within the rough descriptions of the place: a long, broad ridge with steep slopes, a pond and a marshy area up top, and a nasty cliff. Until recently, União dos Palmares was called Macaco. In all likelihood, this is the place. It certainly is celebrated as the place.

Palmares was all but forgotten for over two centuries after Zumbi's death. During all those years it is mentioned only a handful of times in Brazilian historiographies and other documents. In 1726, Sebastião da Rocha Pita published his ten-volume *História da América Portuguesa*, which included 26 paragraphs about Palmares, some of it apparently based on reports from people who had lived during the time of Palmares.<sup>17</sup> Palmares didn't come into national awareness again until the 1932, when *Os Africanos no Brasil*, by Nina Rodrigues, was published. Though well researched and written in good detail, the book perpetuated the notion of Palmares as a regressive retribalization of Bantu culture that succumbed to the heroic efforts of the Paulista *bandeirantes*.<sup>18</sup> In 1933, Gilberto Freyre published *Casa Grande e Senzala: A Formação da Família sob o Regime de Economia Patriarcal* (*The Masters and The Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*), which exposed uncomfortable truths and myths about slavery and the role of blacks in the history of Brazil.<sup>19</sup> In 1924, Affonso de E. Taunay started his eleven-volume history of the *bandeirantes*, *História Gerals das Bandeiras*

---

<sup>17</sup> Richard Marin, "Zumbi does Palmares: Um Novo Tiradentes?" *Clio: Revista de Pesquisa Histórica*, U. Federal de Pernambuco, 1, no. 20 (2002): 236

<sup>18</sup> Marin, 237

<sup>19</sup> Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: a study in the development of Brazilian civilization*, (*Casa-grande e Senzala: formação da família sob o regimen de economia patriarcal*) translated by Samuel Putnam (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986)

*paulistas*, which would take him 27 years to write. It included the story of the conquering of Palmares. In the 1930s, Artur Ramos wrote a ten-volume series titled “*O Negro na Civilização Brasileira*,” praising Palmares as “the first great epic that the Negro wrote in the land of Brazil,” eulogizing its economic organization as “perfect.”<sup>20</sup> In 1946, Edison Carneiros, published, *O Quilombo dos Palmares*, the first book dedicated to the history of Palmares. In 1959, Clóvis Moura published *Rebeliões nas Senzalas (Rebellion in the Slave Quarters)*, a Marxist interpretation of Palmares as historical class struggle.<sup>21</sup>

None of these books became widely popular until the advent of a military coup in 1964 and subsequent rightist dictatorship. The coup was ostensibly a necessary measure to combat rumbles of nascent communism. Communist activity, however, wasn’t much more than a minuscule band of ineffectual guerrillas, a small political party, some liberal tendencies by the president, and some inconvenient muscle-flexing by labor unions. Once in power, the military suppressed unions and oppressed anyone critical of the government.

Under this cloud of military repression, Zumbi and Palmares became symbols of resistance. Symbolically, the struggle between the Portuguese (and their Indian and black allies) and Palmares (with its black, Indian and Portuguese population) had not yet ended. To the politically repressed, Palmares symbolized resistance to tyrannical government.<sup>22</sup> To Marxists, it symbolized resistance to capitalism. To the poor, it symbolized resistance to the rich. To the people of the miserably impoverished northeast, it symbolized resistance to the federal attention

---

<sup>20</sup> Artur Ramos, *O Negro na Civilização Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Editora da Casa Estudante do Brasil, 1956), 59-69.

<sup>21</sup> Clóvis Moura, *Rebeliões da Senzala*, (São Paulo: Edições Zumbi, 1959).

<sup>22</sup> Marin, 240

that was focused on the wealthy south. To blacks, it symbolized resistance to racism and white domination. To those espousing Liberation Theology, the Church's blessing of the annihilation of Palmares symbolized Catholicism ignoring the plight of the poor and the black.<sup>23</sup> Seen the in the right light from the right perspective, Palmares could symbolize any liberal cause. Unfortunately, the desire to adopt the symbol often meant interpreting history through a lens of something other than fact.

No one knows the precise locations of any of the *mocambos* of Palmares except for a mountain that is still called Barriga in today's state of Alagoas, a few hours inland by car, just outside the town of União dos Palmares, hulking above the muddy Rio Mundaú. As far as anybody knows, the *serra* has always been called Barriga, and it fits within the 17<sup>th</sup> century descriptions of the place: a long, broad ridge with steep slopes, a pond and a marshy area up top, and a nasty cliff. Until recently, União dos Palmares was called Macaco. In all likelihood, this is the place.

It certainly is celebrated as the place. In 1978, the Serra da Barriga was named a National Historic Site.<sup>24</sup> Since about that time there has been a Zumbi memorial event on top of Barriga every November to mark his death. Every year until 1998 a bulldozer worked its way up from União dos Palmares, ironing out the dirt road, then leveling and pushing the vegetation off a site not far from the famous cliff. As it plowed back and forth, piling up rubble at the edge of the area, it clipped off innumerable prehistoric (that is, pre-Colombian or, in a term often applied to Brazil, pre-Cabral) Indian burial urns, the tops of which were just a foot or two below the surface.

---

<sup>23</sup> Marin, 242.

<sup>24</sup> Allen, 84

Then a stage got set up, and a few days later people congregated for speeches about freedom, spiritual moments, and African music. Then everybody went home, often with a piece of prehistoric pottery in the pocket, leaving the mountain to the few dozen peasant families who have lived there since the 1960s.<sup>25</sup>

It's a glorious and weepy place for such a ceremony but a nightmare for an archaeologist. Human activity and the search for evidence of earlier human activity do not combine well. No matter how intriguing a given artifact, if it is out of context — that is, separated from whatever lay near it the last time somebody actually used it — its message and meaning are almost entirely lost. It's the surroundings of an artifact that give it meaning and hint at its history. The chunks of ceramic burial urns piled up around the perimeter of the memorial site don't indicate much except that a bulldozer had been there and that for some reason people in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century had smoothed out the area once a year.

