

The Portuguese Inquisition Comes to the Amazon

Belém, Captaincy of Pará, 1764 and 1767

Introduction:

These three testimonies were collected by a Portuguese Inquisitor who arrived in the Amazonian captaincy of Pará in 1763 to conduct a six-year 'Visitation.' Father Giraldo José de Abranches declared a grace period to encourage people to confess religious crimes; in the event that they were not denounced first, they could avoid going to Lisbon for trial and possible sentencing. Many others came forth with denunciations.

This late-eighteenth-century Visitation to Brazil was exceptional for several reasons: (1) it followed the previous dispatch of an Inquisitor to the colony by almost a century and a half; (2) it occurred during the twilight years of the Inquisition's institutional power in Portugal; and (3) it focused largely on evaluating and controlling indigenous beliefs and practices. While the persecution of New Christians is thought to have been a prime motivation for the earlier Visitations to Bahia and Pernambuco, the dispatch to Pará occurred in a different era, when concerns about crypto-Judaism had waned. A more generally accepted explanation for the dispatch is that the Inquisition during this era acted as an auxiliary of the State, utilized in certain moments to increase crown control over a strategically important region.¹ The Amazon had, by the mid-eighteenth century, become the new focus of imperial reform efforts, including the outlawing of Indian slavery (1755), the secularization of the missions (1757), and the expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries (1759). The Indians who appear in the second and third denunciations were residents of these former missions, and on both occasions they were denounced by one of the recently installed secular administrators (called "directors").

A sample of fifty confessions and denunciations from this Visitation revealed following distribution of cases:²

- 20 people implicated for practicing sorcery or spells [*feitiçaria*]
- 6 for performing magical cures/healing
- 6 for blasphemy
- 6 for bigamy
- 5 for sacrilege
- 4 for sodomy
- 2 for heresy
- 1 for a brutal and "un-Christian" form of corporal punishment on slaves

In the same sample, the racial breakdown of those who confessed or were denounced is as follows:

- 17 were of undeclared racial heritage, or simply labeled "Brazilian"
- 13 were Indians (only 1 confessed to a crime; the rest were denounced).
- 9 were whites
- 6 were *mamelucos* (mixed Indian/white)

¹ Laura de Souza e Mello. *O Diabo e a Terra de Santa Cruz: Feitiçaria e Religiosidade Popular no Brasil Colonial* (São Paulo: Companhia de Letras, 1986), 289-290.

² These numbers are based on my analysis of the cases included in the published collection by José Amaral Lapa, ed., *Livro da Visitação do Santo Ofício ao Estado do Grão-Pará, 1763-1769* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1978).

5 were blacks

Questions for discussion:

1. Compare and contrast the denunciations: Is there a common procedure for questioning the witnesses? How do their responses differ?
2. The Inquisition was a very sporadic presence in Brazil, and it had never before come to the Amazon. How might the public have responded or understood the arrival of the Inquisitor and his inquiries?
3. What do these denunciations reveal about the social hierarchy in the Amazon during the late eighteenth century? Which racial or social groups are perceived as having power and knowledge?
4. What do these documents tell us about religious deviance as practiced in the colony? Which religious practices seem to have been perceived as threats to the dominant order?

Recommended Reading:

“Confessing to the Holy Office of the Inquisition, Bahia, Brazil (1592, 1618).” In *Colonial Latin America: A Documentary History*, edited by Kenneth Mills, William Taylor and Sandra Lauderdale Graham. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002.

Laura de Mello e Souza, *The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross: Witchcraft, Slavery, and Popular Religion in Colonial Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

Document 1:

Denunciation of the Indian Sabina by Raimundo José Bitancurt

On the 7th of October, 1767, in the city of Pará [Belém] and the College of Santo Alexandre...the Inquisitor Giraldo José de Abranches, Visitor of the Holy Office³ of this state, called before him a man who had been waiting to ask for a audience...

