

“They are the Hands and Feet of the Europeans”

Portugal, c. 1758-1776

Introduction:

In a prison cell between 1758 and his death in 1776, the Jesuit João Daniel composed his 776-page masterpiece on Amazonian people and nature, entitled *Tesouro descoberto no máximo rio Amazonas*. The manuscript was based on the observations and experiences accumulated during his sixteen years that he lived in the Amazon. In 1757, Daniel was expelled from the region, along with all the other Jesuit missionaries, on the orders of the Marquis of Pombal, Portugal’s powerful prime minister. Passing the rest of his life behind prison walls, Daniel wrote what remains the single most important historical source on the colonial Amazon. Equal parts ethnography, geography, anthropology, and ecology, it combines the religious perspective of a missionary with the interests of a naturalist.¹

The passages below consist of excerpts from Part 5 of the manuscript, from a section entitled “On the Spices and Riches that the Amazon Produces in its Forests.” Here, Daniel offered a critique of the long-distance expeditions mounted by settlers to collect forest products like cacao, sarsaparilla, and Amazonian clove, which he viewed as expensive, risky, and detrimental to both the missionary enterprise and the Indians who served as crewmen. The expeditions had formed the basis of the colonial economy since about the mid-seventeenth century, and struggles between settlers and missionaries for the control of Indian labor had, by Daniel’s time, become a constant feature of colonial life. These struggles also played a part in the Jesuit expulsion, since the missionaries were accused (among other things) of monopolizing native labor to enrich themselves and their religious orders.

The paradox that comes across in these passages is that the Amazon was a chronically poor colony with a tiny number of settlers, most of whom were just barely eking out a living with subsistence agriculture and sporadic extractive activities. As Daniel reminds his readers, the Indians had such numerical superiority that “they could defeat and throw out as many Europeans as they saw fit...” Yet the region’s only major revolt happened *after* colonial rule had ended, in the 1830s, and it involved as many black and mixed-race individuals as it did Indians.²

Questions for discussion:

1. Who seems to be Daniel’s audience for these passages? How does this shape the way he constructs his argument against the collecting expeditions?

¹ Maria Regina Celestino de Almeida, “Um Tesouro Descoberto: imagens do índio na obra de João Daniel,” *Tempo* (Rio de Janeiro) 3: 5 (1998): 7.

² There is an excellent book about to be published on this revolt: Mark Harris, *Rebellion on the Amazon: Race, Popular Culture and the Cabanagem in the North of Brazil, 1798-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2009).

2. What does this source reveal about the nature of colonial Amazonian society? Who had power, and what were its limitations?

Recommended Reading:

Dauril Alden, "Jesuit Efforts to Defend the "Freedom" of the Brazilian Indians," in *The Making of an Enterprise: The Jesuits in Portugal, Its Empire and Beyond, 1540-1750* (Stanford University Press, 1996), 474-501.

Excerpts from Part III, Chapter 2: On the Great Inconveniences Brought by the Canoes of the *Sertão*

...The inhabitants of the Amazon have put all of their hopes of great fortune and wealth in these canoes of the *sertão*; [but] when considered in light of their risks and contingencies...it could easily be claimed that their inconveniences are greater than their profits. I do not doubt that many settlers have been enriched, but how many have been impoverished? How much have they pawned? How much have they lost? The hope of finding success, a good cargo, and easy navigation deludes them; but they end up destitute when they see that the expenses have racked up, with no advances or profits. Since this truth is not easily believed in this state, I want to mention a few of the many inconveniences [brought by the canoes of the *sertão*].

The first inconvenience is the expense of the trip and the uncertainty of the profits. A canoe is not prepared nor dispatched to go collecting in the *sertão* without spending at least 300 to 400 *mil réis*³ in manioc flour for the Indians to eat and as payment for those same Indians; in cane liquor; in tools; and in all the other equipment necessary for the canoe; and the settlers usually buy or rent these canoes for as much, or slightly less, [sums of] money. To cover these expenses, the settlers often buy the supplies and provisions from merchants on credit, with the promise of paying them back upon the return trip. These expenses are certain, and without them [they cannot even get started]...because the payments are made to the Indians as soon as they recruit them in the missions, and the Indians, taking only what is necessary, leave the rest for their wives and families to use during their long absence.