The first archeologists to take a look at Barriga were Charles E. Orser, Jr., of the Illinois State University, and Paulo A. Funari of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas in the state of São Paulo. In about two weeks in 1992 they dug a hasty trench, did a superficial assessment of the area, and identified a few stone artifacts and a lot of surface-level pottery, some of it prehistoric, some of it of European origin, some of it apparently made in Brazil but using technology that Brazilian Indians didn't have. They found a clay vessel under the soil. It appeared to be a typical Indian burial urn, but there were no bones in it. Since it was a bit chipped at the top, they theorized that it had been opened and closed many times. The archeologists suggested that it had been used as an underground storage vessel, which happens to

---

<sup>25</sup> Allen, 90

be a tradition in Africa. Maybe, therefore, it was evidence that blacks had lived at Barriga. In an article about their findings, Funari and Orser wrote “The pottery used at Palmares thus attests both to the integration of the runaway polity into a much wider world of exchanges — from the Brazilian coast to Africa and to Europe — and to the polity’s unique character. The material world of Palmares was not native, European or African; it was specific, forged in their fight for freedom.”<sup>26</sup>

Funari went even further, describing Palmares as a place of racial harmony, home to Africans, Indians, Jews, Moors, heretics, sodomites, and witches. It was, in his words, a “Little Brazil,” a utopian ideal that worked in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and therefore was not impossible in the imminent 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>27</sup>

The presumption of these archeologists, however, was a wishful extrapolation based on scanty information in documents. Nothing about the pottery, let alone its discombobulated context, indicated that escaped slaves were involved or that the artifacts had been produced in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It didn’t even indicate that Indians or anyone else had actually lived on the site. It may simply have been a burial site. Or pre-Colombian people may have lived there and abandoned the site before the runaway slaves arrived. Or the fugitive slaves may have joined the Indians in their village, as is known to have happened elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> It’s not at all unlikely that the

---

<sup>26</sup> Charles E. Orser, Jr. and Pedro P.A. Funari, “Archaeology and Slave Resistance and Rebellion.” *World Archeology*, 33, no. 1, 67. Also suggested in Funari’s “A Arqueologia de Palmares: Sua contribuição para o conhecimento da história da cultura Afro-Americana” in João José Reis, and Flávio dos Santos Gomes, *Liberdade Por Um Fio: História dos Quilombos no Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996), 27.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, 191, citing *Folha de São Paulo*, June 4, 1995, and “Public Archaeology in Brazil,” 1999, an unpublished manuscript for the Session on Public Archaeology, World Archaeological Congress 4, Cape Town, South Africa.

<sup>28</sup> Allen, 167-168.

residential village of Macaco was down at the Rio Mundaú, with only the fort up on the hill. As for the assortment of pottery, it's not unlikely that the Tupinambás had contact with the European culture (and its ceramics) in the hundred years that may have preceded the arrival of the first black refugees. Nothing in the pieces of pottery indicated African influence. Nothing indicated that anything had been "forged in a fight for freedom."

Broad interpretation based on a few artifacts is difficult if not impossible. There has been so little archaeology done in Brazil, and even less on the sites of quilombos, that there is no way to fit artifacts from Barriga into a bigger picture. They are as meaningless (and full of potential) as individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. One piece of a puzzle says almost nothing about the puzzle as a whole. Another dozen pieces don't tell much more. But from a thousand pieces one could not only guess what the big picture is but begin to put the pieces together and fill in the gaps of missing pieces. Take, for example, a smoking pipe found at Barriga. One edge of it is slightly raised. Archeologists wonder whether that slight difference in design might indicate African culture and therefore a Palmares. Or, they wonder, did the pipe have a certain purpose? Or was it particular to a certain clan or tribe? Or was it an artistic flair that was never repeated? Without more pipes from more sites, this particular pipe has no interpretable meaning. If archaeologists found similar artifacts at a site known to have been home only to former slaves who had been born in Africa, and at another site of slaves who had been born in Brazil, and at another of Indians who had never had contact with European culture or technology, and at another of former Africans who had lived together with Indians for a long time, a comparison of those artifacts with artifacts from Barriga would be very meaningful, very telling.

But Brazil is far, far from any such advanced stage of archaeological research. Rhode

Island has many more archaeologists per archeology site than Brazil has, and indeed it was from Rhode Island — Brown University, to be precise — that archaeology student Scott Joseph Allen came to Brazil in 1996 to begin research that would eventually add up to his dissertation for his Ph.D. Just barely beginning his post-graduate work, he came with what he soon recognized was an unscientific objective. He was looking for evidence of a black community where Indians and whites may also have lived. Like Funari and Orser, he was entranced with the idea of digging up the relics of a rebellious black republic, and he was predisposed to finding them.

But good archaeologists, like all good scientists, aren't supposed to be predisposed. They don't establish a conclusion and then go looking for evidence to back it up. Archeologists approach a site in search of whatever is there. They draw their conclusions from whatever they find, not from what's most exciting or politically relevant. They contribute their findings to the greater body of knowledge about ancient times. What they find might not tell them much about the place where they found it, but it might give clues about findings in other places.

Regardless of what Allen was originally looking for, what he found was the same tragic mis of prehistoric and modern rubble, the pieces of burial urn and busted clay smoking pipes piled up with plastic water bottles, shopping bags, and cigarette butts. He also found a touchy political situation. Brazilians in general wanted very much to find something that would confirm the many stories about Palmares: the courage and high-minded principles of Zumbi; the existential leap over the cliff by 200 people who would rather be dead than enslaved; the democratic essence of the Palmares republic; the communal, quasi-Marxist nature of Palmarian society; the harmonious intermingling of blacks, whites, and Indians in a community of mutual respect. Such interpretations bolstered spirits and causes of the political left.

Allen soon cured himself of his predisposition. His dissertation ended up being not about what happened at Barriga or the culture that existed there or artifacts remaining today. The title was “ ‘Zumbi Nunca Vai Morrer’: History, the Practice of Archaeology, and Race Politics in Brazil.”<sup>29</sup> The first sentence is “I arrived in Brazil in 1996 expecting to research and write a very different dissertation than the one that finally emerged.”

What emerged was a discussion of the potentials of archaeology and the weaknesses of “official history.” The official history of Palmares included not only myths but the reports and other documents written by the Portuguese of the times. Those reports hardly constitute solid scientific information, having been written by people who couldn’t write very well and, in the case of the Paulista bandeirantes, barely knew Portuguese. The bandeirantes and the leaders of the many militias certainly weren’t writing with the aim of describing a culture or establishing historical records. They did their writing in an era when journalism and sociology hadn’t been invented and history was a concept recognized by only a few rare philosophers back in Europe. Their version of truth was clouded by prejudice, presumption, politics, avarice, rumor, and stupidity. Some of it was extracted by torture. Reports that reached the king weren’t necessarily reports of what had happened; they were as likely reports of what the writer wished had happened or thought that the king would want to have happened.

