

Wives and Concubines

Free and enslaved families of the parish of
Antonio Dias, Vila Rica – 1760-1785

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Abstract

At the end of the 18th century, the population of the captaincy of Minas Gerais counted nearly 350,000, of which more than 50% consisted of African and Creole slaves. The gold mining towns, especially Vila Rica and Vila do Carmo, concentrated around 40 to 50% of all slaves of the captaincy. The continuous inflow of Portuguese nationals and African slaves has gradually led to an intense miscegenation, beginning at the last decades of the 17th century, and formed a population of complex racial composition, where 34% consisted of free black and mulattoes. In this society, the manumissions were frequent and there was the possibility of self-purchase for both sexes. The urban labor context favored the low class women, freed or slaves, typically dedicated to the petty and food commerce and marketing (*negras de tabuleiro*), and were preferably employed by their masters as managers of their grocery stores. The so-called *forras* or freed women were seldom married and headed an unusually large number of households, when compared to other contemporaneous societies. This suggests that they possessed a high degree of autonomy, compared with the white women. It is observed that, in most cases, the freed women exercised their autonomy by creating new alliances and patterns of social interaction to ensure their survival and their children, reinforcing and creating maneuvering space in a society profoundly marked by class segmentation and prejudice.

Introduction

At the end of the 17th century, large gold deposits were discovered in the Brazilian inlands, generating a golden rush as never seen before in Modern History, attracting hordes of adventurers from other provinces of Brazil and Portugal. After no more than two decades, a dozen of towns flourished in the mining territory. The population grew to such an extent that a new captaincy was created at the beginning of the 18th century. From a population estimated at 30.000 souls in 1700, Minas Gerais became, at the end of the century, the most populated of the entire country, reaching almost 400.000 people.

Opposed to the rigidly stratified rural societies that predominated in colonial Brazil in precedent centuries, a complex, fluid and essentially urban society emerged in the 18th century's mining towns. Fueled by the growing gold based economy, the importation of African slaves increased substantially, changing forever the racial, cultural and social composition of the "mineiro" people.

At that stage, urbanization was not an unknown phenomenon and then the economy of the Brazilian cities, like all those around the world, depended upon the country and the city served only as administrative and service centers, redistributing the wealth produced elsewhere. In Minas Gerais, this ordination was subverted, anticipating a characteristic that would only become common in the 19th century, with the emergence of the industrial districts: in the gold mining villages, the economy and wealth production depended upon the very soil within the town's limits.

Following those changes, an ethnically and culturally mixed society was formed, with high levels of miscegenation and specific patterns of social behavior. There were significant changes in gender roles and large numbers of households were headed by women who worked outside the domestic environment, sometimes dominating commercial positions and activities. Besides other distinctive features, it is noteworthy the diversity of household arrangements as well as family formation processes, other than the traditional catholic marriage.

Marriage, Family and Household in Colonial Minas

Up to the 1970's decade, historians of the family adopted the extended patriarchal family as typical of the predominant rural societies, prior to the 19th century, following the pioneer studies of Gilberto Freyre, Oliveira Vianna and Antônio Cândido, published between 1930 and 1950. In their point of view, the simple nuclear family model resulted of the social and economical changes observed during the industrialization process, occurred in early 20th century.

As a type, the patriarchal family is defined as an extensive group consisting of a conjugal nucleus, children, kin, employees, aggregates and slaves, subjected to the unconditional authority of the family's head. Among other features, the patriarchal family is characterized by a high fertility regimen, low social and geographical mobility. In the 18th century's Portugal, family was defined as the people living together in the same home, comprising the parents, their children and domestic staff. A theoretical aspect common to all those definitions limits the concept of family to the existence of a conjugal nucleus, disregarding alternative familiar arrangements. The family structures would be necessarily patrifocal, when the male performed the role of a provider and held all decisory power while the woman played the secondary role of wife and mother, fitting the European experience and fundamental family theories. Thus, existing patterns where the woman performs a central role or the male's is relatively peripheral, typical of other cultures, were summarily defined as inferior or anomalous forms of family.

Colonial marriage and families

In accordance with the Portuguese legal code, the Ordenações do Reino, a marriage could be contracted under one of two patrimonial ordinations – the “meação”, where each spouse possessed half of the total couple's assets, under the male's sole administration as “head of the couple”; and contract of “arras”, where the marriage was subjected to a premarital agreement that established the terms of division and administration of the assets, including the value of the bride's dowry (Silva, 1995). In this last case, both spouses could keep the right to administrate freely the properties possessed before the marriage, allowing a higher degree of autonomy to the women, who could administrate her own assets, without the husbands' consent (Naro, 2006), limited only by their own capacity and personal ambitions. However, in any of both

regimens, it was expected and almost a norm that the husband took care of the family businesses, acting in the wife's behalf. Traditionally, the autonomy and decisory power only passed to women's hands in the absence of the masculine counterpart, as in the widowhood (Silva, 1995), men's migration, or permanent celibacy.

In other words, the colonial society recognized only the family founded under the rites of the Tridentin marriage, "by words of present" and "at the face of the Church". In this sense, it was praised and protected by the legal code system that determined its indissolubility, the criminalization of the concubinate and adultery both in civil and ecclesial courts, institutionalizing the aversion to illegitimate children, especially those conceived in adultery and sacrilege. The male's absolute control over the family was secured by legal instrumental tools represented by the marital and fatherly powers. In Antônio Dias parish, the families were formed in accordance with the following typology: (Campos, 2007):

- a) Formal marriage where no premarital cohabitation prior to the wedding's date;
- b) Formal marriage at varying stages of cohabitation, with one or more children born before the wedding's date. In some cases, the total number of the couple's children was already completed when the marriage took place;
- c) Stable consensual unions with children which did not reach the formal marriage due to social and/or economical inequalities; these unions were either residential or, more commonly, non residential (Ramos, 1993);
- d) Eventual or temporary unions which resulted in pregnancy and live births.