He said that his name was Raimundo José Bitancurt, Adjutant to the Military Regiment of the Captaincy of São José do Rio Negro, married to Dona Maria Josefa de Brittos. [He was] born in the city of Angra on Terceira Island and now lives at the foot of the Church of São João, in the parish of this city; and he is thirty-four years old. The facts that he had to denounce were the following: That on a Monday towards the end of last August, around three or four o'clock in the afternoon, he found himself gravely afflicted [with a disease] of the eyes. And he read a notice about an Indian named Sabina – he doesn't know her name nor her situation, only that she lives in the house of Padre José Carneiro in the

³ The Holy Office of the Inquisition.

neighborhood of the Campina [in the city of Belém] – who was famous for her healing and was known for effectively curing various people. He sent a slave of his, named Garcia, to get her. She came; present were the wife of the denouncer and his nephew, Antônio de Avila, a soldier who lived in the same house. [Sabina] then asked for a pipe with tobacco and a light, and after smoking it for a bit...[illegible]...she made some crosses with her index finger on his forehead, while uttering words among which he perceived Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as well as Virgin Mary...

And then she inhaled new smoke from the pipe, blew it into his right eye, and put her own tongue in it, running it around the inner part of the eye, and after this performance she acted as if she were vomiting, and she spit into her hand a creature...[which looked somewhat like a fish]...Seeing the fat belly of the creature, the wife [of Bitancurt] opened it up and showed the Indian woman that it was full of dead offspring. The Indian said that the smoke had pulled it out, killing the creatures [that lived] inside the eye...⁴

She went on and did the same to the left eye, spitting out what she said was sand or ash, but not showing them. She came back on another day, on Tuesday, and repeated the same ceremonies and procedures in both of his eyes, and from the left one she said she removed a wasp, which was already dead when she spit it into her hand. She handed it to his wife, who was present without the aforementioned brother of hers, Antonio de Avilla. And upon leaving, [Sabina] said that these were spells that had been cast by two or three Indian men and an Indian woman, whose names she did not want to say...[She advised] the confessant...[illegible] to wash his eyes with holy water to make them heal faster. And on the following Thursday, the Indian woman returned to do all of the abovementioned things, cleaning his eyes with her tongue and saying that she no longer found anything inside of them. There was no doubt that he, the denouncer, felt some relief with these cures...

...Because of the same sickness of the eyes, he summoned her, through the abovementioned black man Garcia, to his house two more times, and she did the same procedures in the presence of the black man. She showed him [Bitancurt] that from his right eye she had removed with her tongue two shrimp eyes, and from the left, just one; the second time, she removed from the left eye two of these shrimp eyes; and on the third occasion, she didn't find anything and just spit a few times. And it is certain that he, the denouncer, saw the abovementioned shrimp eyes, and that he felt relief in his own. The Indian woman recommended frequent exorcisms and washing his eyes with holy water.

...

He was asked if the Indian Sabina showed any intelligence, or if she was crazy, lacking in judgment, or accustomed to drinking, and if she was drunk when she did these things that he had declared.

⁴ According to one ethnographer of a group of Amazonian Indians called the Manao, "Key figures in Manao communities were the shamans who healed the sick by shaking rattles and muttering incantations, blowing tobacco smoke on their patients, massaging them and then sucking out of them pathogenic objects such as red mushrooms, bugs, grubs, and centipedes." There is no evidence that Sabina was a direct descendent of the Manao tribe – which occupied the upriver regions of the Amazon Basin – but clearly she came from a similar metaphysical tradition. See Alfred Métraux, "Tribes of the Middle and Upper Amazon," in *Handbook of South American Indians* (3: Washington, 1947), 709.

He said that she seemed to be intelligent, not at all crazy, nor addicted to drink, as far as he knew; and she was not drunk on the abovementioned occasions.

He was asked if he knew whether the Indian Sabina had performed the same or similar cures on others, in the presence of others, and [if so,] whom.