Official history is typically written by the winners, that is, whoever dominates a given society. This is most often a government that uses propaganda and censorship to steer official history. The same can apply to the awarding of grants and government permissions. They tend to go to researchers who can be counted on to present evidence that supports the official history.

---

<sup>29</sup> Scott Joseph Allen, “ ‘Zumbi Nunca Vai Morrer’: History, the Practice of Archeology, and Race Politics in Brazil,” (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, May 2001)

In his dissertation, Allen quoted an academic article that warned that “erasure of local histories [is] one of the most cancerous products of international capitalism in both its colonial and its metropolitan manifestations. . . . Colonial and neocolonial powers manipulate the production of histories, encouraging certain forms of history while discouraging and even silencing others. The state exercises power over the production of local histories in various ways: *censorship*, the appointment of *official state historians*, the allocation of *resources for research and training* that serve to amplify knowledge about only the period in which the state is identified, the sponsorship of archaeological methods that ensure the *erasure of local histories* from the landscape, and *sanctions* against and outright suppression of those who attempt to challenge official histories.” (Italics added by Allen.)<sup>30</sup>

Official history can lead to myths, but myths are not necessarily undesirable. They serve a special purpose. Whether or not their stories sound true, the beliefs that guide them seem natural, unarguable, and inevitable. They are the basis of values and morality. And of course if the myths seem to be based on or even part of history, their values seem all the more valid. The myths of Palmares, some based on original documents, others on wishful thinking, reaffirm such values as courage, independence, racial equality, human dignity, democracy, and communal economy.

Such values did not serve the purposes of a right-wing military government that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1984, yet the history and myths of Palmares persisted and grew in popularity. Though the military dominated Brazil for two decades through the use of propaganda

---

<sup>30</sup> Allen, “Zumbi,” 199, citing Peter R. Schmidt and Thomas Patterson, “Introduction: From Constructing to Making Alternative Histories,” Schmidt and Patterson (eds.) *Making Alternative Histories: The Practice of Archaeology and History in Non-Western Settings*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series, 1995, 1-24.

and censorship (and torture, arrests, and killings), it failed to establish an generally accepted history or to suppress the growing awareness of Palmares and the spreading of its myths. It didn't even try. The official history of Palmares was written not by the government but by left-leaning historians and academics. In fact the two main writers of histories of Palmares in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were leftists writing while in exile. Edison Carneiro, author of *O Quilombo dos Palmares*, fled Getúlio Vargas's rightist government of the 1930s and 1940s. He wrote his book while in Mexico and published his first edition there in Spanish in 1946. The first Brazilian edition was published in 1948 by Editora Brasiliense, which was owned by a Marxist historian. It was dedicated to the founder of the Brazilian Communist Party. Décio Freitas researched *Palmares: A Guerra dos Escravos* while in exile in Europe after the coup of 1964 and first published it in Spanish while in Uruguay.

In Brazil there is such a thing as a *Palmarista*, someone who claims a political affiliation with Palmares.<sup>31</sup> Trusting the accuracy of the original documents and then stretching them to the left, Palmarista historians depicted a glorious black republic that was not unlike the one they wished contemporary Brazil would become — a nation of racial harmony, cooperative spirit, equitable economy, and independence from foreign powers. Décio Freitas, for example, claimed that there was “civil and political equality among the *Palmarinos*” and that all adults, presumably including women, shared political power.<sup>32</sup> His book does not cite sources, and if sources support such statements, they are scanty, unreliable, and inadequate for such conclusions.

An interesting part of the generally accepted — or “official” — history is the claim, initiated by Décio Freitas, that Zumbi knew Latin. Freitas based the claim — and the whole

---

<sup>31</sup> Allen, *Identidades*, 176.

<sup>32</sup> Allen, *Identidades*, 52-53.

claim that Zumbi was captured as an infant and raised by a priest — on documents that have disappeared. They belonged to a Graziela de Cadaval, Contessa of Schonborn, whose family has been preserving a large number of books and documents, some going back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The documents relating to Zumbi were letters written by Fr. Antônio de Melo, the priest who raised him. They were written in 1696 and 1698, when the first duke of Cadaval was president of the Overseas Council. These and many other documents of the time were passed down through many generations, their numbers dwindling as they descended. A fire destroyed some. Others disappeared when Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1808 and the Portuguese nobility fled to Brazil, taking entire libraries with them to set up government in Rio de Janeiro. An inheritance later divided the Cadaval documents, and some were sold off. Only half stayed with the Contessa. And then one day a researcher in a wheel chair visited the archives and absconded with Fr. de Melo's letters — or so Décio Freitas said.<sup>33</sup> He has since passed away, and as far as Scott Allen knows, no one else has seen the copy that Freitas said he had.

The Zumbi-Priest-Latin story is part of the official history of Palmares. Though it is not based on solid evidence, it is accepted as true. True or not, it's a nice thing to believe in. It adds a beautiful human element to the story of Palmares. It glorifies the value of education. It enhances the image of a people that Brazilians like to imagine as embodying all that their country could be.

The myth of the mass suicide over the cliff has been dropped from official history. Those who have studied Palmares know that there is no evidence that it was suicide, but great masses of people are content to believe it was. It was the historian Rocha Pita, a contemporary of Zumbi,

---

<sup>33</sup> *Folha de São Paulo*, November 12, 1995, section 5, 7.

who first declared that “Prince Zumbi and his strongest warriors and loyal followers” had committed mass suicide. “Not wanting to die on our [i.e. Portuguese] swords, they climbed to the height of their eminence and willingly threw themselves off and with that style of death showed that they did not love life in slavery and did not want to lose it to our attack.”<sup>34</sup> Pita apparently made this claim without evidence, probably just generating a tragic and poetic image of existential heroism. Multiple documents confirm that Zumbi (or at least a man presumed to be Zumbi, or claimed to be Zumbi) was hunted down and killed almost two years after that final battle and the incident at the cliff. But the notion, irresistibly romantic, has been repeated in many other books and articles right up to modern times.

