

“This state so forgotten and so little heard”: The Problem of Governance and Slavery in the Lower Amazonian Borderlands, 1621-1720

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The CLAS Summer Field Research Grant allowed me to carry out critical research in preparation for my doctoral dissertation. With this funding, I was able to research in two archives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Despite the fact that Rio is my hometown, this was my first time researching in Brazilian archives. As such, this trip was an opportunity for me to learn how to navigate Brazilian archival system, as well as a way for me to explore new areas and historic neighborhoods in my hometown.

The purpose of this research trip was to narrow down my dissertation topic. Broadly speaking, my dissertation is shaping up to be a political history of the Lower Amazonian Borderlands, or the modern-day states of Maranhão, Pará, and Amapá in Brazil. This region, known as the State of Maranhão (or Amazonia) in the colonial period, was a separate colony from the rest of Brazil, and ruled directly from the Portuguese imperial administration in Lisbon. One of the reasons why this was the case is that sailing time from São Luis (the capital of colonial Amazonia) to Lisbon was faster than São Luis to Salvador (the capital of colonial Brazil in the seventeenth century) or to Rio de Janeiro. This created really unique dynamics in Amazonia, which had less local governance than the State of Brazil and relied heavily on Lisbon’s authority. Part of what I am interested in is how settlers and indigenous peoples alike reacted to Portuguese imperial policy, as well as trying to understand why there were so many rebellions in Amazonia during the colonial period. As such, my dissertation directly argues against the popular idea that the Amazon is a “virgin rainforest” outside of history by showing how Portuguese settlers and indigenous peoples repeatedly made demands to the Crown in a region neglected by the imperial administration.

As this was a pre-dissertation research trip, I was primarily interested in figuring out exactly how much time I need to spend in Rio for my fourth year. Fourth year is the year in a History PhD track where you move to your region of study and carry out the bulk of your archival research. This summer, I focused on breath over depth, looking through a considerable number of sources and taking hundreds of pictures, rather than sitting closely with one source. At this stage, it is very important for me to understand just how much material there is that I can use for my dissertation.

Because most of my dissertation focuses on the seventeenth century, the vast majority of my sources are in imperial archives in Europe. Though the bulk of my archival material is located in Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands, the National Library and the National Archive in Rio both contained some very valuable copies, primary sources, and secondary sources for my dissertation. Most of my time was spent at the National Library, located in downtown Rio. There I was able to find copies of Jesuit

accounts of early Amazonian European settlements and interactions with indigenous peoples. In my time in the National Library, I encountered three collections of sources that were particularly helpful to my research project.

The first was a copy of the *Crônica da Companhia de Jesus da Missão do Maranhão* by the Jesuit priest Domingos de Araújo. Though this chronicle was written in 1720, it concerns itself mostly with the tumultuous history of the State of Maranhão in the seventeenth century. Araújo recounts the expulsion of the French from Maranhão, Tupinambá wars in 1617, and the Dutch occupation of São Luis in the 1640s. This source was particularly important for my research because there are not many Portuguese accounts of the Dutch occupation of the Amazon. It also confirmed my suspicion that many of the Portuguese soldiers who fought in those wars were also some of the same men who fought to establish colonies in Angola and in India.

One of the most difficult parts of working in an archive is uncovering the indigenous perspective from a colonial archive. Because archives primarily contain documents written from the imperial European perspective, their accounts and descriptions of indigenous peoples must be read with extreme caution. The most ‘uncorrupted’ indigenous voice I found in the National Library was the petition of the Tabajara man, Antonio da Costa, who petitioned the Crown to be compensated for his work in fighting the Dutch away from Maranhão. Antonio da Costa explains how the Dutch imprisoned him, how he fought them off because of his loyalty to the Crown, and how he has since worked to better the conditions in that colony. Something that I repeatedly find in my sources is that Portuguese settlers and the indigenous groups allied with the Portuguese, like the Tabajara, continuously talk about the State of Maranhão as a colony that is failing and neglected by the Crown.

By far the most important source I found in the National Library was a book of laws and legislation from the Crown concerning the State of Maranhão. In the National Library, I encountered multiple copies of legislation forbidding indigenous enslavement in the Amazon. Because the State of Maranhão was underfunded and neglected, it did not receive enslaved men and women from Africa until the eighteenth century. Some of these sources reaffirmed the fact that Portuguese settlers in the Amazon could not conceptualize the colony as truly successful and established without the institution of African chattel slavery. As such, Portuguese settlers in Maranhão and Dutch settlers in Suriname would often go into the heart of the Amazon to capture indigenous peoples and enslave them in a process known as the *resgate*. The documents that I found in the National Library illustrated these processes, and showed how the Portuguese Crown vacillated from allowing to forbidding to overlooking indigenous enslavement.

Ultimately, my research trip confirmed multiple of my previous suspicions. The first is that I do not need much more time in Rio for my research, and that my next trips should focus on going to Pará and Maranhão. My experience in Brazil also made me officially decide to change and extend the chronology of my dissertation, going into the

eighteenth century instead of stopping in the 1680s. Lastly, this trip made me realize how much ethnographic training I need in order to do justice to the indigenous perspective in my dissertation, since I cannot rely solely on European documents to recreate the history of this region.