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Indigenous Peoples in the Early Days of Conquest: Interethnic, Sociocultural, and Political Relations Amid Bartering and Wars

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Abstract

In a historical-anthropological approach, this text aims to demonstrate the role of the indigenous peoples of Portuguese America in the processes of conquest and occupation of the region in the 16th century. The interdisciplinary analysis of the contact relations between indigenous peoples and Europeans shows the influence of their actions on the Portuguese indigenist policy. Although constructed during the reign of King João III, this policy developed from the challenges imposed by the native peoples since the first contacts, still during the reign of King Manuel I. By highlighting how the political actions of indigenous peoples and their complex interactions with the colonizers gave limits and possibilities to the decisions of the Metropolis regarding the policies of conquest and formation of colonial societies in America, this text contributes to the current historiographical debate that questions the centrality of the Portuguese empire, valuing local dynamics that include the actions of subaltern peoples for the analysis of policies, laws and power relations between the colony and the Metropolis.

Keywords: Indigenous People; Portuguese Indigenist Policy; Interethnic Relationships; Sixteenth Century; Portuguese American Conquest

Introduction

In recent decades, historiography has begun to rethink the dominance of the metropolis over the colonies, increasingly valuing local dynamics and the actions of colonial agents, including subjugated peoples as important factors in analysing policies, laws, and power relations in the Americas.¹ Among the subjugated peoples are the Indigenous peoples who played a pivotal role in the processes of conquest and colonization in all parts of the hemisphere, as outlined by S. Schwartz and J. Lockart.²

¹ Ângela Barreto Xavier; António Manuel Hespanha, “A Representação da sociedade e do Poder”; “As Redes Clientelares” in *História de Portugal (History of Portugal)*, vol. 4, *Antigo Regime (Ancient Régime)*, ed. António Manuel Hespanha (Lisboa: Estampa, 1998), 113–22; 339–49; João Fragoso; Maria Fernanda Bicalho; Maria de Fátima Gouvêa (ed.) *O Antigo Regime nos Trópicos: a dinâmica imperial portuguesa (séculos XVI–XVIII)* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2001)

² Stuart B. Schwartz; James Lockhart. *Early Latin America: a History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Using a historical-anthropological approach, this article aims to illustrate the role Indigenous peoples in Portuguese America played in the process of conquest and occupation of the region in the sixteenth century. Interdisciplinary analysis of contact relations between Indigenous peoples and Europeans shows the influence their actions had on Portuguese Indigenist policy. Although established during the reign of King João III (1521–1557), this policy emerged as a result of challenges imposed by the Native peoples dating back to the very first contacts during the reign of King Manuel I (1495–1521).

The dialogue between history and anthropology provides new insights into interactions between Indigenous peoples and surrounding societies and, in particular, the role of Indigenous peoples in the historical processes in which they were involved. By abandoning the idea of authentic, fixed, and limited cultures and identities, interdisciplinary research reveals the capacity of Indigenous peoples to redefine social networks, cultures, histories, and identities in situations of contact, no matter how violent. From this perspective, the article discusses the conquest of territory in Portuguese America in the sixteenth century, focusing on the actions of Indigenous peoples, to demonstrate their influence on the Crown's Indigenist policy, which was based on complex interactions between the Portuguese and numerous distinct Native peoples who, amid bartering, wars, and alliances, responded to contact in various ways. The relationships established between Indigenous peoples and Europeans gain new meanings when we pay attention to various characteristics of their social organizations, to the fluidity and flexibility of their relationships, and to the ample opportunities for change that the contact situation entailed.³

The extreme violence and incalculable damage inflicted on Indigenous peoples during the conquest and colonization of Portuguese America from the time of first contact with Europeans did not deprive them of opportunities to act and relate to the Europeans based on their own interests associated with the dynamics of their social organizations.⁴ Instead of considering Indigenous peoples somewhere between the two extremes of brave resisters or passive victims of violence, thus negating them as historical subjects, current studies are complexifying the interactions between Indigenous peoples and Europeans, seeking to identify the specific motivations of the Indigenous that drove their actions and choices in relations with foreigners.⁵ At the same time, such studies point to the limits of power of the foreigners who were extremely dependent on the Indigenous, especially in the early days of colonization.

It is from this perspective that this article is written, seeking to demonstrate how actions by Indigenous peoples, and their complex interactions with colonisers from the time of first contact, imposed limits and conditions on decisions made by the metropolitan power regarding its policies of conquest and occupation of lands. By highlighting and discussing these issues, this article contributes to the current historiographical debate that questions the centrality of the Portuguese empire, valuing local dynamics that include the actions of subjugated peoples when analysing policies, laws, and power relations between the colony and the metropolis. The focus is primarily on the Tupi peoples, predominant in coastal Brazil in the sixteenth century, with whom the Portuguese had the closest contacts.

³ Stuart Schwartz; Frank Salomon, "New peoples and new kind of people: adaptation, adjustment, and ethno-genesis in South American indigenous society" in: *Cambridge History of Native Peoples of the Americas*. vol.3. *South America*, ed. Stuart Schwartz; Frank Salomon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 443–501.

⁴ John Monteiro, *Negros da Terra - Índios e Bandeirantes nas Origens de São Paulo* (São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1994).

