

Bringing Indians into the Colonial Sphere

Villages of Baião and Franca, Captaincy of Pará, 1775 and 1766

Introduction:

In the Amazon during the second half of the eighteenth century, independent native groups were regularly brought from the interior to the settle in the colonial Indian villages. Known as *descimento* (“descent”), these resettlements replenished village populations that were chronically losing residents to epidemic disease or desertion.

Residents of the colonial villages – Indians as well as mixed-race individuals – participated at various stages of the *descimento* process. They initiated and maintained long-term relationships with independent native groups through informal visits and trade, engaged in gift exchanges, and forged alliances with individual chiefs. Villagers also acted as sponsors of *descimentos*, petitioning the governor for the necessary licenses and supplies and then leading the expeditions to bring new people into the colonial sphere. If successful, expedition members typically hosted the newcomers upon their arrival in the village, providing lodging, food, and instruction in the ways of the colonial world. Between 1757 and 1798, when the colonial Indian villages were supervised by state-appointed administrators, villagers planning *descimentos* received funding from the Royal Treasury, a considerable expense that was justified, from the crown’s perspective, by the importance of settling contested frontier areas, maintaining existing centers of population, and generating wealth in a colony dependent on native labor. Those who brought about successful resettlements also received titles of office and other royal privileges, to reward what was seen as an important service to the crown.

Kinship ties were the most important means of gaining access to uncolonized groups. Some colonial villages, however, had no such ties and had to come up with creative strategies for entering into contact with Indian nation, which might involve the use of non-Indian or otherwise atypical informants. Document 1 shows that the *descimento* prospects of the village of Baião, a new settlement that had only been established several years earlier, depended on an old *mameluco* (mixed Indian-white) named Francisco Gregório, who had once lived as a fugitive. The plans stalled when Francisco Gregório died in 1776 or 1777, and it seems that an expedition to contact the target native group was only carried out in 1781. There is no record of its outcome.¹

Creative approaches were also required when *descimento* expeditions could not find the groups of relatives they had been seeking in the interior, as in Document 2. Rather than cutting their losses and returning to the village, the Indians of Vila Franca decided to forge onwards, in the hope that their combined navigational, linguistic, and social skills would serve them well in any chance encounters with independent native groups. The results were promising, but as in the previous case, there is no further information on whether an actual resettlement came to pass.

¹ In 1781, the newly appointed village director made reference to a *descimento* expedition to be undertaken by the headman to the territories of the “Airary” Indians. (Director Luis Antônio Malato de Castro Peruvino to governor, Baião, 30 July 1781, Arquivo Público do Estado do Pará (APEP), Cod. 372, Doc. 23). On Baião’s labor distribution list from July of 1776, Francisco Gregório is listed as a “*velho*” (an elderly person, not capable of working) but then does not appear at all on the lists of 1777 and 1778, which suggests that he had passed away by that time (APEP, Cod. 301, Doc. 34 [for 1776]; Cod. 320, Doc. 32 [for 1777]; and Cod. 318, Doc. 90 [for 1778]).

Questions for discussion:

1. According to these documents, how were *descimentos* planned and carried out? Who participated in the undertaking?
2. How do the authors of these two documents establish the feasibility and desirability of the *descimentos*? – i.e., how do they describe the target groups?
3. What do these sources reveal about the role of cultural intermediaries? Why might Indian and *mameluco* villagers have been willing to aid the Portuguese colonization effort by bringing new residents into the colonial sphere?

Recommended Reading:

Alida Metcalf, *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2005).

Mary Karasch, “Damiana da Cunha: Catechist and Sertanista,” in David G. Sweet and Gary B. Nash, eds., *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

Document 1:

Letter from Director João Pedro Marçal da Silva to Governor João Pereira Caldas

Near the first waterfall of this Tocantins River, it meets the Itaquana River, whose margins are inhabited by various settlements of Arámary Indians – and other nations as well – whose main chief is named Aráransai.

In this village [of Baião] there is an old *mameluco* by the name of Francisco Gregório, who lived for more than twenty years as a fugitive (*amocambado*) nearby these Indians, with whom he had some *práticas* and social contact. He said that these Indians liked to know all about the Whites and the Fathers [missionaries] and had asked him various times for things belonging to them. They wished to see the Fathers and Whites, and on the last occasion that they spoke with him, they suggested that he return to his village to get some of the whites’ things, such as tools and trinkets (*resgates*).

When [Francisco Gregório] came back to this village, he never again had the opportunity to communicate with them. He said that these Indians do not use any kind of drink, that they are very caring and affable, and that there are huge numbers of them. Their chief has a son, who himself is a chief.

I have encouraged this *mameluco* and the headman of this village [of Baião] to go speak with the heathens, to encourage them to descend to this village and come speak to Your Excellency. Both the headman and [Francisco Gregório] show great eagerness to go... But they have asked me for the goods that are listed in the attached document, in order to please the [Arámary] chief and the rest of his people, and to facilitate the good harmony and

friendship that we would like to have with them. And if we succeed, and God wills it, it shall amount to a great Conquest in these backlands, as these are places where whites have never gone before (so they tell me).