He said that he knew her to be notorious, that she did the same [cures] and many more things, as well as divinations, for lots of other people. Not long ago, not even five months ago, she cured Dr. [illegible] de Melo e Albuquerque, General Magistrate of this city. She offered him her help, showing him the spells that had been hidden in his bed...⁵ And there were innumerable other cures, which she had notoriously done in this city, but he could not describe them individually since he was not certain of their circumstances.

He was asked how long he had known Sabina, and what opinion he had of her beliefs, life, and customs.

He said that he had known her for two years and did not have a bad opinion of her, for he had always heard that everything she did was due to the special power of a cross, which she was said to have on the roof of her mouth. He had never heard of her behaving badly.

He was asked whether anything motivated him to make this denunciation, if he did it out of hate or bad feelings toward the Indian woman.

He said that he only did it to clear his conscience...

Having sent the denouncer outside, the priests [who had witnessed the denunciation] were asked if they thought he had spoken in truth and deserved credit for what he said. They said that yes, it seemed like the truth and could be believed, since it was known in all of the city that the Indian woman was able to do everything, and much more than, that which was described by the denouncer. They then signed this, as did the Visiting Inquisitor. Father Ignácio José Pastana, notary of the Visit, wrote it.

Source:

José Amaral Lapa, ed., *Livro da Visitação do Santo Ofício ao Estado do Grão-Pará, 1763-1769* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1978), 266-270.

⁵ In 1763, before the same visiting Inquisitor, Sabina had been denounced for occult services rendered to an even higher-ranking official: the governor of the captaincy. The former servant of the governor who denounced her described the following scene: "Entering the room in which [the governor] had his bed, she asked for a knife, and with it she made a hole in the wall...From this hole she extracted a small package, clearly made many years ago, which contained various little bones...Sabina declared that the package was not put there to bewitch the present governor but rather it had been intended for the previous, already deceased Governor José da Serra." Sabina then conducted a ceremony for the sick governor in which she blew tobacco smoke on him, rubbed his leg, and then "with her hands made crawl out of it three live creatures, each the size of a chickpea and very sluggish." After paying her, "the denouncer as well as the governor were left suspecting the said Indian woman of evil, for they saw that she had divined what was hidden." Lapa, *Livro da Visitação*, 172-173.

Document 2:

Denunciation of the Indians of Beja by Raimundo José Bitancurt

On the twelfth day of April in 1764, in this city of Pará, the Visiting Inquisitor Giraldo José de Abranches called before him a man who had asked for an audience...

He said his name was Raimundo José Bitancurt, married to Dona Maria Josefa de Brittos and originally from the parish of the city of Angra. He resides in the village of Beja in this bishopric and occupies the post of Director of Indians in that village. He is thirty-one years of age. The fact that he wanted to denounce was the following:

[It took place] about fifteen days ago at the end of March or the beginning of April in the village of Beja. The denouncer had in his house an Indian named Lázaro Vieira, married to the Indian Maria [illegible]; all he knows of the Indian's origins is that he was formerly under the administration of the Carmelite missionaries. The wife of the denouncer, Dona Maria Josefa de Brittos, sensed something distrustful and suspicious, and since the Indian and his wife were out of the house, she went to the quarters where [the Indian] stayed, knowing that he had been given a box in which to keep his belongings. She opened it and found a package inside. Soon she fetched [her husband], the denouncer, so that they could both see what it was. Inside they found a host (Communion wafer) folded in four parts, wrapped in a paper...with red and black letters, that was evidently from Breviario[?]. On top of this paper was a covering of dark paper. They also found in the same package seven fragments of stone the size of little buttons. And everything in the package was finally covered with a piece of tissue and wrapped in a fragment of scarlet taffeta. He, the denouncer, and his wife supposed the worst about the package and put it back in the same box so that the Indian would not suspect anything when he returned home.

The next day, Father José Giraldes, vicar of the village, along with Father Luis Francisco Monteiro, resident of this city, came by. He, the denouncer, showed them the package which he retrieved from the box. Seeing it, the priests said that the aforementioned seven pieces of stone were without a doubt from the altar stone. He, the denouncer, put the package in a *baul* [trunk?].