In all those cases, even in the absence of a married couple, the maternity/paternity was a necessary and sufficient condition for the family formation process. Therefore, the concept of family adopted in this study establishes that two or more individuals, linked by a paternity relationship (as a mother and her only child), living together in the same house, defined a family.

Analyzing the series of marriages of this parish, it became clear that a principle of social equality predominated, whatever the spouses' juridical condition, ethnic origin, fortune and social class¹. Even in some apparently unequal unions, where a white Portuguese immigrant married a freed mullato woman, there was no contradiction to that principle. In the Portuguese world, those who worked with their hands were as socially disqualified as the freedmen of mixed blood in the colonial society, and

probably were regarded as equals, in the social hierarchy, even by themselves. Masons, butchers, tailors, ironsmiths, rural workers, shoemakers and other so-called mechanic workers formed the bottom of the *ancient régime* societies and were not accepted in administrative positions or nobler religious brotherhoods, anywhere in colonial Brazil. In this sense, the illegitimate daughter of an upper class white man would be a suitable bride for an illiterate mason, especially when she was left some money or a dowry in her father's will. Even a freed black woman would be regarded as a prospective bride for such low class white men. Thus, interracial marriages (white men with mixed-blood women) accounted for a consistent proportion of around 12% of all marriages recorded from 1727 to 1800. In the other hand, only 26% of all white men who died in Antonio Dias, during the period from 1760 to 1784, were married or widower, which corroborates the assumption that there was a shortage of brides of the proper social position and the marriage to lower classes women was not an acceptable option for all.

White wives and concubines

In Vila Rica, white upper class families formed a minority group, most of them representative of the first and second generations of royal officers' families as well as of a certain number of Portuguese merchants enriched in the slaves and goods trades. The women of this segment suffered at the most the pressures of a social behavior modeled upon a Christian archetype of mother and wife, where the sanctification of their domestic role required total passiveness and submission to their father or husband. Eventual transgressions only reinforced the concept of the frailty and inconsequent nature of the female's condition, as described in the Portuguese marriage guides, widely read since the 17th century. Analyzing the parochial records of women titled as "donas", it seems that the feminine "misbehavior" was rarer in the upper classes, with fewer cases of births outside the wedlock. Contrary to similar events recorded for low class women, the illegitimacy of upper class children was only a temporary condition, corrected by the marriage of the child's parents. In fact, the birth of an illegitimate child represented only a normal event in the family life cycle, with no relevant consequences to social position or "virtue" of the people involved.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Colonel Carlos José de Melo, addressed a complaint to the captaincy's authorities, denouncing the abduction and dishonoring of

his sixteen-year-old daughter, Carlota de Seixas, by a local high ranked magistrate, Dr. Antônio José Duarte Gondim, who was living conspicuously with her. Dr. Gondim reacted appropriately, pointing out that the colonel Melo was a bachelor and the girl was a “daughter of unknown parents” since she was baptized as an “*exposta*”, i.e. abandoned at birth. Carlota’s real parents and familial backgrounds were well known to all involved, yet Dr. Gondim denied the accusation of misconduct as the circumstances of the girl’s birth were cause of social disqualification and would not support the colonel’s allegations. To restore his daughter’s dignity and social position, the colonel Carlos José de Melo had first to correct his own irregular situation, by marrying Carlota’s mother, D. Emerenciana Mayrink de Seixas, in the April 25th, 1817. After that, the whole situation changed and, months later, at October 30th, Dr. Antônio José Duarte Gondim married Carlota de Seixas, six-month pregnant of her first child.

More than the mere compliance to religious or moral norms, in this social group, marriage and family were a fundamental base of familiar projects designed to tighten political alliances and secure the access to administrative positions, privileges and economical advantages for all family members, preserving lineages and fortunes. In many cases, those projects seem to have influenced significantly the mean age at the marriage for both sexes, postponing the marriage until a candidate partner matched the family’s requirements and standards. In the period of 1760 to 1784, the female’s mean age at marriage was 22.2 years old, in the parish of Antônio Dias. When only upper class women were considered, the mean age raised to 23.9 years old.

The lieutenant colonel Carlos José da Silva, widower, married for the second time to the twenty-nine-years-old Maria Angelica de Sa e Menezes, from a wealthy and influential family from the village of João d’el Rei. At the age of 19, Maria Angelica was contracted to marry her cousin Francisco Ribeiro, but her mother strongly opposed to that marriage on the grounds that the groom’s financial situation was heavily compromised by debts (Brügger, 2007, p. 225). She justified her disapproval in the ecclesial courts, explaining that the high dowry agreed by her deceased husband in the *arras* contract, if paid, would serve to restore one house’s fortune only to ruin another’s. Apparently, her reasoning prevailed as Maria Angelica had to wait ten more years until she could finally get married to the colonel da Silva. Not surprisingly, their marriage also reinforced a prior alliance between both families, as her brother, Dr. Manoel de Sa Bustamante de Menezes, was married to one of her groom’s daughter.

