

## “Upholding the Constitution and the Sainly Catholic Religion, Loving the Fatherland and the Emperor”

*Popular Liberalism in the Balaiada Rebellion in the Brazilian Province of Maranhão*

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Brazilian Independence and its monarchical regime (1822–1889) are traditionally contrasted with Spanish American decolonisation, which resulted in the fragmentation of the former Spanish empire into more than a dozen Republican states.<sup>1</sup> Yet the contrast is less absolute if one takes a closer look at Brazil's post-independence political history. Even though the political game of the Braganza dynasty was successful in securing two crowns for the family in the short run, Brazil's first emperor Dom Pedro I had to bow to the combined pressure of the Brazilian elites and popular classes and step down on 7 April 1831, a day often praised by contemporaries as the real independence date.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent period 1831–1840, when the country was governed by regents appointed by parliament, ushered a wave of liberal constitutional reforms and decentralisation. The Regency (as this period is known in Brazilian historiography), however, was also not able to guarantee political stability until the end of the decade. Numerous rebellions—especially in the more peripheral provinces—challenged the central government in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>3</sup> The Cabanada in Pernambuco (1832–1835), the Cabanagem in Pará (1835–1840), the Farroupilha in Rio Grande do Sul (1835–1845), the Sabinada in Bahia (1837) and the Balaiada in Maranhão (1838–1841) shared aspirations of regional autonomy or even Independence and the massive military draft to fight the first ones only precip-

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1 The literature on the Independence in Latin America period is vast. For a concise overview, see Hamnett (2017). For Portugal and its Atlantic Empire, see Paquette (2013).

2 For a historiographical introduction to Brazilian Independence, see Bicalho & Schiavinato (2021).

3 Hebe Mattos (2020) provides an instigating account of how the Brazilian Empire was built on the continuity of slavery.

itated further rebellions.<sup>4</sup> Despite important commonalities these rebellions also displayed some fundamental differences in social basis, political aims and ideology. Whilst the Farroupilha was exclusively led by big landowners, which were also predominant in the initial phases of the Cabanada and Cabanagem, other social groups were more important in the other rebellions. The Sabinada was an urban movement led by a middle-class of colour led by a doctor, Sabino and officers frustrated by their racist exclusion from the new National Guard (Kraay, 2001). Therefore, the ideology of the various groups of rebels also varied significantly: from the conservative restorationism of the Cabanada to the separatist republicanism of the Farroupilha.

Until the end of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1985) history books usually only mentioned these rebellions to dismiss them and challenge any idea of consequent separatism in order not to defy an essentialist idea of the Brazilian nation. Since the 1980s a number of academic works have resulted in innovative monographs that have shown the complexity of regional contexts and alliances, making generalisations difficult. This chapter aims to take a closer look at the ideology underpinning the Balaiada rebellion in the Northern province of Maranhão (1838–1841). The objective is to show how a combination of local factors, national issues and Atlantic developments resulted in a significant radicalisation of the demands of a free population of colour that were expressed in the rebel manifestos and letters, but were rendered invisible by the tactics of counterinsurgency employed at the time and the subsequent conservative historiography.

The civil war that went down in history books as the Balaiada devastated the provinces of Maranhão, Piauí and even part of Ceará. After a series of defeats from rebel forces, the Imperial forces received reinforcements and resources from other provinces and from the central government. The Regency sent out Luís Alves de Lima—the future Duke of Caxias—to take over supreme political and military power in the Maranhão province. A new “Pacifying Division”, divided into three columns, was to surround and attack the army of rebels who had taken control of a good portion of the hinterlands. At the same time, loyalist officers attempted to convince rebel leaders to put down their arms. The rebellion became known as Balaiada, a term derived from Balaio, the nickname of one of their supposedly most cruel leaders (meaning a woven basket). By extension, rebels were called *balaíos* by loyalists and the subsequent historiography.

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4 For an overview and interpretation of these revolts, and further historiography, see Dantas (2016). For the Balaiada, see Assunção (1999). For the Cabanagem, see (Harris, 2010).

Francisco Sergio de Oliveira, commander of the first column, was the author of an appeal in which insurgents were referred to as “mad people” in need of pardon. The most prominent *balaio* leader, Raimundo Gomes, refuted this accusation in a long letter dated July 1840, in which he expounded on the motives that had led to the insurrection:

[...] We do not want to kill anybody, and we have thus shown that the first Man who took up this Cause set an example that was neither killing nor looting and all that we wanted was the solid Law of the Constitution.<sup>5</sup>

This emphasis on the Constitution may come as a surprise, proceeding from a man who was always seen by authorities, elites and conservative historians as ignorant and disqualified as “dark skinned” (*pardo*, *cabra* or *fulo*), or even stigmatised as physically handicapped.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in spite of these invectives, he was in fact the supreme leader of one of the greatest agrarian revolts of Brazilian history. The Brazilian collective imaginary, and even a significant part of historiography, have tended to promote the view that social movements in the countryside during the Imperial period were either inspired by messianic ideas or were the result of banditry. More recently, however, historians have tried to rescue what Gabriel Paquette (2020, 149–158) called the “demotic” political languages, or the political languages of the popular classes.

As Astolfo Serra (1946) has already shown, the “strange contagion” (his expression) that took hold of Maranhão was in fact linked to the regional expression of liberalism. Rebels referred to themselves as “*bem-te-vis*”, the name of a bird that is very common in Maranhão, but also was the nickname of liberals in the province.<sup>7</sup> The rebel auto-denomination is significant, as it shows the set of liberal ideas that inspired them had taken hold among the free and poor

5 Document sent by Raimundo Gomes Vieira Jutahy to Major Falcão, 10.7.1840. Caxias Collection, bundle 1, doc. 45, National Archives, Rio de Janeiro (hereafter AN). All quotes have been translated from original Brazilian Portuguese into modern English, orthography kept modern and punctuation added for better understanding. Capitalisations have been kept in order to convey a sense of the importance given by contemporaries to certain terms.

6 Racial terminology in Brazil varied significantly according to the time period and region. *Pardo* was and is a generic term for people of colour. *Cabra* in Maranhão meant a dark-skinned person, between black and mulato. *Mulato* had the same meaning as the English “mulatto”. *Fulo* in contrast was used for lighter skinned people of mixed ancestry. According to Abranches (1992: 66), Gomes was “bow-legged”. The most negative description can be found in Magalhães (1848, 348–349).

7 *Bem-te-vi* is Brazilian name for the Great Kiskadee (*Pitangus sulphuratus*). The name *bem-te-vi*, meaning “I have seen you”, resonates with the call of that bird.

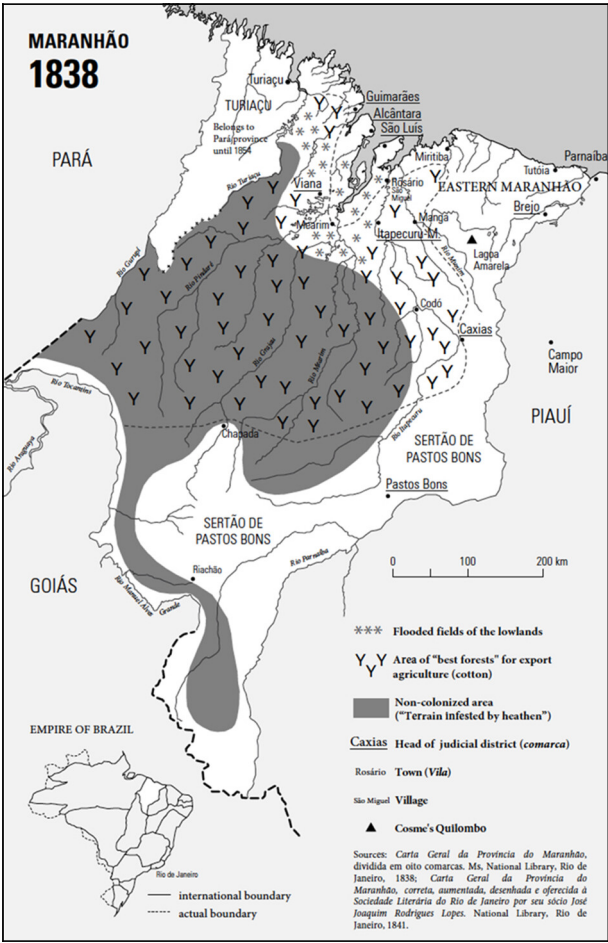


ILLUSTRATION 9.1 Maranhão in the year 1838  
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population of the region—also known as the Mid-North of Brazil—during the struggles for Independence and the Regency.<sup>8</sup> For that reason I am using the term interchangeably with the more established *balaio*, out of respect for the rebels and their struggle.

