



The history of the Miriri mill

A trajetória do engenho do Miriri

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzed the establishment of the Miriri mill during the period of colonial Brazilian history and its contribution to the formation of the Captaincy of Paraíba, given that the foundations of the Hereditary Captaincies were part of the entrepreneurial logic of the Portuguese Crown in the conquest of overseas territories. We sought to discuss the strategic importance of this engenho for the creation of the captaincies in the north of the colony. Furthermore, we can see that the plans to use the sugar cane mills on the banks of the main rivers in Paraíba were part of the commercial dynamics of the first centuries of the construction of the Captaincies for the occupation of the territory, and in this context the religious orders played a fundamental role in their implementation, which, in the case of the Miriri mill, the religious of São Bento played a leading role.

Keywords: History, Miriri mill, Paraíba.

RESUMO

A presente pesquisa analisou a implantação do engenho do Miriri, no período da História do Brasil Colonial e sua contribuição para formação da Capitania da Paraíba, visto que, as fundações das Capitânicas Hereditárias fizeram parte da lógica empreendedora da Coroa Portuguesa na conquista dos territórios Alémmar. Procuramos discutir a importância estratégica desse engenho para a criação das Capitânicas do Norte da Colônia. Ademais, enxergamos que os planos de utilização dos engenhos de cana-de-açúcar às margens dos principais rios paraibanos estiveram dentro da dinâmica comercial dos primeiros séculos de construção das Capitânicas para ocupação do território, sendo que, nesse contexto as ordens religiosas tiveram papel fundamental na sua implementação, o que, no caso do engenho do Miriri, os religiosos de São Bento realizaram papel preponderante.

Palavras-chave: Trajetória, Engenho do Miriri, Paraíba.

1 INTRODUCTION

This research analyzed the establishment of the Miriri mill during the period of colonial Brazilian history and its contribution to the formation of the Captaincy of Paraíba, given that the foundations of the Hereditary Captaincies were part of the entrepreneurial logic of the Portuguese Crown in the conquest of overseas territories. We sought to discuss the strategic importance of this engenho for the creation of the captaincies in the north of the colony. Furthermore, we can see that the plans to use the sugar cane mills on the banks of the main rivers in Paraíba were part of the commercial dynamics of the first centuries of the construction of the Captaincies for the occupation of the territory, and in this context the religious orders played a fundamental role in their implementation, which, in the case of the Miriri mill, the religious of São Bento played a leading role.



2 OBJECTIVE

To analyze the establishment of the Miriri mill in the period of colonial Brazilian history and its contribution to the formation of the Captaincy of Paraíba, given that the foundations of the Hereditary Captaincies were part of the entrepreneurial logic of the Portuguese Crown in the conquest of overseas territories.

3 METHODOLOGY

The research is bibliographical and documental, based on the theory of decolonial studies, as well as on the analysis of sources through the Historical Method, using the stages and procedures, namely: heuristics, criticism and interpretation, both in historiography and in the reports on the Northern Captaincies of Portuguese America and the entire structure of exploitation and fraternization of indigenous and African peoples, in order to carry out the European colonizing project.

4 DEVELOPMENT

My research began with the stories told by my grandparents, memories that spoke of the struggle for land, but were also on the side of the workers in the sugar cane fields of the Miriri mill. Not just from the perspective of the big landowner, the rich man from Paraíba, the modern-day plantation owner, the one whose land extended beyond both sides of the River Miriri. But also from the perspective of the subalterns.

However, the sensitivity of learning from the simple man leads us to perceive, to watch the pain, the pain of those who are integrated into the work in the sugarcane fields, without study, without professional qualifications, depending on a salary that often does not allow them to meet the basic needs of urban and rural life.

That's how I got to know the Specialization Course in the History of the Northeast of Brazil at the Catholic University of Pernambuco - UNICAP, in Recife. The discussions about enslaved men and women - captured on the other side of the Atlantic and brought here, with no rights whatsoever, with no life or appearance, dumped in unknown places, living in the open, suffering and being raped, all because of the land, the sugarcane plantations - brought a sensitivity to the subject.