Though archeology is not likely to prove that Zumbi knew or didn’t know Latin, it can in other ways threaten official history. It opens the possibility of an alternative history, one that diverges from the image of Palmares as a black community with a culture of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Such a possibility is a threat to people of various liberal persuasions. So when Scott Allen arrived at Barriga, a rubble of artifacts wasn’t the only mess he found. He also found a mess of politics. The military government was ten years past, and the left-leaning history of Palmares was alive and well, and few wanted to see it threatened. Academics and political activists were even less eager to see an American digging into the sacred heart of Palmares.

The Fundação Cultural Palmares is a governmental agency within the Brazilian Ministry of Culture. Endowed with legal authority over many issues relating to quilombos in Brazil, it would not allow Allen (or anyone else) to excavate at Palmares. This prohibition coincided with

---

<sup>34</sup> Rocha Pitta, *História da América Portuguesa*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 241.

the first public awareness that the Serra da Barriga almost certainly included an Indian component, a reality, which, if proven, might wrest authority from the Fundação Cultural Palmares and transfer it to some other agency, such as the Fundação Nacional do Índio, which handles Indian issues.<sup>35</sup> No one actually stated this, but to Scott Allen it smelled more like heritage politics than anthropology.

“The practice of archaeology is integrally linked to political agendas that are diverse and archaeologists frequently feel the pressure of these agendas, which include the development of tourism, interethnic conflicts, and advancing of resources, etc.,” he would later write in his dissertation. “...Generally researchers who challenge these official histories are prohibited from carrying out further studies by denying them resources or official permissions.”<sup>36</sup>

Allen had no intention of targeting a challenge on anything, but intentions are irrelevant in science. Any challenges would depend on whatever archaeology revealed at Barriga, and if nothing got dug, nothing would be revealed, and nothing would be challenged.

Stymied for the time being, Allen went surfing for a couple of months, then got down to researching whatever he could without actually digging a hole. At the same time, he probed the Brazilian bureaucracy, looking for a way to get something done at Barriga, where every year the situation worsened as the bulldozers went back and forth, erasing a few more inches of history to open up a space for the annual commemoration. Unfortunately, they were smoothing off an area known as “the plateau,” the area most logical for habitation and therefore the most likely to yield artifacts.

The plateau was also the most logical place to build a monument to Palmares. Plans for a

---

<sup>35</sup> Allen, *Identities*, 174

<sup>36</sup> Allen, “Zumbi,” 175.

memorial park and museum had begun shortly before Allen arrived. On November 20, 1995, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso gave a speech at Barriga to commemorate 300 years since Zumbi's death. With him were soccer hero Pelé, who was Brazil's Minister of Sports, and a black senator, Benedita da Silva. "I come here to say that Zumbi is ours," Cardoso said, "that he is of the people of Brazil, and he represents the best of our people the desire for freedom. [...] Zumbi has gone beyond his identity as an Afro-Brazilian."<sup>37</sup>

In 1997 an act of the Brazilian congress named Zumbi dos Palmares a National Hero. The only other hero at that time was Joaquim José da Silva Xavier, more familiarly known as Tiradentes. An itinerant dentist and gold prospector in Minas Gerais, Tiradentes conspired to oust the Portuguese over a tax issue. The conspiracy accomplished nothing before its participants were betrayed and arrested. Tiradentes was hanged, beheaded, and quartered, his body parts left on display in Ouro Preto. His martyrdom, like that of Zumbi, is often likened to that of Christ. "Zumbi dos Palmares" was inscribed in the *Book of Steel* at a monument to Brazil's *Heróis Nacionais* in Brasilia. In that same year, the president of the Universidade Federal de Alagoas asked Scott Allen to join his faculty and to establish an archaeological presence at Barriga.

After much political wrangling, the Fundação Cultural Palmares came to understand that bulldozers were scraping away the heritage that the foundation was supposed to be preserving. They declared the entire mountain an archaeological site and put Dr. Allen in charge of it. The building of the memorial park and museum would proceed, but nothing was to scratch the surface of the earth without Dr. Allen saying it could it could scratch. His first project was to allow the construction of the memorial park on the plateau. This was a political, not

---

<sup>37</sup> Marin citing Jean-Francois Veran, "Brésil: les découvertes du *quilombo*. Las construction hétérogène d'une question nationale," *Problèmes d'Amérique latine*, (January-March 1999): 55.

archeological decision. Under better circumstances, he would never have allowed this until a thorough excavation had been completed. But the bulldozer had done its damage, and a few test holes confirmed that in all likelihood nothing remained. Bearing in mind that he had to balance scientific accuracy with the national passion for Palmares, he quickly gave his archeological nod to a boundary around much of the plateau. One side of the boundary was set at a point where they had found a clay smoking pipe. The pipe was interesting but not unusual. It could have been made by Indians well before Columbus set sail or by blacks during the time of Palmares, or sometime in between or sometime well after. But still, it was something, and its undisturbed location indicated a good place to draw a line.

Architects came forward with plans for the memorial. Despite any evidence of how the buildings of Palmares had looked, architects wanted structures to be in some way authentic, and they wanted the structures in places that were either authentic or aesthetic or just practical. The governor of Alagoas approved the final plan, not noting that the bathroom had been nudged over the boundary Allen had set. One end of the bathroom, in fact, was not far from where the pipe had been found. The governor had no right to approve the plan, but Allen wasn't tactless enough to try to get it unapproved. Sure enough, as workers began to dig the bathroom foundation, they found a burial urn. It had been clipped off by a bulldozer, but its bottom part was intact. Inside was a chunk of concrete. Either the inhabitants of Barriga knew the formula for cement or the context of the urn had been compromised. The former idea being virtually impossible, Allen concluded the latter. He already had plenty of pieces of out-of-context urn, but the presence of this one could indicate the presence of other artifacts nearby. He called a halt to construction of the bathroom until he and some students could excavate the area where the corner of the

bathroom would go. Nothing would flush until Allen said it could flush.