⁵ Hal Langfur (ed.), *Native Brazil: Beyond the Convert and the Cannibal, 1500-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014); Maria Regina Celestino de Almeida, *Os Índios na História do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 2010); Maria Regina Celestino de Almeida, *Metamorfoses Indígenas. Identidade e cultura nas aldeias coloniais do Rio de Janeiro*. (Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2013). 2nd edition.

The Indigenous and the Portuguese: Early Contacts in Brazilian History and Historiography

The systematic conquest and colonization of Portuguese territory in America began in the 1530s, with establishment of the settlement of São Vicente in 1532, the system of hereditary captaincies in 1534, and the governorate general in the late 1540s. Tomé de Souza, the first governor general, arrived in Brazil in 1549, accompanied by six Jesuits, with the recommendation that they treat the Indians with “special care to cause them to become Christians.”⁶ His standing orders already contained the basic principles of the Indigenist policy that would be maintained throughout the colonial period.⁷ The colonization project was linked to the catechesis of the indigenous populations, with the indispensable collaboration of the Church, through the *Padroado*.⁸ In 1551, the creation of the diocese of Salvador, with the appointment of Pedro Fernandes as the first bishop of Brazil, was another important step in the construction of Portuguese power in America, as Paiva pointed out.⁹

The division of Native peoples into the categories of meek and savage—according to whether or not they allied themselves with the Portuguese—established from this period on, would be maintained in the centuries that followed, serving as the basis for policies of village system settlements,¹⁰ just wars, and slavery that continued into the nineteenth century, and were incorporated by the Brazilian Empire.¹¹

It is worth noting that this policy has its roots in the previous period, especially in the complex interactions of the continent’s Native peoples with each other and with Europeans within the first thirty years of contact. It has subsequently been called the era of bartering, a period and subject that has long been neglected by historiography and approached in a simplistic, prejudiced, and misleading way in relation to Indigenous peoples, disregarding the weight of their actions and choices in the practices of economic exploitation, occupation of lands and definitions of Indigenous policy.

One exception to this rule is the excellent classic study by Alexander Marchant.¹² His book entitled, *From Barter to Slavery: The Economic relations of Portuguese and Indians in the settlement of Brazil 1500–1580*, published in Brazil in 1943,¹³ had already made clear the fundamental role of Indigenous people in defining the economic activities of the Portuguese and in occupying the land. The author discusses economic relations between Indigenous

⁶ Documento de 1548 de D. João III aos jesuítas, *Cartas dos Primeiros Jesuítas do Brasil*, vol.1, .5-6. Apud Roberto Gambini. *O Espelho Índio: Os jesuítas e a destruição da alma indígena* (Rio de Janeiro: Espaço e Tempo), 1988, 82

⁷ Regimento de Tomé de Souza, in *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro*, 61 (1898), 39-57.

⁸ Charles R. Boxer. *A Igreja e a Expansão Ibérica (1440-1470)*. (Lisboa: Edições 70), 1981, 99.

⁹ José Pedro Paiva “Trabalho mais para que não se pervertam os brancos do que para a conversão dos negros” Pedro Fernandes, bispo de Salvador da Bahia (1551-1556), entre Paris, Lisboa, Goa, Cabo Verde e o Brasil *Varia Historia*, vol. 37, no. 73 (2021), 17-52.

¹⁰ This refers to the *aldeamentos* policy, which was to establish *aldeias* (Indigenous villages) near colonial centres for the purpose of moving Indigenous people from their original villages to these new settlements under Portuguese administration. See Almeida, *Metamorfoses Indígenas*, 87-9;

Beatriz Perrone-Moisés, “Índios Livres e Índios Escravos: os princípios da legislação indigenista do período colonial (séculos XVI a XVIII)” in *História dos Índios no Brasil*, ed. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. 1992),115-32.

¹¹ Just wars against Indigenous people and their enslavement were prohibited by the Law of 1755, under the Pombaline reforms, but were re-established by King João VI in 1808 and remained in force until 1831. Unofficially, however, hostile Indigenous peoples continued to be persecuted and enslaved throughout the nineteenth century. For nineteenth century Indigenist policy, see Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (ed.) *Legislação indigenista no século XIX. uma compilação (1808-1889)* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1992).

¹² Alexander Marchant. *From Barter to Slavery, The Economic Relations of Portuguese and Indians in the Settlement of Brazil, 1500-1580*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1942).

¹³ Alexander Marchant, *Do Escambo a Escravidão. As Relações Econômicas de Portugueses e Índios na Colonização do Brasil, 1500-1580* (São Paulo: Ed. Nacional, 1980). Trans Carlos Lacerda. 2a. ed.

peoples and the Portuguese in the first eighty years of the conquest, which he divided into three periods: 1) 1500–1533: The era of bartering, when Portugal had a limited presence in America and its dependence on Indigenous people was total, even for survival. This period was characterized by trade relations with Indigenous people (mainly for brazilwood), by the establishment of trading posts, and by the launching of armed expeditions along the coast to defend the land against hostile Indigenous people and foreigners, especially the French, who according to accounts, frequented the coast as much as the Portuguese. 2) 1533–1549: This marked the beginning of systematic occupation of lands through the establishment of hereditary captaincies in 1534, and efforts by colonisers to ensure that the colonies prospered by exporting agricultural products (mainly sugarcane), with an increasing demand for Indigenous labour. This led to an increasing number of Indigenous people being forced into slavery and, consequently, the outbreak of Indigenous wars all along the coast. 3) 1549–1580: This period saw the establishment of the governorate general, clearly indicated by Marchant as a Portuguese political response to the Indigenous wars.

