

Exploits of a Native Headman

Village of Pinhel, Captaincy of Pará, 1769 and 1770

Introduction:

These two letters center on the figure of Sebastião Pinto, a rebellious Indian headman who divided his time between the colonial village of Pinhel, on the Tapajós River, and the uncolonized forests of the interior. In the first document, the village director reports that he is sending Pinto in chains to the governor, after discovering his plan to form a hostile alliance with an independent native group. The director also mentions Pinto's predecessor in office, the headman Marcelo de Alfaia, here only referred to as the "principal enemy of the whites." According to other archival documents, Alfaia had fled Pinhel in 1762 with a large entourage of followers of his ethnic group, the Mawé. In 1769, it emerged that several white settlers from the area had been murdered in Mawé territories, leading the government to prohibit all colonial trade with the Mawé.¹ The first document, written that same year, should be understood in this context of conspiracy theories and recent violence between settlers and uncolonized Indians.

The second document, from the following year, brought even darker tidings. The director reported evidence of an alliance between Pinto (who had returned from his brief imprisonment), Alfaia, and eight different Indian nations, who were suspected of plotting a war on the whites. Interestingly, the evidence came from the testimonies of a group of Indian crewmen from Pinhel, who had participated in a collecting expedition under Pinto's leadership. They claimed to have been brought unwillingly along on an unauthorized visit to Alfaia's territories in the forest.

Later documents (not included here) show that the alleged plot never came to fruition. In a dramatic reversal of strategy, Headman Alfaia unexpectedly showed up in Pinhel in 1771, proposing to resettle there with some of his fellow Mawé, after nearly a decade's absence. The same director who had labeled Alfaia, just the year before, the "principal enemy of the whites" (see Document 1) welcomed the visitor and reported the new developments with enthusiasm: "the headmen tell me that after they leave [the forest] with their people, there will certainly be more who want to come!"² (One can only imagine what the Indians of Pinhel thought of these events; the testimonies of the crewmen who had been brought to visit Alfaia's territories in 1770 imply they would have been deeply skeptical of him.) Alfaia's truce with the authorities, however, was short-lived. Within a year, he had been sent to Belém in chains for an unspecified crime, never to reappear in any of the sources from Pinhel. Sebastião Pinto, for his part, continued to hold the office of headman of Pinhel until the early 1780s, when he disappeared from the documentary record.³

¹ Governor Fernando da Costa de Ataíde Teive to Pedro Maciel Parente, Director of Santarém, Belém, 3 October 1769, Arquivo do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (Rio de Janeiro), Lata 283, Pasta 10.

² Director Belchior Henrique Weinholtz to governor, Pinhel, 29 August 1771, APEP, Cod. 235, Doc. 38.

³ Headman Pinto remained on the village rolls through the 1770s. In the early 1780s, there is some evidence to suggest that he and the other Mawé officials deserted after an irresolvable conflict with the director (see Director Francisco da Costa, 24 November 1784, APEP, Cod. 408, Doc. 110). Pinto did not appear on any subsequent village lists.

Questions for Class Discussion:

1. How are independent native groups portrayed in these documents? What about colonial Indians? What kinds of people are the most feared by colonial authorities, and why?
2. What do these documents tell us about native resistance and accommodation to colonial rule? What strategies were used by different types of Indians?
3. As indicated in the introduction, we know that Headman Pinto remained part of the Pinhel community until at least the early 1780s, and that Headman Alfaia returned to Pinhel and made peaceful overtures to authorities despite his past transgressions. Does this information change your reading of these earlier descriptions of their behavior and aims?

Recommended Reading:

B. J. Barickman, "'Tame Indians,' 'Wild Heathens,' and Settlers in Southern Bahia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *The Americas* 51:3 (Jan. 1995), pp. 337-368.

Hal Langfur, "Moved by Terror: Frontier Violence as Cultural Exchange in Late-Colonial Brazil," *Ethnohistory* 52:2 (Spring 2005): 255-89.

David Sweet, "Native Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Amazonia: The 'Abominable Muras' in War and Peace," *Radical History Review* 53 (Spring 1992): 49-80.

Document 1:

Director Belchior Henrique to Governor Fernando da Costa de Ataíde Teive

The Headman [Sebastião Pinto], who I am sending to Your Excellency, was going to leave this village in an even more deplorable state than it already finds itself. He came up with the idea of bringing all of the young women to the beaches, on the pretext of making turtle egg butter, from which nothing came but one or two pots...I had prior notice of his diabolic plans, which consisted of giving [the women] as a gift to the heathens of the forest, who find themselves short of females, and thereby forming an alliance with them, perhaps with the goal of making war on us here [in the village]. He himself has publicized as much, [upon] taking the place of his father-in-law, the principal enemy of the whites.⁴ He has already exerted his influence over an Indian he brought from the forest when they came back from collecting clove bark, who was the chief (*capataz*) of the heathens. He induced the chief to

⁴ Referring to the Headman Marcelo Alfaia (see introduction).

kill the villagers of Boim⁵ and to take the gifts that are customarily distributed among the heathens...He also persuaded this chief to kill some people from Pinhel, sometime after the chief had left the house of the Headman....as various people have informed me.

Having found out about all these movements, I prohibited him from bringing with him women of any kind. Displeased by my order, he went to his homestead, urging some of the villagers as well as the son of the chief to follow in his footsteps. As soon as the Headman had left, I heard that he was going to the forest and ordered him to be tracked down, making sure that no one could follow him [in his desertion].

