To Be a Slave in Brazil
1550–1888

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The African Adapts to Brazil and the Brazilians

Slavery: An Old Condition in a New World

Because certain forms of slavery had existed for centuries on the continent of Africa, Brazilian historians used to say that blacks imported from across the Atlantic were docile and ready to accept their new status as slaves. This assertion is based on the unwarranted assumption that what was true of a limited area of Africa was typical of the continent as a whole. In fact, slave hunting became widespread in Africa only as a result of the slave trade—as that trade grew, and for its benefit. It was the business of capturing slaves for sale to European colonies that reinforced the power of those African kingdoms whose warriors supplied the slavers. In any case, there were major differences between slavery as practiced in Africa and slavery as practiced in Brazil. In Africa slaves were not necessarily assigned to productive tasks. Some were personal slaves of powerful lords, in some cases of their own tribe, in all cases of their own color. Africa’s slaves never left their native region and so remained in familiar surroundings physically and psychologically. Living in a known culture, they easily adapted to an almost familiar way of life. The slave system was a venerable part of a stratified society, and slaves were protected by a range of well-defined traditional institutions. Subequatorial Africa—the region that furnished most of Brazil’s slaves—was the part of the continent in which true slavery—slavery for productive ends—was least practiced prior to the advent of the colonial slave trade. In the warrior states that hunted and sold slaves to the slavers exploitation of slaves as practiced on the other side of the Atlantic was unknown. In Brazil slaves were used first to produce export crops and to extract precious metals and stones; in urban centers they worked as artisans and provided social services. Thus relations of exploita-
tion in Brazil were closer to certain forms of slavery in the ancient world than to the patriarchal slavery of Africa. What is more, this resurgence of an ancient mode of production occurred in the heart of an expanding capitalist economy, in which the coexistence of new and old forms of slavery created a novel system. Indeed, it is doubtful whether it is correct to speak, in an undifferentiated way, of “relations of production and exploitation” in connection with such social services as transport of freight, navigation, and domestic chores. Was the slave who hired himself out on the labor market both exploited and exploiter? Was the slave who himself owned slaves at once slave and master? Was there more than one kind of slave? How can we characterize social relations between different groups of slaves, and between slaves and other social classes? We cannot begin to answer these questions until we know more about the endless variety of material and emotional circumstances in which Brazilian slaves found themselves over the course of the three centuries during which slavery was practiced in Brazil. It is pointless to try to impose an a priori model. A much better approach is to look first at the variety of situations in which Brazilian slaves lived.

To speak of “material and emotional circumstances” is already to take a step in the right direction and to view the slave as a member of a larger society. How was the transition made from captive to slave? To answer this question we must take up the story of our captive where we left off: after his sale to his new master but before he has begun to work in the job from which his new identity will derive.

**From the Cargo of Captives to the Slave “Head”: Did the Slave Regain his Identity?**

For endless hours the African captive waited in anguish for the slave ship that would carry him to Brazil. We do not know how much time elapsed between his capture and his arrival in America, since the documents record only the time of crossing. Nor do we know how much time elapsed between his arrival and eventual sale. During this distressing time of captivity, slaves must have formed friendships, however hesitantly, with their companions in misfortune. If, by chance, a comrade from the slave depot or the crossing happened to turn up working in the same mine or town or on the same plantation, firm bonds of friendship were likely to develop. Such friendships, called *malembo*, were the beginning of socialization. They created real solidarity among captives, who felt a powerful obli-
gation to help one another. In 1836, for example, a freed slave started an organization whose purpose was to repatriate some two hundred other freed Bahian slaves. He chartered a British ship for five million reis (the equivalent, at the time, of 875 pounds sterling) to carry them back to the port from which they had sailed: Onim, present-day Lagos. This man had been part of a shipment of slaves brought to Bahia in 1821 by the ship Emilia: “Having acquired a certain reputation among his fellow emancipated, he used it to induce them to return to their native land. To finance the operation he sold various slaves from his own personal property and granted freedom to six others who were to accompany him.” Of the two hundred who sailed for Africa, sixty had belonged to the Emilia’s cargo. Then there was the celebrated African king known to the Brazilians as Chico-Rei. Captured along with several members of his family and community and sold in Minas Gerais, he managed to gain his freedom and, one by one, bought the liberty of every member of his tribe.

Striking as these examples are, similar stories are not rare. Slaves who enjoyed such bonds of friendship with their fellows were better off than the majority of captives, who were sold singly and delivered alone to their buyers. Often they found themselves isolated, since most masters mixed slaves from different tribes for reasons of security. Initially the black African was a “captive” wrested from his native society, and he remained a captive until he became a member of slave society. The transition was more difficult for those who had been taken by surprise and suddenly lost all the family, tribal, and communal ties that had given them a place in society. Desocialization led inevitably to loss of personhood. The slave became a thing, an object, an item of cargo. He entered a state that nullified not only his possessions but his being: whatever he may have been in his own society, now he was a captive whose fate lay in the hands of others. The buyer wanted him to be malleable, economically and socially, so that he could be assigned work that would bind him to his master. Accordingly, the slave was denied any legal or civic status. It was his function, his job, that determined his situation. The conditions of slavery were as varied as the jobs that slaves performed, but in all cases the slave remained entirely subject to the whims of his master. Thus slavery is not fully characterized by the relations of production. To speak only of relations of production is to neglect an understanding of the situation of individuals who did not necessarily participate in any definite mode of production, who were assigned jobs and functions on which the very existence of the ruling class depended—the usual relationship between exploiters and exploited was stood on its
head. Nevertheless, the relation of the slave to society as a whole was always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in terms of his lord and master. The master set the norms and laid down the rules that governed this relationship. That said, does it make any sense to ask whether the slave could, under such conditions, regain his personhood? The question is surely complex, and by breaking it down into simpler questions perhaps we can formulate an answer.

First, we may look at the laws that governed social relations in slave societies: The slave was legally "inferior" to his master; he was private property, a "thing" with no legal status; and he was not in control of his fate. Looking at the question in this way, it is difficult to see how the slave could have acquired legal personhood, even if he had a place in society and in social relations of domination.

But from a psychological standpoint the black man’s very survival unquestionably depended on his “repersonalization,” on a certain acceptance of his position in social life. The question now takes on an entirely new meaning and assumes a fundamental importance. To maintain that human beings could have survived without adapting in some degree to their situation is of course absurd. Now, adaptation surely depended on the slave’s relationship to his new environment, and the qualities of the master, his family members, and his lieutenants were surely just as important as the qualities of the individual slave and of the group of slaves among whom he lived. Ultimately, the slave’s new social personality would be created by his insertion, along with other black men whose minds were still formed by African models, into a society shaped by a white model. This difficult process of social integration created constant tensions. Such was the lot of the slave forced to adapt to the slave system; he was forced to work hard, to humble himself, to obey and show loyalty to infallible masters. Humility, obedience, loyalty: these were the cornerstones of the slave’s new life. For slaves were merchandise of a very special kind, and their buyers and owners always discovered in the end that slaves were also human beings, with whom it was possible to enter into close relationships, provided of course that the blacks showed themselves to be loyal, obedient, and humble. The slave’s social being, his acceptance by free men in a society based on slave labor, depended almost entirely on whether or not he proved to be loyal, obedient and humble. These three essential qualities were the key to the personality of the “good slave”: the slave who possessed them could acquire the competence, the know-how that brought power sufficient to regain some sense of identity. With the
power that came with skill the slave could feel less fearful; some of the wounds born of capture and loss of homeland could heal; and the slave could then acquire a new language, a new home, a new and unique identity born of a tacit but solid social contract.

