

The Minas Gerais: A High Point of Miscegenation

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From the earliest days of its history, Brazil has been a favoured 'laboratory' for ethnic, cultural and religious hybridization. The absence or scarcity of white women and the temptations of sexual exoticism drove the Portuguese discoverers, and with them sailors from Normandy, Brittany and Poitou, to have relations with Indian women they chanced to meet, thus creating a race of coloured people, oddly called *mamelucos*, later *cabocles* (of mixed white and Indian ethnicity). Afterwards, the very substantial recourse to the Negro slave trade and to manpower of African slave origin because of the requirements of the sugarcane economy (which remained predominant for a long time, especially in the Nordeste region of Bahia and Pernambuco), as well as the numerical imbalance of the sexes, characterized by a great predominance of men, popularized concubinage – all the more so because the Catholic Church was extremely reluctant to sanction interethnic unions with the sacrament of marriage. The Jesuits even recommended the despatch of white prostitutes or women condemned by common law (*degradadas*), for whom Brazil would furnish the opportunity for redemption, in order to avoid or reduce the number of unions of this kind. Thus, concubinage was the most common vehicle of miscegenation in Brazil.

On the *planalto* of São Paulo,¹ the first region of the Brazilian hinterland to have been opened up to Portuguese colonization, miscegenation primarily involved whites and Indians, whilst in the Nordeste² it was a question of whites and blacks, then mulattoes and blacks. But in the Nordeste miscegenation remained relatively controlled because it occurred within the framework of the plantation, the domain of the mill master (*senhor de engenho*) and within relations of dependence that were often strong, while the *planalto* of São Paulo very quickly became violent. The *bandeiras* who practised Indian-style hunting to obtain the necessary labour force subsequently traded in Indian women, *negras de terra* (in short, 'native negresses'), to use the expression then employed, who had to share the bed of a white or mixed-race master, whether they wanted to or not.³

The origin of Minas and its population increase

Minas Gerais was the scene of a completely different experience. At the end of the seventeenth century, Minas did not exist. The territory which was to bear this name was virtually empty. The Indians who remained free had gone further westwards to escape the *bandeirantes*. Climate and soil were unsuitable for the cultivation of sugar cane. This desert land which separated the population centres of the Nordeste and those of Guanabara, São Vicente and the São Paulo plateau contributed to making Brazil a kind of continental archipelago, whose constituent parts communicated more easily by sea than by land.

The discovery of gold-bearing deposits, which occurred in the Serra de Mantiqueira in 1697 and 1698, on the left bank of the upper basin of the São Francisco River, produced a radically different situation in Brazil. It was a revolution. The irruption of the yellow metal prompted a spectacular rush. The inhabitants of São Paulo who, together with the *bandeira* of Bruno de Siqueira, had been at the root of this discovery, were the first to flock there. But they were immediately followed by the *cariocas*, then by the inhabitants of Bahia: even plantation owners left their sugar empires, sold their lands to acquire mineral rights, and emigrated to Minas with their slaves. There was a considerable influx of Portuguese: 2,000 to 3,000 annually in 1700–1710 and continually increasing, peaking in the 1760s with between 8,000 and 10,000 a year, so that from 1700 to 1760 some 500,000 Portuguese, many inhabitants from the islands of the Azores and Madeira among them, came to settle in Brazil. This was on such a scale that the population of Portugal declined between 1710 and 1730, particularly that of Minho. Naturally, a large contingent of these Portuguese settled in Minas. The crown sought in vain to limit the exodus: the measures taken in 1709, 1711, 1720 and 1744 had virtually no effect at all.

Gold-working, using very crude methods (in the main, washing off sand and gravel in running water through sluicing-troughs), required the use of high levels of manpower. Once again, there was recourse to the African slave population: mining stimulated the import of black slaves, which reached extraordinary levels, while Bahia or Pernambuco sold a share of their slaves to Minas. In c.1720 the annual influx of slaves to Minas reached 4,000; in c.1730 it reached 6,000. Between 1700 and 1770, Minas thus absorbed some 340,000 slaves! Moreover, the new territory became the geographical link between the Nordeste, which gave access to the São Francisco Basin and the coast, above all after the opening-up of the direct route from Ouro Preto to Rio de Janeiro, built in order to facilitate the transport of gold and the import of supplies, and the south of Brazil, supplier of cereals, *charque* (dried meat), etc. Minas was thus the essential agent in the geographical unification of Brazil. Besides, its role as thoroughfare clearly fostered miscegenation.⁴