From the prospective of the colonel Carlos José da Silva, to be married to a dame of high rank certainly strengthened his social prestige and favored highly desirable marriage alliances for his sons and daughters. Furthermore, it would be an additional qualification to be granted the title of cavalier he was seeking in the prestigious Ordem de Cristo, at that time. In fact, it was noticeable the colonel's eagerness to consolidate his family's social position, evidenced by the careful choices of his children's godfathers, all baptized by the Captaincy's governors, members of the ancient Portuguese high nobility. In that sense, Silva's rationale fitted a societal vision characteristic of populations of the *ancient régime* which was "marked by a very sharply delineated system of status, which drew firm distinctions between persons and made some superior, most inferior" (Laslett, 1965). Colonel Carlos Jose da Silva's strategies seem to have been successful and two of his daughters were married to very important members of the political and social spheres.

Aware of the modeling role performed by such families in a colonial context, the magistrate José Verissimo da Fonseca, also a widower and a father of teenager daughters adopted a similar strategy, seeking a distinguished bride for him. He married the widow of a colleague doctor, and no matter his relatively modest origins, managed to marry his daughters to heirs of remarkable and very important families of the captaincy.

From a demographic point of view, it is significant the fact that, coherently with the general concept of patriarchal family, both the Silva and Fonseca's families presented high levels of fertility. The first marriage of the colonel Carlos José da Silva lasted for no less than twenty years and he fathered fifteen children. Twelve of them were born in Antônio Dias, within the relatively short mean intergenetic spacing of 15.7 months, assuming that no living births were omitted in this family. Fonseca's first wife married at the age of 21 years old and gave birth to thirteen children, until her death, eighteen years later, at a mean intergenetic spacing of 14.5 months. Only two children had their deaths recorded in the parish, one four-year-old child and a baby aged one day only.

Extensive or nuclear, traditional white families were also a minority in the parish. Even less frequent were the cases of families and households headed by single white women. The lack of qualitative documentation does not allow the recovery of clarifying details of those women's way of life, except for a few ones. A noteworthy

case is that of D. Ana Maria da Silva Teixeira de Menezes, natural of the village of Sabará, who resided with her daughter Josefa, in the Antonio Dias parish, alongside some domestic slaves. At an earlier stage of her life, D. Ana had been involved in an affair which lasted an unknown length of time, with the sergeant major Caetano José Viegas. He had been married twice, at the first time, to a certain D. Teresa de Faria. After her death, he married again, this time to D. Inacia Catarina da Silva. He probably was still married to D. Inacia, when engaged into a romantic affair with D. Ana, resulting in the birth of at least two children. To conceal the adultery, she moved to another village or parish and faked the abandonment of her children, as this kind of transgression was treated by the religious and civil authorities with much less tolerance than in a simple concubinate case. Thus, Caetano Jose Viegas was not free to marry D. Ana until after the death of his second wife. Viegas' third marriage took place at his death bed and seemed to have served only to make his children eligible to inherit from him as well as securing them a higher social position. At that time, D. Ana was already an old lady of almost sixty and the existence of a premarital contract suggests that her only gratification was to be upgraded from single to a widow mother. Nonetheless, the parochial records portrayed her as an economical and socially autonomous lady, owning her own home, a few gold mining sites, and more than 30 slaves.

Other white women also faked the abandonment of their children at some loyal friend's doors, immediately after delivery, becoming virtually invisible as single mothers in the baptisms books, especially upper classes'. In most cases, the child was raised by friends, relatives or allies, returning to the parents' company eventually, when and if they got married. Until then, those women continued living with their parents or attached themselves to relatives' families. That was the case of the already mentioned D. Emerenciana Mayrink de Seixas, who was enrolled in the 1804 census (Mathias, 1969) as a childless single lady, living under the protection of her uncle. At that time she was already mother of two children, one of them Carlota de Seixas, born in the year of 1800.

For white women of lower classes, the situation was entirely diverse. Without the protection of a family, they suffered social isolation and economical restrictions due to maternity outside the wedlock, as they usually left home or were expelled when they became pregnant (Ramos, 1993). Opposing to the household's organization of patriarchal families, based primarily upon kinship, low classes' household arrangements

were built upon economical relationships. Without fortune or social prestige, even a fair complexion could become a further restrictive factor in the already limited capability to earn a living, as it was not acceptable that free white or light skin mullato women worked in socially degrading occupations meant for slaves or freed black women. Frequently, the only options available were intermediate jobs as sewers, soap and candle manufacturers, spinners and teachers as well as dissimulated forms of prostitution. Compared to the commercial activities performed by black women, those occupations were far less lucrative and offered few opportunities to save even modest sums of money, providing only enough for subsistence. As soon as their children grew enough they were hired as tailoring or shoemaking apprentices, usually living as aggregates in their teacher's home. As an alternative, twelve-year-old boys were engaged as soldiers in the paid militias, contributing to their family's support, especially when they could not afford at least one slave to earn some money as journeyman.

Joana Maria da Conceição, white woman, single, native of the São Caetano parish, was the mother of three boys, all born in Antônio Dias parish, in the years of 1773, 1779 and 1789 and earned their living as a sewer. Her middle son, Antônio, died at the young age of three. Assuming that there was no omission of live births, the long intergenetic spacing suggests that Joana was not a part of a stable couple and the births could have resulted from brief unions. The prostitution alternative can not be discarded as the sewers were frequently associated with those activities, during the colonial times.