Thus, we intend to discuss how the strategic importance of the creation of captaincies in the north of the colony was built up, in the case of Paraíba. In addition, we will discuss the strategies for using the sugar cane mills on the banks of the main Paraíba rivers, which were part of the logic of trade in the first centuries of the formation of the Captaincies, and in this context the religious orders played a fundamental role in their implementation, which, in the case of the Miriri mill, the order of São Bento played a preponderant role.

To this end, we set ourselves the following objectives: to analyze the construction of the Miriri mill in the colonial period and its contribution to the formation of the Captaincy of Paraíba. In addition, to discuss



the formation of the Hereditary Captaincies, as part of the entrepreneurial logic of the Portuguese Crown, in the conquest of overseas territories. As well as understanding the strategies for using sugar cane mills on the banks of the main rivers in Paraíba, which were part of the dynamics of trade in the first centuries of the establishment of the Captaincies in the north of the colony, and finally, presenting the Religious Order of São Bento, in the fundamental role of undertaking the Miriri mill.

We will therefore begin our research by outlining some concepts and perspectives on the subject, which began with the history and implementation of the sugar economy in the captaincy of Paraíba. Regina Gonçalves (2007) shows us that the expansion of the sugar economy to the captaincy of Paraíba (1585-1630), via the process of conquest, was a consequence of the context that Pernambuco was going through. This captaincy was exhausted in land terms - there was a lack of land to increase production - and in social terms - an area was needed in which the sons of the "nobility of the land" could settle.

The services rendered by this "nobility" were rewarded by the Crown with land, military and bureaucratic offices. In this sense, there were conflicts between members of this elite, which, however, were stifled by the need to consolidate the conquest, since they were afraid of the Potiguares Indians who had previously occupied the region and, for this reason, established an alliance. This alliance was only broken in 1634, when the region was invaded by the Batavos and/or the Flemish (GONÇALVES, 2007).

Another concept adopted for the research, which anchored the approach, is the term coined for Capitánias do Norte, taken from the title of the works of João Fernando Almeida Prado, published in four volumes between 1939 and 1942, which discusses, among other topics, the first settlers in the region in the period up to 1630.

In this period, he proposes that colonization basically took place on the coast of Pernambuco and Itamaracá, with small nuclei in the coastal regions of Paraíba and Rio Grande. Certainly, at this time, Olinda was the major hub for the conquest expeditions to the north coast. However, as we will discuss later, since there was a change in the shape of the Captaincies themselves, with the creation of a new one and the territorial reduction of two others, there was no perception of a certain set of what we intend to call the Northern Captaincies (ALMEIDA PRADO, 1932-1942).

Given this, we have the classic work of Vera Lúcia Costa Acioli (1997), which analyzes the conflicts of domination, which mentions the disputes of the Government of Pernambuco in subordinating the Captaincies of the North. We also have Evaldo Cabral de Mello's research (2003), which discusses the intra-elite conflicts of the Pernambuco Captaincy itself, and despite making little relation to the neighboring captaincies, uses the term Capitánias do Norte.

This work deals with the history of the banks of the Miriri river and the construction of its mill of the same name between the 16th and 17th centuries, as part of the process of forming the Hereditary Captaincy of Paraíba. This river is mentioned in various works of importance to Brazilian historiography on the sugar



trail, such as those by Adrian van der Dussen (1947) and Gilberto Freyre (1969), all of whom will be used here to demonstrate its importance in the construction of Paraíba's history.

The text will therefore turn to the historiography of the place called Paraíba to discuss the issues surrounding the construction of the Engenho do Miriri. We will therefore use the work of Evaldo Cabral de Mello (2012), contextualizing excerpts from the most important documents on the Batavian presence in the Northeast, which is a valuable tool for studying the socio-economic history of the period.

In "*O bagaço da cana*", the author analyzes aspects of sugarcane activity in the northeast between the beginning of Portuguese colonization and the definitive withdrawal of the Dutch, and argues that even at the time of its greatest expansion during the years of the Nassau government, sugar cultivation never reached the level of the pre-1630 phase. *O bagaço da cana* is the result of exhaustive research based on documentation of Dutch and Portuguese-Brazilian origin, and an essential work for understanding the first economic boom of Colonial Brazil.