The next morning, the three of them went to the Church. Examining the stone that was on the altar, upon which the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated, the vicar showed them that it was missing a piece of one of its corners, about the size of two fingers, which he had discovered missing...when he found a piece of brick cut to the same size and mounted on the same corner to replace the piece that had been taken. The three of them compared the pieces [from the package] with the altar stone and found that it was the same stone, having the same color and quality, with no difference whatsoever. And the three of them conferred about how to find out who had taken the piece of the stone, and they agreed to call the Indian Joaquim, an unmarried resident (origin unknown) of the same village, who lives in his mother's house (name unknown). He is a widow of someone and lives next door to the Church, where he serves as sacristan. He is about twenty years of age.

[Joaquim] was summoned and asked if he had taken the piece of the stone, with the assurance that he would not be harmed; the denouncer added that he ought to tell them the truth, since they knew very well that he had taken it. The Indian Joaquim thus confessed, saying that the Indian Domingos Gaspar (Sergeant Major of the village, married to the Indian Domingas, and of unknown origins) had asked him to take a piece of the altar stone to give to him, along with a host. He gave him all this, but the Sergeant Major did not tell him why he had asked for these things.⁶

Pressed for details, [Joaquim] declared that he also gave the same things to the aforementioned Indian Lázaro Vieira and to the Indian Mathias who also serves in his, the denouncer's house, who is unmarried, of unknown birth and origin and about twenty-two years of age. To this Indian he [Joaquim] gave only two pieces of the stone without any host. He also gave some of the stone to an Indian boy, eldest son of the Indian João Lourenço, and whose name he could not remember, nor could he recall the name of the boy's mother. The boy is about fifteen years old.

Asked if he had saved any of the stone in his house or brought any on his person, he responded that he had not. Nevertheless, the denouncer and the abovementioned priests decided to search his house. As they accompanied him on the way, the vicar grabbed a pouch that [Joaquim] had been wearing around his neck. They went on to search the Indian's house, and they found another pouch in the bottom of a basket. Soon [Joaquim] confessed that this one had been made to give to the abovementioned Indian Mathias.

They took the pouches and opened them in the house of the vicar. In the one that the Indian sacristan [Joaquim] had carried around his neck, they found a number of pieces of stone and a host, all bundled together in paper. The host had already disintegrated due to the sweat. In the other pouch, they found only pieces of the altar stone.

Asking him why he had carried the pouch around his neck, the sacristan responded that he did not know. Later they asked the Indian Mathias why he had wanted the pouch that the sacristan had made for him, and he responded that he had wanted it because they said that whoever had the stone with him would certainly not die without confession.

[At that point] the news arrived from the denouncer's wife that his slave Manoel de Jesus (Angolan, unmarried, fourteen years of age) was also involved and had been given some of the same stone by the sacristan. They examined him closely to find out why he wanted it... Finally he said that he wanted to carry it with him because the [following had transpired]: the sacristan had gone to the kitchen with some pieces of the stone and had offered them to the Indian Mathias, and when asked what they were for, he did not respond at all; he laid down in a hammock with the abovementioned Lázaro and offered him some of the same stone. The latter responded that he did not want any, since he did not know its use. The

⁶ A closely related hearing was held two weeks later, in which a Carmelite friar denounced three more Indians, all from the nearby village of Benfica, for stealing a piece of his church's altar stone, along with bits of ribbon from the manger of the Baby Jesus effigy, a piece of the host, and wax from the church candles. One of the accused confessed that the same Indian Joaquim (the sacristan from Beja) induced him to steal the altar stone, which indicates that the cult had spread from one village to the next, and possibly beyond (Lapa, *Livro da Visitação*, 214-217).

sacristan said that he should take it, and then he would tell him what it was used for. The black Manoel de Jesus, who was not supposed to be privy to any of this, pretended to go outside but then placed himself where he could overhear the conversation. He heard the sacristan tell Lázaro that whoever carried the stone would never experience the piercing of the body with knife or sword because everything would break upon [touching] the body, and [furthermore] one could get any women that he wanted. For these reasons the black Manoel de Jesus wanted to have it too, but the sacristan would not give it to him as he was still a youngster and it was not yet necessary.