In the census of 1804 (Mathias, 1969) Joana was enlisted as single and head of the household, earning her living as a sewer. Her surviving boys lived with her, the older one identified as a soldier. She lived in a rented home, owned no slaves and, notwithstanding their apparent poverty, she was raising an "exposto", which stands for a child abandoned at birth. As the Town's Council rewarded the raising services until the child reached the age of eighteen, Joana probably decided to raise both the abandoned boy and her newborn son to get access to a complementary income source represented by those payments, particularly during the tougher times after delivery.

Due to their limited professional opportunities and economical resources, single white women were forced to live as aggregates in other households, frequently headed by other females, as recorded in the census of 1804. This solution represented a substantial reduction of the living costs for all co-residents, while the links to a familiar group could provide protection, economical support and professional opportunities.

From the household's head point of view, the rental of rooms could both represent an additional income source and increase the household's manpower as a productive unit.

The 1804 census describes the case of a household headed by Timotea Maria Guedes, mullato, aged 44 (Mathias, 1969, p. 20) who lived in Antonio Dias with her twenty-year-old sister and a little mullato girl of nine. Both women were single, worked as sewers and owned an eighty-year-old African slave. Three other women were recorded as Timotea's aggregates: an eighteen-year old white woman named Maria Candida, single, who was enrolled as a sewer apprentice, a married mullato named Maria Joaquina and her eight-year-old son, and finally an African freed woman, Joana angola, single, and her two minor daughters. Ten people shared Timotea's home, six adult women and four children. Besides the domestic female slave, the census indicated only the occupation of three women, probably because the sewing activity was linked to the household, in a stable basis. The remaining women seemed to have been temporary lodgers between households. Maria Joaquina was married and she could be expecting to reunite with her husband, after overcoming an eventual economical crisis or forced absence due to military duties. In the case of Joana angola, assuming that she had recently bought hers and her daughters' freedom, she could be trying to save enough to afford her own household. This case confirms some perceptions of an increasing feminization of the households at the time (Ramos, 1993, p. 657).

Another noteworthy example is that of the twenty-six-year-old Caetana Moreira de Torres Lima, white, single, aggregate in the household of Manoel Pinheiro, a single white soldier of thirty-three, where she also worked as a sewer. There was a small family nucleus in the same house, formed by the seventy-year-old mullato Rita Vaz de Carvalho, her fifty-year-old daughter Maria Francisca and their personal slaves. Both were widows and worked too as sewers. The proximity of ages between Caetana and Manoel Pinheiro may lead to the reasonable assumption that they formed a couple. However, the census of 1804 rarely distinguished aggregates from guests, lodgers, kin, employees, or concubines. Thus, the existence of older female sewers in the house indicated that Caetana could have been also an employed artisan or rose either by Rita Vaz or Maria Francisca, as an 'exposta'. It is also reasonable to assume that Rita Vaz was actually the head of the household and Manoel Pinheiro an aggregate enrolled as such because he was white, a soldier and the only adult male in the household, nonetheless the fact that Rita e Maria Francisca owned all household's slaves.

Wives and concubines in captivity and freedom

In the colonial society, whatever her color or social status, the women were necessarily regarded a secondary and submissive position in relation to men. The black female slaves and freed women, besides the restrictions associated with gender roles alone, they suffered yet the degradation imposed by racial considerations and the social inferiority brought upon them by the slavery. Thus, the black woman shared with the white the permanent oppression and exclusion derived from a social structure, based on the male's dominancy and was regarded as socially disqualified and consistently identified as immoral and addicted to prostitution.

In the American context, Gutman (1976) opposed to conceptual distortions about the black slave's family and sexuality, attempting to explain structural differences between black and white families. The previous theory claimed that the blacks were naturally promiscuous and licentious, averted the marriage, incapable of establishing stable households and families, with the presence of both parents. Writing about the slave women in Caribbean society, Bush (S.d.) noted that such notion was sanctioned by religious institutions in the 18th century, and that "the alleged immorality and licentiousness became the basis of many misconceptions about the nature of slave marriages and slave family life" (Bush, s.d., p. 12).

Recent empirical studies for Brazil (Botelho, 2003; Metcalf, 1991; Slenes, 1999) have demonstrated that, contrarily to the previous assumptions, even in captivity, the African blacks managed to reformulate and reconstruct domestic arrangements, probably based upon their own values and beliefs, constantly vivified though the continuous inflow of African slaves, and transmitted to the subsequent generations. Under their prospective, the premarital sex was not necessarily qualified as immoral or deviation from social norms. Coherently, the children conceived under that circumstance were not regarded as illegitimate and did not jeopardize future marriage chances. Gutman (1977) also argues that, among the American slaves, the endogamy was subjected to sanction and marriage between cousins and close kin, a normal event among the white families, were not tolerated or practiced. In traditional African societies, the exogamy expanded the kin ties, strengthening the family group and the

overall community and, amongst the Antônio Dias slaves, that could have been the adopted pattern.