Minas Gerais, which had been empty in 1700, became, from the time of the population census in 1776, the most densely populated 'captaincy' (created in 1720) in Brazil, with around 300,000 inhabitants, one-fifth of the population of the entire colony – more than Bahia, more than Pernambuco. The blacks alone made up more than half the work force, the whites less than a quarter. The situation thus created was to be long lasting. At the time of the census in 1872, more than a century after the end of the gold boom, Minas Gerais was by far the most densely populated province in Brazil with 2,040,000 inhabitants, and it retained the largest number of slaves: 370,459, or 18.2 per cent of the population. This was not, it is true, the biggest percentage, which was very much higher at Rio de Janeiro.

An original society

However, if we look more closely, we find that from 1776 Minas included a significant minority of 'free' blacks. Minas society, initially very masculine, unstable and violent, operated in a way that was very different from that of the Nordeste at Bahia or at Pernambuco, founded on the dualism of *casa grande-senzala* (master's house-slave quarters), closer to the model of São Paulo, from which it had originated but the dominance of which it had rejected at the time of the war of the *Emboabas* ('feathered people') of 1708–9.⁵

Interethnicity, which at once became a very prominent feature in Minas (where at the outset men, motivated by gold fever, were extraordinarily predominant – 80 per cent to 90 per cent in the first years), displayed some very specific features in this region. Instead of being ‘framed’. Whilst within the structures of the great estate (plantation, sugar mill) or the urban parish it took the form of relatively stable concubinage, at Minas it was – if I can put it like this – almost free and operated according to ‘passing liaisons’ in an expanding and fragmented space, where mining encampments came and went at random as seams were exhausted and new deposits found. Gold prospecting did not lend itself to regular supervision of the work. Slaves searching for gold thus benefited from relative freedom and occasional spare time. Moreover, although their work was hard, they had far more opportunities than on an *engenho* to win freedom, thanks to the bonuses they were paid when they ‘produced’ significant quantities of gold; the discovery of a large nugget could sometimes even be worth the immediate grant of freedom in recompense.

In Minas, a number of slaves succeeded in gradually scraping together the money for their manumission by practising small urban trades on their master’s account: itinerant peddling, various craft industries such as shoe-making, saddlery, pottery and so on; others obtained a responsible position with the mule convoys taking gold to Rio de Janeiro and returning with important loads of supplies and products of all kinds.

For their part, the women, precious on account of their great scarcity value, benefited from a guaranteed income from which they cleverly derived profit. As Pedro de Almeida, a governor of Minas, observed, black concubines of white men achieved their freedom fairly quickly; many of them then opened shops that conferred a superior social status upon them. In addition to the fact that these shops became *parloirs*, or meeting-places for people from the same ethnic group, freed women were sometimes able to lead some of the numerous confraternities instituted in the captaincy in the course of the eighteenth century because they were the majority there: this was the case with the black and the mulatto confraternities of Villa Rica de Ouro Preto, with the exception of those dedicated to the Rosary.

Minas Gerais thus became the region in Brazil where the percentage of freed people of colour was the highest by far. In c.1800, freed or free persons of colour made up about a third of the population of the captaincy. One of the consequences of these working conditions and of the significant number of free men and women was a high degree of mobility, an active factor in miscegenation. On the other hand, many slaves escaped and sought refuge in the *quilombos*, such as that of Ambrosio (the largest from Palmares but which was destroyed in 1743), or in the *calhambolas*, small groups of maroons in a state of permanent delinquency. From the *quilombos* or the *calhambolas*, the blacks thus ‘freed’ organized expeditions with the express purpose of seizing women of whatever colour to satisfy their natural instincts.