Marchant makes it clear that establishment of the governorate general was required to defend the land, especially from hostile Indigenous peoples rebelling all along the coast in reaction to the ever-increasing demands by the Portuguese for labour and slaves that they were no longer willing to supply. Well-argued by several primary sources, the author supports the hypothesis that Indigenous peoples began to refuse barter relationships when such relationships no longer interested them because they already had enough objects and were unwilling to work beyond their needs. Marchant clearly links the increase in large-scale enslavement that began in the 1530s with the growing number of Indigenous and colonial wars.

His work leaves no doubt about the fact that relations with Indigenous peoples shaped the way trade was organized and the policies for occupying land. The Portuguese were almost totally dependent on Indigenous people for all their activities, including their very survival. This dependence was also made clear in the first volume of Francisco Adolpho de Varnhagen's work, which Marchant quotes extensively. Few in number, the first settlers had only the Indians to help them. According to Varnhagen, faced with warriors so strong and extremely skilled with the bow and arrow, "... the *donatarios* could not, except in the case of dementia, fail to know that the best and safest policy was to draw to themselves, by means of persuasion, such elements of strength."¹⁴

The vital role of Indigenous peoples in the conquest of Portuguese territory in America has also been extensively documented by John Hemming, in his book entitled *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians*, published in 1978 in Great Britain and only in 2006 in Brazil.¹⁵ Solidly anchored in numerous primary sources, the author depicts the scale of violence of the colonial and Indigenous wars that erupted and intertwined in Portuguese America, mainly in the sixteenth century, but extending far beyond that period. These were wars fought with and against Indigenous peoples, since they made up the bulk of the troops.

We can therefore see that the vital role of Indigenous peoples in defining Portuguese policies for economic exploitation and occupation of lands is nothing new today. However, until very recently, Indigenous peoples continued to occupy an insignificant place in Brazilian history, where roughly speaking, they appeared only in times of conflict and were characterized from the viewpoint and interests of the Portuguese. In this way, they were 'meek' or 'savage,' allies or rebels, acting always in the interests of others. In these

¹⁴ Francisco Adolfo Varnhagen. *História Geral do Brasil Antes da sua Separação e Independência de Portugal*. vol.1 (São Paulo: Melhoramentos, [1854]1962), 3ª ed, 271. Donatarios were the administrators of the hereditary captaincies who received broad civil and criminal powers from the King to carry out their duties. See "Direitos dos Donatarios e Colonos. Portugal Nesta Epocha." Varnhagen, *História Geral do Brasil*: 180–199.

¹⁵ John Hemming, *Red Gold - the Conquest of the Brazilian Indians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); John. Hemming, *Ouro Vermelho. A Conquista dos Índios Brasileiros*. (São Paulo: EDUSP, 2007).

accounts, Indigenous peoples did not act but merely reacted to the actions of foreigners. Once defeated or subdued, they were absorbed into the colonial world, with no opportunities for action or choice. Thus, they were reduced to the status of slaves or the dispossessed of the colony and erased from history. Even though sixteenth century sources and the previously cited authors claim otherwise, the actions and choices of Indigenous peoples were long regarded as inconsequential to any understanding of the processes of history.

Varnhagen's assertion that for "... *the Indians, peoples in their infancy, there is no history, just ethnography*" seems to have been well received in Brazilian historiography, where the place of Indigenous peoples was roughly limited to a chapter preceding colonization.¹⁶ They were the object of study by anthropologists who, from the functionalist perspective prevalent at the time, sought to understand Indigenous cultures in terms of their traditional characteristics, with little or no attention to the processes of change. Indigenous histories and colonial histories, although intertwined since the Europeans arrived in the Americas, as Jonathan Hill stated and as seen in the documentation and work of the authors cited, were long studied in parallel, to the detriment of both.¹⁷ Alfred Métraux and Florestan Fernandes, for example, whose studies are essential to our knowledge about the sociocultural organizations of the Tupi peoples, failed to consider the historical changes such peoples also experienced in contacts with the Portuguese.¹⁸ Fernandes singled out the bravery and resistance of the many peoples who rebelled against the Portuguese. He focused on their key role in struggles against the conquerors and helped deconstruct mistaken notions about their interactions with colonizers. But in the functionalist perspective that governed his analyses, he paid no attention to the changes Indigenous peoples were experiencing in their relations with the foreigners. In his analysis, Indigenous resistance was limited to revolts against Europeans, and once they were defeated, in his view lost all chance of acting on their own volition and had no influence on history. Despite denouncing atrocities against Indigenous peoples, his interpretation of contact relations and Indigenous peoples' actions ended up being closer to Varnhagen's and helped deprive the Indigenous of their status as historical subjects.

Thus, the self-interest that guided Indigenous choices in their interactions with foreigners, a self-interest that continually changed according to the dynamics of relationships and events, was not sufficiently valued at a time when anthropology and history were rarely in dialogue. While anthropologists were expressing no interest in the processes of change experienced by the Indigenous, historians considered actions by the Indigenous as irrelevant to any understanding of the processes of history.