Guilherme Gomes da Silveira d'Avila (2019) in: "*A contribution to the beginnings of the History of the Benedictines in Paraíba*" with an illustrated edition in 17th century engravings and current photographs. It shows the Order that arrived in this land of *Brazil* from the end of the 16th century, when they landed in the city of Salvador, captaincy of Bahia, in 1581. From there, they went to São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro in 1586, then to Olinda in 1592, with their arrival in the Filipeia City of Nossa Senhora das Neves, "head of the Captaincy of Paraíba", dating back to 1595. Only then did they land in São Paulo in 1598 (2019, p. 37).

The report by Elias Herckmans (1596 - Recife, 1644) as a Dutch geographer, cartographer and writer. As director of the Dutch West India Company, he governed the captaincy of Paraíba from 1636 to 1639. From this period, he left us a detailed report on the captaincy, entitled "*Descrição Geral da Capitania da Paraíba*" ("*Generale Beschrijvinge van de Capitania Paraíba*"), dated 1639. The first part is dedicated to the capital, the second to the mills in the Paraíba river valley and the third to the customs of the Tapuias. He was later involved in the Dutch expedition to Chile, with the aim of determining the location of the gold mines, establishing a colony in Valdivia, exploring the island of Santa Maria and making an alliance with the indigenous people. Back in Recife, Herckmans was blamed for the failure of the expedition where, embittered by the failure and the accusations, he died (MELLO, 2004).

We first started with the donations of land made by the Portuguese Crown to the Benedictines and used the History of Colonial Brazil, which allowed us to discover that there is vast documentation on the monasteries of this order in the Northeast, more specifically in Pernambuco. As for this documentation, we are not going to work with primary sources - time does not allow for the monographic research in question - because the citations of the monks' tomes, in which the Miriri farm is located, are described in d'Avila (2019), which will contribute to substantiating the issues surrounding the construction of the mill through historiography.



In the field of theory, we will use the perspectives of decolonial studies in history. In this way, it is important to emphasize that, because the construction of historical concepts has been diluted for a long time as a result of the colonial tradition, the white and European perception was filled with exceptional superiority. However, for Mignolo (2014, p. 11) "the decolonial option is not a historiographical project, but rather an epistemic-political and ethical one". Thus, the heritage also operated by creating and imposing subjectivities on the colonized, through the construction of narrative discourses made official in a monocular vision, which legitimizes inequalities and domination by Europeans (BARBOSA, 2012).

In terms of theory, we understand that:

Theory" refers to a way of seeing the world or understanding the field of phenomena being examined. It refers to the concepts and categories that will be used to guide particular reading of reality, to the network of mental elaborations already established by other authors (and with which the researcher will dialog to develop their own theoretical framework). The "theory" refers to generalizations intended to be applied to a specific object or to a case study delimited by the research. "Methodology", on the other hand, refers to a certain way of working on something, of choosing or constituting materials, of extracting something from these materials, of moving systematically around the theme defined by the researcher. Methodology is linked to concrete actions aimed at solving a problem; rather than thinking, it refers to action. Thus, while "theory" refers to a "way of thinking" (or seeing), "methodology" refers to a "way of doing", or to the field of human activities that in philosophy is called praxis (BARROS, 2005, p. 77-78).

One of the great problems historians face is making sense of the past. Understanding is also interpreting, which can result in the generalization of experiences, and a jumble of data and confusing information. It can be considered that the remarkable achievements of any science are due to its own evolution because all disciplines develop in institutions influenced by the circumstances, traditions, needs and characters that make up their vertebrae (MACHADO, 2011).

It is the task of historians to disentangle this myth-making process without falling into a prolix historiography with too many explanations or excessive syntheses, because historical research is interested in clarifying the past, freeing itself from the contributions of interested parties and poetic additions, and this can be achieved by using well-written prose, representative of a perfect social communication system, old and prestigious sciences complemented with new sciences, technologies and methods of analysis and instrumental processes in the construction of a new historical knowledge (MACHADO, 2011).