Two other factors intervened to give miscegenation in Minas Gerais a distinctive character. The first inhabitants of the new Eldorado were people from São Paulo. Since the 1550s, however, the Paulistas had interbred intensively with the Indians who peopled that region (Tupinambás, Tupinikin, Guaranis), with the result that there were a large number of *mamelucos* on the plateau of São Paulo. The latter, and especially the women, had learnt from their Indian mothers how to crush maize; to prepare manioc flour; to weave vegetable fibres, a primary material for hammocks; to shape clay to make basic pots; to use many herbs and cashew nuts as medicaments for snake bite, injuries and

open wounds, constipation or dysentery; to eat monkey meat; to feed, if necessary, on lizards and wild fruit; and to track game. Thus in Minas the Indian contribution transmitted by the *mamelucos* combined with what had been grafted from the Portuguese – itself saturated with Asian influences, in addition to African elements – in a complex syncretism which we shall observe in other forms.

Now, the African contribution was not remotely homogeneous. The demand for black slaves was so high in the course of the eighteenth century that all the slave markets in Black Africa were trawled. It is notable that Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro (the principal port of arrival for the slaves destined for Minas) had received more diversified ethnic groups from Africa than had Bahia, Pernambuco or Maranhão, where the Mina (Dahomey), the Hausas and the Nagos (Nigeria) were clearly the most numerous. At Minas, peoples from West Africa, such as the Ibos or the Mandubi, were admittedly plentifully represented, but the same was true of those from the Congo, Cabinda, Anécho (Petit Popo), Angola, Cambambe, Kasanje, Gabon, Luanda and so on, who all came from Central West Africa, or those from Moçambique, Quelimane, Mucena, Makua, Makondo, Ronga and so on, who were from East Africa. This extraordinary diversity in origin, eating habits, bodily ornamentation, festive customs, music, song and religious rituals was to leave its mark on *mineira* society.

Affirmation of identities and resistance to miscegenation

Naturally, the process of miscegenation which gave birth to this society was slow. Paradoxically, the confraternities, one of the fundamental social institutions of Minas Gerais, were simultaneously obstacles to miscegenation and a framework that was conducive to its development. The explanation is relatively simple. At an early date, the newly arrived slaves sought reassuring points of reference: they therefore tended to join ethnographically homogeneous confraternities where they found men and women of geographical provenance the same as their own or nearby. Marcus Aguiar thus observed that in Minas slaves of African descent regrouped in confraternities in honour of the Rosary (*Rosario*), while 'creole' slaves belonged to confraternities placed under the patronage of Our Lady of Graces (*Noss Senhora das Mercês*). He stated: "For specific groups, within colonial society, the confraternities represented the possibility of not seeing their identity abolished within larger entities." By means of spiritual codes, rituals or special clothing, a certain number of individuals, who would have been condemned to silence or anonymity by their social status, thus achieved recognition. At the same time, they were less powerless in the face of frequent oppression on the part of their masters. This also explains the often tightly sealed boundary between black and mulatto confraternities until a relatively late date: at the end of the eighteenth century the four principal urban centres of Minas (Villa Rica de Ouro Preto, Mariana, São João Del Rey and Sabará) had eleven black and ten mulatto confraternities in all. Finally, some confraternities with a very segregationist recruitment policy could serve as a screen for the preservation of African rituals considered heterodox. According to Roger Bastide, this was the case with the confraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary in Mariana.

The situation was different in the case of slaves who were well integrated into or had been born in Brazil (known as 'creoles'). For them, the priority was manumission. Consequently,

they sought confraternities which regarded slave manumission as one of their essential aims and which could be open to whites, in return for a higher subscription, the sum total of which was paid into the manumission fund. These differences in part explain the existence of many confraternities in small towns such as Sabará, where there were three in 1780. From the middle of the eighteenth century a good number of the confraternities of Minas Gerais had no end other than the redemption of slaves. In regions where there were mining encampments, the confraternities often included both men and women of all races: thus, that of Our Lady of Graces at Tijuco, in the diamond-mining sector, welcomed whites as well as blacks and mulattoes.

Within confraternities of this type, which did not disregard their function of social protection, social antagonisms were reduced and the various groups muted their own demands, without deluding themselves over falsely egalitarian appearances. Nevertheless, this institutional framework gave the more dependant the possibility of having interlocutors who were better placed on the social ladder, and who could, for example, agree to be godparents to their children and assist them in case of difficulty. Moreover, confraternities of the same type constituted veritable networks across the captaincy, so that confraternity members who moved house instantly found staging posts and connections. Finally, these easy social relations between different ethnic groups facilitated miscegenation.