Since the 1970s, however, closer dialogue between history and anthropology has led to significant historiographical revisions in the fields of both cultural and political history, allowing new interpretations about relations of otherness and the limits and opportunities Indigenous actions and choices had on the policies laid out for them. The power relations between metropolis and colony are being reconsidered in analyses that by highlighting the internal dynamics of the various regions of the Portuguese empire, reveal the complexity of political interactions between the various actors from the kingdom and the colonies, including subjugated peoples.¹⁹ Without forgetting the appropriate links with the metropolis,

¹⁶ Varnhagen, *História Geral do Brasil*: 42.

¹⁷ Jonathan Hill. "Contested Past and the Practise of Anthropology: Overview" *American Anthropologist*. 94:4 (1992), 809-15.

¹⁸ Alfred Métraux. *A Religião dos Tupinambás e suas relações com as demais tribos tupi-guaranis*. (São Paulo, Nacional, [1928] 1979). Trans. Estevão Pinto. 2a. ed; Florestan Fernandes, *A Organização Social dos Tupinambá*. (São Paulo: HUCITEC, [1949] 1989).

¹⁹ Maria de Fátima Silva Gouvêa, "Diálogos Historiográficos e Cultura Política na Formação da América Ibérica" in *Culturas Políticas - Ensaios de História Cultural, História Política e Ensino de História* ed. Rachel Soihet; Maria Fernanda

these analyses focus on local actors, institutions and dynamics, highlighting the countless and essential instances in which metropolitan regulations, laws and initiatives were adapted in the colonies, according to regional particularities.

Among these particularities are the actions of Indigenous peoples. The supposed immobility imposed on them by their status as *acculturated* and *dominated* in the colony no longer holds up in the face of current theoretical perspectives related to politics and culture. Ethnicity, alliances, trading, and political culture are categories of analysis that, when incorporated into political history, lead to a deconstruction of the idea of rigid opposition between dominators and dominated, according to which the former exercise total control over the latter, negating their ability to act.²⁰ Social groups, even when reduced to slavery or conditions of the worst kind, are capable of restoring meaning, strengthening cultural identities and confronting the challenges they face. The cultures of Indigenous peoples are historical, dynamic, and flexible constructs that are continually transformed by the contact experiences.²¹ These ideas are critical for understanding that the actions and choices of Indigenous peoples, in their complex contact relationships with each other and with Europeans, must be interpreted according to the meanings they attributed to agreements and interactions.

Therefore, it is imperative that we pay attention to certain characteristics of their social organizations, to the fluidity and flexibility of their relationships, and to the wide-ranging potential for change that contact situation entailed.

Interethnic Relations from an Interdisciplinary Perspective

Starting from the perspective of the analysis presented above, we can understand how the Crown's Indigenist policy was shaped by the complex interactions between the Portuguese and numerous different Native peoples who, amid trading, wars, and alliances, responded to contact in various ways.

Despite the limitations of the available knowledge about the sociocultural characteristics of Indigenous peoples in the pre-contact period, ethnohistorical studies, especially regarding the Tupi peoples, have provided new interpretations about their motivations in relations of otherness.²² Divided into various subgroups, the Tupi peoples were the main inhabitants of the Brazilian coast and had extensive contact with foreigners.²³ One of the most striking characteristics of the Tupi peoples was their extreme openness to relations of otherness, which gave meaning to their societies and were basically conducted through trading, marriages and wars with both rival and allied groups.²⁴ The Tupis did not ignore or wish to change others, but rather to experience them intensely. Hence the ease with

Baptista Bicalho; Maria de Fátima Silva Gouvêa (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad, 2005), 67-84; Fragoso; Bicalho; Gouvêa, *Antigo Regime nos Trópicos*, 21-5; Xavier; Hespanha, "As redes clientelares," 339-49.

²⁰ Ângela de Castro Gomes, "História, historiografia e cultura política no Brasil: algumas reflexões" in *Culturas Políticas - Ensaios de História Cultural, História Política e Ensino de História*, ed. Rachel Soihet; Maria Fernanda Baptista Bicalho; Maria de Fátima Silva Gouvêa (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad, 2005), 21-44.

²¹ Fredrick Barth, "Introduction" in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the social organization of culture difference*, ed. Fredrick Barth (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1969); Sidney W. Mintz, "Culture: An Anthropological View," *The Yale Review* 71:4 (1982), 499-512; Edward P. Thompson, *A miséria da Teoria* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1981).

²² Métraux, *A Religião dos Tupinambás*; Fernandes, *A Organização Social dos Tupinambás*; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "O Mármore e a Murta: sobre a inconstância da alma selvagem" *Revista de Antropologia*, 35 (1992), 21-74.

²³ Carlos Fausto, "Fragmentos da História e Cultura Tupinambá: da etnologia como conhecimento crítico de conhecimento etno-histórico" in *História dos Índios no Brasil*, ed. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1992), 381-96.

²⁴ Fernandes, *A Organização Social dos Tupinambás*; Viveiros de Castro, "O Mármore e a Murta," 21-74 Fausto, "Fragmentos da História e Cultura Tupinambá," 381-96.

which they absorbed the Europeans into their intertribal relations, granting them gifts and women, and involving them in their wars.