The uncertainty and contingency of the profits is also certain, because however much one might hope for success, no one can promise good fortune, because it depends on so many other contingencies. [These include] whether the Indians will flee, since some or even all of them sometimes abandon the canoe and the canoe boss (*cabo*); and whether they get sick, which is always a concern given the insane workload, poor [quality of] life, and at times severe hunger and thirst that they suffer, especially those who go after clove (*cravo*) and sarsaparilla and have to enter the interior lands, in the middle of the forest, where they do not eat anything more than a bit of manioc flour that they bring with them, and some wild fruits that they find...sometimes for 10, 15, and sometimes many more days in a row. [Other contingencies include] whether they find good harvests in the places where they stop

³ Portuguese monetary unit.

and set up camp. It often happens that they do not find any cacao in those places, having spend many days, or even weeks, making the camp and opening access to the forests. They find themselves obligated to seek [other places] and make new camps with the same uncertainty, spending all their time on this until it is time to go back, and they are forced to return with nothing. [The success of the expeditions] also depends on not being perceived, nor assaulted, by wild Indians. If this happens, there might be deaths and there might be wounds; and if by good fortune they escape, they find themselves obligated to leave behind the [collecting] site, abandon the camp, and seek other rivers, select new sites [for collecting], and erect new camps. In sum, these harvests come with so many contingencies, and their success depends on so many conditions, that they offer nothing certain except their expenses... They cannot even be sure of better fortune the next year, because the harvests vary from year to year; one year the forests are laden – say, of cacao on this river – and the next year they have nothing to give, and so it is with the rest.

The second inconvenience, which is the main one, is the perturbation of the missionaries, the disruption of the missions, the disturbance of the Indians, and the ruination of the mission villages... No matter how much the missionaries want to fulfill the labor requisitions and want to satisfy all of the whites who are going to the sertão (*brancos sertanejos*), they often cannot find Indians. Sometimes it is necessary to send the [native] officials to go look for them on their homesteads; other times they do not want [to be found] and hide in the forest, and it is necessary to go after them like one hunting rabbits with a ferret; other times [the missionaries] find themselves obligated to send the native officials [on the collecting canoes], however much they are needed in the mission villages. The burden and disruption that these labor requisitions represent to the missionaries cannot be overstated. For it does not work to tell the whites that there are no Indians, that the few there had been already went ahead [on other canoes], because they [the whites] attend to nothing but being served. They think little of showing disrespect, abusing and threatening the missionaries.

...

How many whites are not content with the Indians named in their labor requisitions, and nab others, even skilled Indians (*oficiais públicos*), such as fishermen, blacksmiths, and sacristans? How many go to the homesteads of these same Indians and tie up not only all the Indian men they can find, but also the Indian women, and take them on the canoes? How many threaten [the Indians] with beatings, and perhaps even kill them, if they resist?... There can be no peace... when the poor Indians cannot be secure in their own houses, or even in the church; for there have been occasions upon which some military men, who think they can do whatever they want, waited for the all the Indians to be unguarded in the church listening to Mass, [and then] attacked and surrounded the church, tying up all the Indians they wanted and forcing them to row their canoes, without even letting them bid farewell to their families or bring along anything for the trip!

The disturbance of the Indians is one of the greatest inconveniences, because between the settlers' canoes, the military men's canoes, and the royal service expeditions of the government... the poor Indians have no time to rest and live in constant hardship (*andar em uma roda-viva*). Moreover, their wives live like widows and their children and families like orphans. How many experience hunger and misery, because their fathers and husbands are not in the mission villages to find food for them? How many die of neglect because their fathers are absent? How many times do fugitives rob their homesteads, and sometimes even take their sons and daughters, because they have no fathers around to defend them? In sum,

all of this is disturbance for the Indians, discomfort for their families, and the ruination of the missions, villages, and settlements of Indians.