Allen had heard suggestions that he dig first and most where he'd most likely find something integrally linked to the black community of Palmares — at the bottom of the cliff, for example, the one the 200 people fell over. Maybe there were still bones down there, or a ring or a button or something. But what would the findings tell him? At most (and this isn't very likely), that people really did fall over the cliff. But archaeology can never tell us *why*. Was it stampede, suicide or murder? Did those people really prefer death over slavery? Or in panic did they take a wrong turn in the dark? Or did white men with guns and swords force them over the edge? The myth is more beautiful than the alternatives, Allen says. Why not just let it be? The same goes for the undocumented story that Zumbi knew Latin. These myths and questionable facts all put beautiful values — dignity, democracy, equality — on the pedestal of humanity's principles, and they make little difference in the study of how people lived in the past. Why not leave the myths alone, Allen says, and let archaeology sift through history's dustbin in search of simpler facts about human existence? If myths support the funding for archeology and the nobility of mankind, let them be.

The trench behind the bathroom turned up nothing. The Parque Memorial Quilombo dos Palmares now inhabits the plateau with reasonable representations of how people may have lived there before Domingos Jorge Velho arrived. The huts look authentically African. Palm trees stand like flag. A platform at the edge of the plateau looks out over cane fields that stretch to the horizon, and think about it all. One can sit on a bench in the shade and listen to recorded lectures about slavery, *capoeira*, and the African gods that are still worshipped in Brazil — Ogum, the warrior; Oxossi, the hunter; Omolú, the healer; Xangô, the judge. One can see how nice and flat

the bulldozer has made the land. A sign attests to the presence of Indians in the quilombo, though it refers to remains of huts that are still visible on the site — a presence, if proven, that would certainly raise Scott Allen's eyebrows to a dangerous height. One can take a little walk to the Lago dos Negros, an algae-green pond from that sustained Palmarians for a century. On one side there's a jumble of small boulders with deep scratches. People like to think that Palmarian warriors sharpened their weapons there. People also once liked to think that Zumbi had buried the treasurers of Palmares — gold and silver stolen from mills and farms — under the water of the pond. Wishful prospectors dug it all up, creating yet another archaeological nightmare, but found nothing.

Women still do laundry at the pond, squatting in the water in the shade of a broad, old gameleira branca (*ficus gamelleira*) with a dense canopy and roots that reach down from its lowest branches. Gameleiras are considered sacred, especially this one. It isn't old enough to have been around in 1694, but its mother may have been. The gameleira is an African tree now common in Brazil. How this one came to grow beside this pond is a matter of myth. The best or at least most beautiful guess is that an escaping slave wore an amulet with a gameleira seed from Africa. She planted it at the pond, and the tree has been there ever since. In fact, in a sense, it's mythically possible that it's the same tree because the gameleira starts its life as a parasite living off another tree. It typically sprouts in rotted leaves in the fork of another tree — perhaps its parent — and then sends roots to the ground. Little by little it overtakes the host tree and subsumes it — *becomes* it — as the ancestor fades into the soil.

That isn't just a myth. It's a metaphor. The gameleira that may have shaded Zumbi himself has disappeared, its molecules dissipated, but something has grown out of it. So, too, has

Palmares disappeared, burned to the ground and wiped away by centuries of rain, rot, vegetation, and bulldozers. If anything remains, it hasn't been found. Maybe one of those eight cannonballs is still up there. Maybe under some undisturbed soil there's a smudge left by a Palmarian fence post. Maybe somebody scratched something unarguably African on a stone. But if we find anything, it probably won't tell us what most people would *really* like to know about Palmares.

It could be said that Palmares' and Zumbi's effect on Brazilian society is more through legend and myth than anything else. No technology or knowledge came out of it, no art, no music, no literature, nothing except certain values supported by myths. Whether the myths are based on truth or not, the effect of them, the *inspiration* of them, is all we've taken from Palmares.

In a sense, Palmares survives, or even prevails, in the way that the African cultures survive (and arguably prevail) in modern Brazilian culture. African music is the antecedent of *samba*, *bossa nova*, *capoeira*, *axé*, *maracatu*, *afoxé*, *batucada*, *batuque*, *lundu*, *choro*, and other kinds of music popular today. African instruments — the *berimbau*, the *atabaque*, the *pandeiro* — are played in everything from *música popular* to opera. Foods once found only in the *senzala* (slave quarters) are now delicacies, one of which, the famous *feijoada* black bean stew, was made with the parts of the pig that slave owners considered undesirable. African-based religions — *candomblé* and *umbanda* — are still widely practiced, and every market has its kiosk selling soaps, incense, herbs, trinkets, candles, perfumes, and paraphernalia associated with mystical powers and a variety of gods, some of whom are disguised as Catholic saints.

And there are still places that consider themselves *quilombos*, and the politics surrounding them echo the struggle over Palmares.

## Chapter 18

### The Struggle Today

Domingos Jorge Velho did not kill everyone at Palmares. Many escaped. Indeed, for as long as there was slavery — it wasn't abolished until 1888 — there were people running from it. The Fundação Cultural Palmares has identified thousands of populated sites all over Brazil that were probably *quilombos*. One especially famous quilombo legalized its status in 1802, deep in today's state of Pernambuco, some 500 kilometers (310 miles) west-northwest of Palmares. In that year, six *crioulas* — the word would refer to black women born in Brazil rather than captured in Africa — legally purchased 17,845 hectares (44,095 acres, almost 69 square miles) in the western part of today's Pernambuco state. This was 86 years before the end of slavery in Brazil and almost 200 years before the national government established effective law and order in the area. The purchase is unusual not only because the buyers were blacks but because they were women. In the extremely patriarchal society of 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil, women didn't wander around. They didn't settle in unsettled territory, and they didn't buy land.

It's not unlikely that the women had fled slavery, but this isn't necessarily so. They may have fled a *quilombo* somewhere when it was discovered and overrun. They may have somehow earned their freedom and headed west. The inevitable myth, as romantic as it is unlikely, is that

their ancestors had escaped the massacre at Palmares a hundred years earlier. It would seem that they must have been running from something because women in Brazil, black or white, were not free. Even the wealthiest white woman was a virtual slave who was restricted to her home, entrusted no further than the nearest market. But six *crioulas* may well have been descendants of others who had arrived earlier (arguably from Palmares), in which case the interesting fact would be that it was the women in the community who took the initiative to save money and buy the land.