Raimundo Gomes Vieira Jutahy, the “Commander in Chief of the *Bem-te-vi* Forces”, had been the leading cowboy for a landowner in the Maranhão low-

8 The War for the Independence of Brazil took place in 1822–1823. Maranhão surrendered to Patriot troops 28 July 1823. [Translator’s note]

lands (a region known as the *baixada maranhense*).<sup>9</sup> In December 1838, a year and a half before his above quoted response to loyalist actions, he was herding cattle for his boss around the town of Manga, when the police sub-chief (*sub-prefeito*) forcibly drafted several men under Gomes' command as recruits. Gomes did not hesitate: together with nine companions, he broke through the jail doors and freed his brother and other imprisoned companions. Twenty-three national guardsmen stationed there joined the uprising.<sup>10</sup> Five days later, Gomes, headed a troop of a hundred men, including those from the detachment that the police chief (*prefeito*) of Itapecuru-mirim had sent out against him (Amaral, 1898–1906, 1: 79–80). Gomes, after his rebellion against official forces, immediately issued a manifesto containing four demands, invoked in the interest of “public tranquillity”:

First, that the Constitution and citizens' rights [*garantias*] be sustained. Second, that the President of the Province be dismissed, and that he hand over the government to the Vice-President. Third, that all police chiefs [*prefeitos*], deputy police chiefs [*subprefeitos*] and commissars be abolished, leaving only general laws and provincial laws in force that do not clash with the Empire's Constitution. Fourth: that all Portuguese be dismissed from their jobs, and leave the Province within two weeks, except for those who are married to Brazilians and have Brazilian families, and the elderly, age 16 [*sic*, it should read 61] and over.<sup>11</sup>

The attack on Manga prison was understood by the authorities of the time and the subsequent historiography as the “beginning” of the Balaiada rebellion (1838–1841). Both the authorities and the conservative historians who wrote the first accounts of the revolt insisted on qualifying the rebels as “criminals” (*facínoras*) and denied that they had any political motives beyond a thirst for pillage and vengeance.<sup>12</sup> Considering the “rabble” incapable of writing manifestos, they went as far as arguing that an “invisible hand”, in other words, the Liberal Party, was behind the revolt. Ribeiro do Amaral's classic study of the Bal-

9 *Vaqueiro*, in the historical context of Maranhão, was the name for the person responsible for all cowboys of a cattle ranch, who also undertook dealings like cattle sales on the behalf of the owner.

10 The National Guard was a militia of citizens created in 1831. [Translator's note]

11 This manifesto, bearing no date, accompanies the document of Itapecuru-mirim prefect dated 12.18.1838 and has been reproduced in *Documentos* (2001, doc. 12: 36–37). This is the most comprehensive collection of primary sources on the Balaiada to date, organised by Mundinha Araújo. All sources have been translated from Brazilian Portuguese.

12 The first published accounts of the Balaiada are Magalhães (1848) and Alencastre (1872).

aiada refuted this theory (1898–1906, 1: 39–60). Yet the rebels' ideas continued to receive inadequate attention from historians.<sup>13</sup>

Why was it that thousands of men from the countryside, poor and non-white in their majority, took up arms in the name of the Constitution and citizen rights?

I believe that the explanation can be found in the way two processes—one socio-economic and the other political—came together. A plantation economy was established in Maranhão during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, based on cotton and rice crops and the work of enslaved Africans. A relatively autonomous peasant class developed in the interstices left by the cotton economy, producing for the internal market or merely for its own subsistence. This peasantry developed from three different sources: descendants of indigenous people who had been forced to live in mission villages (*aldeias*), enslaved workers who had been freed or were living in maroon groups (*quilombos*) and migrants from the *sertão* (dry hinterlands) of Ceará province.

What type of antagonisms ran through this society? As in any plantation society, the enslaved workers whose labour reaped profits for their masters were at the same time a source of constant concern for them. Given the existence of vast areas of rainforest that had not yet been colonised and lay outside the control of authorities, many enslaved workers were able to escape and build runaway communities (*quilombos*) beyond the frontier. This was perceived as a permanent threat to the slave order, more than in most other provinces. Moreover, from 1817–1818 the export economy plunged into a crisis from which it was never to recover completely. Many planters that produced cotton for export became highly indebted, a reason more to oppose metropolitan colonial order. In the aftermath of Independence, a small planter elite in the central area of Maranhão seized provincial power. Political marginalisation generated dissatisfaction among manioc planters and cattle ranchers from outlying areas (the south and the Parnaíba valley) whose production were geared more toward the internal market. Conflicts around labour and the commercialisation of produce also created opposition between planters and the poor free population.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, the coming of the “Age of Revolution” to Maranhão society unleashed a process of intense mobilisation and political transformation.

13 The first person to look upon the rebels with a certain sympathy was Carvalho (1924) followed by Serra (1946, 221–243) who examines Bem-te-vi ideas. Santos, (1983, 46–54, 63–102) discusses “ideological renovation” and provides a detailed study of the relations between rebels and slaves.

14 For further details, see Assunção (2018, 255–267).

As we shall see below, the re-appropriation of liberalism by different social actors played a fundamental role in the conflicts that unfolded during the years 1820–1838.

## 1 Constitutionalism, Patriotism and Liberalism, 1820–1838

The Liberal Revolution of 1820 in Portugal brought the North of Brazil, previously little exposed to enlightened ideas, definitively into the realm of political modernity.<sup>15</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the first constitutional system implemented in Brazil came, in 1821, as an immediate consequence of the 1820 Revolution in Porto. The new regime launched a campaign to convince voters in Brazil that the constitution which was being elaborated by the Portuguese Parliament (Cortes) would promote a “regeneration” of the fatherland, uniting the “Portuguese of both hemispheres”. A segment of the Maranhão elite adhered to this political project, expecting it to end colonial, or *ancien régime* despotism. Thus, from this moment on, the constitution became a positive reference for all those opposing absolutism.

The Independence movement launched in Southeast Brazil gave rise to a second moment of rupture and realignment of political groups in the province, followed by a veritable war against the “Portuguese” party (1822–1823). Maranhão was engulfed by a wave of violence (*lustrós*), perpetrated by those who now referred to themselves as “patriots”, and directed against the “Portuguese” and the white minority that controlled local trade. Independence consolidated constitutionalism through the Charter of 1824, imposed by the emperor Pedro I after dissolving the Constitutional Assembly in 1823, who wanted to curtail his power. The 1824 Constitution reproduced the classical division into executive, legislative and judicial powers but created a fourth one, called “Moderating Power” which granted important prerogatives to the emperor, who could convoke and dissolve the Chamber of Deputies and sack ministers.<sup>16</sup> Hence exalted liberals and republicans alike denounced this monarchical authoritarianism. On the other hand, the Constitution granted active citizen rights to any free adult male over 25 with an annual income of R\$100,000, which allowed a significant group of middle-class men to participate in elections.<sup>17</sup> This was an

15 On the impact of Enlightenment, see MacLachlan (1979).

16 On the Moderating Power, see Lynch (2005) and Mattos (1987).

17 Elections took place in two turns. First voters elected “electors” (*eleitores*), which in turn elected deputies. To become an elector, the censitary franchise was raised to R\$200,000. Emancipated slaves who met the income requirement were allowed to vote, but could not

important concession to popular sovereignty, at a time when even countries with longstanding parliamentary traditions like Britain did not allow a higher proportion of its population the right to vote.

In this period a new political culture found its expression not only in the debates that unfolded within the representative bodies of the new nation, but also through newspapers, which began to be published in the province of Maranhão in 1820. As Lúcia das Neves (2003, 117) emphasises, the vocabulary of this culture “can be grouped according to four key concepts: despotism, liberalism, constitutionalism and separatism”. These new categories were reinterpreted along the lines of local conflict. Republicanism, for example, lost its credibility in Maranhão after Miguel Bruce’s presidency (1823–1824) and the failure of the “Confederation of the Equator” (1824).<sup>18</sup> Popular aspirations of the Independence period were re-ignited during the Setembrada rebellion (1831). Yet as in the rest of Brazil, “exalted” liberalism lost influence and was pushed aside by moderate liberalism, particularly after the *regresso* of 1837, that is, the “reversion” to conservative politics at national level.