The means used to train slaves to show apparent loyalty, obedience, and humility could be either violent or gentle. Masters generally preferred persuasion to coercion. Sugar planters in the northeast dropped violence and threats in favor of patriarchal and paternalistic forms of manipulation. They sought to make the slave a servant, a member of the extended family, to involve him in a modus vivendi that saved owners the expense of surveillance and diminished the risk of attacks on his person or property. The slave, for his part, acquired a certain social identity. He was assigned specific social roles and even gained some social influence, some importance in the eyes of free men, thanks to his master’s backing and protection. Some slaves became overseers, stewards, or group leaders and thus seemed to circumvent authority. But this new social identity was really the result of identification with the master’s family. In fact, the master struck a bargain with the slave: “Give me your loyalty and I shall give you protection and my family’s identity.” Slaves went from “living with” their masters to identification, at least in part, with the master class, which in turn tried to accommodate them. The result was a very unusual situation, of a sort likely to confound social analysts, many of whom have drawn the conclusion that this type of relationship represented a perfect adaptation of the slave to his new environment. In spite of these intimacies, however, the world of the masters and that of the slaves remained culturally and socially distinct and antagonistic: confrontation between them was inevitable. The apparent mildness of relations between masters and slaves and the seeming adaptation of an obedient and humble slave work force were in fact effective and subtle manifestations of black resistance to a society whose goal was to strip blacks of their moral and cultural heritage. We shall see how the slaves were able to make use of the social constraints imposed on them by their masters; ultimately they were able to restore some equilibrium to the system, making it possible for them to live amicably and in some ways to cooperate with their owners. But this equilibrium was fragile and could be upset by a trifle, leading to suicides, escapes, and individual or collective rebellion. Then the master was forced to resort to violence and repression. In fact, in the northeastern part of Brazil, a section reputed to be so attractive to slaves and so easy for them to adapt to, escapes and rebellions were most numerous and conflicts between masters
and slaves most violent. Paternalistic as they were, masters lived in con-
stant fear that blacks would react in unanticipated ways. For that reason
they created instrumentalities to ensure their social and economic survival
in case of trouble— even in areas where slave violence was not a reality but
only a possibility. "Preventive" violence, for example, was intended to re-
duce the slave to humility and obedience. Since disciplinary violence had
to take account of religion and the law, it was generally rather moderate.
But excesses did occur, and repression sometimes provoked resistance and
led to the death of a slave. About such problems there is no dearth of
evidence— on the contrary.

In this dialectic of adaptation and inadaptation, resocialization and re-
sistance, an important role was played by "senior" slaves. New arrivals
had to be integrated not only into the culture and society of the ruling
class but also into the group of fellow slaves, to whom the newcomers
were linked by economic, emotional, and religious bonds. Adaptation to
the society of the masters, adaptation to the community of slave brothers:
both processes were important to the slave's conquest of a new identity. It
was as difficult for the new slave to adapt to his fellow slaves as to the so-
ciety of the master. But the problems encountered were different in the two
cases. The newcomer was embraced by a group of men of his own color,
themselves slaves engaged in the same kind of economic activity. But the
masters were careful to mix slaves from different tribes and communities in
the hope that a less homogeneous group would be less inclined to rebel-
lon. Some masters went so far as to stir up tribal rivalries by systematically
assigning members of one tribe to supervisory roles and members of other
tribes to hard labor. In the cities, different religious confraternities ac-
cepted members of only one tribe up to the beginning of the nineteenth
century. Black Africa was endlessly diverse. Sudanese blacks, for example,
had experienced a level of political and social development far in advance
of anything known to the Bantus, whose civilization was still at the level of
rudimentary community organization. These political and social differ-
ences were compounded by religious differences, and the role of religion
in African societies was a very important one. The Bantu religions were
quite different from the Yoruba religions, and the Muslim black had little
in common with his "pagan" comrades. The latter eventually created a
new religion, a Brazil-based survival of old African religions. Later on I
shall discuss the religious question more fully, and we shall see how Islam,
which had already undergone a transformation in Africa at the hands of Is-
lamized blacks, would be further transformed on Brazilian soil. Here, the
newly arrived slave encountered other slaves whose customs were diverse and whose families were dispersed. Customs and families were the linchpins of African society. Even if the blacks of Brazil were able to create a new social organization, distinct from that of the whites, that new community was as strange to the newcomer as was the society of the white man. How was he going to adapt? One might imagine, for instance, that if new and old slaves managed to establish family ties, newcomers might find themselves on familiar ground as soon as they were able to take their bearings within the new family. But the number of men was always larger than the number of women, and master rarely looked favorably upon marriages between slaves. Thus the African could not hope to find his social identity through the family in the narrow sense of the word. Marriage was not the linchpin of the new slave communities; rather, we must look to relationships between neighbors, coworkers, and participants in leisure activities and other associations of many kinds.

For such relationships to develop, the group had to accept the newcomer and the newcomer had to wish to join the group. And wishing was not enough, for the new arrival immediately encountered problems of language and religion. The religious difficulties were less serious than the linguistic ones. But learning Portuguese, which became the vernacular of slaves who could not understand one another’s native tongues, took time, and there was a real language barrier between new arrivals and the rest of the slave community. As for religions, the slaves of Brazil quickly evolved a syncretic religion acceptable to almost all Africans, which incorporated elements of the Bantu, Yoruban, Fon, and Catholic religions. Only Islam, which in any case was really a significant factor only in the cities in the first half of the nineteenth century among a “black elite” that was often hated and feared by other blacks, was left out of this synthesis that embraced the bulk of the slave population. The African’s chief need was to be accepted by his group. It was the group, ultimately, that determined the quality of daily life, for white society was even more “alien” to the newcomer than the society of his fellow slaves.

Slaves born in Brazil, and who therefore spoke Portuguese, were called creoles. Generally they were raised in the master’s family and bore a strong imprint of white society. Their problems of adaptation were quite serious, for they were soon seized by the desire to be as fully assimilated as possible. There was some social mobility in slave society: a slave could go from laborer to artisan or domestic servant, for example. There was also the hope of manumission for those who accepted western values and re-
ounced their African heritage. In reality, freed men were always rejected by white society and thrown back onto the black community. The black community, which was constantly receiving new members from Africa, was not necessarily ready to reject the cultural heritage of its African ancestors in favor of the white man’s heritage. Thus slave society was constantly riven by tensions between the creoles and the Africans. The creole was the victim of the irreducible contradictions between black and white. He was the slave who had the greatest difficulty in forging his own identity; powerful whites expected much more from the creole than from the African, and forgave him nothing. Hence for the creole the requirements of obedience, loyalty, and humility took on a whole new dimension. Masters considered him a human being responsible for his attitudes, whereas the African bossale (the one who is born far away), who barely spoke the white man’s tongue, was usually regarded as an ignorant child to be educated and trained. What a creole was supposed to learn as a child the bossale was allowed to learn over a lifetime of labor. The master usually took notice of the African cultural heritage and often viewed the African slave as a “savage” in need of education in all areas. Thanks to this mind set, it was actually easier for an African slave to win emancipation than for a creole slave. To whites, Africans were less dangerous competitors than creoles and granting an African his freedom represented, in many cases at least, a smaller loss. What is more, solidarity among Africans was much stronger than among creoles. The bonds among new arrivals from Africa made a better cement than the creoles’ desire for assimilation. This solidarity among Africans proved useful in obtaining letters of manumission, which restored to some slaves the liberty they had lost. Finally, it is again the Africans to whom we are indebted for the survivals of African tradition in Brazil. They felt the need to forge a new culture, a culture that would be their original and vital response to the difficulties of adapting to the new environment in which they found themselves obliged to live.