In any event, it surely took many years for them, and possibly their ancestors, to save enough money to buy 17,845 hectares. Being women and being black in a part of the world with only a frontier economy, they couldn't have earned very much. The land must have been all but worthless. It was far from the coast and not near any rivers. No rain fell during six months of the year, and sometimes none fell for twelve months of the year. The soil was mostly sand and gravel but fertile enough to grow cotton, which was very much a woman's business. From its planting to its harvesting to its production into textiles, women — free or enslaved — did the work throughout the process.<sup>38</sup> Maybe it was that reason — their control of the whole process — that allowed these woman to earn and save enough money to buy so much land. According to one of the women who bought the land, Francisca Ferreira, God made the acquisition possible by God after she promised Him she'd build a chapel to Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Our Lady of the Conception, if He allowed them to buy the land. Just as the 18<sup>th</sup> century turned into the 19<sup>th</sup>, the six women received the deed, signed by a clerk named José Delgado, with sixteen seals of

---

<sup>38</sup> E.C. Maupeou, *Cativeiro e Cotidiano num Ambiente Rural — O Sertão do Médio São Francisco (1840-1888)*. (Master's thesis, CFCH-Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. Recife, PE), 2008.

approval, from the Casa da Torre that effectively owned the area. The land was theirs. They built the promised chapel and called the place Conceição das Crioulas. (There's an alternative explanation for the name: After the women took possession of the land, a man named Francisco José, having deserted from the army, arrived there, bringing with him an icon of Our Lady of the Conception. He helped build the chapel and named it after the icon. Variation: Francisco José was a fugitive slave who led the women to that place.)<sup>39</sup>

For the next hundred years, Conceição continued to operate as quilombos always had.<sup>40</sup> The community held the land in common. They shared the scarce water supplies and peacefully apportioned land to people who would use it. They planted subsistence crops and raised goats for meat. They planted cotton, their only cash crop, the full substance of their little economy. As far as we know, most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was relatively calm for Conceição. If anything especially important or violent happened, it eludes the community memory.

But the community remembers that early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “white” farmers started encroaching on Conceição land. These farmers weren't necessarily a whole lot whiter than the people in Conceição; they were simply from outside the quilombo. “Black” and “white” were cultural and geographic differences more than racial differences. At first the outsiders didn't exactly steal the land. According to community memory, which is probably an amalgam of myth and fact, an outsider asked someone in Conceição if he could set up a little corral in the area.

---

<sup>39</sup> See <http://pimentanegra.blogspot.com/2007/03/quilombo-de-conceio-das-crioulas.html> and [http://www.cpisp.org.br/comunidades/html/brasil/pe/pe\\_conceicao.html](http://www.cpisp.org.br/comunidades/html/brasil/pe/pe_conceicao.html)

<sup>40</sup> Except as otherwise indicated, information about Conceição das Crioulas is based on conversations with Aparecida Mendes and managers at the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária. For photos of conceição, see [http://xama.incubadora.fapesp.br/portal/imagens/fotos2\\_conceicao\\_crioulas.pdf](http://xama.incubadora.fapesp.br/portal/imagens/fotos2_conceicao_crioulas.pdf). For official information from the town of Salgueiro, see [http://www.salgueiro.pe.gov.br/distrito\\_conceicao\\_crioulas.php](http://www.salgueiro.pe.gov.br/distrito_conceicao_crioulas.php)

He'd be glad to pay a kilo of cheese and a quarter of a cow for the privilege. Someone agreed. The farmer established his corral and then strung up a fence. And then a longer fence. And then a shed. And then a barn. And then a small house for workers. And then a bigger house. And more fence. And then when he died, he left this fenced off land to his sons. More fence went up. More improvements. Of course they went for the best land, that which had water and veins of arable soil. The blacks didn't have much choice in the matter. They were up against colonels in a land without law. They survived the way they always had: by backing off, lying low, avoiding confrontation. They rose up, a bit, in 1904. Nobody remembers exactly what happened, but there was some violence. The church sent in priests to pacify the community, and for the first time the federal police came in to impose law and order. But law and order meant nothing more than protecting the whites and the land they claimed while keeping the blacks under control. The message from the pulpit wasn't much different from that of the Jesuit Antônio Vieira — to remain peaceful and passive, to accept the status quo in the name of Jesus and await reward in the afterlife.

Slavery, outlawed in 1888, took on a modern dimension. The *quilombolas* were forced — none of them remembers what force was used, but they remember it was force, or maybe just false promises — to work for the whites during planting and harvest. That meant that they couldn't take care of their own crops. They got paid, but not much, not enough to buy the same food that they had planted and harvested.

The whites kept grabbing land, little by little, taking what they wanted as if it had never belonged to anyone. They came to control almost all the water. They kept the quilombo in perpetual misery. When *quilombolas* came onto land the white farmers had claimed, to dig up a

little clay for ceramics, the farmers chased them off. Once, during a drought, quilombolas snuck onto prohibited land to dip some water from some springs in stone basins. The whites not only chased them off but threw dead cattle into the water and then filled it in.

Fortunately for the quilombolas, a plague wiped out the cotton in 1987. That was the end of the economy in Conceição, but it was also the end of the presence of foreign farmers. Subsistence farming in a place without employment or cash was better than having to work under conditions near those of slavery. Although the outsiders went back to Salgueiro, they didn't give up their claim to the land. By this time they could claim the rights of squatters, or at least thought they could. They'd improved the land. They'd been there for generations. They had papers — not deeds but wills — “proving” that the land had been handed down to them. Why should it belong to people who hadn't put the land to productive use in half a century?

The whites left but the blacks stayed. This meant something. Conceição das Crioulas was a community of people who'd been born and raised in the place where generations of ancestors had been born and raised. The whites were of the city, of a place other than the land.

By the 1990s, the population of Conceição was a little under 1,800. People lived in sixteen hamlets in the harsher pockets of the property that the whites hadn't bothered to take. They lived on the absolute minimum that can sustain human life. They ate *corda* beans, the only kind that would grow there. They ate squash, watermelon, corn, manioc, and goat. When they needed medical attention, they called a *rezadeira*, a person adept at prayer. When they gave birth, they called a *parteira*, a midwife who had, at best, a diploma for graduating from the fourth grade. Some joined the mass emigration to the south Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo — but relative to most areas of the Brazilian northeast, few from Conceição abandoned their land. And

if they did, most eventually came back.