It is important to underline that the emergent popular liberalism sought inspiration from its elite form yet differed from the latter on several accounts. The historiography of the Balaiada consistently emphasises the role that a small newspaper played in sparking the conflict. The *Bemtevi* was launched in June 1838 and published 29 issues prior to the elections, in October of that year. Its one and only editor, Estevão Rafael de Carvalho (1808–1846), taught classes in Trade as well as Geography and History at the São Luís Secondary College (*Liceu de São Luís*).<sup>19</sup> Carvalho received his degree in Coimbra.<sup>20</sup> Upon returning to Maranhão, at the end of the 1820s, he took part in the radical liberal agitation that culminated, in 1831, in the Setembrada. He was elected to the Brazilian Parliament for the 1834–1837 legislature.<sup>21</sup> During his term as MP in Rio de Janeiro, he put forth radical projects such as the emancipation of all enslaved “mulattos” born in Brazil and the separation of Church and State (Lopes, 1987, 12–21).

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stand as candidates for the National Assembly. Real (plural réis) was the currency of Brazil until 1942. It is usually abbreviated as R\$.

18 For more details on Bruce’s presidency see Assunção (2006, 345–378).

19 There is some disagreement regarding his birth date. Some writers indicate it as 1800 and others as 1808. See Morais Filho (1987, 23–27).

20 There is also disagreement regarding Carvalho’s degree: natural sciences, philosophy or mathematics (Morais Filho, 1987, 23–27).

21 After the Balaiada he continued his outstanding career, as inspector for the provincial public treasury, provincial representative 1842–1846, and member of the Brazilian Institute of History and Geography (Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro).



Carvalho chose the nickname that had been given to the Maranhão liberals—*bem-te-vis*—for his newspaper. It was one of the small programmatic liberal publications that participated in virulent, ongoing polemics with the local conservatives, or *cabanos*, as they were called.<sup>22</sup> Taking up the discourse of the “exalted” liberals in Maranhão, Carvalho emphasised several well-known issues that reappear later in the discourse of the *balaio* rebels. The exalted liberalism of the 1830s no longer defended the republic. The newspaper positioned *bem-te-vis* as moderates situated between right-wing absolutists and leftist republicans such as the “ferocious and brutal Sabino da Bahia”.<sup>23</sup> Its words of order were: “War on the republicans, war on the absolutists” and “Constitution and Emperor, and only Constitution and Emperor” (*O Bemtevi*, 1987, 19).

Carvalho’s virulent polemic with the conservative journal *A Crônica dos Cronistas* (“The Chronicle of the Chroniclers”) allows us to understand the mental attitudes that shaped the political debates of the period. The insults and associations made to disqualify adversaries reveal the ways in which historical agents interpreted social conflicts. Thus, the *Crônica dos Cronistas*, following a conservative Lusophile tradition which dated back to the days of Independence, systematically used racially derogatory terms to refer to the liberals, such as “*nagôs*”, “*cabras*” and “*bodes*” insinuating liberal inferiority in terms of the early modern notion of “purity of blood”.<sup>24</sup> The *Bemtevi* (1987:32) refuted these insults, yet only ambivalently. It did not criticise discrimination, nor call for racial equality, but merely lamented: “Dear God, why must you so offend the voters?” It also defended liberals from the conservative accusation that they were republicans or that they were calling for revolution (1987, 42, 68). The *Bemtevi*, on the other hand, placed responsibility on the Portuguese for government corruption and the exclusion of the “Brazilians”, that is, the Maranhão liberals. It suggested that the province was, in fact, directed by the leader of the Portuguese community, Meireles. It took pleasure in remembering that the latter had already been an object of popular resentment during the Independence period, having had his windows shattered during a *lustr*o, or anti-Portuguese

22 There are a range of publications on the history of the press in Maranhão during that period. The most recent at the time of writing was Jorge (1998). *Cabanos* derives from *cabana*, hut in English, and had different regional meanings that are a bit confusing. Whereas in the provinces of Pará and in Pernambuco it referred to rebels, in Maranhão it referred to the conservatives that supported the central government.

23 *O Bem-te-vi* (1987, 38). Dr Sabino was the leader of a popular rebellion in Salvador, Bahia, in 1837. [Translator’s note].

24 *Nagô*: “nation” of enslaved Africans in Brazil originally from present-day Yorubaland in Nigeria and Benin. *Cabra*, *bode*: literally, “she-goat” and “goat”, both refer to mulattos. (Translator’s note)

riot. The *Bemtevi* (1987, 27, 39, 42, 44) associated Meireles with the fraudulent contracts of the fresh meat (*carnes verdes*) through which the town councils of particular municipalities conceded a monopoly over meat sales on the local market, guaranteeing heavy profits to the holders of these exclusive contracts. As in other parts of the country, the “Portuguese” were identified with absolutism and the restoration of colonial rule. The liberals’ task, therefore, involved defending the laws of the Empire against the conservatives who were frequently accused of being “sorcerers of absolutism”, promoting anarchy in an attempt to overturn the 1824 Constitution (1987, 22–23). The *Bemtevi* (1987, 18) asserted the existence of a direct link between the Holy Alliance in Europe and Maranhão secret societies that were also interested in a return to absolutism.

Another favourite *Bemtevi* (1987, 1) target was the provincial president, the conservative Vicente Camargo. In its first issue, the journal chastised Camargo for living under the tutelage of “a handful of men who breathed only revenge and ambition”. It repeatedly denounced the way the president handed out jobs, as well as his recourse to protégés when naming police chiefs (*prefeitos*). Attacks on Camargo were vehement and personal. The *Bemtevi* (1987: 39, 54, 58) described the president as “ugly” and qualified him as “inept”. It equated the highest provincial authority with a member of a faction that promoted anarchy and attacked his earlier performance in Pernambuco. The provincial president reacted immediately, dismissing Estevão de Carvalho from his position as college teacher. At that point, Carvalho withdrew to his hometown, Viana, untouched by the revolt. He remained there until the end of Balaiaada, about which he took no public stance.

Maranhão conservatives accused Carvalho of having promoted the rebellion, alongside João Francisco Lisboa, who was editor of the most important liberal journal of the period and one of the leaders of the *bem-te-vi* party. Lisboa attempted to show, even while the war was going on, that liberal papers (like his own *Crônica Maranhense* and the *Bemtevi*) “had not exercised any influence at all in the disorder” [...] and “much less incited anarchy; rather, they made an appeal to established authority and the resources provided by the Laws of the Empire”. He recognised that the papers had denounced the arbitrary attitudes of police chiefs (*prefeitos*), but argued, nonetheless, that “their doctrinal impact [on the rebellion] was absolutely irrelevant.” Furthermore, he emphasised their limited circulation:

The *Bemtevi* ran some four hundred copies, half of which were distributed among the peaceful population of the capital and the rest sent out exclusively to voters in other areas, including regions not involved in the disorder. It is clear that it reached not even two individuals for each copy.

Furthermore, the journal lasted only three months, during which two small issues came out per week; evaluate, then, the strength of the accusation. We can even rush to assure that among the 8,000 who may have taken up arms in favour of disorder, there were not even 200 that knew a paper called *Bemtevi* existed and it is undeniable that despite all the attempts that agents of the “Faction” [the conservatives] have made to find this and other things out from the rebels that they have taken as prisoners, still have not been able to prove anything.<sup>25</sup>

It is obvious that the need to refute conservative accusations induced Lisboa to belittle the newspaper's role. Ribeiro do Amaral, the meticulous Balaiada scholar, who knew many direct witnesses to the event, asserted, quite to the contrary, that the paper's limited circulation was no impediment to its considerable popularity:

This newspaper, written in satirical and distinctive language, won public favour from the start, and was thus avidly sought and read by all, the big and the little, seeing its circulation expand rapidly throughout the entire province. (Amaral, 1898–1906, I, 37)

Newspapers such as the *Bemtevi* could be influential outside the capital, in spite of their limited printing, and it is quite probable that they were read out loud to wider audiences of illiterate people. Thus, although the *Bemtevi* could not be held directly responsible for the outbreak of the Balaiada, I do believe that it contributed to disseminating the central points of the liberal programme, such as the defence of the Constitution and the monarchy. It fanned the flames of “exalted” dissidents in their virulent campaign against the president of the province and police chiefs and nurtured old resentments when it argued that all was the fault of “Portuguese” absolutists. The *Bemtevi* also made a progressive reading of Christianity that moved it close to the perspective of popular Catholicism. It accused the “absolutist sorcerers” of insulting “Jesus Christ's religion, that religion of equality and freedom” (*Bemtevi*, 1987, 61). However, on a few points its content diverged from the discourse of more radical rebels such as Raimundo Gomes. It defended the masonry, which “plants and sustains People's freedoms” against the absolutist Holy Alliance (*Bemtevi*, 1987, 18). Its complaint that the government was overtaxing “the poor planters” and accusa-

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25 Article by João Francisco Lisboa in *Crônica Maranhense*, 9.4.1840. Reproduced in: *Bemtevi*, 1987, n.p. [177].

tion that prefects were sending spies into landowners' families in order to corrupt "our slaves" reveals a clear identification with the planter class (*Bemtevi*, 1987, 2, 15). As we shall see below, some *bem-te-vis* went also much further in their defence of racial equality.