The histories and wars between Native peoples of the Americas and the Europeans have been intertwined since the very first contacts, and conquest and colonization have also become the history of the Indigenous peoples who took part in them but who have also attached to them their own meanings. These meanings were connected to their traditions but changed along with them as a result of their contact experiences. Openness to others, the fluidity and mutability of relationships, intertribal wars, and many other aspects of Indigenous culture took on new dimensions in contact situations.²⁵ As allies or enemies, the Europeans inserted themselves into the wars and interethnic relations of the Indigenous peoples, continuing their traditions, but with significant impacts on them in the face of so many new threats (wars, enslavement, epidemics) and attractions (iron instruments, firearms, powerful allies).

In the first three decades of the sixteenth century, most of that time during D. Manuel's reign, the Portuguese had only a sporadic presence along the coast. Relations with Indigenous peoples were not yet as intense and traumatic as in later periods but already contributed to altering Indigenous relationships and social organizations and caused tremendous damage and death. During this period, the colony's main source of wealth was brazilwood, and the French frequented the coast almost as regularly as the Portuguese.²⁶ They established trading relations with the Indigenous, vied for their alliances and depended on them for everything. Indigenous people, in turn, formed alliances and laboured to suit their own interests. They were by no means at the service of the Europeans in Brazil, nor did they work hard to supply them with valuable products in exchange for trinkets, as often suggested in the history books. This misconception is dispelled when we consider the cultural differences and diversity of interests involved in these relationships. Trading, marriages, and war were of vital importance to the Tupi peoples, so their relationships should not be viewed solely through an economic lens. Although Indigenous people were very interested in European goods, their relations with the Europeans also meant opportunities to expand relationships of alliance or hostility.²⁷ In addition, the many objects traded had different values and meanings for the groups involved. While objects valuable to the Europeans could be exchanged for trifles by Indigenous peoples, the latter, in turn, demanded a lot for what they considered rare and precious. One elderly Indigenous woman, for example, wanted a large cannon in exchange for her parrot. According to Jean de Léry, it was a very special parrot "... that understood what its owner was saying to it." He said that the Cherimbaré Indian woman told them: "Give me a comb or a mirror and I will make my parrot sing and dance in your presence." And the parrot obeyed, singing and dancing according to her orders; but if they did not give her what she asked for, she would tell him to stop and "...he would stand still without uttering a word, no matter what we told him he wouldn't move his foot or his tongue."²⁸ Bird feathers and trained parrots were rare and valuable objects for the Native peoples. Their main interest was firearms and tools, as Marchant mentioned.²⁹ The Europeans depended on Indigenous mediators for brazilwood, food, slaves, women, parrots, etc. During the early decades, Indigenous slaves acquired by the Europeans were mainly the prisoners of war they had exchanged with allied groups. For the Tupi peoples, wars served a very important social function that provided cohesion to the groups. Their prisoners were

²⁵ R. Brian Ferguson; Neil Whitehead, "The Violent Edge of Empire" in *War in Tribal Zone: Expanding States and Indigenous Warfare*, ed. R. Brian Ferguson; Neil Whitehead (Santa Fé: School of American Research Press), 1992, 1-30.

²⁶ Marchant, *Do Escambo à Escravidão*, 27-30.

²⁷ Monteiro, *Negros da Terra*, 17-42.

²⁸ Jean de Léry, *Viagem à Terra do Brasil [1578]* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1980), 151.

²⁹ Marchant, *Do Escambo à Escravidão*, 78.

taken to be killed in the anthropophagic ritual that cemented the interminable relations of revenge and strengthened the bonds of friendship and enmity between the groups, as Florestan Fernandes and Viveiros de Castro pointed out so well.³⁰ Furthermore, the practice of exchanging their prisoners with the Europeans who enslaved them, known as ransom, changed the relations between the various Indigenous peoples, who intensified their wars against each other in order to meet the Europeans' demands for slaves and preserve their rituals. The presence of foreigners and the increasing rivalries between them, including alliances with Indigenous groups, influenced the intertribal relations of these groups. Their interest in European tools and weapons intensified the competition between groups, who not only escalated their wars to satisfy the Europeans' interest for slaves, obtaining coveted goods in return, but also fought each other for access to them.³¹

However, if the Europeans were quick to understand the hostile relations between the Indigenous people of the Brazilian coast and used them to their own advantage, the same could be said of the Indigenous peoples. They also realized the negative impact of these alliances. Endless betrayals by the Portuguese led them to change sides countless times, increasing the instability and fluidity that was already a feature of their relationships. Contagious diseases, although poorly documented before the 1550s, had already existed since the earliest contacts.³² All of this contributed to dismantling Indigenous society and had already caused a considerable increase in mortality rates. Towards Europeans, Indigenous people were becoming more suspicious, aloof, and hostile.

The Systematic Occupation of Land: Slavery, Wars, and Alliances

From the 1530s on, systematic occupation of the colony, with the establishment of settlements and hereditary captaincies, would considerably accentuate the conflicts and hostilities between Indigenous peoples and Europeans. The Portuguese, who were still extremely dependent on the Indigenous, tried to maintain the system of bartering for agriculture work, but found themselves facing ever-increasing challenges. The demands on the pace of work in agriculture and in the sugar mills that were beginning to be built were much more rigorous and angered the Indigenous. Above all, they were motivated to work to suit their own interests and when the workload grew beyond what they were willing to accept, they began to refuse to work.

