CHAPTER 2

Indian Freedom and Indian Slavery in the Portuguese Amazon (1640–1755)

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Introduction

Compared to other regions of America, the Amazon basin—situated on the northwest of the Portuguese possessions—was conquered and occupied in a later period of the Portuguese colonization of the continent. It was only during the 1610s, that the crown undertook the occupation of that region in a systematic and definitive way. During the early 1620s, when the Spanish and the Portuguese monarchies were united, the crown founded an independent province in the north, the Estado do Maranhão—the State of Maranhão, formed by two main captaincies, Pará (or Grão-Pará) and Maranhão. This decision was based upon the distance between Maranhão and the capital of Brazil, in Bahia, and the difficulties of traveling along the north coast, owing to contrary winds and currents. Not only was the state of Maranhão a separate province of the Portuguese dominions in South America, but its colonization also followed different paths compared to the other “conquests” of Portugal on the continent. In fact, the Amazon region was characterized by several distinct features: its frontier status (bordering Spanish, French, and Dutch possessions), by the dispersion of its population over a vast territory, by the importance of forest products in its economy and thereby the significance of its sertão (the hinterland), and by the crucial role played by Indian laborers.

During the seventeenth century, the settlers and the royal and local authorities soon discovered the importance of the region’s native population and

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widely used Indian workers. Natives were the main laborers in transportation by rowing canoes, in the collection of products in the sertão (like cacao, bark-clove\(^3\) and sarsaparilla), in colonial defense as troops, and in the cultivation of such crops as manioc, cacao, sugar, and tobacco. Thus, as the Overseas Council explained to the king, in 1645, “it is impossible to cultivate and fructify the lands of these captaincies without Indians.”\(^4\) Two years later, Governor Francisco Coelho de Carvalho stated the necessity of having all the allied Indians prepared for war, since, according to him, on “those Indians depends the defense of this State.”\(^5\)

Except for some short periods (1609–1611; 1647–1653; 1680–1688), in seventeenth-century Portuguese America, Indian enslavement remained legal; it was finally abolished, at least officially, in the mid-eighteenth century. Contrary to that of African slaves, Indian slavery had raised much discussion about its legitimacy among the settlers, missionaries, authorities, the crown, and the Indians themselves, concerning the nature of Indians’ freedom and the limits and modes of enslavement. These debates and struggles expressed the views of different groups within the empire and in the colonies, as well as in the Court at Lisbon.\(^6\) Since the sixteenth century, many royal orders, in accord with papal decrees, sought to define the relationship between Portuguese settlers and the native population.\(^7\) After the creation of the State of Maranhão, the kings of Portugal

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\(^3\) Bark-clove, *cravo de casca* or *pau cravo* (*Dicypellium caryophyllatum*), was a bark of a tree which resembled Indian clove in taste, and was widely collected by settlers, becoming one of the main products of Grão-Pará’s exports.


\(^5\) Coelho de Carvalho’s letter is included in: *ahu*, Pará, caixa 1, doc. 67, “Requisition from Sebastião Lucena de Azevedo to Dom João IV,” [1647].