## 2 Against the "Despotism" of Police Chiefs: *Bem-Te-Vi* Slogans and Demands

The Balaiada was a socially heterogeneous rebellion, mobilising landowners, cowboys, peasants and enslaved workers. Furthermore, it was a decentralised movement. Notwithstanding the implantation of a "Military Council" after the town of Caxias was taken (August 1839) and in spite of a formal hierarchy in which Raimundo Gomes figured as "commander in chief" and Lívio Lopes as the leader of the revolt in the province of Piauí, rebel groups were led by independent leaders who did not necessarily agree in their objectives nor in their insurrectional practices. In Piauí, for example, the revolt was directed most specifically against the Baron of Parnaíba, who since Independence had monopolised power in that province.<sup>26</sup>

For this reason, it is convenient to distinguish at least three areas of revolt. In a large part of the province of Piauí and the south of the province of Maranhão (the so-called Sertão de Pastos Bons, or "Backland of Good Pastures"), the revolt mobilised, above all, cattle ranchers and their clientele. In the Itapecuru and Iguará valleys, on the other hand, most cotton planters remained loyal to the government, while many enslaved people joined the rebels or formed their own maroon groups. In the entire eastern part of the province of Maranhão (valleys of the Munim, Preto and Peria rivers, among others) and on both sides of the Lower Parnaíba, the *caboclo* or peasant population joined the movement en masse.<sup>27</sup>

Reconstituting the *balaio* imaginary from rebel letters and proclamations is a risky task, since these texts represent, above and beyond all else, the opinions of its most politicised and literate leadership. Without doubt, the majority of the rebels were illiterate. This did not necessarily prevent them from communicating with their fellow rebels or government officials by letter, since illiterate *balaio* leaders (and even those who were literate, such as Gomes) had personal

26 On the Balaiada in Piauí, see Nunes (1975), Oliveira (1985) and Dias (2002).

27 *Caboclo* originally was a term for the acculturated descendant of indigenous people in Brazil, but was and is also widely used in northern Brazil as a synonym for peasant (Translator's note).

secretaries. We should take into consideration how intensely literate and illiterate persons lived their daily lives side by side. Albeit in differing degrees, all of them took part in the regional political culture that went beyond the limitations of the written. Politics, in those days, were largely oral, carried out through assemblies, on the streets and on the battlefield.

There are three types of *bem-te-vi* texts: proclamations meant to stir up support among the population, letters that were exchanged between them and were confiscated from arrested rebels and formal letters that they sent to government officials. Military officers, in turn, sent copies of original rebel letters to their superiors, and these are the copies that can be found today in the National Archives or in Maranhão and Piauí State Archives. Most rebel letters are brief, dealing only with campaign details or repeating slogans and core demands. Yet there are a few more detailed manifestos which attempt to justify and explain the motives behind the rebellion. They enable us to get a better perspective on the worldview of the *bem-te-vis*. In order to analyse these documents, we need to take their relationship with the chronology of the rebellion into account, as well as the possible differences between authors (invariably, leaders of rebel groups.) Since few programmatic texts are available and the ones I refer to here employ a similar rhetoric, I have chosen to engage in thematic analysis, signalling those that stand out from the rest.

All rebels used the same slogans. All reiterate their faithfulness to the Emperor, the Constitution, Catholicism and the Brazilian homeland. Letters and proclamations usually end by saluting these fundamental references of *Bem-te-vi* discourse, such as the following:

And we should cry out with gusto: Long live the Catholic religion, Long live Dom Pedro the Second, Long live the Constitution, Long live the *Bem-te-vi* troops! (Undated proclamation, *Documentos*, 2001, no. 152, 234)

Beyond these mottos and salutations, the central points of the programme—articulated for the first time by Raimundo Gomes in the above-mentioned manifesto of December 1838—were also defended by all the rebels. Thus, three demands—guarantee of citizens' constitutional rights, abolition of the police chiefs and expulsion of the Portuguese—were reiterated until at least the mid-1840s. The provincial president's resignation was the only demand that was abandoned by a large number of rebels, after the central government substituted Camargo with Melo e Souza (3.3.1839).

The demands were sometimes accompanied by declarations on the importance of rebel troops, clearly meant to make an impression on adversaries. For example, Francisco Lopes Castelo Branco, from an influential Piauí family, "Col-

onel and Commander of *Bem-ti-vi* forces”, guaranteed that “from Brejo to Balsas Island, there were eleven to twelve thousand men in arms”.<sup>28</sup>

When, during the year 1839, the rebels were able to take over a large portion of the province of Maranhão, their demands intensified. The “Military Council” that met in Caxias, “made up of commanders of *Bem-te-vi* forces”, made a point of emphasising that it had 6,000 armed men and reiterated initial demands on July 10th (*Documentos*, 2001, no. 72: 111–114). It also demanded that amnesty be conceded to the rebels, as well as an indemnity of 80 *contos de réis* for *bem-te-vi* troops and the integration of some rebel officers into the province’s armed forces.<sup>29</sup>

As in many popular revolts, the rebels sought to legitimate their own audacity in taking up arms against provincial authority. Thus, rebel leader Pedro Alexandrino dos Santos, who at the head of 3,000 men dominated a large part of the lower Parnaíba valley, called a meeting at the town council of São Bernardo, seat of the Brejo judiciary district (*comarca*). This “General Council” of June 3, 1839, emerging from the tradition of the “General Councils” of the Independence, brought together not only three rebel officers but “subordinate officers, people in arms and other citizens”. Lieutenant Colonel Antonio de Caldas Ferreira was elected to the presidency of the Council by general acclaim. Rebel commander Pedro Alexandrino went on to expose “the evils, to which the entire Province is about to be submerged”. He requested that the General Council dispatch a document with an almost literal transcription of the four demands that Raimundo Gomes had proclaimed in December of 1838, in other words: to hold up the 1824 Constitution and citizens’ rights; the renunciation of the provincial president; abolition of the “prefectures” and other provincial laws that infringed the Constitution and the dismissal of the Portuguese holding public employment. After it had been read and discussed, the general council resolved to take this manifesto to the provincial president, designating two citizens, by popular acclaim, to carry out this task. Forty-nine officials and citizens signed the document.<sup>30</sup> Nine days later, the town of Tutóia held a similar General Council meeting, reuniting “the People in Arms and other citizens”. Following São Bernardo’s example, the “town convened in Council” chose two

28 *Documentos*, 2001, no. 149: 227–228. The Balsas is an affluent of the Parnaíba river in the South of Maranhão, in what was known at the time as the Sertão de Pastos Bons.

29 “Instructions” of the Military Council the delegation, quoted in Serra (1946, 227–228). Real was the Brazilian currency at the time, plural réis. Milréis corresponded to one thousand reais, and 1 conto de réis to one million réis.

30 “Ata do Conselho Geral reunida nesta Vila de São Bernardo”. In: *Documentos* (2001, doc. 61, 95–98).

citizens to deliver the manifesto with the rebels' demands, signed by seventeen people, to the provincial president.<sup>31</sup> Through the signature of these "citizens" (that is, men who met the censitary suffrage criteria established by the Constitution), the rebels obtained a democratic legitimacy which unfortunately was not recognised by provincial authorities.<sup>32</sup>

### 3 "Upholding the Constitution and the Sainly Catholic Religion". The *Bem-Te-Vi* Worldview

What meanings underlie the *bem-te-vi* catchphrases? Their demands and their mottos summarise a particular worldview. The *bem-te-vi* creed emerged from the interaction of popular Catholicism and liberal constitutionalism and the political experiences that rebels had acquired since Independence. It found its expression in the measures that, according to them, provided a solution for their most serious problems.