Alexander Marchant wrote that as the Portuguese disputes over Indigenous labour increased, the latter, already satisfied by the number of tools they had obtained, became increasingly less willing to cooperate.³³ By using tools, the Indigenous could do more in less time, causing them to work fewer hours. According to their cultural beliefs, they were unwilling to work more simply to acquire more, and instead used their free time for other activities. In addition, the Tupis viewed farming as labour traditionally practiced by women, which made this type of work unattractive to men. Cultural factors, therefore, also played a part in explaining the demise of bartering, as Stuart Schwartz and John Monteiro have pointed out.³⁴

The Portuguese then began to enslave people on a large scale, which led to violent reactions on the part of the Indigenous. Brutal conflicts between the various Indigenous peoples

³⁰ Fernandes, *A Organização Social dos Tupinambá*, 107; Viveiros de Castro, "O Mármore e a Murta," 49.

³¹ Ferguson; Whitehead, "The Violent Edge of Empire," 1-30.

³² Warren Dean, "Las Poblaciones Indígenas del Litoral Brasileño de São Paulo a Rio de Janeiro. Comercio, esclavitud, reducción y extinción" in *Población y Mano de Obra en América Latina*, ed. Nicolás Sánchez-Albornoz (Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1985), 25-51.

³³ Marchant, *Do Escambo à Escravidão*, 63-64.

³⁴ Stuart B. Schwartz, *Segredos Internos. Engenhos e Escravos na Sociedade Colonial* (São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1988) 41-42. Trad. Laura Teixeira Motta.; Monteiro, *Negros da Terra*, 17-42.

and Europeans of different nationalities erupted along the Brazilian coast. Intertribal wars, which were already intensifying due to the effects of contact relations, would reach unprecedented proportions.³⁵

As a result, the immense difficulties faced by colonial administrators in settling and making their captaincies prosper are explained much more by hostility from the Indigenous than by other factors. Most of the hereditary captaincies failed largely because of attacks by Indigenous people. The two that prospered the most – São Vicente and Pernambuco – were those whose administrators were able to rely on the invaluable support of Native leaders, with whom the Portuguese had established close ties of alliance through marriage. Marriages were a way to strengthen alliances, which is why Indigenous women wedded foreigners who, upon marriage, could then rely on an important network of alliances for wars. Matrimonial unions solidified relationships and expanded the power of the warriors because the more brothers-in-law and sons-in-law they had, the more powerful they became. Having many wives was therefore a symbol of prestige and power among the Tupi peoples. A warrior who captured enemies and executed them in an anthropophagic ceremony gained, among other distinctions, the right to obtain yet another wife.³⁶

This enables us to better understand the role of João Ramalho among the Tupiniquim peoples of São Paulo, and Caramuru among the Tupinambá peoples in Bahia, both Tupi sub-groups. Ramalho and Caramuru were castaways or perhaps banned convicts from Portugal who married the daughters of great Indigenous leaders and achieved positions of leadership and prestige in the groups that welcomed them.³⁷ Considering that Indigenous leaders based their power on prestige and were only obeyed by the will of their followers, there is no doubt that the aforementioned Portuguese had accepted Indigenous customs and acted in accordance with their norms, otherwise they would have been killed like so many others. The key roles both played in the very first Portuguese settlements on the coast gives us an idea of the importance of alliances with Indigenous peoples during the settlement process. Caramuru in Bahia and João Ramalho in São Paulo were both pivotal figures in providing security for the Portuguese in their earliest settlements.³⁸

It is remarkable to note that the two became prominent historical figures because of the power conferred upon them by the Indigenous and thanks to the role the latter also gave them in their own social organizations. The two men became important historical subjects because of the actions of the Indigenous people who, ironically, were considered unimportant when it came to understanding historical processes.

In the captaincy of Pernambuco, the alliance with the Tabajara peoples, based on the marriage of Jerônimo de Albuquerque, brother-in-law of colonial administrator Duarte Coelho, to the daughter of the great leader Arco Verde, was also instrumental in guaranteeing the Portuguese continued occupation of the territory.³⁹ The important role the

³⁵ Hemming, *Red Gold*.

³⁶ See Fernandes, *A Organização Social dos Tupinambá*, 55-128.

³⁷ Monteiro, *Negros da Terra*, 29; Janaína Amado, “Diogo Álvares, o Caramuru, e a fundação mítica do Brasil” *Estudos Históricos (Historical Studies)* 14: 25 (2000), 3-39; Almeida, *Metamorfoses Indígena*, 57-58.

³⁸ To deepen the discussion on the role of indigenous mediators, see Alida Metcalf. *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600* (Austin: The University of Texas Press), 2005.

³⁹ The greatest challenge to the Portuguese occupation of this region came from the Potiguaras and Caetés. They were both Tupi peoples and, although rivals, were associated with the French, who encouraged their hostilities against the Portuguese. The Caetés were violently persecuted after a just war was decreed against them in 1562, as punishment for killing and cannibalizing Bishop D. Pero Fernandes, and his shipwrecked companions. See Fátima Martins Lopes. *Índios, Colonos e Missionários na Colonização da Capitania do Rio Grande do Norte* (Mossoró: Fundação Vingt-um Rosado, Instituto Histórico e Geográfico do Rio Grande do Norte), 2003; Hemming, *Red Gold*, 161-197. D. Pero Fernandes was mistakenly named, in the historiography, as D. Pero Fernandes Sardinha, as Pedro Paiva clarifies. See José Pedro Paiva “Trabalho mais para que não se pervertam os brancos do que para a conversão dos negros,” 19-20.