Once Your Excellency has given us license for this undertaking, we will need the Indians named in the attached list for the expedition, if Your Excellency could order the justice of the peace (*Juis Ordinário*) to have them readied and sent here. These Indians are all in the vicinity of this village, enlisted in the militia, and well suited for the task at hand. As for the additional Indians, canoes, and whatever else may be needed, I will have everything ready, except for manioc flour, which Your Excellency may allow to come out of our [royal] tithes, and which are still here in my hands.

The mameluco said that they will be able to make the trip with great ease in two months' time; that is, going, coming, and spending some time there. He and the headman are now on their way to the city [of Belém], going to the feet of Your Excellency, to be instructed on how Your Excellency's will may be done. And for this expedition to be effective, it would be best if it happened soon, as any delay in these matters brings with it contradictions and regrets; it is well known to Your Excellency that these people are of little constancy.

...Your most obedient subject,
[The Director of Baião] João Pedro Marçal da Silva
8 October 1775

P.S.: These Arámary Indians speak a truncated *língua geral*,² and they understand it well.

Attached to the above letter:

List of what is needed as gifts for the Arámary heathens:

Two axes	Two scythes
Two tools for making canoes	Two dozen knives
Six pairs of shears	Six clasp-knives
Six mirrors	Two hundred white fishhooks
Four packets of glass beads	Two dozen ceramic plates
Two packets of needles	Fifty religious medallions (<i>veronicas</i>)

[What is needed] for the trip:

Four pounds of gunpowder	Six pounds of lead
Two pounds of musket shot	Twenty flints
Twenty <i>alqueires</i> of manioc flour ³	

² This was the Tupi-based lingua franca that was devised and taught to mission Indians by the Jesuits. The fact that this independent native group could communicate in the language is intriguing, and it suggests that these were the descendents of former mission Indians, or that perhaps runaways from the missions had at some point been incorporated with them.

³ Equivalent to about 163 gallons (1 alqueire = approx. 8.17 U.S. dry gallons).

Source:

Arquivo Público do Estado do Pará, Cod. 283, Doc. 27.

Director Antônio Gonçalves de Sousa to Governor Fernando da Costa de Ataíde e Teive

I report to Your Excellency that on the day of the Feast of the Cross⁴ the [native] Captain Simpício da Costa arrived in this village with all of the Indians he had taken on the *descimento*, alive and well, not having had any encounters with enemies en route.

They had entered the Curuá River, went on to the Great Waterfall, and by error of the guide went all the way to the headwaters of the River. They found themselves lost, wandering about the forests, with no idea of how to find the relatives of the Indian Raimundo de Farias.

And returning to the main river without any hope, they headed back. Arriving at the bottom of the Great Waterfall, they fortunately took a small tributary that Our Lord God showed to them. [Traveling] upriver for a week and walking through the forest for three days, they ran into three villages of tame heathens (*gentio manso*). [Among them] were three headmen who immediately shouted in the *língua geral* that they were children of God, not murderers. Ours responded that they were the same, and that they were looking for the Curihé nation, their relatives. The heathens then said that this nation was at the headwaters of the stream, a two-week trip; that they themselves were the nation Aritu; and that their ancestors had always said that there would be good people of God who would come to look for them. Our [group] was then received and hosted there for three days, and they conversed, sharing news with one another, all in the *língua geral*, though I assume [it was] a version corrupted by slang.

The three headmen arranged to send their sons to see this village, so as to inform them [about it], and indeed they came and arrived in this village. I did everything for them that they needed, and it was arranged that, according to their fathers' orders, they would leave in two weeks [to return to their lands].

They say that the houses of this village are very full of people, and that it would be necessary for them to come with some of their followers...to make houses and gardens. I responded that they should send me an answer [when they had decided that it was time] to send lots of canoes to retrieve them...

The same canoes, officials, and Indians [from the village are going to bring them back and carry the answer [back to me]...

They grow in their lands everything that we make here, cotton, tobacco, corn, and manioc; they do not drink bitter wine, only the sweet; and they eat manioc gruel (*farinha de água*). They don't paint themselves, even though they have paints...They never make war, and have always lived in peace. They know of God and everything else, and they only say that they do

⁴ *Dia da Vera Cruz*, usually observed on May 3.

not know how to pray.⁵ They have never seen canoes and are very fearful of getting in them, because they have never heard of them or seen them until now, besides what their old people spoke about from time to time. The women make by hand some cloths that they use to cover their parts (*urilbas?*), and they spin very fine thread with which they make good hammocks, not like the other heathens, but like those that are made here [in Vila Franca].

From what they say, they always lived in the hope of us coming to fetch them.

I ordered them to be made clothing, pants, shoes, and socks to make them look better and show their fathers how the noblemen (*muacaras*⁶) are treated in these parts, and they brought skirts and shirts for their women... They told the Vicar that they want, from now on, [sewing] supplies and fabric with which to dress their followers, because they were ashamed of going around nude...

...

May God guard Your Excellency for many years.

[The Director] António Gonçalves de Sousa
Vila Franca, 12 May 1766

Source:

Arquivo Público do Estado do Pará, Cod. 167, Doc. 134.

Translated by Heather Flynn Roller.

⁵ Along with the reference to their speaking the *língua geral*, this strongly suggests that these were the descendants of former mission Indians.

⁶ Interestingly, the author uses *moacara*, the Tupi or *língua geral* word for nobleman.