In order to take a stand against this interethnicity, or, at least, to slow it down, the whites of Minas Gerais (but also of Bahia and Pernambuco) increased the number of institutions that were more selective than the confraternities, namely the 'tertiary orders', notably the Franciscan. The tertiary orders were regulated by statutes which stipulated a financial contribution, discriminatory in itself, but also proofs of a regular Christian life and membership of the white race. For a good part of the century, these statutes excluded even white men married to Negro or mulatto women, *a fortiori* those who lived with coloured concubines. It is true, however, that these requirements were relaxed or even disappeared towards the end of the century.

Cultural miscegenation and syncretism

The history of Minas Gerais makes this region the favoured locus of a specific cultural syncretism, which is most tellingly displayed – through the medium of the confraternities – in the complex forms of religious life, architecture and sculpture. We should not forget that the Portuguese government, keen to avoid excessive accumulations in ecclesiastical treasuries and to retain the major part of gold production for the profit of the parent-state, had forbidden the founding of religious orders, and thus the foundation of monasteries, throughout the captaincy. As a result, it was the confraternities who were responsible for the building of churches and shrines and who jealously guarded their ownership, the priests being reduced to the status of providers of services and distributors of sacraments. But the appearance within these confraternities of many 'miners' who had become wealthy and wanted to leave lasting and prestigious traces of their way through this world foiled the Crown's precautions. Minas, which gathered together in one place a large number of enterprising, extrovert and dynamic individuals and, as already mentioned, an unusually large proportion of free women of colour, was at first an exceptional theatre of baroque piety, the manifestations of which on feast days attained an unusual intensity of expression. The

Eucharistic Triumph of May 1733, 'an exemplar of Lusitanian Christianity in its public exaltation of the faith', was an extraordinary manifestation of this: it was a series of spectacular and noisy demonstrations, particularly processions (accompanied by fireworks, a permanent feature of Minas, despite all the prohibitions) that accompanied the moving of the Blessed Sacrament, which had remained in the care of the black confraternity of the Rosary whilst the important new town church in Villa Rica (or Ouro Preto), Our Lady of Pilar, was being built. The main procession at the time of the transfer involved the whole population: behind the confraternity which bore the Blessed Sacrament came the political and social hierarchies, led by the governor, the count of Galveias, the "military and literary" (!) nobility, the municipal authorities (*Câmara*), a company of dragoons, then the other confraternities.⁶ At the infinitely more modest day-to-day level, baroque piety expressed itself in ostentatious devotions in which music, song and dance had a very important place, as well as the display of important objects of devotion such as the *agnus Dei*, scapulars and wooden figures glorifying the Virgin and the saints, often of stylized African fashion and which the numerous *santeiros* sculpted.

The captaincy was also one of the main areas for the expansion of baroque architecture and sculpture, and for one of its forms of expression, rococo, where Portuguese, Italian, African and Chinese influences were intermingled. One of the paradoxes of Minas Gerais is that Portuguese influence actually disseminated the objects, fashions and styles of the Far East, undoubtedly because many of the administrators and officials sent by Lisbon to Minas to administer the gold policy had held posts in India (especially in Goa) or in China, at Macou: they introduced porcelain, lacquer wares and Asian silks to Brazil, and brought over established artists: thus, the presence of Jacinto Ribeiro, *pintor da Índia* ['painter from India'], who came from Goa, is documented.

The religious architecture of Minas Gerais bears the mark of these oriental influences. The pagoda-shaped roofs of churches in the captaincy have often attracted comment, commissioned, we should not forget, by the laity. Our Lady of 'Ó' at Sabará, built in 1725, is a good example, but many wooden churches, now vanished, were closely modelled on the pagoda. Still more than the architecture, however, is the decoration which bears witness to borrowings from the Far East. In the principal chapel of the above-mentioned church of Our Lady of 'Ó' is ornamentation in the Chinese style, with a red ground and gilding, decorated with junks. Also at Sabará, but this time in the main church, the Macou doorway with inlaid lacquer makes no secret of its inspiration. The decoration of the cathedral of Mariana (the *Sé*), on which Jacinto Ribeiro may have worked, is also in oriental style. In addition, numerous altarpieces in churches in Minas use decoration that makes imaginative use of Chinese motifs.