Prevailing among all the rebels was the firm conviction that the *cabanos* were taking advantage of Dom Pedro's tender age to infringe on the Constitution and oppress "peoples". This enabled the rebel Francisco Lopes Castelo Branco, in a letter to the highest officer of the legal forces, to state that he was

holding the different places under my command in defence of the Empire's Constitution and of the integrity that evil men have attempted to rob. [I am] aided by the enthusiasm of the peoples who have encouraged me to raise arms against these oppressors of His Majesty's Throne [...].<sup>33</sup>

"Oppression" in this case made reference first to the "despotism" of police chiefs (*prefeitos*) against poor free men, as well as to the arbitrary recruiting or mistreatment of prisoners. As Raimundo Gomes explained, recruitment imple-

31 "Ata do Conselho Geral reunida nesta Vila de Tutóia". In: Documentos (2001, doc. 64, 101–103). When they arrived in São Luís, all the emissaries chosen by the General Councils were taken prisoners. Just as in the case of the Caxias delegation, all the noteworthy, including plantation owner Ignácio Portugal de Almeida from Tutóia, promptly deserted the rebel cause, arguing that they had been forced into that emissary role. On this matter, see *Crônica Maranhense* (1969, 2a parte, 135, 137, 210).

32 The 1824 Constitution gave voting rights to males over 25 with a yearly minimum income of R\$100,000. Emancipated slaves who met the income requirement were allowed to vote, but could not stand as candidates for the National Assembly. Elections took place in two turns: Voters first had to elect "electors", which in turn voted for MPs.

33 Letter dated 16.12.1839, in Documentos (2001, no. 149, 227).

mented by the newly created police chiefs infringed “Constitutional Law”: “the Police Chiefs issuing orders for recruiting, Single and Married, Young and Old. Now Sirs, tell me, is that in the Constitution?”<sup>34</sup> The arbitrary acts that he lists are similar to those the liberal press of the 1830s referred to. This does not necessarily mean that one is a copy of the other, but that these were the injustices that poor free men from the interior of Maranhão most resented.

The Constitution, in contrast, together with the figure of the emperor, made up the two pillars, which, in the eyes of the rebels—yet not in their eyes alone—upheld imperial society and promoted the unity of the Brazilian people. The emphasis on Catholicism was complemented by the accusation that the *cabanos* had formed secret societies through which they had usurped provincial power. In this regard, the rebels were merely expressing the fears of the “restorationist societies” which, as in other parts of Brazil, advocated a return to authoritarian regime of the Braganza dynasty and became important in Maranhão after 1831. They also gave voice to Catholic suspicion of masonic activities, a sentiment which appears in a number of rebel texts.

Patriotism, another feeling that ran strong among the rebels, had a number of implications. In the first place—and in consonance with a logic of decolonisation—the *bem-te-vis* wanted a Brazil for Brazilians. They seem to reiterate the demands of the Independence movement, although the historical context now was quite different. In their view, “the Portuguese” used ruses to maintain control over the young independent nation. However, drawing a clear separation between Brazilians and Portuguese was not easy, as was demonstrated when the time came to decide whether or not to exempt the “adopted” Brazilians—that is, Portuguese citizens who had automatically been granted Brazilian citizenship at Independence—or those married to Brazilian women from expulsion from the province.<sup>35</sup>

The opposition between Portuguese and Brazilians overlapped and combined with the dichotomy between whites and non-whites. The latter distinction was particularly relevant, due to the small number of whites in Maranhão, compared to other Brazilian provinces. For the *bem-te-vis*, Brazil could not be a country for whites only, since the nation “are a mixture of pagan [= indigenous] blood and the blood of the African coast and the Portuguese”.<sup>36</sup> In fact, many rebels viewed this miscegenation positively, affirming their *caboclo* identity.<sup>37</sup>

34 Letter sent to Major Falcão, 10.7.1840, Caxias Collection, Bundle 1, document 45, AN.

35 On this issue, see Ribeiro (2002).

36 Letter by João da Mata Castelo Branco, 16.11.1840, in Documentos (2001, no. 185, 303).

37 As noted above, *caboclo* refers both to indigenous ancestry and peasant status (Translator's note).



*Bem-te-vi* Brazilian patriotism fused with a certain regionalist pride, as can be seen in an anonymous proclamation that salutes “Brazilian Freedom” and the “courageous Maranhenses [inhabitants of Maranhão]”.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, some texts suggest that there was a certain animosity against people from Pernambuco (which may be due to President Camargo’s origin from that province). Raimundo Gomes, for example, exhorted rebel leader Oliveira Brauna to have “no further communication with the *cabanos*”, fearing dishonesty on their part, and proclaimed:

[...] hold onto our Brazil and put our emperor on the throne and hold onto the Constitution and the Catholic religion and not trusting the fine words of people from Pernambuco, who are weak [...] <sup>39</sup>

Just like the Constitution and religion, defence of freedom and the fatherland are frequently associated. Thus, one manifesto appeals to people from Maranhão to “defend freedom if it costs us our lives” and calls for people to “sacrifice private hatreds on the sacred altar of the fatherland”.<sup>40</sup> These expressions are accompanied by moral appeals to the civic virtues of fellow citizens. Believing that “by these means we will save our lives, our honour and our estates”, the rebels appealed to “all Brazilians who love our *Bem-te-vi* cause” to “follow the good order, unite, shun abuse and ambition, obey God and the authorities [*sic*]”. In contrast to government accusations, they even offer their aid: to those who seek “the helping hand and the protection of *Bem-te-vi* Troops [...], you will be well accepted and kindly treated, because the *Bem-te-vis* Troops are humane”.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4 “The Same People of Colour Are What Make up the Forces of Brazil”. Raimundo Gomes and the Struggle for Equality.

Alongside the struggle for liberty and for constitutionally guaranteed rights, some letters suggest there was another struggle for equality at stake, as in the above-cited manifest of July 10th, 1840 in which Raimundo Gomes refuted the accusation of “crazed peoples” made by the commander of the first column. This is one of the most detailed letters of his authorship, written after escap-

38 Anonymous proclamation, n/d. In Documents (2001, no. 69, 109).

39 Letters from 13 and 14.11.1839. In Documents (2001, nos. 122–123, 190–192).

40 Anonymous proclamation, n/d, In Documents (2001, no. 69, 108–109).

41 Anonymous proclamation, n/d, In Documents (2001, nos. 152–153, 234–235).

ing a number of attacks from the loyalist forces, and after his own troops were defeated at a place called Vereda, between the Munim and Iguará rivers, where they lost their supplies and 40 horses.<sup>42</sup> Gomes defended himself against government accusations regarding the movement and insisted that the civil war was disastrous for everyone, regardless of their colour:

[...] we don't want to kill all the Whites as they say to increase support for their cause; everyone dies, Whites, *cabras* and *caboclos* alike.<sup>43</sup>

The "Commander in Chief", like the rest of the rebels, explained the disregard for the rights of Brazilian citizens as a consequence of the fact that "the Portuguese" were still in command of the province: "the justice [= judiciary] in all of Brazil obeys to the Portuguese, only at the head [of the judiciary], to trick those fools, is one Brazilian". He thus directed the following query to an official:

[...] Sir, we ask you to please inform us what is the land where you were born and which blood you are shedding, for if you are Portuguese then perhaps you are right, but if you are a Brazilian then you must be crazier than the rest of us.

It is in this spirit that many rebels preferred to negotiate with Brazilian-born legalist officers, such as Major Falcão, rather than with "adoptives", that is, naturalised Brazilians of Portuguese origin. Gomes also believed that a masonic conspiracy was attempting to re-enslave people of colour, such as himself and his peers:

[...] we were not aware of how this business was plotted through the secrets of the Masonic Society, that only Rich Whites are to be Citizens, and that all the people of Colour who they have the habit of disdaining should suffer under the heavy yoke of absolutism and slavery.

In fact, this was a popular theory. Many rebels were convinced that the *cabanos* who had aligned with the Portuguese wanted to "make us their slaves."<sup>44</sup> But what slavery was that? In liberal elite discourse, the term "slavery" was frequently used to describe colonial exploitation and absolutism rather than the captivity of Africans (Neves, 2003, 131). Yet within the Maranhão context of the

42 Amaral (1898–1906, vol. III, 48, 52–53).

43 Letter dated 7/10/1840. Caxias Collection, Bundle 1, Doc. 45, AN.

44 Anonymous proclamation, n/d., In Documents (2001, no. 69, p. 108).

1830s, when men of colour spoke of slavery, they were also speaking about their fear of being (re) enslaved.