Not long after the cotton farmers left, drug traffickers invaded. Conceição lay at the center of “the marijuana polygon,” a vast area of open spaces and little government presence. It was a violent business that stood out in a region where violence was a perpetual part of history. It wasn’t unusual for the drug traffickers to set up road blocks. They’d steal four-wheel-drive trucks so they could go into the outback to take in their crop. Road maps showed little warnings beside highways in the area: “*Alto Risco de Assalto.*” Again the outsiders all but forced the blacks to help with the agricultural side of the business, though not in any profitable way.

Though there was very little actual use of the drug in Conceição, the traffic brought the federal police. They kicked in doors in the middle of the night, beat people up, arrested them, showed no respect for the village of poor, rural, powerless black farmers whom they suspected were supporting the drug trade.

However abusive, the tactics worked. The traffickers went elsewhere, and so did the police. Conceição could go back to its struggle with the nonfarmers who continued to claim the best land. Salgueiro, the municipality that includes the district of Conceição, was of minimal legal, financial, or social help. The people who controlled the land also controlled the municipal government. A little of the money that trickled down from the federal and state governments made it to Salgueiro, but virtually nothing made it to Conceição. At best, municipal assistance consisted of a water truck coming around during a drought. Until 1995, the school in Conceição only went to the fourth grade. In that year, a school in Salgueiro agreed to open a branch in the village, though it went only to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Salgueiro did nothing to alleviate the misery or reduce the poverty. The village was on its own and still all but under siege by outside farmers.

In 1988, Brazil adopted a new constitution. Article 68 recognized the continued existence of *quilombos* and granted the descendants of resident fugitive slaves the right to own and manage their land as independent communities, as they always had. To qualify, they would have to prove, through documentation or anthropological evidence, that they had always been *quilombos*, using their land communally since their founding and resisting, even if only by surviving, the many threats that blacks face in Brazil. According to the Brazilian Association of Anthropologists, quilombos didn't stop being quilombos once slavery was abolished. They were quilombos for as long as they resisted whatever threatened their existence as such.

The constitutional entitlement to quilombo land turned out to be bad news for the quilombolas of Conceição. Now that they had the possibility of regaining their original 17,845-hectare tract, the white squatters on their land faced the possibility of losing what they felt was theirs. Tensions increased. In the northeast of Brazil, conflicts over land are not traditionally determined by documentation or anthropological evidence. They're often determined by the death of an interested party. The *pistoleiros* of a *coronel* can hold more sway than the opinions of a judge.

The Fundação Cultural Palmares was in charge of deciding which places qualified as *remanescentes de quilombo*, a remnant of a *quilombo*. To qualify, a community had to form some kind of quasi-governmental authority, an organization and mechanism through which the community could make community decisions. In 2000, Conceição formed the Associação Quilombola de Conceição das Crioulas (AQCC). It was a formalization of the informal way in which the community had always reached decisions — by working for the common good in a place effectively under siege.

The AQCC was organized largely by women. Conceição was still a matriarchal society. A good demonstration of this took place in 1993, when the governments of Brazil and Salgueiro donated to Conceição enough bricks to rebuild 25 of its houses. The community had been suffering a high incidence of Chagas disease, which is caused by a bug called, in Portuguese, the *barbeiro*, or, in English, the assassin bug. It hides in the chinks of adobe walls, comes out at night, bites people ever so gently, sucks up a little blood, then defecates near the wound. The fecal material can contain a parasite. The victim scratches the wound, rubbing the parasite into the bloodstream. Eventually, the parasite attacks the nervous system, the digestive system, and the heart. It can be fatal, usually by heart failure. There is no vaccine, and the cure is dangerous and often ineffective. The best prevention is a house made of something other than adobe. But when the donated bricks arrived, people were suspicious. The government had never helped them before unless it was time to harvest votes. They were afraid the politicians would take the houses as soon as they were built. Men refused to accept the bricks, but the women took the initiative. They accepted the bricks and set to work, using all-female barn-raising crews to build one house at a time. The men just watched for a while, then felt ashamed and joined the work.<sup>41</sup>

The AQCC arranged to use an unoccupied house as headquarters and from there gathered the paperwork that would prove that Conceição had always been a *quilombo* and had functioned as a community with communal land.

For the first time since 1802, and arguably since the struggle to defend Palmares, the battlefield wasn't in the *sertão*. It was in the courts and the offices of government agencies. Once the Fundação Cultural Palmares had qualified a village as a *quilombo*, the Instituto Nacional de

---

<sup>41</sup> F. Sucupira, "A Luta das Crioulas," *Problemas Brasileiros*, no. 371. Sept./Oct 2005. (São Paulo: Editora SESC, 2005).

Colonização e Reforma Agraria (INCRA) was in charge of deciding the boundaries of the affected land and what to do with other people who claimed it. This is a very long process in a country where documentation isn't always complete or clear, surveying may never have been done, the government imposition of land transfers is politically charged, the court system is minimally functional, and violence often plays its special role in how decisions are made and carried out. INCRA therefore tends to be a bureaucracy paperwork and dreams go into but rarely come out of. The pronunciation of the acronym, in fact, sounds a lot like the word for “clugged up.”

Still, INCRA is a legal, government-backed agency that is fundamentally honest even if extremely inefficient, slow, confused, and often disregarded. The white squatters on Conceição land held no advantage in legal proceedings, so they tried to change the battle back to one of violence and intimidation. When an agent from INCRA left his air conditioned office and drove the 46 kilometers of dirt road to Conceição, he got an earful from the quilombolas, and back in town he heard scathing vehemence from some farmers who sincerely believed they owned land in Conceição. He decided that the situation was too volatile to deal with, and went back to his air conditioned office. Anthropologist Vânia Rocha Filho de Paiva e Souza, researching the roots and culture of Conceição, wrote, “Leaving Route 116 to enter the dirt road to Conceição das Crioulas, there is always a big, big sense of anticipation and anxiety. Tucked into a ‘land without law’ because of marijuana trafficking, to get to Conceição is nothing less than an adventure. If the car is of the government, it’s in danger of being confused with the Federal Police. In a private car, it is essential to be accompanied by people of the area.”