The black man arriving from Africa faced a simple dilemma: either he did not adapt or refused to try—in which case his only alternatives were struggle to the death, suicide, flight, or revolt—or else he did manage to integrate himself sooner or later and to one degree or another into the new society, in which case he took on a new identity. This new identity was the product of a two-fold adaptation: a tactical adaptation to the white model, to the masters’ demands for obedience and loyalty, together with a sincere adaptation to a mode of life and a mode of thought created by a heterogeneous group of slaves. Along with this adaptation went tension,
caused by attempting to imitate the white model on the one hand while maintaining African tradition on the other. In fact, most slaves eventually learned to obey, to pray, and to work in order to win their masters' approval. At the same time they succeeded in the delicate task of adapting to the new culture created by previously arrived slaves and creoles. This dual apprenticeship was indispensable to the new slave's survival and the key to his new identity.

**To Obey?**

For the slave, the necessity was to obey; for the masters, to win obedience. Obedience could take many forms. It depended on partners, on the work required, and on the conditions in which that work was performed.

To begin our analysis we may distinguish between societies according to whether they are more or less hierarchical and more or less rigid. In Brazil urban slaves were not organized in the same way as rural slaves. Obedience took different forms in the fields, in the cities, and in the mines. The obligations of a slave who worked as a shepherd were different from those of a domestic, an artisan, or a peasant.

Brazil's first need was for farm hands. The fortunes of northeastern and east-central Brazil were based on the large-scale production of primary export products, primarily sugar cane, especially along the coast. The plantations made use of a highly structured system of exploitation, which led to the development of a rigid social hierarchy. Sugar was originally grown on vast tracts of land granted by the Portuguese crown to *sesmarias*, or planters who had shown they could produce a good yield. The concessionaire was obliged to do everything possible to develop an efficient system of production. It was not enough merely to sow and to reap; the harvest had to be transformed into a consumer product: sugar. This need gave rise to an agro-industrial complex, the so-called engenho, which demanded a fairly high degree of rationalization. Jobs in agriculture and industry awaited slaves to fill them. The engenho was a major enterprise, and without division of labor it could not have succeeded economically. Slaves found themselves taken in to a highly structured system, in which command and control methods were adapted to the needs of sugar production. Even after Brazilian agriculture had shifted from sugar to coffee, cotton, and subsistence products, its organization retained the indelible mark of these early days. At first sight the system would seem to have been one
of two distinct classes: masters and slaves, rulers and ruled, whites and blacks. In this patriarchal system absolute control of production seemed to be the prerogative of those who owned the land and even more the means of production, the slaves and the machines of the sugar mills. An engenho's land was not worth much in colonial Brazil if that land was virgin or if the manpower required for the coming harvest was lacking. In this agrarian society the slave was therefore an indispensable instrument of production, but his job was fixed and there was little prospect of social mobility. Innumerable writers have described this traditional agrarian society, with a few masters at the summit and a mass of indistinct, industrious, and obedient slaves at the base. This picture is really oversimplified, as we shall see; it is in fact incorrect to draw too stark a contrast between this agrarian type of society and the societies that developed in the mining and livestock-raising regions of the country. On the whole, however, it apparently was easier for some degree of familiarity and camaraderie to develop between slaves and free men in the mines or in the vast sertão than in the engenho. In mining areas, all the master asked was that the slave produce a satisfactory quantity of gold or diamonds. In general the master held only temporary title to the land on which he set his slaves to work. When his fortune was made or the earth's resources were exhausted, he would sell his slaves or sell them their freedom. Or if he moved on in search of new riches, he would have to rely on the slaves to uncover a new seam or to pan for gold in the streams. Little by little the slave might become a partner in the venture. This trend was in fact facilitated by the central government. The crown granted sugar planters almost full powers to govern their lands, where they reigned as absolute masters. By contrast, in the mining regions the central government hastened to establish a strong military and police presence, for it was essential to achieve an abundant and steady output by whatever means proved necessary. The industrious or clever slave, the slave blessed by the gods who discovered the extra nugget or the precious diamond, might well succeed in earning himself a personal nest egg. The master was entitled to require a certain minimum output, the amount for which he was responsible to the government under the terms of his contract. Beyond that, the slave was in control and even enjoyed the government's protection. Slaves in the mining regions could therefore rise in the social hierarchy and become free men, because the society in which they worked was more open than the society in the agricultural regions of the country.

In the vast livestock-raising regions of the interior, social boundaries
were even more fluid. The territory was relatively unpopulated and the
climate harsh. No one owned the land, and people of different nations
fought over it for many years, especially Spaniards and Portuguese. The
master who owned the cattle led the same nomadic life as the slaves who
helped him with the herd. Society in the Brazilian sertões was primitive
and not especially hierarchical, because the number of slaves required was
small and because masters themselves lived a primitive life. In addition
there were poor whites involved in the activity, the so-called peões and ad-
venturers of every stripe. In this relatively free land of nomads, slaves were
subject only to the same constraints as everyone else who had to cope with
the austere environment. In the nineteenth century, when large salt houses
were established in Rio Grande do Sul for the production of dried beef,
some of this cowboy population settled in the area. The new society that
developed in the cattle centers quickly became stratified, taking for its
model the patriarchal society of the agrarian regions. The number of slaves
increased while the chance of rising in the social hierarchy decreased and
controls were tightened. Thus field hands, mine hands, and slaves of the
sertões experienced very different fates, and their relations with the society
that employed them were also quite different.

What about urban slaves? What was the slave’s place in the city? Could
he hope to find himself in a social environment flexible enough to allow
for adaptation and advancement? Brazil was not a particularly urbanized
country in the period 1600–1900. By 1820 approximately 7 percent of
the population resided in cities, almost all of which looked to the sea and
the mother country for their livelihood: Pernambuco, Bahia, and Rio
were nothing less than economic fortresses. They arrogantly lorded it over
a vast hinterland, whose small towns, hamlets, and villages were only way
stations on inland routes. Only the mining province of Minas Gerais,
whose towns were inhabited by agents of the royal government and large
numbers of merchants, was urbanized to any significant degree.

The Atlantic ports and the mining cities of the interior played an impor-
tant role in Brazilian life, as centers of commercial activity, social services,
and government. In a system in which slave labor predominated, inevita-
bly much of this would be entrusted to slaves. Slaves were assigned jobs
that the European population viewed as base; even poor Europeans
avoided lowering themselves by doing certain kinds of work. Besides, all
emigrants came to the colonies hoping to enjoy a higher status than they
could claim in Europe. Travelers’ accounts depict slaves engaged in the
most varied tasks as far back as the early seventeenth century. Free labor
was rare in any case. Slave workers were indispensable, and in every city of Brazil we see the figure of the slave owner eager to hire out his slaves.

Urban society seems to have been less divided and less structured than rural society. In the cities lived numbers of people who were neither slaves nor high officials nor important landowners nor great merchants. This growing intermediate stratum consisted of professional men, lower level clergy, minor civilian and military officials, artisans of every stripe, small and medium merchants, and sailors. Does the existence of a middle class suggest greater social mobility for slaves? Undoubtedly it does, and it would be useful to know what proportion of this group consisted of freed men. Be that as it may, urban slaves surely were often more independent of their masters than were rural slaves. The slave artisan might live at some distance from the residence of his master, to whom he was obliged only to pay a lump sum out of what he earned from his work. The master who hired out his slave as a stevedore, painter, or sailor kept an eye on him to be sure, but he was also obliged to allow the slave a certain autonomy. Urban slaves were free to walk the streets and to form friendships with the humble free men with whom they worked; they certainly felt themselves to be less prisoners of their condition than did rural slaves. Some degree of social mobility was possible because of this relative independence, which lessened the traditional antagonism between master and slave, ruler and ruled.