In Gomes' view, there should be no difference between citizens based on the colour of their skin, or, as people said in those days, their "quality". In order to defend his view of the equality of all men, he evokes a powerful image that challenged the notion, still hegemonic at that time, of the "purity of blood":

[...] Tell me, Sirs, these Men of Colour, did they perhaps stick their Colour on the Whites[?] These Men of Colour are they perhaps not Children of God[?] Show us then, Sirs, another Adam and Eve, let the Blood of three men flow into One single Cup, from one White, one *Cabra* [*mulatto*] and one *Caboclo* and then show us the separate blood of each one of them.

In response to whites who wanted to re-enslave the people of colour, he asserted that all men had "equal rights." Gomes goes as far as making the claim that the living strength of the Nation comes from its *cabras* and *caboclos*: "these People of Colour are the Strength of Brazil".

Raimundo Gomes was perhaps an exceptional visionary. Yet I believe he represents the emerging consciousness of the "people of colour" in the province, as an economic, social and even—in this conjuncture—a political force. This concept, going beyond the narrower categories of *caboclo*, *cabra* or *cafuz* were part of colonial classifications and hierarchies based on the "purity of blood", created the possibility of a new class consciousness "for itself" on the part of poor and free peasants, cowboys and other rural workers. It is used in a similar sense in at least one other rebel text. In the manifesto directed at the deputies of the National Assembly in Rio de Janeiro, leaders Francisco Gil Castello Branco, Roberto José de Maria and Anastácio da Costa also denounced the "cruelties towards Poverty [= the poor]". They decry the situation in which

[...] People are left desperate by their own Nation having no work their families unprotected their Children dying their Relatives their Homes the Enemy setting fire to their Fields uprooting their Vegetables.

Like Gomes, they complain about the disdain with which "this People of Colour" were regarded and they query:

Now Sirs, what is this aversion that you have taken to these Men of Colour[?] Could it be that their colour is contagious that it will stick on the Whites[?] Could it be that the Whites' Blood is of another colour[?] Could

there be another Adam and another Eve[?] Could it be that these Men are not the sons of God[?]<sup>45</sup>

This rhetoric, similar although not identical to the one which Gomes uses, suggests that rebels were united by a common way of thinking. It combined Christian egalitarianism and the notion of constitutionally guaranteed rights and was expressed in the salutations they offered to the Constitution and the Catholic religion.

Their views, while egalitarian, democratic and radical for their time, ran up against their own limitations insofar as they omitted the enslaved Blacks. As Maria Januária Vilela Santos (1983, 91) emphasised: “in a generic sense, the Black slave [*negro*] was included in this view. Yet the omission persists.” Just as could be said of the Parisian *sans-culottes* [urban lower classes that were central to the French Revolution], a radical democratic position merged here with the belief in a conspiracy of reactionary forces; which can be explained, among other things, by the importance of rumours in a society in which information circulated in very restricted ways. Furthermore, this mistrust had a rational basis, justified by the poor treatment that people of colour were given. And if whites were fearful of another “Haiti”, the people of colour of Maranhão had no dearth of reason to fear re-enslavement. Both fears were complementary: one fed into the other. Both allude to slavery as the fundamental category for understanding ideological debates among free men in a plantation society.

## 5 “Loving the Fatherland and the Emperor”. How the Emperor’s Coming of Legal Age Opened up the Path toward a Truce

It is worth noting that at no point did the *bem-te-vis* argue that their rebellion was directed against the central government. On the contrary, they thought that they were defending the Constitution and young Brazilian-born Dom Pedro II against the Portuguese usurpers and conservatives, who had been able to take over the provincial government through intrigue. For this reason, the salutations offered—to the Constitution, religion, the fatherland and the Emperor—with which they customarily ended their proclamations do not, at a first glance, appear to be revolutionary at all. Rather, they seem quite similar to those who

45 “Appeal to the People of Maranhão” from 15.05.1840. Caxias Collection, Box 808, Doc. no. 34, AN. Transcribed in Assunção (2018, 369–373). And translated into English in Assunção, (2024).

stood on the loyalist side. Captain Valério Alves de Sousa, for example, who considered the rebels little more than “a horde of anarchists”, ended his proclamation with similar words, saluting religion and D. Pedro II. Yet rather than to the Constitution, his cheers go to the legal authorities and the “restorers” [of order and legality].<sup>46</sup> Thus, in this regard there was real closeness between *Bem-te-vi* ideas and the moderate liberal ideology of the Regency governments. This proximity laid the groundwork for negotiation that loyalists were able to use in their own favour.

Under the circumstances of guerrilla war, the situation was not one of two armies hermetically separated by a front; rather, in between skirmishes and battles, the camps had contact with one another. Loyalist forces did not cease to remind the *bem-te-vis* that a revolt in the name of the Emperor and the Constitution against a President who governed in the name of those very same principles was a contradiction in terms. As Major José Thomas Henriques explained in relation to his meeting with rebel chief Valério José de Oliveira Brauna, many rebels believed the conspiracy theories that were in circulation. For this reason, the official nourished “high hopes about bringing to their senses those who are under the illusion and consider us Republicans who are enemies of His Majesty the Emperor”.<sup>47</sup>

During the final months of President Manoel Felisardo Souza e Melo’s administration (March 1839–January 1840), army officers were already attempting to attract rebel leaders to the loyalist side by offering them a number of rewards. The same Major Henriques, who had been trying to convince rebel chief Mathias Luiz de Medeiros to turn himself over, provided the information that “leader Mathias was ill and hidden in the Saco dos Molundús, trying to get better” and that he was no longer helping Raimundo Gomes. He explained that as part of this negotiating process, “I let his wife return home with the slaves, and I treated her well”.<sup>48</sup> Such tactics were beginning to show results, as by the end of 1839 some rebel chiefs had started to tire of fighting. Among them was the ex-gunman of a conservative estate owner, Manoel Rodrigues Ferreira Coque, who distinguished himself in the collaboration with the loyalists and hence went down in history as the “Judas” of the Balaia. The President wrote to the Minister of Justice that Coque had lent “relevant services to the loyalist forces” and argued that “the good treatment that Coque had been given encouraged other

46 Proclamation of 14.10.1839. In Documents (2001, no. 98, 156–157).

47 Letter from 11.11.1839. In Documents (2001, no. 120, 188–189.)

48 José Thomas Henriques Letter, from 24. and 25.10.1839. In Documents (2001, no. 105 e 106, 166–170).

leaders to desert”.<sup>49</sup> Negotiations between other *balaio* leaders and loyalists did not go unnoticed. Francisco Castelo Branco thus wrote to his companion, the rebel chief Bernardo Antonio da Silveira, that “a terrible suspicion has spread here, that you have switched sides”. He requested that Silveira “please counter this rumour soon” and for these purposes join Captain Lamêgo “to go fight the enemy”.<sup>50</sup>

When the notice that the young D. Pedro II had been declared apt to reign (at age fourteen), which arrived with some delay, in Maranhão, it stirred perplexity amongst the rebels. Pompously announced by Luís Alves de Lima in late August, the news was accompanied with an appeal to the rebels to put down their arms. The Bishop of Maranhão also sent out a pastoral letter that was similar in content. It was not long before a new Cabinet had been put together in the imperial capital. It was liberal in tendency and offered amnesty in an attempt to pacify the rebel provinces on the periphery of the Brazilian Empire.<sup>51</sup> This change of political context on the national level, along with the experience of civil war itself, led many *bem-te-vis* (particular those who still had some wealth to lose) to reassess their situation. The dialogue with loyalist forces increased their uncertainties.

There was a clear change of tone in rebel letters during the second half of 1840. Several leaders thought not only of putting down their arms, but even of changing sides, which was in fact a demand by Alves de Lima.<sup>52</sup> In his singular interpretation of the law of amnesty, he required rebels to pursue the maroons of Cosme in the forests before retiring to their homes.<sup>53</sup> An example reflecting this change is the letter signed by seven *bem-te-vi* officers, including the Commander Coronel João da Mata Coelho Castelo Branco. Dated from September 1840 and addressed to Major Henriques, they claim that

until now [we have not] committed arbitrary acts nor acted as outlaws and murderers nor have we looted nor deflowered maidens nor disrespected married ladies [...].