Indigenous played in establishing this captaincy is evident in its geographical layout which, in the sixteenth century, followed the line of allied *aldeias* (Indigenous villages), as Bartira Barbosa has shown.⁴⁰

Indigenous peoples allied themselves with the Europeans to suit their own interests, even if it was to alleviate the immense harm caused by contact relations. They understood the rivalries between the European groups and positioned themselves in relation to them, seeking alliances that best met their interests and needs. In the process, however, they became polarized by their own hostilities. All along the coast, the various Indigenous groups clashed, coalesced, and splintered around the rivalries between foreigners who also vied for their alliances. They moved between one side and the other, as was their custom, but the colonial powers institutionalized these divisions into militarism, which served to accentuate them.⁴¹

By focusing on specific Indigenous groups, we can see how they responded to contact with Europeans. This allows us to dismantle simplistic views that broadly portrayed them as monolithic blocs locked into the roles of allies or enemies. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, instead of the French and Tamoios on one side and the Portuguese and Temiminós on the other, we see a complicated network of interactions in which the different Tupi peoples circulated, in a back and forth of agreements and disputes between themselves and the Europeans. They often switched sides according to the circumstances and their interests, which changed with the contact experiences.⁴²

From this perspective, instead of Portuguese heroes defeating *savage Indigenous peoples* with the support of *faithful and submissive Indigenous peoples* who had completely converted to Portuguese sociocultural values, we encounter distinct ethnic and social groups who fought and negotiated, each trying to assert their own interests. For their part, Indigenous people are no longer seen as naïve and manipulated because their actions are now understood as the product of their own choices, consistent with the thinking of their societies and the opportunities available to them. Such choices were limited, no doubt because relations were uneven and took place amid a chaotic scenario of extreme violence. Many groups went from being allies to becoming fierce enemies of the Portuguese because of their betrayals, violence, and mistreatment. The Tupiniquins in São Paulo are an excellent example of this.⁴³

The Governorate General and Portuguese Indigenist Policy: A Response to Challenges Posed by Indigenous Peoples

The arrival of the first governor general accompanied by the Jesuits sought to maintain sovereignty over the colony against foreign attacks, but mainly to subdue enemy Indigenous peoples and integrate allies, which was achieved through policies of just war and Indigenous village systems.⁴⁴ Tomé de Souza's standing orders laid the groundwork for the Crown's Indigenist policy, which was based on dividing the Indigenous into those who were "meek" and those who were "savage."⁴⁵ It was the formula for keeping the Indigenous as allies as well as a source of labour. The allies would become Christian subjects of the king in *aldeias* (Indigenous villages) established for the purpose of integrating them into

⁴⁰ Bartira Barbosa. *Paranambuco herança e poder indígena Nordeste séculos XVI-XVII*. (Paranambuco hiiritage and indigenous power) (Recife: Ed. Universitária da UFPE, 2007).

⁴¹ Ferguson; Whitehead "The Violent Edge of Empire," 18-28.

⁴² Almeida, *Metamorfoses Indígenas*, 47-86.

⁴³ See Monteiro, *Negros da Terra*, 29-42; Almeida, *Metamorfoses Indígenas*, 79

⁴⁴ This was known as the *aldeamentos* policy, as explained in note eight.

⁴⁵ The indigenist policy in Spanish America also divided the indigenous people into allies and enemies, giving them different places in colonial society. See Stuart B. Schwartz; James Lockhart. *Early Latin America*, (1983).

the colony while the “savages,” i.e., those who refused to collaborate with the Portuguese, would be beaten, defeated, and forced into slavery.⁴⁶

The Jesuits had an important role to play in transforming Indigenous people into Christian subjects loyal to the king. Their plan for catechesis, however, underwent several modifications to cope with the difficulties created mainly by the Indigenous people. In the beginning, the missions were itinerant, but faced with the challenges and risks imposed by Indigenous people, these missions were replaced by settled Indigenous villages (*aldeias*) located near the colonial centres, as Charlotte de Castelnau-L’Estoile has described.⁴⁷ In the face of Indigenous resistance to catechesis and escalating wars, missionization in the backlands had proved dangerous and ineffective, which led to a change from the original approach. From the itinerant preaching of the early days, the Jesuits began the practice of relocating Indigenous peoples closer to the Portuguese centres to establish them in *aldeias* built specifically to bring them together. It went from conversion through love to conversion through fear, as José Eisemberg has noted.⁴⁸ The extensive and settled *aldeias* became increasingly important, especially under the third governor general Mem de Sá, and received broad support from the missionaries, who were delighted with their violent campaigns that drove Indigenous people into the *aldeias*.

Indigenous village policies and just wars went hand in hand. They continued so until the nineteenth century, defining themselves on the basis of local dynamics and, more importantly, the response of the Indigenous people to the policies and actions directed at them. Many Indigenous wars became colonial wars and vice versa, because the Indigenous, as enemies or allies, represented the bulk of the troops. The choice of allies and enemies depended on circumstances and interests and changed frequently.