The denouncer's wife also said that the sacristan had given some of the same stone to the Indian Francisco who was ten years old, son of the Indian Ignácio and the Indian Luisa. Other boys who were questioned by the vicar confirmed that they did not have any, but that it was the boy Francisco who did.

[Bitancurt said that] this denunciation was made to clear his conscience, and because he understood that it was his obligation to tell everything.

He was asked if the Indian Joaquim (sacristan), Lázaro Vieira, Domingos Gaspar (Sergeant Major), Mathias, the son of João Lourenço, and the boy Francisco Ignácio were people of sound judgment and capacity; or if they were, by contrast, all crazy and born without understanding of their actions, or if they were accustomed to drinking and thus losing their judgment.

He said that each of them had the kind of judgment that fit their condition as Indians, and that none of them was crazy nor did they drink to excess (although they did drink occasionally); and outside of these particular instances they governed themselves well.

He was asked how long he, the denouncer, had known them and what opinion he had regarding their beliefs, lives, customs, and behavior. He said that he had known the Indian Mathias for eleven years and the rest of them for about five or six months. [He also mentioned] that all were baptized and went to Church; however, their lives, customs, and behavior were not normal as they never lost the opportunity to offend God.

He was asked whether anything motivated him to make this denunciation, if he did it out of hate or bad feelings toward any of the aforementioned people.

He said that he only did it because he understood it to be his obligation...

...

Having sent the denouncer outside, the priests [who had witnessed the denunciation] were asked if they thought he had spoken in truth and deserved credit for what he said. They said that yes, it seemed like the truth and could be believed. They then signed this, as did the Visiting Inquisitor. Father Ignácio José Pastana, notary of the Visit, wrote it.

Source:

José Amaral Lapa, ed., *Livro da Visitação do Santo Ofício ao Estado do Grão-Pará, 1763-1769* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1978), 203-207.

Document 3:

**Denunciation of the *Mameluco*⁷ Pedro Rodrigues and the Indian Marçal Agostinho
by Giraldo Correia Lima**

On the fourth of September in 1764 in the city of Pará, the Visiting Inquisitor Giraldo José de Abranches called before him a man who had asked for an audience...

He said his name was Giraldo Correia Lima, the unmarried, legitimate son of Simão Correia de Oliveira and Josefa de Oliveira. He lives off his ranches and is originally from the village of Lagarto in the province of Sergipe de El-Rey [in Northeastern Brazil]...He is the Director of Indians in the village of Boim, in this Bishopric, and is forty-three years of age. He offered the following denunciation:

About two months ago he, the denouncer, found himself in the village of Boim in the exercise of his directorship. He had a conversation in the home of Father Acácio da Cunha de Oliveira, who is presently the vicar of the village and settlement and who is from this city [Belém do Pará]...He [the vicar?] is served by a *mameluco* named Pedro Rodrigues, a carpenter of unknown origins who is married to the Indian Roza Maria and who resides in the village on the Square of São Paulo. He is well known to be a sorcerer, diviner, and principal oracle among the Indians. He often teaches [the Indians] false doctrines, which are totally opposed to all divine and human laws. One of them is to persuade the Indian women who find themselves pregnant that it is not a sin to kill within their wombs the children whom they have conceived, since the souls of the very children thus killed in the maternal wombs come and speak from the other world to him, Pedro Rodrigues.⁸ And to better and more easily convince them of this diabolical error, he brings all the Indian men and women together in a group and speaks to them in strange tongues...telling the miserable Indians who listen that these voices are the souls of the children who were killed in the wombs of their mothers. And [he claims] that all of this is so very true, having been revealed to him by the Holy Virgin Mother.