49 Letter from 10.12.1840 to the Minister of Justice. In Documents (2001, no. 142, 218–219).

50 Letter from 26.12.1839. In Documents (2001, no. 145: 233). See also no. 133, to rebel leader João da Mata.

51 Imperial decree from 22.08.1840. See Holanda (1978, Book II, vol. 2: 163). In Maranhão, Alves and Lima delayed official publication of the decree until the 14th of November 1840. See Alencastre (1872, 465).

52 The general Luís Alves de Lima was sent by the Imperial government to restore order in Maranhão. This and other successful campaigns earned him a title of nobility (Duke of Caxias) and the official title of Brazil’s “Pacifier” (Translator’s note).

53 For a critical evaluation of the Law of Amnesty, see Carvalho (1927, II, 397–398).

Rejecting accusations of looting and pillage, they claimed that, quite to the contrary, *cabano* properties and families had been treated with care:

rather we have exercised our command in places where [? illegible] many women, wives and children of *cabanos* [were present] and we always treated them with the greatest respect and we always favoured them in any way we could and it was our duty and the slaves of the *cabanos* that we knew were theirs, we got them and handed them over to their mistresses and those that didn't have a mistress and were [? illegible] we got them and sent them back to the fields of their masters and war it was but just among the men [...].

It is significant that these rebels emphasised their attempt to respect "women's honour" and even the enslaved people owned by their enemies. They lamented the fact that, as they saw it, *cabanos* and loyalists did not act in similar fashion:

Today I see all the *bem-te-vis* that you have taken, that you are killing and beating [them] in ways that the *bem-te-vis*, after seeing that despotism, many have started doing the same ... Now we think, fine, Sirs, that this is no longer a battle over public issues but vengeance that you treat them with, but know you must, Sirs, that among these *caboclos* there are many men of integrity and who know the law and work for the law and who are not a band of thieves as you Sirs have claimed [...].

The rebel officers asked the legalist troops to send home the *bem-te-vi* wives who are in their power "so that they can work and care" for their homes and that they would also let the *cabanos'* women return home, guaranteeing that "we have nothing against them". Since D. Pedro II had already taken the throne, and the *cabano* party had also endorsed the emperor:

[...] we want to know about you, Sirs, about why you continue to attack us with the aim to finish us off if you are now in our party since we are no longer dealing with police chiefs and deputy police chiefs.

They proposed going to Rio together to present their case to the emperor, because the *bem-te-vis*

with all our brutality, we have a lot to say and should be listened to and our deeds should be approved, perhaps ours more than yours, you who are cultured [*doutos*] and we who are boorish [*rústicos*] we think there is

madness in you wanting to finish off the *caboclos*, don't you realise that there are many *caboclos* and you can't get rid of all of them.

They also appealed to the governmental troops, "let us stop this burning of homes [...] and of messing with families, women and children who aren't a part of this".<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, these appeals produced no results, and during its last phase the civil war took on genocidal proportions, that is, in terms of the actions of government forces against the *caboclo* or peasant population.

In November 1840, when it became clear that the emperor had assumed his "Moderating Power" and that the revolt was losing steam, and reducing even further the insurgents' bargaining power, João da Mata Castelo Branco wrote to the commander of the second column:<sup>55</sup>

We are aware of all you say about our Emperor Sir D. Pedro II who has now gotten his Crown and is governing us as our emperor of all Brazilians [...] and we have kept in mind a proclamation of our Emperor in which he, guided by his prudence and as a good father who cares for his children, pardons all Brazilians in general [...].

Nonetheless, João da Mata did not want to hand over all his cards at once. Thus, using Luís Alves de Lima's demand for the concession of amnesty as a pretext he asserted:

[...] though yes, we cannot lay down our arms without fighting that D. Cosme who already proclaimed the Republic and who signed as the Emperor of Brazil and haven't we already put an end to him and all the blacks [*pretos*] who are with him because, Sirs, of your troops [...] I and no troop of mine never took up arms against our Emperor Sir D. Pedro II, yes in his defence these absolutists are the ones who are fooling you, just to see us at war amongst ourselves.<sup>56</sup>

With this ruse João da Mata thought he might avoid laying down his arms and still be treated on an equal standing by the government forces. However, by this time the power balance had shifted, and Luís Alves de Lima was no longer

54 Letter from 26.9. 1840. In Documents (2001, no. 171: 278–279).

55 According to the 1824 Constitution, beyond the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary Powers the Emperor enjoyed "Moderating Power" which allowed him, among other things, to dissolve the National Assembly and call for elections (Translator's note).

56 Letter from 2.11. 1840, In Documents (2001, no. 177: 291–293).



satisfied with mere declarations of good intentions. Da Mata would have to prove his loyalty by actions, as rebel chief Pedrosa had done, who achieved recognition for his outstanding service hunting down enslaved rebels. Alves de Lima had a masterly understanding of the deep fissures in the Maranhão social fabric. His strategy to divide the movement worked. Slave holding and land-owning rebel leaders had much to lose by continuing to fight the loyalists and much to win through re-conciliation. Freedom was important, but so was the property that would enable them to put these liberties to use. Cornered by the three columns of the “Pacifying Division”, they attempted to negotiate their withdrawal.

## 6 Intransigent *Bem-Te-Vis* and Radical Maroons

Raimundo Gomes and several other rebel leaders did not surrender, in spite of changes at the national level and the clear faltering of the revolt after the defeats of July, August and September 1840. From where did this intransigence come? A complex bundle of reasons needs to be considered.

In the first place, it seems that Gomes, together with three other rebel chiefs, did consider laying down arms in late July, 1840. According to Major Falcão’s report, they showed “regret for having taken up arms against the legal government”.<sup>57</sup> However, this early negotiation led nowhere, perhaps because at that same time, loyalist forces closed the circle around the “Commander-in-chief of *Bem-te-vi* forces”—for whose capture—“dead or alive”—the government was offering a reward of one thousand *milreis*.<sup>58</sup> On July 18th, Raimundo Gomes and another 300 rebels were defeated by the conjoint forces of the First and Third Columns at the foot of the hill of São Bento. Gomes was able to escape, but lost “all his equipment and correspondence” and his brother was taken prisoner. Shortly thereafter, rebel chief Francisco Lopes Castello Branco (nicknamed “Ruivo”, or the “Redhead”) was also taken prisoner. Further difficulties arose when the rebel who had been Gomes’ baggage carrier presented himself before the loyalist troops and provided the information that his “chief was in such trouble that he had not even had time to hide his belongings and escape with his family to Bella Agua.” The man then proceeded to lead the troops to Gomes’ hiding place where four boxes with his files of correspondence were apprehen-

57 Official document from Feliciano Antonio Falcão to Luís Alves de Lima, 4.7.1840. Caxias Collection, Box 808, doc. 46, AN.

58 Letter to Luís Alves de Lima, Caxias Collection, Box 808, doc. no. 38, AN.

ded.<sup>59</sup> In August, Francisco Ferreira Pedrosa, leading 1,600 rebels, went over to the loyalist side, yet remained in the woods to combat the maroons of Cosme. In the face of these defeats, why then did the hard core of the rebels not surrender?

Rebels such as Gomes, Matroá (leader of the former indigenous mission village of São Miguel) and several other *caboclos* maybe had less to lose. Perhaps they had made a different evaluation of their chances for success or were enchanted with the ephemeral power to which they had sudden access as rebel leaders. Yet I believe that there were also reasons of political and ideological character, particularly in Raimundo Gomes' case. He had been the first man to raise the flag of revolt to defend himself, as a citizen, against the "despotism" of the police chiefs and the provincial government. Furthermore, in contrast to what more moderate leaders argued, Gomes and several others had, since the end of 1839, systematically incorporated enslaved workers into their rebel army, causing the government particular consternation. According to the provincial President, "on that occasion, it was said that Lamego, a black man with the title of *balaio* Commander preached freedom for the slaves and asserted that at least those of his nation would be free".<sup>60</sup>

The eventual alliance between the maroons (*quilombolas*) and free rebels is a matter that has not yet been sufficiently clarified. If on the one hand, the rebels omitted bondspeople in their declarations of freedom, loyalist correspondence shows that Gomes not only recruited enslaved plantation workers but actively encouraged them to rebel.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the personal relationship between Cosme, the famous leader of the Lagoa Amarela *quilombo*, and Raimundo Gomes, has not been sufficiently understood.