This is not the first time that this Headman has fled to the forest...[and now he is] the cause of the heathens of the forest coming to kill us...That is why I took the actions just described to Your Excellency, hoping that in this way I have loyally served His Majesty and not offended him.

Given these circumstances, I have asked for supplies of gunpowder and musket shot from the Commander of Santarém, as long as Your Excellency does not send what I have requested. As for the rest, Your Excellency will do what seems best.

May God guard Your Excellency for many years.
Pinhel, 18 September 1769

Belchior Henrique Weinholtz [Village Director]

Source:

Arquivo Público do Estado do Pará, Codice 202, Document 77

Document 2:

Director Belchior Henrique to Governor Fernando da Costa de Ataíde Teive

On the eighth day of the present month, the *Cabo* (canoe boss)⁶ arrived in this village to report on the behavior of the Headman Sebastião Pinto, the one I sent in chains to Your Excellency last year, and who had gone on the collecting canoe as pilot, of his own volition!

The *Cabo* told me that just one day's travel from the village, they heard about some stands of clove (*cravo*). He sent [some crewmen] to check it out, and they came back saying that there was indeed [clove bark to be harvested]. [The *Cabo*] dispatched the Indians into the forest with the Headman, and after three weeks, they came to tell him that there was none [after all], and they brought something like two *arrobas* of clove bark.⁷

⁵ A neighboring village on the Tapajós River.

⁶ Each expedition to the interior was led by a *Cabo*, usually a white or mixed-race individual, who was held accountable for the success or failure of the expedition.

⁷ Equivalent to about 64 pounds, not considered a large amount for this particular product.

As they were getting ready to embark and go further upriver, the Headman got a case[of cane liquor]...and got drunk, along with his brother-in-law. He told [the *Cabo*] that he did not know of any products to collect, except in the heathen territories (*terras do gentio*), and that he wanted to go there. Some of the other Indians responded that it was not a good idea to go there, as they could be killed. The Headman's brother-in-law then drew his knife to stab whoever had responded in such a way. When the knife was taken from him, he took out his arrows, and he and the Headman told the [crewmen] that they had to go.

I questioned the two Indians who the *Cabo* brought back with him, and they told me that there was indeed clove at that site, and that the Headman prevented them from gathering it.

They headed two more days upriver, and the *Cabo* ordered the Headman and the rest of the Indians to go find something to collect. [The Headman] came to tell him that there was nothing to be found, which I know to be false from the confession of the two Indians, who had found some sarsaparilla, but the Headman did not want them to gather it.

Upon leaving that spot, the *Cabo* told [the Headman] to go look for products in another area, to which he responded that [the *Cabo*] should look for them himself, because the only products he knew of were in the tribal territories. The *Cabo* responded that this was against the orders of Your Excellency, to which [the Headman] responded that this didn't matter to him, and that those territories were his. The *Cabo* replied, "Seeing as you don't want to obey me, you might as well do what you want." By himself, he could not challenge the whole group!

Finally, arriving at the mouth of the stream where the Headman had been headed all along, the *Cabo* told him, "Seeing as you have brought me here by force, go collect those products you say you know about, and don't go speak with the heathens." They left, leaving the *Cabo* [behind] in the canoe. A few Indians wanted to go find some sarsaparilla, but the Headman told them, at gunpoint, that all of them had to go with him to the [village of the] heathens. Fearing him, this is what they did, and they spent twenty-three days there [with the heathens] and came back without [having collected] a single thing. One of the Indians revealed to the *Cabo* the false pretenses under which the Headman had traveled around during the past three months, and that his goal had always been to go speak with the heathens and not collect anything.

Finding out about this, I ordered the two Indians who came back with the *Cabo* to be questioned. [Asked] if they knew whether the Headman had spread any bad ideas (*tinha feito alguma ruim prática*) among the heathens, they said that they did not know what had passed between them. They only found out that the heathens had told him [Pinto] that the Headman Marcelo [de Alfaia], who was from this village [of Pinhel], had two dogs, and from the signs that they gave, they realized that these had belonged to the whites they had killed on the beaches last year. [The heathens] also showed him/them the trail they used to [launch] attacks on the beaches. And [they found out] that Marcelo was allied with eight nations of heathens, and he had some of the firearms that had belonged to José Pinheiro⁸, now dead. [Marcelo], with diabolic intentions, had been telling them that they had never

⁸ Pinheiro was a white settler who was killed by a group of independent natives. This detail implicates Marcelo Alfaia in their murder.

managed to destroy the whites because they had feared their armed expeditions, but that these had never come, and now was the time to persecute the whites as much as they could.

The [non-Indian] residents of this village are afraid, in light of the news that has just arrived, and in consideration of the Headman Sebastião's infidelity and his secret dealings with the heathens – where he went against Your Excellency's orders – to which not even the Indians [crewmen] were privy, except those who are especially close to the Headman. [The residents] think that now even the village Indians are enemies and have allied with those in the forest. All of them have told me that if Your Excellency does not rescue them by sending soldiers, they will desert the village, because they do not have the strength to resist the invasion that they suppose is inevitable in these circumstances..."

Pinhel, 18 April 1770

Belchior Henrique Weinholtz[Village Director]

Source:

Arquivo Público do Estado do Pará, Codice 215, Document 53

Translated by Heather Flynn Roller