What is more, Pedro Rodrigues teaches them to do excessively rigorous acts of penitence, saying that whoever dies while doing them will go straight to Heaven. It so happens that he [Pedro Rodrigues] taught his daughter, Rosaura Rodrigues (married to the Indian Duarte Serrão), to do these rigorous acts of penitence...such that she became so thin that when her husband returned to Boim [after being absent]...he severely reprimanded her.

Using these and other false doctrines he [Pedro Rodrigues] has convinced the credulous Indians, who give him all their respect and veneration, as they also fear him...The most prejudicial thing is his illicit behavior with any woman who appeals to him, whether single or

⁷ *Mameluco* refers to the offspring of an Indian mother and a white father.

⁸ According to a recent history of the colonial Amazon, abortive or contraceptive practices were one of the most enduring forms of resistance among Indians. Indigenous women continued to rely on the traditional medicines and the ceremonies of the shamans to abort unwanted fetuses, disregarding Christian doctrines about conception and frustrating the population-building ambitions of the village directors (Ângela Domingues, *Quando os índios eram vassalos: Colonização e relações de poder no Norte do Brasil na segunda metade do século XVII* [Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações do Descobrimentos Portugueses, 2000], 197).

married; they give themselves to him willingly, or out of fear of the death with which they are threatened.

He also said that on the same occasion that he spoke with the abovementioned vicar, he was told that the Captain Marçal Agostinho – an Indian married to Andreza Cardoso, born in the interior (*sertão*) and resident in this same village of Boim – taught the same false doctrines, telling the members of his ethnic group (*nação*) that women did not commit a sin when they killed the children in their wombs. And he persuaded them that the souls [of the dead fetuses] came to speak with him afterwards... And to more easily convince the credulous Indians, he gathered them together to conduct their revelries (*potageros*) and on this occasion he spoke in altered and unknown voices, so that the miserable Indians would believe that they were pronounced by souls from the other world. It is by this means that he realizes his depraved intents with any woman who appeals to him, who out of willingness or fear give themselves to him, because they recognized him as their shaman (*pajé*) and superior...

All of this proceeds from the belief held by these miserable Indians that these are shamans or sorcerers, as they customarily call them. He, the denouncer, understood that all of the facts, wrongdoings, and false doctrines described to him by the vicar and Francisco de Brito Mendes were opposed and contrary to the true religion and to the purity of our holy Catholic faith, and thus to clear his conscience he declared all of this at the Desk [of the Inquisition].

He was asked if Pedro Rodrigues and Marçal Agostinho were people of sound understanding and clear judgment; or if they were, by contrast, all crazy...or if they were accustomed to drinking and if so, whether they were drunk when they taught the false doctrines declared above.

He said that each of them, the *Mameluco* and the Indian, had sound judgment and were not crazy. He supposed that they were friends of the drink, which is common among Indians, but he had never seen them completely intoxicated. However, he always heard people say that when they held their gatherings they were never without their drinks. He did not know if they were drunk when teaching what he declared above.

...

He was asked how long he had known Pedro Rodrigues and Marçal Agostinho, and what opinion he had regarding their beliefs and respective customs and behavior. He said that he only became Director of the village fourteen months ago, and only since then has he known them. He could not judge their beliefs, although he had seen them at Mass; he knew them to be of bad behavior and terrible customs, without any fear of God...Both were publicly and scandalously [living with] concubines.

He was asked whether anything motivated him to make this denunciation, if he did it out of hate or bad feelings toward Pedro Rodrigues and Marçal Agostinho.

He said that he only did it to clear his conscience and with the desire to see these people leave behind the errors of their miserable ways...

He was read his denunciation...and said that it was written accurately. He signed it, as did the Visiting Inquisitor. Father Ignácio José Pastana, notary of the Visit, wrote it.

Source:

José Amaral Lapa, ed., *Livro da Visitação do Santo Ofício ao Estado do Grão-Pará, 1763-1769* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1978), 224-228.

Translated by Heather Flynn Roller