Magalhães argues that Cosme kept him prisoner and wanted to execute him, but other documents, including a declaration by the maroon leader himself, suggest that there was a de facto collaboration between the two.<sup>62</sup>

Raimundo Gomes must certainly have been conscious of the fact that closeness with insurgent maroons could only work as a deterrent to government pardon. Yet he was also aware of the political shifts at the Court in Rio de Janeiro, which weakened arguments in favour of a continuation of their struggle. In late October, 1840, he informed a rebel commander that the Emperor should be applauded, yet at the same time continued his invectives against the *cabanos*. He offered the information that "Francisco Ferreira [Pedrosa] would be appear-

59 Amaral (1898–1906, vol. III: 59, 61–62).

60 Letter from 5.12.1839, in Documents (2001, no. 138, 212–214).

61 See, for example, Documents (2001, no. 127, 140–141, 143–144).

62 For more details see Assunção (2018, 351–357).

ing with his entire troop” and warned, “Do not be fooled. Keep your arms ready and let’s try to overthrow the enemy, let us not trust the pretty words of the *cabanos*”.<sup>63</sup> In November he declared to the commander of the town of Rosário that it was his duty “to communicate with Brazilians who love our Emperor’s Crown”. He also insinuated that he was now ready to join forces with the loyalist party because “it is about time this Brazilian bloodletting finished”.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, the following day he sent a letter informing that he could not meet at the agreed-upon location, “because it is not in my interests” and requested permission to enter the town with his troops, assuring the commander that there would be no murders nor thefts.<sup>65</sup> Was this merely a tactic used to confound the enemy or was it a sincere gesture? One way or another, after this aborted attempt, he continued his campaign against the forces led by Luís Alves de Lima. In a December letter, he related that the loyalists had sent him to the town of Rosário to accept an offer of pardon and that he was instead met by “the *cabanos*’ [artillery] fire”. The tone of the letter indicates feelings of betrayal. He asserted that he had 25,000 (*sic*) men in arms and ends the letter in intransigent terms, reiterating *caboclo* rights to equality:

[...] I obey my Emperor, Sir D. Pedro 2º, who is the Lord of my head, and I believe in the Catholic religion, politics in war is good, because *caboclos* were also ennobled by his Majesty.<sup>66</sup>

Gomes finally surrendered in January 1841, the last day before the amnesty offer expired. His mistrust of loyalist forces was justified, for he died in their hands shortly thereafter, in unclear circumstances, although he was supposed to have been sent into exile to another province.

The last rebel chief to be taken prisoner was Cosme Bento das Chagas. Originally from Sobral, in the province of Ceará, he was taken prisoner and kept in the jail in São Luís, at the beginning of the 1830s.<sup>67</sup> He may have been able to escape from prison some time later, in one of the numerous collective

63 Letter to Bernardo Alves Simões, 30.10.1840. In Documents (2001, no. 176, 289–290).

64 Letter to Major Augusto Rocha, 10.11.1840. In Documents (2001, no. 180, 296–297).

65 Letter to Major Augusto Rocha, 11.11.1840. In Documents (2001, no. 183, 300–301).

66 Letter to the Commander at Icatu, 17.12.1840. In Documents (2001, no. 204, 330–331).

67 Letter to the Jailer at the Maranhão Prison, Hospital Madre de Deus Joaquim Miguel de Lemos, May 2 1833, Public Archives of the State of Maranhão (APEM). My thanks to Raimunda Araújo, at that time the director of the Archives, for having referred me to this document.

breakaways that took place during that period.<sup>68</sup> Where he spent the following years is still unknown, but he reappeared during the Balaiada conflict as the leader of the most famous maroon group that participated in the revolt.<sup>69</sup> Cosme's behaviour is indicative of the fact that some enslaved people were well attuned to the exalted liberal discourse of the *bem-te-vis*. He may be considered an example of "political creolisation", in which African ideas and values, and revolutionary traditions of European origin came together in Maranhão. Cosme dressed using African-style adornment and supposedly employed "witchcraft" to entice his followers. He appealed to colonial popular Catholicism in his identification with the brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary. Yet at the same time, he pursued goals derived from the principles of the European Enlightenment. Cosme opened a school in the *quilombo* of Lagoa Amarela in which maroon children were taught to read and write. He also forced slave-owners to write emancipation letters for their enslaved workers. He referred to himself as the "Emperor" whose kingdom was "Freedom". This empire was also defined through recourse to the regional expression of Brazilian liberalism, since Cosme considered himself "protector of *Bem-te-vi* freedoms". His ideas went way beyond the exalted liberalism of the *Bem-te-vis*, insofar as he also spoke of a republic and of emancipation. He went as far as proclaiming universal abolition, with formerly enslaved workers supposed to remain on plantations, similar to what had been attempted in the English Caribbean only few years earlier:

I make it known to all inhabitants who are plantation owners that the Slavery Law has arrived and they are freed by the Law of the Republic. If you want to keep your slaves on the plantation they will work as freedmen, free from the whip, and he who was their master will act like a father and will pay them every year, which on a large plantation will be a contribution of 200 [*milreis*] a year and if you want this arrangement you need to write to me.<sup>70</sup>

Cosme attempted to join forces with the *balaio* rebels and for this reason claimed to be the "protector of *Bem-te-vi* freedoms". He knew that it was his only hope for success on the battlefield. As General Luís Alves de Lima realised, Cosme's audacious plan was a direct threat to the imperial order. It was for this

68 In the year 1833 alone there were two collective prison escapes, made by exit through the latrine pipes.

69 For a in-depth study of Cosme, based on new archival evidence, see Araújo (2008).

70 Official document dated 16.11.1840. In Documents (2001, no. 190, 309–310).

reason that the future Duke of Caxias did everything within his power to prevent it from happening. In a singular interpretation of the Imperial Amnesty Decree, he demanded that all those whom it benefitted serve as slave catchers. Cosme—an enslaved insurgent—was not considered eligible for amnesty, but was condemned to death and hung. Thus Lima, who entered history books as the “pacifier”, not only sowed the seeds of discord between enslaved and free “people of colour”, thus poisoning the relationship between both groups, but also withdrew the power to concede amnesty from the provincial civil authority, as established by the Imperial decree.<sup>71</sup>

The *bem-te-vi* defeat resulted in the annihilation of a rich political culture that was fruit of the broad involvement of popular classes. *Bem-te-vi* rebel ideas demonstrated the significance of popular liberalism within two Brazilian provinces. This liberalism originated in the re-appropriation of its elite forms and its combination with elements of regional popular culture. The democratising and egalitarian characteristics of this new creed, resulting from the political experiences of the 1820–1840 period, threatened Second Empire conservatism, even though it was couched in pro-monarchical language and never questioned the Moderating Power.<sup>72</sup> Thus, its suppression through central government intervention also meant closing the doors on the involvement of subaltern classes in politics, and the casting aside of regional political culture. As Florência Mallon (1995) argues regarding Peruvian and Mexican cases, research on the incorporation or exclusion of popular political cultures is fundamental for understanding processes of State formation. In Maranhão, as a consequence of the defeat of the *Bem-te-vis*, politics of exclusion were maintained for decades, leaving room for the concentration of local power in the hands of strongmen, known as the “colonels” (*coronéis*).<sup>73</sup> The resulting patron-client system

71 For the complete text of the Amnesty Decree, as well as Alves de Lima's polemics with a judge who was accused of harbouring Bem-te-vi sympathies and who resigned after being denied the right to concede passports (*guías*) to ex-rebels, see Serra (1944: 124–135).

72 In this respect the discourse of the Balaiada rebel leaders, being pro-monarchical and democratic in their radical defence of equality, do not fit the type of “demotic” and “democratic” languages studied by Paquette (2020: 149).

73 Local strongmen usually consisted of one or a couple of big landowners, and are known as *coronéis*, or colonels, because many held these officer posts in the National Guard. They relied on a patron-client relationship with the lower classes, distributing favours or help in return for support in elections and other services. Through these patron-client relations and the help of their henchmen they manipulated elections to ensure that their candidate always won. For patron-client relationships under the empire, see Graham (1990), and under the First Republic, Leal (1977).

constituted the political basis of the Empire, the First Brazilian Republic (1889–1930) and even subsequent regimes and has been to a large extent responsible for maintaining and expanding the extreme social inequality that still characterises the country today.

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# Global Portuguese

*Literary, Historical, Sociolinguistic and  
Anthropological Approaches*

*Edited by*

Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya  
Stefan Halikowski Smith



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