The privileges enjoyed by urban slaves seem to have been shared by domestic slaves. It has often been said that masters chose as personal servants slaves made in the image of the white man: born in Brazil, often into the owner’s family, and raised, educated, and *criados*—literally, “created”—in the big house. When it became necessary to sell some of these slaves, their masters waxed eloquent in praise of their qualities, and the newspapers described them as valuable and capable individuals. Domestic slaves could easily make themselves indispensable to their masters, to whom they gave their daily devotion and perhaps also the money earned by work done in addition to normal household chores. Many domestic slaves went through the streets with plates of candies or lace which they carried on their heads and sold to earn not inconsiderable profits for their owners. But life was by no means idyllic for these slaves, always under the eye of the master, always watched and monitored. In order to have any hope of rising in the social hierarchy and ultimately of gaining his freedom, the household slave had to exhibit, even more than the ordinary slave, the cardinal virtues of obedience, humility, and loyalty imposed by the master.
For the slave, then, obedience was not simply a necessity. Obedience of course made the master happy, but the slave had longer-range goals in mind. The field hand’s horizons were more limited than the horizons of the slave in the mines or towns. But in all cases obedience was the only available strategy, for the black man could not rise in the social hierarchy and achieve some life of his own unless he made use of the values of the white society in which he lived. Using obedience as a protective shield, he could recreate his fragmented world, or rather create a new world colored by the Brazilian surroundings and yet all his own. But once obedience was accepted as a tactic necessary for survival and progress, the slave had to learn how to make this tactic pay dividends in everyday life. Before he could benefit from his apparent docility, the slave had to undergo a three-fold apprenticeship: to learn the language of his masters, to learn to pray to the Christian God, and to learn a useful skill.

To Understand, To Pray, and To Work

Adaptation through language, prayer, and work had two faces, for as we have seen the slave had to live with two communities: the slave community and the community of free men. Thus it was a double lesson that awaited him as he learned to speak Portuguese, to pray to the God of the Christians, and to do his job on the coffee or sugar plantation, in the gold or diamond mine, or in the city.

The language problem was not an issue for the creole slave, who had imbibed the language of his masters since childhood. As for the African slave, it was rare for him to encounter at his workplace another slave who spoke his own language. To the master or, more often, to his overseer—generally a mulatto, black, creole, or occasionally an African who had been in Brazil for a long time—fell the responsibility of teaching the new arrival the rudiments of Portuguese. Learning continued through contacts with fellow workers or with the chaplain. Priests were actually seldom found on the plantations, and by the eighteenth century one no longer saw Jesuit missionaries versed in certain African languages who were assigned to travel about the countryside seeking to convert “black pagans.” The masters were in any case not very demanding instructors: if the slave could understand simple orders, that was enough. This was especially true of small agricultural communities, which had little contact with the outside world. By contrast, in the nineteenth century, we find growing up around the coffee plantations inns in which black slaves and poor whites could meet
over a glass of whiskey and where the Africans could pick up a few well-chosen curses and enough of a vocabulary to permit elementary conversation. Only slaves in constant contact with their masters, especially the domestics, became truly bilingual, and their children, raised alongside the master’s children, learned an African vocabulary as impoverished as the Portuguese vocabulary of their African relatives.

Schooling of slaves was strictly prohibited in Brazil, and even emancipées were not allowed to attend classes. This restriction remained in force throughout the slave era, even in the second half of the nineteenth century when the slave system was already in decline. The few masters and priests who decided to teach slaves to read and write were violating the established rules. For this reason Brazilian slaves have left no written archives. There are no “Slave Souvenirs” of the sort that are so common for the southern United States to tell us about the emotional lives, the actual experience, of these subjugated men and women. There is much to be learned from the white man’s account of the black, of course, but the slave was unable to tell his own story. We therefore have no choice but to try to understand him through his behavior.

Masters were content if their slaves could speak rudimentary Portuguese. Consider, for example, the following newspaper advertisement that appeared in 1855, describing the African “Antonio, known by the name ‘Antonio Vapor,’ of the Nago nation, tall, more than 50 years of age, and who speaks in a rather confused but quite understandable manner.” Or another advertisement, which says of an African slave from Mina who disappeared in 1858 that he is “tall and fat, with big lips and very white teeth and speaks very well.” The language problem was quickly solved for the master who was content merely to make himself understood. Ultimately the awkwardness of the slaves in speaking Portuguese distorted the language spoken by Brazilians of all social categories. Even today in northeastern Brazil it is possible to recognize in the pronunciation and vocabulary of descendants of great cane-planting families linguistic anomalies directly inherited from plantation black. To say fio for filho (son) or fazer for fazer (to make) is the mark of a person educated with Africans or the descendants of Africans. Furthermore, the Africans introduced a variety of new words into the Portuguese vocabulary which rapidly became part of the language of Brazil: molambo (rags), moleque (adolescent), mucama (nurse), tanga (loincloth), mandinga (witch doctor), cacula (second eldest son), and many more. It is difficult to know whether the African or bossale chose deliberately to remain in a world where the means of communica-
tion were limited, where he could keep his distance from his oppressor and yet exert an influence on him. The game was quite subtle, and every slave had the opportunity to use his own skill to connect up his past with a present that bore his own personal stamp. These were humble victories, to be sure. For the ladino or creole slave, who of course spoke Portuguese, the problem was different: whether or not to preserve the African vocabulary of his ancestors.

The master who needed to make himself understood so that he could give orders and organize his slave's working day also attempted to instruct the slave in the rudiments of the Catholic religion and to teach him how to pray. Slave society counted on the support of the Church to teach workers the virtues of patience and humility, resignation and obedience to the established order. Brazilian Catholicism was a religion of formalistic obligations, an authoritarian religion in which the patriarchal family head assumed the role of religious leader. On plantations where there was a chaplain in residence, he was totally subordinate to the owner and entirely cut off from his bishop. He was responsible for educating the master's children and for saying mass, hearing confessions, and celebrating baptisms, marriages, and funerals. He was in no way prepared to practice or preach a religion of liberation. On the contrary, the religion he preached was one of penitence and fear. For the clergy, the cornerstones of morality were paternalistic charity for the masters and conformity and asceticism for the slaves: “There is no labor,” said Father Vieira in a sermon delivered to the slaves of an engenho in the Reconcavo of Bahia at the festival of St. John the Baptist in 1633.

no way of life, more similar to Christ’s cross and Passion than yours. ... Profit by this to sanctify your labor in conformity with, and imitation of, such an exalted and divine exemplar! In an engenho you are the imitators of Christ crucified because your suffering is very like the Lord’s suffering on the cross. ... Here, too, cane is not lacking, cane like that mentioned twice in the Passion. The Passion of Christ occurred partly in the night though he did not sleep, and partly in the day though he did not rest, and such are your nights and your days. Christ was naked and you, too, are naked. Christ was mistreated in every way, and so are you. Of irons, prisons, lashings, wounds, and ignominious names your imitation is made, which along with patience will win for you the rewards of the martyr. ... When you serve your masters, do not serve them as one who serves men but as one
who serves God. Because then you will serve not as captives but as free men, and you will obey not as slaves but as sons.