Slave families based on the catholic marriage were relatively rare in Antônio Dias, during the 18th century, but the families formed were extremely stable. It seemed that the marriage depended basically upon the slaveholder's will or religious attitude and a matter of negotiation between slaves and master. In any case, there were almost no records of marriage between slaves owned by different slaveholders. The colonel Manuel de Souza Pereira, a rich miner of Antonio Dias, owned 12 out of the 89 (13.5%) slave couples married between 1750 and 1770, year of his death. Four brides (two of them, sisters) of those 12 marriages were identified as legitimate daughters of slave married couples owned by the same Pereira. On the other hand, some African and Creole² slave women seemed to have been part of stable alternative unions, as their reproductive histories were similar to those of married women, characterized by the occurrence of many births with similar spacing patterns. In Antonio Dias, I selected the cases of Ana mina, age unknown, slave of another mina freed woman, Rita da Silva. Ana had at least four children, born in the years of 1764, 1768, 1771, 1779, 1789. Arcangela Creole, single, age unknown, slave of Sebastiana Fernandes, bore nine children, in the years of 1766, 1768, 1769, 1772, 1774, 1777, 1779, 1782 and 1783. After that, no other information was found about her so far, but all her children were recorded as Creoles, which suggests that, in case of a stable union, their father was either an African or a Creole man himself. Arcangela's history presents a remarkable regularity in child spacing, which raises the hypothesis of cohabitation or partner's routinely presence in her day-to-day life.

The census of 1804 (Mathias, 1969) listed some single African and Creole fathers living with adult children, but since their identities were summarily omitted in illegitimate birth entries, it is almost impossible to recover the entire family history, if the mother is dead and not mentioned. However few, especially due to the low life expectancy for black male slaves, those cases may be viewed as evidences that black fathers participated actively of the family's life, in a lifetime basis. In another case, Antonia Creole, born around 1754, slave of Francisco da Costa Cardoso had five children during her captivity period, born in the years of 1764, 1768, 1771, 1779 and 1788. A single Creole freed woman named Antonia da Costa Cardoso had four more children, born in the years of 1789, 1791, 1792 and 1795 and her surname, address and

personal connections led to the assumption that she was the same person. The child spacing between the years of 1779 and 1788 also suggests that she might have lost her first partner by death or sale, and took some time to engaging herself in another relationship. Alternatively, she could have lived temporarily as a lodger somewhere else after her manumission, before settling again in the same neighborhood. Also, it is reasonable to assume that her priority was to purchase her freedom and her children's, which took usually many years work, provided there were no omissions of live births. The classification of such cases as unconventional marriages would change substantially the nuptial rates of the African and Creole women, bringing the rates closer to those observed for the free population.

Studies focused on the 19th century's plantation economy (Florentino & Góes, 1999) suggested that the formal slave family would serve as an instrument of "social peace", minimizing the occurrence of riots, runways and suicide among slaves, at the advantage of the slaveholders. Others, as Slenes (1999), claimed that, when associated to the development of a slave community, the formal slave family represented a strategy of resistance to the slavery, creating privileged spaces and conditions for subversion and insurgence.

Nonetheless, in a highly stratified urban society as Vila Rica's, both interpretations may not apply entirely, especially from the point of view of the slave himself. In parallel to the ordained world of the upper classes, alternative stable familiar arrangements emerged among the non-elites, slaves included, based upon parental or spiritual links between single parents and their children, at the horizontal and intergenerational levels. However, the nature and depth of the links between slavery and the production of matrifocal structures has not been fully investigated to establish, for instance, how further they replicate and perpetuate cultural patterns of the African ethnic groups or Portuguese models at the base of the social pyramid. As Ramos (1993) pointed out, while there were social differences between whites and blacks, such as age at marriage and child spacing, their definitions of residential household bore a surprising similarity (Ramos 1993, p. 661), except for ruling families.

Survival, Work and Freedom

In the field of survival strategies, skin color and better social conditions apparently restricted the mobility and opportunities for white and mulatto single women, in the colonial labor market. Taking advantage of their ancestral tradition of street marketing, African women and their Creole daughters, particularly those from the Sudanese nation group *mina*, monopolized the petty commerce of food, probably the female's most lucrative job, at that time. One indicator of that lucrativeness is suggested by the fact that, amongst all unmarried women, African and Creole women owned their houses in a higher proportion than the mullato and white. At the end of the 18th century, this predominance was observed in the ownership of more valuable downtown houses, where the number of residents of that category was low. The town council's record of private buildings of 1806 listed 651 houses in the main streets of Antônio Dias parish. Only 35% of them were owned by women and from those, the African and Creole single women owned 31%, while the single white and mullato women owned respectively 4% and 24%. The remaining 40% were owned by widows of all colors (Table 1).

Table 1 – Proportionate Distribution of Urban Properties Owned by Women in the Antônio Dias Parish - 1806

	Single	Widow	Total
White	4%	12%	16%
Mullato	25%	15%	40%
Black	31%	13%	44%
	60%	40%	100%

Source: Livro de Tombos n. 12 (1806) Ouro Preto City Historical Archives

Since the first decades of the mining settlements, slaveholders were aware of the African women's commercial skills, especially those of the *mina* denomination and used their services as managers of small food shops, next to mining sites. Other preferred to employ them in door-to-door sales of bread, fruit, sweet corn, vegetables or cooking in the open air, allowing them a great deal of autonomy and flexibility in the administration of the business. The impact of this activity may be inferred from records of taxes paid by the free productive population in the year of 1733, when one third of the total contributions of the whole village was paid by women or recorded as "Antônio

Simoes for his slave Rita mina”. Half a century later, in 1773, Vila Rica Town’s Council listed 697 small food shops, 70% of which were owned or controlled by African and Creole women (Figueiredo, 1993, p. 56). After subtracting expenses and taxes, the slaves would pay their masters a fixed daily sum, keeping the surplus to themselves. Those who worked under this rule were called “*escravos de ganho*” or journeymen. Del Priore (2000) claims that the method had the merit of regulating the relationship between masters and slaves, which would suggest a more tolerable situation but, from the slave women’s point of view, it would mean to endure a twofold exploitation – economical and sexual.

