Rethinking Palmares: Slave Resistance in Colonial Brazil

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Colonial Brazil, based as it was on the coerced labor of Indians and Africans, was continually threatened by various forms of resistance to the fundamental institution of slavery.1 Throughout the Americas wherever slavery was a basic institution, slave resistance, the fear of slave revolt, and the problem of fugitive slaves plagued colonists and colonial administrators. This resistance took a number of forms and was expressed in a variety of ways. Day to day recalcitrance, slow downs, and sabotage were probably the most common forms of resistance, while self-destruction through suicide, infanticide, or overt attempts at vengeance were the most extreme in a personal sense. In Brazil, the most dramatic examples of collective action were a number of slave revolts that took place in Bahia in the early nineteenth century, but actions like the Malê rebellion of 1835 were truly extraordinary events.2 By far, the most common form of slave resistance in colonial Brazil was flight, and a characteristic problem of the Brazilian slave regime was the continual and widespread existence of fugitive communities called variously mocambos, ladeiras, magotes, or quilombos.

There was a time when Brazilian historiography ignored this aspect of Brazil’s past, but work during the past half century, especially on the great


fugitive community of Palmares, has considerably changed this situation. Still, in many ways, the topic of slave flight and resistance in Brazil has been treated as a deceptively simple one, and analyses of it have often been based on a limited set of questions to which common sense answers have been made: Why did slaves flee? To escape slavery. Where were runaway communities located? Far from possible white retaliation. Why did fugitives attack white society? To liberate their fellows and because they hated slavery. Was there class solidarity among slaves? Of course. What kind of societies did fugitives create? More or less egalitarian ones based on African traditions. Noticeably missing from the study of marronage in Brazil has been concern with some of the issues that have preoccupied students of this phenomenon in other American slave societies or solid evidence that would illumine some of the more intractable questions about ethnic solidarities, political goals, and strategies, as well as variations in form. For example, distinctions between the petite marronage of slaves who absented themselves for short periods and those who fled to escape slavery altogether has rarely been made in Brazilian historiography. Maroon intentions have preoccupied much writing in Jamaica and Haiti, but

3 For a general overview of the subject see Clovis Moura, Rebeliões da senzala, 3d. ed. (São Paulo, 1981), and his Os quilombos e a rebelião negra, 2d. ed. (São Paulo, 1981). See also, José Alípio Goulart, Da fuga ao suicídio. aspectos de rebeldia dos escravos do Brasil (Rio de Janeiro, 1972). There has been a considerable development of the regional historiography of the quilombos. For example, on Pará there is Vicente Salles, O Negro no Pará (Rio de Janeiro, 1971); on Rio Grande do Sul, Mário José Maestri Filho, Quilombos e quilombolas em terras gauchas, (Porto Alegre, 1979); on Minas Gerais, Waldemar de Almeida Barbosa, Negros e quilombos em Minas Gerais (Belo Horizonte, 1972); on Bahia, aside from the above mentioned article by Schwartz, there is much material contained in Pedro Tomás Pedreira, Os quilombos brasileiros (Salvador, 1973). Many other works dealing with slavery in general at the local or regional level contain information on quilombos. See, for example, Ariosvaldo Figueiredo, O Negro e a violência do Branco (Rio de Janeiro, 1977) on Sergipe. The classic works on Palmares remain Edison Carneiro, O quilombo dos Palmares (São Paulo, 1947) and M. M. de Freitas, O reino negro de Palmares. 2 vols. (Rio de Janeiro, 1954), to which should now be added Décio Freitas, Palmares: a guerra dos escravos (Porto Alegre, 1973).