Paiva e Souza also wrote, “The area is extremely arid, with the best land occupied by the

intruding farmers. The areas left to the inhabitants of Conceição present a lot of rock and are inappropriate for agriculture.”<sup>42</sup>

In 2004, shortly after INCRA got involved in the case, Aparecida Mendes, one of the AQCC’s most active leaders, was called to meet with a woman who led the family of one of the largest outside claimants to the land. As the woman talked with Mendes, the woman sat with a visible air of superiority and disdain for those beneath her. Feeling like a worthless peon in audience with a queen, Mendes sensed action outside. She quickly realized that the place being surrounded. Men with guns appeared at the windows and the doorway. The woman told her — screamed at her — that she’d better stop trying to get the Conceição land approved as a *quilombo*. Mendes, terrified, was allowed to leave. As she walked out the door, she was certain that she was going to get a bullet in the back of the head, but she just kept walking and the bullet never came.

She seriously considered giving up. People get killed over land issues, and when the rich murder the poor, they almost always get away with it. But then she started thinking about the struggle, how far back it went, how it had been handed to her, and how it was now her duty to carry it forward. She remembered Zumbi. She remembered her grandfather, who had taken part in the uprising of 1904. She remembered two women, Dona Maria Ana and Dona Agustinha, both of whom had struggled before her and under the same threats of death. Both had died in bed at ages over a hundred.

Not long after that, someone threw gasoline around the association headquarters and set it on fire. Then someone broke into the building and stole all the equipment and, most crucially, all

---

<sup>42</sup> Vânia Rocha Filho de Paiva e Souza, “Conceição das Crioulas, Salgueiro, (PE),” in *Quilombos: Identidade Étnica e Territorialidade*, (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2002), 109-110.

the documents. People in Conceição investigated and learned that it had been some teenagers from Salgueiro. They found the boys and somehow forced information out of them. The boys said they'd told to go steal the equipment and grab the documents. The equipment turned up in the scrubland outside the village, and the documents were rescued. The AQCC was able to continue its labyrinthine journey through INCRA and the courts.

Aparecida Mendes comes from the bottom of the heap. She's black. She's poor. She's female. She lives in the northeast of Brazil, and one of the harshest parts of that famously impoverished region. After graduating from the fourth grade, she presumed she'd do like every other woman in town: get married, have babies, and spend the rest of her life taking care of husband and children. A slave, in other words, in the manacles of family. There was no way up, no way out. The closest she got to out was when she had to go work in Salgueiro as a cook and maid while her husband was off working on someone else's farm. This was during a time of intensified drought and misery in Conceição. The only way to survive in Conceição was to work somewhere else. She had to take her seven-year-old daughter with her. Each day she had to lock the little girl alone in the house while she went to work for a rich lady. All day long she felt terrible. She describes her mental state in those days as hell.

In 1995, when the new middle school opened in Conceição, she came back and continued her studies in classes at night. She made it to the seventh grade before a change in government ended the night classes. But she loved to learn, and soon she and a cousin were taking courses through the mail. Now she's studying history at a college in Salgueiro, taking the rattly-bang bus into town for classes and coming home at night. She says she'd get her Ph.D. if it were possible.

Today Mendes is not only a leader of the de facto government of Conceição da Crioulas

(the AQCC) but coordinator of something rarely seen in Brazil outside of major cities: a library. It's in a small, simple building, just three rooms and an entryway. It has a few simple steel shelf units and not enough written material to fill them. But it's a start, and it's an amazing thing to see in a village that often lacks water. The library, she says, is part of the struggle that's been handed down to her and the rest of Conceição. So is the AQCC's video production studio, a simple but effective operation using a Macintosh computer and basic video camera.<sup>43</sup> The association makes videos about their history, their culture, their heritage, their people, and their land. It has several other computers and a very fast Internet connection through a satellite dish. It has a website.<sup>44</sup> It's well into the process of getting approval for a radio station. An organization in Portugal sends them assistance and brings people from Conceição to Portugal for training in video production. Oxfam has sent help. They've moved beyond bows and arrows, slings, boiling water, and pits with stakes. Now the weapons are law, information, and communication, and Conceição is well armed.

The latest assault on Conceição — and innumerable other rural villages — is a massive government project to pull water from the Rio São Francisco for distribution across a wide area of the sertão of Pernambuco, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, and Bahia. Aparecida Mendes and others question the project for everything from its cost to its environmental impact to its technical viability to its ultimate destination — people or industry. Environmentalists say that large-scale spray irrigation may actually hasten the desertification of the northeast because

---

<sup>43</sup> [http://cvideo.identidades.eu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=37&Itemid=54](http://cvideo.identidades.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=37&Itemid=54).

<sup>44</sup> [http://crioulasonline.conceicaodascrioulas.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=60&Itemid=80](http://crioulasonline.conceicaodascrioulas.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=60&Itemid=80).

soaking the ground pulls salts from under the soil and contaminates the surface. Others argue that the next time El Niño alters weather patterns, the northeast will suffer a horrendous drought, as it did the previous time El Niño occurred. It would seem that a promise of water would be welcomed in a place like Conceição, but Mendes says it isn't likely to actually arrive. She says it will inevitably be consumed by the big farms of rich people, not the home water tanks of little people. The big farms, she says, will grow bigger and will threaten subsistence farms in various ways. It would be much more cost-effective, she says, to give individuals money to build cisterns like the one she has. It collects enough rainwater during the rainy season to sustain a household and a garden for the six or eight months of dry. Never again, she says, will she hold a bucket up to a water truck and then bathe by scooping cups of water onto her back. *Never.*

INCRA has been creeping forward with the final resolution of land title issues. The white farmers — all 39 of them — are going to be reimbursed for their land, and they are all in favor of getting some money for land that isn't worth very much. INCRA promised Conceição that it would all be finalized by March of 2009, but then it said by June, and in June said by the end of the year. The delay was in determining the supposed boundaries of the 39 non-properties that didn't belong to any outside farmers in the first place. The boundaries had to be determined definitively so that no one would argue about what's being transferred and paid for. Aparecida Mendes wasn't too happy to see the intruders getting paid for land they stole and used for a century, but she wanted to see the issue finished. She didn't want to see more delays. People had been working on this since about 1603, when Palmares was first defending its right to its territory. INCRA wasn't going to get away with it. She and a bunch other quilombolas were planning a trip to the INCRA office in Petrolina. They were going to stand outside and scream

until somebody came out of his air-conditioned office and gave them their land. It was theirs because it had been their ancestors', and no matter what the government or the rich or the white or the powerful said, it was going to be a quilombo forever.

End