Del Priore (2000) also states that prostitution was probably adopted as a complementary practice to commercial activities and was an attribute of female slaves, frequently pushed to that activity by their masters. That also seems to have been the general impression of many royal administrators. In 1732, in a letter to the king D. João V, the secretary Manoel de Afonseca e Azevedo reported that slaveholders used to send the slave women to the mining sites without the proper working tools, expecting yet to receive daily earnings, suggesting that they were only dissimulating the practice of prostitution. He also reported that many town residents opened small food shops run by female slaves, where they lived and worked without supervision, so they could invite the male slaves to buy, spending away their master’s gold. To prevent gold and taxes deviations, the royal and town’s administrators prohibited this kind of shops in the mining sites, but frequent re-editions of this policy evidenced their poor effectiveness. A similar perception is clearly stated in a letter dated 3 of November of 1727, written by the bishop of Rio de Janeiro, Dom Friar Antonio de Guadalupe, where he reprehended the Parish priests of Minas Gerais for their omission and tolerance in this issue, ordering them to act against

“...the masters who consent that their male and female slaves live in irregular unions until they get them married or else, separating them completely. And (the priests) should assure that the slaveholders of both sexes, who have slave women living dishonestly in shops or as street sellers, equally change their behavior, even by being denied the sacraments, as scandalous and public sinners.” (Trindade. 1928, vol. 1, p. 64).

The door-to-door female marketers were targets of close surveillance and forbidden to work near the mining sites. If caught, they were punished with imprisonment and heavy fines. To protect themselves against persecution, violence and extortion, they mastered the strategy of making alliances with distinguished and powerful citizens, using every resource at hand. That included sexual favors, healing and sorcery services, money loans and payments and even economical partnership in small enterprises. In her letter of will, Rosa Gomes³, freed African woman, indicated the white miner José da Cunha Souza Carneiro as her partner in a mining site, which could include many other financial transactions and other mutual interests.

From the point of view of the slave community, social status was usually defined by the autonomy and relative control of one's time associated with some occupations, pre-existing ancestral African religious status or nobility and the possession of some kind of valuable knowledge or skill. Aware of that, Creole women usually followed the same occupational path as their African mothers while empirical evidence suggests that their mullato descendants rarely or never worked as street marketers. Having a white man by father probably placed the mullato girls in a somewhat actual or imaginary higher social position, at the eyes of the colonial free society. In such circumstances they would attempt to live up to that position, devising alternative strategies as concubinate to a higher rank partner or investing the inheritances received from a successful mother or their white fathers. An interesting case is that of Cipriana Maria Monteiro de Souza, a single mulatto woman born around 1740 and the only recorded daughter of an African freed woman named Inacia Maria Sant'Ana, who made a living out her street sales. Cipriana did not follow her mother's profession, but when she died, in 1788, she left a significant fortune, and among the possessions she left to both her son and daughter, there was a farm with gold mining and agrarian activities in the neighbor village of Guarapiranga, with seven slaves. From the years of 1760 to 1784 Cipriana had six new African slaves baptized in Antonio Dias as well as eleven children born to her already existing female slaves, suggesting that she have owned a relatively high number of slaves. She managed to marry her daughter Maria Francisca to a Portuguese immigrant and, from then on, some of her slaves were recorded as owned by her son-in-law Manoel Moreira Alfena, which suggests that they might have been part or the whole of Maria Francisca's dowry.

In any case, in a society with so many degrees of ascending social status, if a woman was born in a second or third generation of a formal mullato family of a certain intermediate social position, her professional and social behavior would depend basically on how high the family was located in the social scale.

Black slaveholders

Far from threatening the slavery structure, the widely spread system of self-purchase reinforced and reproduced it, since the first thing a fresh freedman attempted to do was buying himself a slave, creating therefore the need of replacing himself and his slave in the slave market. At today's eyes, it may seem contradictory and somewhat immoral that a former slave would become a slaveholder himself. However, besides other cultural and economical considerations, at his or her point of view, the danger of being re-enslaved was not a remote possibility and the status of slaveholder would be provide strong evidence of their status, besides the economical resource it represented. For the newly bought captive, there was always the hope of following the same path and eventually buying his own freedom. Furthermore, in a society divided into masters and slaves, the slaveholder status carried also a strong and socially defined symbolic value.

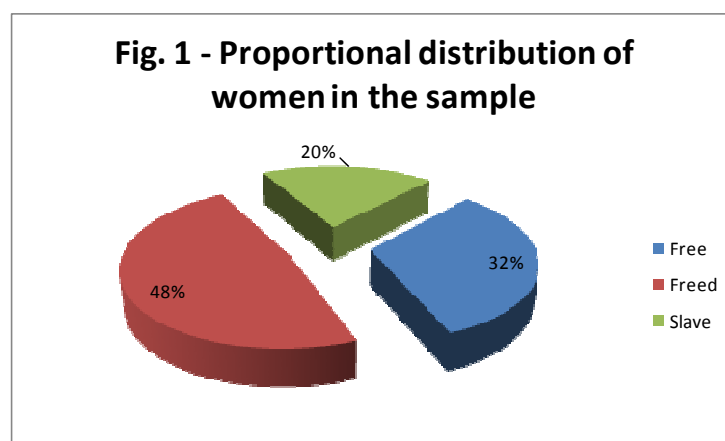
From the prospective of freed women, the possession of slaves was as much a rational business decision to expanding and improving their market activities as a source of protection and fulfillment of personal needs otherwise provided by a biological family. Freed slaveholders, particularly single African women, tended to establish deeper personal and distinctive ties with their slaves than those observed in higher social strata, to a point where, sometimes, they actually replaced their biological family broken by the enslavement.