Similar exhortations may be found in the sermons preached by the regular and secular clergy. For the slave heaven awaited, but only after a life of privation and punishment. This was the Church’s way of justifying the shipment of slaves from Africa to Brazil. In the cities parish priests also practiced a highly formalized religion, in which sacraments were distributed in procession-spectacles, leaving to the lay confraternities and tertiary orders the real work of spreading the gospel. Slaves in fact had little personal contact with priests and chaplains. Most agricultural communities were visited by priests only on the feast day of the patron saint of the locality, at which time marriages, baptisms, and confessions were heard one after another in joyful chaos. The job of instructing new arrivals in religion was generally left to other slaves, whose mission was limited to explaining the outward signs rather than the inward content of religious practice. Such outward signs included the sign of the cross, the Credo, and the litanies of saints. The first prayer taught to the new slave was: “By the sign of the Holy Cross, deliver us, my God, Our Lord, from our enemies.” This was accompanied by three signs of the cross. In great houses slaves were assembled every Sunday and holiday for prayers at the hour of vespers and sometimes also in the morning and evening. It is easy to imagine what became of these Christian prayers when recited by slaves who knew little Portuguese and even less Latin. Some ejaculatory prayers were distorted into incomprehensible and meaningless formulas: for example, Resurrexit sicut dixit became “Reco, Reco Chico disse,” “Kist, Kist, Kist” was all that remained of Benedict XIII’s prayer, “Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ.” Most slaves were born, lived, and died amid the external appearances of religion but without any real contact with Christian doctrine. It was up to them to maintain or create a proper inner life, or even to practice ancestral religious rites under the benevolent eye of the master, who looked upon it all as play. For the master the real sign of Christianization was humility and obedience at work, or the slave’s use of a religious vocabulary to greet him with “Your blessing, my master,” to which the master invariably responded, “God bless you, amen.” These formulas are still widely used in traditional areas of northeastern Brazil.

To obey was therefore to learn the rudiments of Portuguese and the rudiments of Christian practice. Most important of all, however, was to learn to work well. This meant submitting to group discipline. On the
plantations, for example, just as the chaplain represented the master in role as educator and religious leader, the feitor or overseer represented him in his role as organizer of work and disciplinarian. The master could thus remain aloof and thereby preserve his image as a severe but just father, a kind ruler, and a mediator. In the coffee or cane fields, the slave worked in a team of 12–15 men or women. If deemed to have a talent for a more skilled job, he would be put to work under a more senior slave. The sugar mill and its machinery required all kinds of specialized workers. In the cities as well as on the farms masons, carpenters, cabinetmakers, and barbers had to be trained. More specialized jobs were often reserved for creole slaves or for blacks trained in Africa by their clan or tribe (for artisans were quite common in African villages). Children destined for a trade were placed in apprenticeship with an adult when they reached the age of eight, under the watchful eye of the master or overseer, who determined whether or not the young slave was capable of acquiring the necessary skill. In the cities masters found it profitable to hire out the services of well-trained slaves; it was common to place young slaves with older workers, often freed slaves, who became the temporary masters and educators of their young apprentices. Domestic slaves were of course exempt from the surveillance of the overseer and master, but they were closely watched by the mistress of the house. At the slightest sign of insubordination a slave could be sent to work in the fields, since the lot of the field hand was considered harder than that of the household slave. Masters who were not landowners could sell their troublesome slaves to coffee planters or to mine concessionaires in remote provinces.

Corporal punishment also served to maintain discipline by example. But recourse to such measures was not ordinary. No one would deny that some masters and mistresses were sadists. Generally speaking, however, neither the master nor the overseer went about whip in hand, ready to punish every minor infraction. Much more subtle methods were used to obtain obedience at work and humility toward the master. Masters preferred to work on the emotions of their slaves. They sought first to inspire respect, and a job well done could lead to mutual respect between master and slave. Whip and whipping post, chains, brass masks, irons, and pillories were last resorts for masters unable to obtain discipline by other means. They were used only when a slave refused to accept his position. When the black man did not manage to carve out the area of freedom he needed, when he found neither family nor group nor associates nor amusements of his own, then but only then did he refuse to accept the dis-
discipline of work and enter into the terrible realm of refusal, punishment, and rebellion.

Work discipline was not the same on a large sugar or coffee plantation as on a family farm where tobacco and manioc were grown and where the slave lived at close quarters with the master’s family, whose joy and suffering he shared. But the master was always the all-powerful ruler and commander, to whom the slave owed labor, humility, and loyalty. From the master’s point of view, the well-adapted slave was the complacent slave. But if the master saw complacency as a virtue, how did the slave see it? The slave’s goal was to transform obedience into pride and dignity. He sought to be a man of many loyalties, which is to say, his own man: not merely a conscientious and efficient instrument of “white” power but a man sharing in responsibility for the African community. Before attempting to describe the structure of black society and the nature of solidarity among blacks, I want to examine the slave’s true value in white society. By value I mean not price but influence and esteem. This matter, of course, is highly subjective.

**WHO KNOWS WHAT I AM WORTH?**

Legally, the slave was an item of movable property. His master deemed him worth the purchase price plus the cost of caring for him so that he could work. In the historiography of Brazil there are two powerful schools: one holds that slaves were very badly treated, the other that they were much better treated than most of the Brazilian population of today.

The slave’s obligations were to work in obedience and “Christian humility.” The master’s obligation was to protect his worker, who was after all a precious capital investment capable of providing a good return if properly cared for. Was the care the master took of a slave precisely proportional to the value he ascribed to that slave? That is hard to say, because some slave owners were responsible and others negligent. We have seen, moreover, that slave traffickers provided a constant flow of new manpower. Masters may have found it more expedient to replenish their “stock” with new workers. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the life expectancy of many plantation slaves has been calculated to be no more than seven years, which proves that seven years of labor provided a sufficient return on the capital invested in the slave’s purchase and upkeep to make the investment worthwhile. Sometimes the master found it more advantageous to increase his sugar or coffee harvest than to plant maize and
manioc, only to find himself short of cash to purchase what he needed to feed his workers. To judge from contemporary literature and government regulations, slaves could not always eat their fill, were not always decently clothed, and died for lack of essential medical care. The blackest descriptions come to us from such Jesuits as Georges Benci, Antonio Vieira, or Antonil. But the regular clergy in this period surely sought in every way possible to attenuate the unbearable aspects of slavery as an institution. The clergy believed that the slave, too, had a soul in need of protection.

And the church was concerned not only with saving slaves but also with saving their privileged owners. For the latter, salvation depended on charity. Hence good priests castigated wicked masters. The government, too, had an interest in protecting the labor force, since it wished to increase its own revenues by increasing production. The better a slave was cared for, the more productive he became.

The slave owner moreover was a veritable entrepreneur, who surely would not have deliberately allowed the capital needed for his enterprise to deteriorate. We know that the slave diet was far richer in calories, proteins, and carbohydrates than the diet of a poor Brazilian in the twentieth century. Slaves ordinarily ate manioc flour, corn, dried meat, game, local fruits such as bananas, oranges, lemons, and papaya, and molasses. Slaves residing near rivers or seacoasts ate fish and shellfish. In the cities slaves entitled to earn a little money of their own could go to the market and buy tasty and inexpensive dishes prepared by other slaves. In the countryside the “custom of Brazil” (as West Indians called it) was for the slave to have the use of a small plot on which he planted manioc and vegetables. Frequently he sold excess crops to his master or in the market of a nearby town. There were Homeric disputes between slave owners and church officials, because the master wanted his slaves to farm their own plots on Sundays, whereas a regulation adopted in 1700 required masters to give slaves one day off each week and to respect the Sabbath rest.