Europeans and Indigenous peoples could fight in the same war, albeit with different objectives, as has been noted in research conducted in various parts of the Americas.⁴⁹ In the case of the conquest of Guanabara, for example, if for the Portuguese it meant extending their sovereignty over the lands of Brazil, for the Indigenous Temiminós (a Tupi subgroup) led by Araribóia, it was the chance to return to their Native lands to fight old enemies. A few years earlier, they had allied themselves with the Portuguese, settling in Espírito Santo Captaincy to escape imminent massacre by the Tamoio peoples.⁵⁰

But the wars had taken on immense proportions, as was the case with the conquest of Rio de Janeiro (1565–1567), and characterized a process of “warrification,” as defined by Ferguson and Whitehead.⁵¹ Under the leadership of Mem de Sá, the massacres were devastating, leading countless peoples to join colonial Indigenous villages (*aldeias*) to escape the extermination and slavery that threatened them in the backlands.⁵² However, this did not stop them from continuing to trade and look for better prospects for survival on one side or the other.

⁴⁶ Perrone-Moisés, “Índios Livres e Índios Escravos,” 115–32.

⁴⁷ The settled *aldeia* (Indigenous village) was an innovation in the Province of Brazil that replaced the itinerant missions employed in other overseas regions as pointed out by Charlotte de Castelnau-L’Estoile, *Operários de uma vinha estéril. Os jesuítas e a conversão dos índios no Brasil – 1580-1620* (Bauru/SP: Edusc), 2006.

⁴⁸ José Eisemberg, *As Missões Jesuíticas e o Pensamento Político Moderno. Encontros Culturais, aventuras teóricas* (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2000), 111–23.

⁴⁹ Lopes, *Índios, Colonos e Missionários*, 53–88; Lígio de Oliveira Maia, “Aldeias e missões nas capitanias do Ceará e Rio Grande: catequese, violência e rivalidades” *Revista Tempo*, 19:35 (2013), 7–22.

⁵⁰ Almeida, *Metamorfoses Indígenas*. 47–8

⁵¹ Ferguson; Whitehead, “The Violent Edge of Empire”, 18–28.

⁵² Despite the limitations of the sources for accurately assessing demographic data on massacres and enslavements, qualitative documents report large-scale massacres and enslavements, particularly during the administration of Mem de Sá, including an account written by the governor himself. On this, see *Documentos relativos a Mem de Sá*, Anais da Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro, vol. 27, pp. 129–267 (1906).

This is how Brazil's various ethnic groups were absorbed en masse into the colony. As slaves or *aldeados* (Indigenous villagers), they became part of colonial society, mixing with each other and with other members of colonial society (or with other ethnic and social groups on farms, in the mills, on plantations and in Indigenous villages (*aldeias*). Despite all the violence, they continued to act according to the opportunities presented and continued to influence local and metropolitan policies and legislation. Similarly, the so-called savages, i.e. those who managed to maintain their distance and a certain autonomy from the colonizers, moved through the hinterlands and migrated to regions further away from colonization. While trying to maintain their isolation, they also continued to challenge the colonizers and influence colonial laws and policies.

Final Considerations

Regardless of the extent of the violence against Indigenous peoples and the unequal bargaining power between them and the Europeans, we note that, although restricted, their actions imposed a series of limitations on the colonizers. Challenges, pressures, and agreements brought about by the subjugated peoples influenced decisions made by officials at various levels of power (civil and ecclesiastical, local, and metropolitan) and the laws they established, adapted, or revoked, depending on the pressures and circumstances. So critical were Native influences on the realities of early colonial Brazil that they outweighed factors resulting from monarchical succession in faraway Portugal between the reigns of D. Manuel, D. João III, and others. From this we can deduce the importance of studying Indigenous trajectories, actions, interests, and choices in an integrated way with a view to gaining a broader and more complete understanding of power relations in the colony. We must also understand that Indigenous histories and colonial histories are not separate, much less in opposition to each other. By linking them and treating Indigenous people as historical subjects, current research is helping to rewrite some of the pages of Brazilian history, as John Monteiro predicted in 1995.⁵³ As a study of culturally and ethnically distinct peoples who, for too long, received little attention from historiography, this article contributes to underscoring the importance of analysing Indigenous agency, taking into account their own cultural and socio-political characteristics as important factors for understanding the process of shaping colonial Brazil and, from a broader perspective, the multifaceted Portuguese Empire.

By demonstrating how indigenous actions and choices were essential in defining the processes of conquest and colonization of Portuguese America from its earliest days, this article highlights the importance of including them in historiography as subjects who contributed to shaping historical processes. By showing how their political agency shaped and constrained colonial policies, it contributes to current historiographical debates that challenge the empire-centred perspective and underscores the significance of local dynamics and subaltern actors in understanding colonial-metropolitan power relations.

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⁵³ John Monteiro, "O Desafio da História Indígena no Brasil" *A Temática Indígena na Escola. Novos Subsídios para Professores de 1º e 2º Graus*. ed. Aracy Lopes da Silva; Luís D. Benzi Grupioni (Brasília, MEC/MAR/UNESCO, 1995), 221-8.

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