Frequently they acted as godparents of her slaves' children, a non-existent practice in all other social groups. Furthermore, they seemed even to regard their slaves and their children as their own children and grandchildren, freeing them consistently (Paiva, 2001& Higgins, 1999, p. 85). This pattern was common amongst women of the mina ethnics, as the case of Sebastiana Gonçalves Ramos⁴, a childless mina widow, who died in 1778. She left all her possessions to her godchild Margarida Gonçalves Ramos, a Creole girl of seven, daughter of a Sebastiana's former slave named Inacia mina. As her godmother, Sebastiana's first concern was to assure the girl some assets

and resources for the future, which probably influenced her marriage, in 1800, to a young Creole freedman, named Manoel Ramos de Jesus, also born as Sebastiana's slave.

Wives and concubines – demographical aspects

Considering the matrifocality as an essential attribute of freed and slave families, I used an adapted parish reconstitution technique to analyze a non-probabilistic sample consisting of 1219 married and single women in fertile age in the study period from 1760 to 1784. The sex and age structures of the parish's whole population, according to social strata are so far unknown, but the sample comprises 20% of slaves, 32% de free e 48% of freedwomen (Figure 1). The selection criterion was the existence of age data for each woman, with and without children collected in the baptism and death parochial records and complementary sources as the census of 1804 (Mathias, 1969), inventories and letters of will. Taking the 1804 structure as an estimation basis, the slave population is assumed to be under-represented in about 15 to 20% in the sample, when compared to the free and freed populations of the time period studied. According to crude estimates presented by contemporary authors (Vasconcellos, 1994), the population of the whole Vila Rica was around 12,000 souls, half of them living in the Antonio Dias parish.



Source: Table 2

This group of women gave birth to 2372 children which correspond to around 50% of all children baptized in the parish, between the same years (Table 2). I adopted the classification in three categories: free, freed and slaves, instead the more common twofold classification – free and slave – because I understand that the free category would wrongly aggregate two distinctive social and racial groups. However legally comparable to the born free women, the experiences acquired during and from captivity placed the freed women in an intermediate position between the free and enslaved worlds, justifying specific assessments.

The average numbers of children per woman suggest the existence of different reproductive and nuptial patterns which were specific of each color and social category, opposing to the widely spread notion about the lower fertility of African and Creole women, when compared to the free white population. In fact, the mean numbers of children per slave and freed woman, respectively 2.8 and 2.3 are substantially higher than that of women of free birth, which was estimated in only 1.0 child per woman. In that case, age structure, sex ratio and intensity and selectiveness of migration would be the relevant variables to explain the negative or low growing ratios of the slave population than fertility alone, for the whole 18th century. This is corroborated by the relatively high fertility suggested by the mean numbers of children per slave women. Another remarkable feature is that, among all African women of the sample, the percentage of married women was 15%, suggesting that they might have been less inclined to or concerned with the catholic marriage.

In the Creole group the percentage of married slaves is only 7%, but it reaches around 42% in the free and freed groups. The percentage of married women is much higher for the free mullato, around 50% and comparable to the percentage of around 60% found for white women. Only nine women of the mullato group were enrolled as slaves in the sample, all single. The distinction of conjugal status in freedom and captivity is particularly difficult in those cases because is not always possible to know if a freed woman's marriage took place before or after the manumission, inducing to incorrect observations.

Table 2 – Distribution of women and children in the sample according to their race, marital status, juridical condition– Parish of Antônio Dias – 1760-1784

		<i>Free</i>			<i>Freed</i>			<i>Slave</i>			<i>Total</i>		
		<i>Women (N)</i>	<i>Children (N)</i>	<i>Mean Nr. (*)</i>	<i>Women (N)</i>	<i>Children (N)</i>	<i>Mean Nr. (*)</i>	<i>Women (N)</i>	<i>Children (N)</i>	<i>Mean Nr. (*)</i>	<i>Women (N)</i>	<i>Children (N)</i>	<i>Mean Nr. (*)</i>
White	Married	80	217	2,7	-	-	-	-	-	-	80	217	2,7
	Single	53	10	0,2	-	-	-	-	-	-	53	10	0,2
African	Married	-	-	-	10	23	2,3	11	43	3,9	21	66	3,1
	Single	-	-	-	25	21	0,8	87	268	3,1	112	289	2,6
Creole	Married	21	7	0,3	136	399	2,9	9	35	3,9	166	441	2,7
	Single	31	16	0,5	188	338	1,8	127	316	2,5	346	670	1,9
Mullato	Married	95	97	1,0	109	388	3,6	-	-	-	204	485	2,4
	Single	95	21	0,2	110	136	1,2	9	12	1,3	214	169	0,8
Ignored	Married	10	9	0,9	1	5	5,0	-	-	-	11	14	1,3
	Single	-	-	-	2	2	1,0	-	-	-	2	2	1,0
Subtotal	Married	216	339	1,6	256	815	3,2	20	78	3,9	492	1.232	2,5
	Single	179	47	0,3	325	497	1,5	223	596	2,7	727	1.140	1,6
Total		395	386	1,0	581	1.312	2,3	243	674	2,8	1.219	2.372	1,9

Source: Books of Baptisms and Deaths of the Antônio Dias Parish Archives (APAD) 1709-1784 - Ouro Preto, MG

The average numbers of children per woman suggest the existence of different reproductive and nuptial patterns which were specific of each color and social category, opposing to the widely spread notion about the lower fertility of African and Creole women, when compared to the free white population. In fact, the mean numbers of children per slave and freed woman, respectively 2.8 and 2.3 are substantially higher than that of women of free birth, which was estimated in only 1.0 child per woman. In that case, age structure, sex ratio and intensity and selectiveness of migration would be the relevant variables to explain the negative or low growing ratios of the slave population than fertility alone, for the whole 18th century. This is corroborated by the relatively high fertility suggested by the mean numbers of children per slave women.