It is also widely believed that the slave died young because he worked too much. How much work is too much is a highly relative notion in fact. There is no doubt that slaves did work a great deal. Masters required all slaves to work in various jobs for fifteen to seventeen hours a day, and by tradition they were inflexible on this point. The great Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, whose renowned Masters and Slaves, the second edition of which was published in Rio de Janeiro in 1936, painted an almost idyllic portrait of Brazilian slavery, asserts that masters nearly always attached higher priority to productivity than to the slave’s health or life. Some his-
torians have described slaves in the mines as working to the point of exhaustion or even death. With more ample documentation and the use of travelers' reports, however, it has become possible to say that things were not as simple as they might seem. Terrifying accounts of slave labor do have some basis in reality, but broadly speaking the burden of work was unbearable only for short periods. In the countryside there were slack and busy times, following the cycle of harvests and seasons. In the mines heavy rains interrupted all activity. Night work was impossible everywhere, except in the sugar mills during the time when molasses was being cooked. The working day was marked by numerous pauses. Children and old people brought huge pots of water and soup to workers in the fields. There were also many nonworking holidays in the Brazilian calendar: Mauricio Goulart has calculated that there were no more than 250 working days per year.

Thus the high mortality rate among slaves cannot be explained as the result of excessive labor. It was a consequence, rather, of working conditions. The slave worked in very harsh climates. In the northeast it was hot and humid, sometimes very humid, throughout the year, and sudden changes in temperature were common. In the space of an hour the temperature could drop from 24 degrees centigrade to 18 degrees. In this part of the world slaves always wore light cotton clothes. Covers and coats were rare, and slight chills, left untreated, turned into chronic ailments that reduced resistance to bronchitis, diphtheria, and pneumonia. In central, western, and southern Brazil winters were harsh, temperatures often went down to freezing, and there was no heat in either the master's quarters or the slaves'. Slaves often did not have enough covers and woolens to protect themselves against the cold. Treatment for illness was crude at best. Few trained physicians traveled to the plantations to treat patients. The story is told of a group of French pharmacists who had signed on as crew members of French vessels, only to desert those vessels to travel about rural Brazil offering their services and especially their drugs to cure slaves on the coffee plantations. They made a fortune. This episode took place in the nineteenth century, but the two previous centuries also had their share of quacks and patent medicine salesmen. Even trained physicians, often unable to make the right diagnoses, found themselves as helpless in the face of illness as those whose only schooling was derived from common sense, greed, or the empirical teachings of witch doctors. Medicine in this period was based on medicinal plants. When the master of a sugar mill or coffee fazenda paid a doctor to make regular visits to the plantation, the same
doctor treated both the master’s family and the slaves. In the nineteenth century certain large coffee operations employed their own doctor and maintained a separate building as a hospital. A slave served as nurse.

Numerous diseases became endemic in Brazil: tuberculosis, syphilis, lice, scurvy, malaria, and often fatal dysentery and typhus. These diseases affected the entire population. Slaves often had less resistance than whites owing to poor hygienic conditions in the slave quarters. The mortality rate in Brazil was quite high in both the free and slave populations, but there were many elderly slaves, both men and women. In 1885 a law known as the “sexagenerian law” liberated nearly 120,000 slaves over age sixty, which was considered a ripe old age for that era. In addition, the black mortality rate was higher than the mortality rate for whites and those of mixed race, because whites had been subject to a process of selection lasting several centuries. Whites and mulattoes were inured to the hardships and showed themselves more resistant than blacks to certain infections. Blacks died at a greater rate because they could not adjust physically to the new conditions in which they were forced to live.

Thus the slave had to work to adjust not only to a new way of life and new forms of work but also to a new biological environment. His master asked him to accept white values and to seek his owner’s approval here below and in the Christian heaven hereafter. Did slaves accept the white man’s world? And if so, how did they relate to it? For slaves knew better than their masters their origins, their shortcomings, and their worth. Very quickly, too, they understood how indispensable they were to the white masters whom they served.
Refuges and Refusals

It was through work that blacks achieved the basic security indispensable for survival. If they did their work well, masters eased up on surveillance and left them alone. Slaves helped one another on the job, so that each man enjoyed the esteem and support of the entire group. But all people need some autonomy, and slaves could not get all they needed from the working group whether in town or in the countryside. Other refuges were essential. Slave owners were aware of this and tried to meet the need through religious associations or confraternities. But slaves found other refuges from their condition—some mysterious, some violent—and when these seemed to pose a danger to the slave system, the government and slave owners did not hesitate to combat them with every means at their disposal. In a sense, every slave association, whether authorized or prohibited, represented a refusal of, a protest against, an oppressive system. For slaves, to unite was to protest, even if that protest took the form of behavior sanctioned by the masters.

Refuges Accepted by the Masters

Slaves had little in common apart from their work. And even then there was much diversity: what did field hands have in common with shepherds and cowboys, or those who worked in the forests with those who worked in the savannah, or ancestor- or totem-worshippers with the followers of Islam? But slavery in fact, even as it destroyed the underpinnings of African society and indiscriminately mingled members of different ethnic groups, preserved the essential religious values of African society. Slave society was a melting pot out of which came a novel religion of which slave owners had no inkling. We are still largely in the dark about the nature of
this religion, and the interpretations that I am giving are tentative and should be treated with caution.

The slave was confronted with two forms of religious practice. First there was the Catholic religion, which, though difficult to assimilate, enjoyed the prestige of being the masters’ religion. It was based on a trinitarian God, more feared than loved, a God who was vengeful in this world but held out the promise of paradise in the next. Then there was African religion or, rather, there were African religions, as varied as were the peoples and communities of Africa itself. Gradually, however, these African religions tended to coalesce, to evolve toward a form acceptable to all, to broaden to the point where they could serve as a coherent cultural reference for the entire black community. Little by little there developed new forms of religion not based on the European or on any single African model. The slave saw his religious life as proceeding on two different levels; neither could be reduced to the other, and the two were compatible only because they did not intersect. The term “syncretism,” which is often used to describe the religious practices of black Brazilians, is in my opinion a misnomer, for there were in fact two parallel religious modes based on two entirely different sets of values. It was quite possible to be both a good Christian and a good “pagan,” for both religious systems were complete unto themselves. To be sure, from the early days of slavery until as late, perhaps, as the eighteenth century, there was a chaotic profusion of unorganized cults in Brazilian African communities, cults that are often referred to in the sources as “games” or “amusements.” But three “solutions” to the religious problem quickly came to the fore: the Bantu solution, the Fon-Yoruba solution, and, in the cities only, the Islamic solution.