As far as the relationship between this approach and the present study is concerned, it should be pointed out that this research is informed by a historical perspective, which refers to the study of particular relationships during Brazil's colonial period. In this sense, this assertion, the main thrust of the investigation I intend to follow, will guide my research as I seek to study the construction of the Miriri mill and its contribution to the formation of the Captaincy of Paraíba.

These elements are related based on their connections with the time-space axis, using the 16th and 17th centuries as a reference. To make the theoretical and methodological choices made for this research



more specific, it should also be mentioned that this study is based on the theoretical contributions of the Colonial History of Brazil (WÄTJEN, 1938; NOVAIS, 1979; ALENCASTRO, 2000).

Based on these premises, another key concept in this research is historiography. With regard to this concept, Justino Magalhães points out that: "Historiographical production, as a construction and discursive representation of reality, aims at knowledge of the relationship, or rather, of relationships, in a context of multidimensionality" (MAGALHÃES, 1996, p. 53), by making a methodological point that accounts for an emphasis on studies of Brazil's Colonial Period.

In this reasoning, it can be said that the author understands historiography as a particular relational way of working with history. In this research, this concept is very useful, as I have come across different historiographical perspectives at various times.

To this end, as discussed in Damázio (2011), the decolonial project is best understood in terms of how the traditional knowledge of subalternized Peoples elaborates methodologies and plural theories, shifting away from the colonizing pillars, pointing towards an end to the eternalization of the domination of powers and knowledge produced by colonial relations.

In this regard, Damázio proposes:

Unlike classic scientific research methodologies, *decolonial methodologies are pluralistic and position themselves as a break from the kind of colonizing research that has been central to perpetuating coloniality in all its aspects*. There is a need for different types of knowledge to be produced and these must originate from different approaches and concepts. Authors such as Michel Foucault, Edward Said and Walter Mignolo are examples of these multiple methodological perspectives (DAMÁZIO, 2011, p. 24, *emphasis added*).

As such, we question how history has traditionally elaborated and created hegemonic discourses and knowledge. Decoloniality does not mean repeating a history based on colonial archetypes, but rather seeks to tell history from the perspective of the subalternized and their worldviews, ways of seeing the world, in the conception and vision of other worlds. In other words, breaking with historiographical mutisms and recognizing the elements that are distinctive and appreciative of the dominated. Not arranging them in the same way, nor ceasing the evidence of colonization, but rather corroborating it and bringing the critical and theoretical possibility of breaking through and conceiving their epistemological common space in the face of the Eurocentric scenario present in the sciences (NASCIMENTO; SANTANA, 2020).

In this way, we can affirm that decolonial studies, as a network of researchers seeking to systematize concepts and interpretative categories, has a fairly recent existence. In addition, decoloniality also consists of a practice of opposition and intervention, which emerged at the moment when the first colonial subject of the modern/colonial world system reacted against imperial designs beginning in 1492² (BERNARDINO-COSTA & GROSFUGUEL, 2016, p. 17).



Therefore, locating the beginning of the capitalist, patriarchal, Christian, modern, colonial, European world-system in 1492 has significant repercussions for decoloniality theorists. The most obvious is the understanding that modernity was not a

a project that began in Europe with the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, to which colonialism was added.

Contrary to this interpretation, which sees Europe as a container in which all the characteristics and positive traits described as modern would be found within Europe itself, it is argued that colonialism was the *sine qua non* condition for the formation not only of Europe, but of modernity itself. In other words, without colonialism there would be no modernity, as articulated in the work of Enrique Dussel (1994). From this formulation, the centrality of the concept of "coloniality of power" became evident, understood as the idea that race and racism constitute the organizing principles of capital accumulation on a global scale and of the power relations of the world system (WALLERSTEIN, 1990, p. 289).

Within this new world-system, the difference between conquerors and conquered was codified based on the idea of race (WALLERSTEIN 1983; 1992: p. 206-208; QUIJANO, 2005, p. 106). This pattern of power was not restricted to the control of labor, but also involved the control of the state and its institutions, as well as the production of knowledge.