African women presented the higher mean number of children amongst all women, raising some interesting issues about the nature of the intervening cultural factors in their family formation, as the status of wives or concubines seems to matter less in the slave group of the sample studied. When freed, survival strategies, professional, availability of partners and social concerns may have required different

rationale in their reproductive decisions which would explain any changes in their nuptial and fertility patterns. In the slave group, the mean number of children per married African woman was 3.9 and 3.1 among the singles, followed closely by the Creole women, with 3.9 for the married and 2.5 for the single Creole slaves. These numbers suggest that the Creole adopted their mother's reproductive behavior more tightly than the mullato, probably because they kept on living with their mothers, after they gave birth to a child, both as a slave or freed women. There's also the assumption that African's tradition of the father's presence and communal solidarity may have had a relevant impact in their social and reproductive behavior, when it comes to support mother and small children.

The mullato women seem to have been more susceptible to possible influences by their white fathers or families and tended to emulate the behavior of white women, particularly when well advanced in a "whitening" process, in second or third generations of mullato families. The mean numbers of children of mullato women of free birth corroborate this interpretation, indicating a behavior similar to the white women's. In fact, the levels of illegitimacy for both categories are virtually the same, presenting a mean number of illegitimate children per woman around 0.2. However higher than white women's, the freed mullato mean of illegitimate children of was also much lower than those presented by the African and Creole women (Table 2).

There is also the hypothesis that, to achieve a higher social position and finding themselves a suitable partner or husband, the mullato women would attempt to detach themselves from African costumes and, consequently, breaking as many disqualifying ties to the slavery as possible, including the virtual absence of marriage records for mullato slave women, who would have only other slaves for a prospective grooms.

Considering the conjugal status only, the mean number of children per married woman was 2.5 against 1.6 per single woman, indicating that, more than the slavery, the conjugal status seems to be the relevant factor in the low levels of fertility of the Antonio Dias parish women, which presented a mean number of 1.9 children per woman in the whole population.

Final comments

The Antonio Dias society presented a wide diversion of households and family formation processes, based upon a principle of social and economical equity. Assuming

that the sample is representative of the whole society, in the period of 1760 to 1784, the white upper families followed a traditional model, founded on the catholic marriage, with low levels of permanent celibacy and illegitimate children. The choice of prospective spouses fitted familiar projects devised to strength the family's political and economical power. In the other hand, the less privileged strata presented varying degrees of attachment to the traditional Portuguese model of marriage and family. The Antonio Dias mean numbers of children per woman suggest that the mullato women tended to emulate the upper classes, with higher levels of nuptiality and lower levels of illegitimacy than African and Creoles, probably derived from attempts to detach themselves from African ancestral values and other socially degrading associations with slavery. In the other hand, African and Creole seem to share similar reproductive profiles and therefore it is suggested that for African and Creole community, the actual relevant social status was defined in their own community and terms and not necessarily acknowledged by the white society. It could be an already existing ancestral status achieved back in their homeland or derived from personal working skills and valuable knowledge, such as the capacity to decode the white colonial world and translate it to others or possession of religious, healing and sorcery powers. (I would suggest that the personal prestige of some slave or freed individuals otherwise obscure could be detected in the baptism records by the occurrence of unusually large number of entries where they were chosen as godparents).

Empirical findings contradict the myth of a low fertility regime as a characteristic of the African and Creole slaves, caused by excessive duration of child spacing due to the ancestral practice of long lasting breastfeeding, with a mean duration of 2 years or higher. African and Creole parturitions in the sample studied were larger than those observed in white families. Since the white women's fertility was marital in essence, the late marriage could be reasonably pointed out as a fertility reduction factor in that specific group of women. However, for all cases, a comprehensible interpretation of the nuptial and reproductive patterns of the entire population requires yet a further investigation on its age and sex structures, as the lack on the availability of partners of each social and racial category are essential to fully explain some important aspects of the demographic dynamics of the parish of Antonio Dias.

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Notes

¹ Melo, who wrote a practical guide for the spouses, argued that the “proportion of the marriage” assured the couples’ happiness and the disregarding to this rule is the major cause of conflict. He explains that the equality between the spouses is based upon three primary equalities: blood, assets and ages. The equality of blood, involving the concept of social position and lineage, should satisfy the spouses’ parents, as well the equality of assets, which must benefit the children. Finally, equality of ages was meant to please the spouses.

² Creole is defined as a Brazilian born black individual, having Africans or other Creoles as both parents.

³ Letter of Will of Rosa Gomes; Arquivo Histórico do Museu da Inconfidência. Códice 129; Auto 1612; 1791

⁴ Baptism Record of Margarida, Livro de Batizados, 12jun1770, fls. 471. Death Record of Sebastiana Gonçalves, Livro de Óbitos, fls. 125v, de 12jan1778. Letter of Will: Sebastiana Gonçalves Ramos, Arquivo Histórico do Museu da Inconfidência. Códice 64; Auto 713; 1775