Bantu religions were based on ancestor worship, which slavery destroyed by breaking the family tie. Bantu spirits were natural spirits, associated with certain African rivers, forests, and mountains. Again slavery broke the link, this time with nature. As a result, Bantu religions in Brazil were very susceptible to outside influences, and Bantu slaves adapted the Catholic and Indian cults of the dead to their own traditions. In the religious meeting places spirits—African orishas and Indian cabocles—were invoked separately, each in their own language, in a ceremony involving a trance that brought together members of two oppressed communities: Africans and native Indians. Or, to take another example, Bantu reinterpreted Catholicism in such a way that saints Benedict and Iphigenia became black saints who were worshipped as familial and national ancestors. It is common to contrast these Bantu cults with the Yoruban cult, which
remained closer to African models: for example, the candomblés of Bahia, the *chango* of Pernambuco and Alagoas, and the *batuques* of Porto Alegre were Yoruban religious ceremonies. Nago slaves from Guinea and Dahomey, who began to arrive in Brazil in large numbers during the eighteenth century, had a powerful influence on the less highly structured cults of the Bantus. Among the Yoruba of Africa, the orisha, or spirit, was the leader of the family, and each orisha had his own “confraternity” to chant for him. In Brazil, the ancestor worship disappeared but the confraternities remained. Priests grouped the worshipers of all orishas in a single organization. Each spirit was invoked in turn, in a specified order known as the *shiva*. In Africa, as soon as a worshiper was possessed by his orisha the ritual came to an end. In Brazil, divine possessions proliferated. The Yoruban cults, quite common in both urban and rural areas, were highly organized, centered on a *terreiro*, or cloistered religious community; in some cases equipped with its own buildings and places of worship and always with its own hierarchy. The slave found security in these cults, and the community enjoyed having its own sacerdotal hierarchy, a source of social prestige for those who rose from the ranks of ordinary worshipers. The religious leaders became the leader of the entire community, an extended family like the patriarchal family but free of all interference from whites. The slave had a period of time set aside for the Christian religion and another for an African religion. We do not know what psychological stress this situation may have caused. The need for solidarity and for a spiritual life must generally have encouraged the newcomer to accept the cult established by the most influential community leaders. But try to imagine what it must have been like for a Muslim to find himself in a group of slaves practicing an animistic religion, or for a Bantu to join a community where Yoruban influence dominated, or, even more complicated, for a creole slave to confront black religions whose meaning he no longer understood. All these individuals must have been forced to find some compromise, to grope toward a modus vivendi in which unresolved contradictions must have produced constant tension.

Masters authorized dances and celebrations in keeping with African customs, provided there was no conflict with morality or religion. They encouraged surviving African “folklore” but never allowed the open practice of genuine religious cults, which seemed to them incompatible with Christianity. Since the masters’ aim was to hasten the adaptation of black arrivals, such officially sanctioned folklore in many cases quickly lost its spontaneity and became an artificial exercise, particularly when it was sponsored
by the civil and religious authorities and organized within the framework of a Christian confraternity placed under the patronage of Our Lady of the Rosary. These confraternities, based on Portuguese models, had earlier been introduced into the Congo by Portuguese missionaries, who had some success in converting subjects of the Congolese kingdom. Congolese slaves were therefore allowed, with the master’s approval, to continue to worship in their own way, and a papal bull of 1681 gave instructions for organizing the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, set for the first Sunday in October. This included the election of a “king” and “queen” and of male and female judges, as well as African songs and dances, all under the watchful eye of whites, who even gave the elected leaders of the black community cash gifts to pay for the festivities.

How free were the slaves to choose their own leaders? Did the white-approved hierarchy coincide with the actual hierarchy of the black community? The responses to these two questions depend on the organization of the black community and on the charismatic qualities of its leaders. It was in the countryside that the master’s influence weighed most heavily. In the cities, white supervision was much less rigid, and blacks, owing to their large numbers, could gather by “nation.” We must be careful, however, not to underestimate the negative aspect of these ethnic solidarities, which destroyed the unity of the slave community and exacerbated inter-African rivalries.

The urban slave who sought to join a black community also faced another obstacle. In town, African culture was the culture of an ill-defined social class, which included both freed men and slaves. How many generations did it take before the children of a freed slave became socially assimilated, without any ties to the African culture of their ancestors? In some port cities, moreover, there was a constant influx of new arrivals from Africa, whereas the number of new arrivals from Europe was small, so that white society itself was heavily influenced by African culture.

As in the countryside, the first urban black associations were religious. They were modeled after religious confraternities, some imported from Portugal, some developed in Brazil itself, whose purpose was to involve laymen in the mission of spreading the faith. The earliest confraternities in the colonial cities had a white membership, and only after the towns began to grow in the late seventeenth century and the number of slaves and freed men increased did we see the first “colored” confraternities emerge. Free men, freed slaves, and slaves were grouped according to ethnic back-
ground: for example, Our Lady of Baixa-dos-Sapateiros of Bahia admitted only Angolan blacks, whereas Our Lord of the Redemption was composed exclusively of Gégés. Other confraternities accepted only mulattoes, and hence creoles. By the eighteenth century, however, less exclusive confraternities were formed, and in the following century, when civic associations increasingly supplanted religious organizations, ethnic distinctions lost almost all significance. These urban confraternities had a very simple hierarchy—the same for both black and white confraternities. The directorate, which served for one year, consisted of male and female judges, a procurator charged with investigating the private lives of members, a treasurer, and a secretary. The directorate chose the year's "king" and "queen." Wealthy confraternities had their own church, while others occupied an altar in a conven or a parish church, where black and white confraternities sometimes came together.

As both a religious organization and a mutual aid society, the confraternity was supposed to cultivate the faith of its members and, through dues collected, to aid those in need, including invalid slaves cast out by their masters and young women without dowries; money was also collected to pay for manumissions. For reasons of social prestige masters often made large gifts to selected confraternities. Collections were organized both inside and outside the church. Some confraternity members left bequests to the community when they died. As a result, certain confraternities became economically powerful and invested in real estate or spent large sums to decorate their chapels; they also made loans at interest and played an important social role. The confraternity was a corporatist institution that fostered social cohesion and helped to regulate social relations between groups separated by skin color, economic power, and cultural heritage. What proportion of the slaves and freed population belonged to confraternities? Were they reserved for a privileged few? Organizations claiming the patronage of Jesus or his mother or some favored saint were so numerous that it seems reasonable to assume that nearly every black could have found at least one community ready to meet his or her material and spiritual needs. It was easy to belong to more than one confraternity if piety demanded, since these were primarily religious organizations and not mutual aid groups. Confraternities organized celebrations, masses and processions, confessions and communions; they taught religion and kept a watch on the spiritual life of the faithful. Unbaptized members were not admitted. Neither were unmarried couples, at least in theory. Confraternal con-
stitutions were approved by the authorities. The wills of freed slaves preserved in notarial archives are most edifying: among the members of confraternities one finds a constant concern to enjoy a “good death.” In the churches we can still admire all sorts of paintings and sculptures on the themes of Christ on the Cross, Christ in the Tomb, and the Mater Dolorosa. Death, burial, and indeed all rites of passage—from confession to communion to extreme unction to prayers for the dead—fell within the purview of the confraternities. Close as the Brazilian black may have remained to his African culture, and to whatever degree he participated in traditional forms of worship of which we know very little because he was obliged to hide them, he was intensely preoccupied by the desire to die a good death. He counted on the protection of his creator, the Virgin Mary, his patron saint, his guardian angel, and all the saints in heaven. And he took a passionate interest in the funeral rites, be they splendid or simple, and prayers for the repose of his soul that his confraternity would observe after he was gone.

We cannot state with any assurance that these confraternities, Catholic in form, also provided the institutional setting for the practice of African religious cults. In Salvador, however, we do find some support for this hypothesis: the Nago-Yoruba of the Ketu nation met, we are told, in the church of the Barroquinha and formed the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Good Death, which staged a procession every August 15. But oral tradition of the Nago-Yoruba, who still practice their religions in Bahia today, holds that it was not until 1830 that a true African religion was organized when a “saint’s father” (Babalarixa) and a fortune-teller and priest of Ifé, the god of divination (or Babalao), were brought from Africa. The two priests are supposed to have come to Brazil as slaves of two freed women who returned to Africa to find them and bring them back. In any case, African cults never practiced their rites in the same places used for Catholic rites. The African or his children might practice two religions simultaneously, but each had its own rules, its own setting, its own physical space. It is therefore hard to see how Catholic churches could have been used by African cults.