That this distribution of Indians is the ruination of their villages is proved by [the state of] the missions themselves, many of which have been completely destroyed; others in my time were already in decline; and all have experienced a clear diminution and decadence, as the great Father Vieira warned even in his time.⁴ If the missionaries were not constantly devoted to the task of contacting and bringing out of the forest the many resettlements [of independent native groups] with which they replenish their missions, most of these would already be defunct. There are many that were once very populous and now only contain one couple or a single person of [the once-dominant] ethnic group; and in others no one is left at all. One missionary told me that his mission had once been home to some 30 [Indian] nations, which were always conserved via additional resettlements (*descimentos*). [Now] the oldest groups are only remembered in books, while only a few souls remain of other nations. Shortly after he and all the other Jesuits were expelled from the missions, I heard that the aforementioned mission had only five Indians left.

Excerpts from Part III, Chapter 3: The Canoes of the Amazonian *Sertão* Are the Greatest Obstacle to [the State's] Prosperity

The third inconvenience of the canoes of the *sertão* is that they are the greatest obstacle and impediment to the growth of the Amazonian state, and the main cause of the poverty of its European settlers. I prove this not only by what was said in the previous chapter, but also by what I will say in this one: that [the canoes of the *sertão*] are the impediment to the growth of the state because they destroy the mission villages, and they are the yoke (*laço ou sebo?*) of the settlers. All the European settlers in the Amazon know and publicly say that the Indian missions are the force [that moves and powers] these states, as indeed they are according to the system practiced up to the present....The Indians are the ones who cultivate the land and row the canoes for the whites; they are also the ones who extract the riches from the forest, the ones who fish, and finally they are the hands and feet of the Europeans. They are the navigational guides and pilots; the sailors, or rowers, of the canoes. Without them the forest could not be cleared, the rivers could not be navigated, the interior could not be penetrated, and the rebellious ones could not be subjugated.⁵ The whites are served by them and the missionaries are served by them. With them, and through them, barbarous nations are contacted [and persuaded] to resettle, because they [the mission Indians] are the experts of the country, the inhabitants and owners of these lands, such that if they had the courage and desire, they could defeat and throw out as many Europeans as they saw fit...

⁴ Father Antônio Vieira was Daniels' most famous Jesuit predecessor in the Amazon; he served as a missionary there about a century earlier (1650s) and was credited with mass conversions of the Indians, the founding of a number of missions in the region, and the campaign to secure the passage of various laws protecting the Indians and the missionary enterprise.

⁵ Here he is referring to the recruitment of colonial Indians to fight wars against independent native groups.

...During previous years, when the missions were very populous, many more canoes went to the *sertão* than do now, since there are fewer Indians to distribute among the settlers. The harvests of the riches of the *sertão* were once so great that there were not enough ships to carry them to Europe. There was one year in which the cargo only of cacao reached 80 thousand *arrobas*⁶, and there was probably more left over that could not be carried...

...

Since the missions also supply the settlers with provisions of food, the fewer the Indians and the more decayed the missions, the whites become that much poorer. And since the cause of this decline is the distribution of the Indians for the canoes of the *sertão*, it follows that those same canoes are the cause of [the settlers'] poverty. There may be a time when the supply [of provisions] for the whites ends altogether...

It is also very inconvenient that not all the settlers can profit equally from the harvests of the *sertão*, even when they are profitable. Ordinarily it is only the rich, the owners of canoes and slaves, who need [this profit] least. The reason is, first of all, that they need a large canoe, which they call a traveling canoe (*canoa de viagem*), and the poor have no one to make [such a canoe] for them...Furthermore, the poor cannot possibly fund the indispensable preparations and payments of the Indians, and if they do so with loaned money or goods, they may be left destitute and indebted if the canoes run into any misfortune.

Source: João Daniel, *Tesouro descoberto no máximo rio Amazonas* (Rio de Janeiro: Contrapunto, 2004), Vol. 2, p. 243-248.

Translated by Heather Flynn Roller

⁶ Equivalent to about 1,280 U.S. tons (1 arroba = 32 U.S. pounds).