Furthermore, the "coloniality of power" is elaborated in this research, following the theoretical discussion, in which it points to the meaning of decolonial studies, which share a systematic set of theoretical statements that revisit the question of power in modernity.

In this sense, the conceptual procedures are: locating the origins of modernity in the conquest of America and Europe's control of the Atlantic, between the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th, and not in the Enlightenment or the Industrial Revolution, as is commonly accepted; special emphasis on the structuring of power through colonialism and the constitutive dynamics of the modern/capitalist world-system and its specific forms of accumulation and exploitation on a global scale.

In addition, we have an understanding of modernity as a planetary phenomenon made up of asymmetrical power relations, and not as a symmetrical phenomenon produced in Europe and later extended to the rest of the world; asymmetry of power relations between Europe and its others represents a constitutive dimension of modernity and therefore necessarily implies the subalternization of the practices and subjectivities of the dominated peoples; the subalternization of the majority of the world's population is established on the basis of two structural axes based on the control of work and the control of intersubjectivity; the designation of Eurocentrism/Westernism as the specific form of production of knowledge and subjectivities in modernity (QUINTERO, *et al*, 2019, p. 5).

Reflecting on the theory, and then talking about the methodological aspects of the research, one of the basic principles that defines modern historiographical practice is the distinction between primary sources



and secondary sources. Primary sources are eyewitness accounts, documents and material traces that are contemporary to the events in question. Secondary sources, on the other hand, refer to later accounts, such as chronicles and accounts that deal with events to which they were not direct witnesses, but whose access was only possible through other accounts, in other words, one of the elements that would define the identity of the modern historical discipline would be this rigorous distinction between contemporary evidence and accounts after the events (TEIXEIRA, 2014).

This difference between primary sources and secondary sources was erected by the community of historians as the fundamental criterion that made it possible to establish the veracity of the historical account, "the establishment of factuality", as Berheim stated in his classic text on historical methodology, "which guarantees the criterion of verisimilitude for the historical account" (BERHEIM, 2010, p. 56). In terms of methodology, we have the following procedural operations. According to Rösen (2007), these are divided into three stages: heuristics, criticism and interpretation.

For heuristics, Rösen adds that:

It is the methodical operation of research that relates historical questions [...] to empirical testimonies from the past, that gathers, examines and classifies information from sources relevant to answering the questions and that evaluates the information content of the sources (RÜSEN, 2007, p. 118).

The next stage is the establishment of Critique. This can be understood as:

[...] the methodical operation that extracts [...] information from the manifestations of the human past about what was the case. The content of this information is facts or data; something happened in a certain place at a certain time (Rösen, 2007, p. 123).

And lastly, by relating the previous stages, the aim is to guarantee the reliability of a source that is not yet complete in the research process. It needs to be interpreted and given meaning.

As Rösen puts it, we have:

In interpretation, as a research operation, what matters is synthesizing the heuristically elaborated perspectives, which question the experience of the past based on conjectures about its meaning, with the facts of the past obtained by critiquing the sources (RÜSEN, 2007, p. 127).

After listing the theoretical and methodological aspects for the stages in the construction of the historical text, the research points out that the union of the crowns of Portugal and Castile, which took place in 1580, incorporated Brazil into the European political construct, considering that, until then, the role of the Portuguese colony was restricted to occupying a merely secondary position as a place for an eventual scenario of tension in Portuguese-French relations.

The integration of Portugal into the Hispanic Monarchy is one of the most important chapters in Iberian history and the history of Brazil, and especially that of Paraíba, is directly related to what was the



most important union of crowns in modern times, when, in 1580, Portugal and all its possessions came under Spanish rule, in what is commonly referred to as, among other things, the Iberian Union, the Dynastic Union, the Union of the Iberian Crowns or simply "the rule of the Spanish kings", as Joaquim Veríssimo Serrão objectively portrayed (BRITO, 2020, p. 15-16). 15-16).

This is the origin of the name Paraíba, which comes from the river Paraíba, being called the São Domingos river in European nautical charts from the 16th century. However, another meaning appears, that of a bad river, which was related to its navigation, only accessible to vessels of small draft (small boats).