None the less, *mineira* rococo also drew its inspiration from Italian and central European (Bavarian and Hungarian) baroque, perhaps because the architects of Minas, even those of mixed race, used Italian and German engravings to inspire their work: the predominantly curvilinear church plans, with naves flanked by circular lantern towers, are virtually without Lusitanian precedent, with the possible exception of Santo Domingo de Viana at Lisbon. But at Ouro Preto, the main church and that of the tertiary order of St Francis of Assisi, at Mariana that of the Franciscan tertiary order and that of the Rosary of the blacks, and at Sabará the church of the tertiary Carmelite order, happily marry the legacy of Borromeo with influences derived from Minho, especially from the Braga region, and the internal decoration with their ceilings painted in perspective give the art of Minas a real

originality. The greatest artist of Minas Gerais, and of the whole of Brazil at this period, elevated to the rank of universal genius, was the mulatto, 'Aleijadinho', son of a Portuguese architect, Manoel Francisco Lisboa, and a black slave. The symbolism is potent. Born in 1738, educated at first by his father, Antonio Francisco acquired a huge range of artistic, literary and religious knowledge. He possessed a series of European engravings then circulating in Brazil, which contained Flemish, Italian and German work (including that of Dürer), as well as models from Goa and Macou, which might explain the artist's predilection for figures with almond-shaped eyes. Based at Ouro Preto, Aleijadinho completed many architectural masterpieces, among them the churches of Franciscan tertiaries in Ouro Preto (1766) and São João Del Rey (1774), which bear his indisputable imprint: rectangular plans with curved lines, towers incorporated into the sides, roofs with perspective, carved soapstone reliefs. Aleijadinho's emblematic work has as its setting the Good Jesus of Matosinhos shrine, set up in the little village of Congonhas, on the pattern of the great Portuguese pilgrim shrines, and dedicated to Christ crucified. Together with his co-workers, the mulatto sculptor first completed the sixty-six sculptures in polychrome cedar devoted to the episodes of the Passion and destined for the *passos* of Holy Week. However, Aleijadinho's great triumph was the 'ballet of the prophets', an open-air baroque staging in stone on the sanctuary porch, a brilliantly conceived assemblage of invisible lines, where the direction of the gestures and the glances exchanged by the prophets bestow rhythm and movement. The work cannot fail to stimulate the imagination of those who see it. The fact that its creator was the son of a slave woman cannot be ignored, any more than the date of its completion (1800–05), soon after the abortive *Tiradentes* conspiracy, known as the *Inconfidência Mineira* (1788–9), which took place in Minas Gerais; nor can we forget that the characters are prophets. This made it possible for George Kubler to give a bold reading of the Congonhas masterpiece, with these significations superimposed: the victory of Christianity over idolatry, of the New World over the Old; a prophecy of freedom, an aspiration to equality and a declaration of Independence. At the crossing of worlds and races Minas, with the prophets of Congonhas, thus fully assumed its role.

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Notes

1. *Planalto* is the term used to describe the high plateau (700–1,000 metres high) which is the highest part of the present-day State of São Paulo.
2. Nordeste was the first important region in colonial Brazil, thanks to the growing of sugar cane. The first capital of Brazil was, moreover, Salvador (or Bahia) until 1763. The present-day States which make up the Nordeste are Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Rio Grande do Norte and Sergipe.
3. The *bandeiras* were expeditions organized by the Portuguese colonists with the aid of *mamelucos* and Indians, with the declared aim of seeking precious metals, but which also sought the capture of the Indians and their reduction to slavery. Participants in a *bandeira* were called *bandeirantes*. Expeditions of the same kind from the region of Bahia were called *entradas*.
4. It should be added that the importance Minas acquired in the gold boom prompted the transfer in 1763 of the capital from Salvador to Rio de Janeiro, a town from which access to Minas was easier.
5. This war resulted from an uprising among the inhabitants of Minas – who described themselves as ‘feathered’ (*emboabas*) – against the Paulistas, who, on the pretext that they had discovered the gold seams, claimed to have ownership and to administer them as they wished. The rising favoured the assumption of control by the Portuguese authorities.
6. The members of ‘Nossa Soberana Senhora do Rosário’, a confraternity of blacks in Ouro Preto, had had a book devoted to an account of the manifestations of the ‘Triunfo Eucarístico’ printed in Lisbon in 1734 by the ‘Oficina de Música’.