However, it was Elias Herckman, the third Dutch Governor of the Captaincy of Paraíba, who stated in 1639 that the name Paraíba, and by extension the Paraíba River, was: "a barbaric word, or rather a Brazilian word, meaning a corrupted sea, bad water, or even a bad port to enter". (HERCKMANS, 1982, p. 9). Loreto Couto (1904, p. 24) explained in 1757 that Paraíba "na lingua Brazilica (i.e. Rio caudaloso)". Coriolano Medeiros (1950, p. 153), in his chorographic study, condensed the meanings attributed by Herckmans and Loreto Couto, and added that because it was a long river, it acquired different names along its course, with "braço do mar or braço que vem do mar" being the name that seemed to "have the essential elements to be accepted".

In this context, we understand that the historical construction that resulted in the occupation of the Paraíba River in the Brazilian colony as a sugar plantation and the construction of the first sugar mills began in approximately 1585, when the Portuguese consolidated a position near the mouth of the river. There, and on other coastal rivers, especially the Miriri, the first cycles of commercial sugar exploitation took place, resulting in the installation of twenty production units by 1618. The sugar cane production area was then located in the floodplain lands, and the administration's equipment began to be installed, with defense and trade in the city of Paraíba and the river estuary as strategic points (GONÇALVES, 2007).

However, this occupation took place when, for fear of losing its overseas possessions, and in the face of constant threats from various pirates of the time, the Portuguese Crown was forced to undertake and speed up the process of colonizing the discovered lands. Thus, King João III decided to start colonizing Brazil, otherwise he would lose it to the French and other foreigners who trafficked in the territory.

Between 1530 and 1548, the Crown considered several different models for colonizing the new lands. In the primary model, which was known as the royal monopoly (1530-1533), Portugal tried its best to secure the business, but without success; then, in 1534, it put into practice the second model, which was private exclusivity, which lasted for 14 years (1534-1548).

In this scheme, the government resorted to the initiative of private individuals to begin colonization. Finally, in 1548, the Portuguese opted for the mixed system, i.e. donations of hereditary captaincies, generally to people with royal possessions and capital, with the Crown itself partly funding colonization, as in the specific case of Paraíba, created in 1574 as a Royal Captaincy (SANTOS; SILVA, 2010, p. 63).



It is important to emphasize that, as for the implementation of these occupations through sesmarias and their delimitation as hereditary captaincies,³ these were secured on the banks of small and medium-sized rivers, a decisive strategy from the 16th century onwards.

Thus, the production of sugarcane *plantations*, sugar mills and *casas-grandes*, as well as subsistence agriculture and livestock, developed on these shores, allowing the settlement of colonial lands to take root. In this sense, since the mid-sixteenth century, there had already been a *plantation* system in Brazil: "they were like parallel societies that had their own laws; their own customs; their own currency; their own morality; and even their own language" (FERREIRA FILHO, 2016, p. 17).

For example, in the 1580s, Pernambuco had more than sixty sugar mills producing sugar for the European market, and in the last decades of the century the province had strong links with the Antwerp market. It was exactly in this decade that the Royal Captaincy of Paraíba was founded, beginning the process of conquering this region⁵.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research made it possible to present the plot that involved the European powers in the exploitation of indigenous and African labor in the occupation of the Paraíba River region between the 16th and 17th centuries, when it formed the then Captaincy of Paraíba. In addition, we seek to discuss the construction of the Miriri mill in its trajectory, inserted in the colonizing project through the reports of rulers and the West India Company. Using Decolonial Studies, it was possible to present the subalternization of Original Peoples and the enslavement of Africans in Brazil, followed by analyses of the sources using the Historical method. The region was shown to be a vein of sugar rivers in the early centuries of the Brazilian colony, while various peoples were subordinated as sugarcane labor. Another point that stands out is the participation of the Order of São Bento - O.S.B., as part of the project to explore and implement the Brazilian colonization system. The research therefore opens up new fronts for analysis, given the relevance of the topic.



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