No doubt blacks did, however, take advantage of the freedom of association they enjoyed in the confraternities to make contacts that may well have led to meetings for other purposes. In Salvador, at any rate, African cults remained clandestine until the middle of the nineteenth century. They were severely persecuted by the police. Consider, for example, the following excerpts from the press for 1855, eloquent in their dryness:
Arrested and placed at the disposition of the police were Christovam Francisco Tavares, emancipated African, Maria Salomé, Joanna Francisco, Leopoldina Maria de Conceição, Escolastica-Maria de Conceição, free creoles, slaves Rodolpho Araújo Sa Barretto, mulatto, Melanió, creole, and African women Maria Thereza, Benedicta, Silvana with nursling, and Maria, also with son, who were at the place known as Engenho Velho in a meeting to which they referred as a candomblé. [Jornal da Bahia, 5 May 1855]

On the night of the twelfth, a house in Victoria parish known as a candomblé and used for various purposes as a meeting place, was encircled. Most of the group consisted of gullible people who gave offerings to have their fortunes told. The thirty-two people arrested were transferred during the morning of the day before yesterday to the prison of the Aljube. [Jornal da Bahia, 15 April 1855]

African cults probably always existed in colonial Brazil, meeting clandestinely and sporadically in the hope of escaping persecution. The dominant class did not concern itself with these cults unless they somehow threatened law and order.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century a new type of association between freed men and slaves in the cities began to emerge: the so-called manumission societies, a sort of loan fund managed by Africans. Each member had a small square stick on which an official of the society marked his deposits with cuts. Another African was given responsibility for collections. The money collected, generally in small copper coins, could be loaned out at interest, especially for the purpose of purchasing manumission. At the end of the year, dividends were distributed. It is not known whether the membership of these associations was restricted to people of certain ethnic groups, but we do know that at about the same time various lay organizations for mutual worker aid were formed, such as the Society of Artisans or the Poor Man's Protective Society. Only blacks could belong to these groups, whose statutes make no reference to any ethnic restrictions.

As the nineteenth century progressed, ethnic antagonisms, which had been so important in earlier periods, gradually faded. The evidence of wills shows clearly that emotional bonds no longer have anything to do with belonging to the same African nation. A change of attitude? A desire to establish a true African community by glossing over controversial issues? It is hard to know for sure. In any case, it seems that lay associations of this
type did not exist in the cities of the interior, and especially in Minas Gerais. There the confraternities must have supplanted for the propagation of the faith the religious orders banned by the government, whereas in the Atlantic ports the Jesuits, Franciscans, Carmelites, and Benedictines played a major role in catechizing Africans. In the interior, the secular clergy, all of Portuguese origin, were the sole representatives of religious authority, and as society in the mining regions was regimented and closely watched, the Catholic priest must have seemed more like an army chaplain than a pastor. The confraternities were therefore an essential part of the government's efforts to attenuate the system's authoritarian aspects. They helped to bring blacks into the fold of official Catholicism. The prescriptions of Christian morality were here taken more seriously than in the northeast, and slaves were married to prevent concubinage. Many black confraternities in the Minas accepted whites as members, no doubt owing to fraternization on the job between free men and slaves. Manumission was never a leading concern of confraternities in the mining regions, because slaves could always hope to strike it rich and overnight become wealthy enough to buy their freedom.

The confraternities were real melting pots for Africans: everyone enjoyed the same social condition, without distinction as to ethnic background or color. But antagonisms did sometimes develop between creoles and Africans, freed men and slaves, mulattoes and blacks. For example, in the diamond region of the Minas, the confraternity of Our Lady of Tijuco split into two groups when a creole faction left to found the confraternity of Our Lady of Mercy, the confraternity of the "natural creoles of Brazil." Among the freed slaves of the Minas there was a large mixed-race population, and relatively well educated half-breeds were able to wield substantial influence in the face of white society. It was no longer color that divided the economic forces, but social status, since some blacks as well as mulattoes were able to become artisans, professionals, and even landowners and farmers. This trend developed around 1760, as mine output declined, leading to a decrease in new slave arrivals. The slave stock was not replenished. Hence it was easier to assimilate, at least in appearance, those already there. The opposite happened in the coffee-growing regions, where one found few blacks or half-breeds working as artisans owing to competition from large numbers of white European immigrants. In these areas solidarity was usually the result of violence and confrontation.
The following notice appeared in the *Journal da Bahia* for 14 November 1857:

Fled on 31 January while on his way to buy bread at Bonfim, the Mina slave David, average height, stout, three lines on either side of his face, always smiling, he has been spotted between Calçada and Bonfim. It is believed that he has been taken into a home, and a complaint has been lodged already for work days lost and for objects that he took with him. Whoever captures and returns him to his master at Hospice no. 44 shall receive a reward of 20,000 reis.

Or consider this notice, published in the *Diário de Rio* in 1826: “Disappeared from the home of Antonio José Moreira Pinto, a nameless bossale black.”

Along with suicide and murder, flight was a way for the maladjusted slave to give outward expression to inward rebelliousness. The runaway slave fled not only his master and his work but the insuperable problems of daily life. He also fled his station in life, his lack of roots in either the slave or the white community. David, sent to buy bread in the Bonfim district of Bahia, was certainly no newcomer to Brazil, whereas the runaway in Rio had landed quite recently, so recently, in fact, that he had not yet received a new name. Not speaking Portuguese, he took a great risk in trying to escape. But both men refused the lot of the slave, always to give and never to receive, and both chose to run away in search of support, assistance, and affection. Creoles and ladinos, men and women, young and old, people of all walks of life and many different backgrounds filled the “runaway slaves” columns of the Brazilian newspapers. Slaves left city jobs as well as plantations: “Fled from the Timbo plantation belonging to Ignácio Borges de Barros, a slave named Maria, Nago nation, short and fat, face highly marked, missing upper portion of the right ear, because of which she always wears a turban on her head. Anyone returning her to her owner or providing accurate information as to her whereabouts shall be well rewarded for his trouble” (*Jornal da Bahia*, 23 January 1855). Slaves fled in the worst of circumstances, unaware that distinctive signs, as in this case Maria’s ear, would lead to easy detection. The country was strange, immense, hostile. Only a few slaves living along the borders could hope to reach a neighboring land. Some stowed away on ships sailing for Africa,
only to be discovered at the first inspection. Some hoped to find a better master and only went from Charybdis to Scylla. Any escapee who did not find refuge with a group was doomed to be captured. Communities of rebel slaves were repeatedly established throughout the long history of Brazilian slavery. Some runaways were lucky enough to be accepted by Indian tribes. If a slave succeeded in marrying an Indian man or woman, the law declared both the slave and the children of the marriage free, for the government, solicitous of the Indians’ welfare from the early eighteenth century on, hoped in this way to prevent unscrupulous masters from reducing the Indians to slavery by encouraging intermarriage with slaves. Sometimes a slave would try repeatedly to return to the plantation after being sold in town. Another might flee the country for the city. Some even had counterfeit manumission papers drawn up. Some runaways got what they wanted: the person with whom they sought refuge purchased them from their former master, giving the slave the right to work for a master of his own choosing. It was practically impossible to live by oneself in a country as vast as Brazil, but even when couples fled together they were in for a very dangerous adventure. Consider this story, for example, told by Hercule Florence, who, during a voyage to Amazonia in 1841 found on an island near the Itupuerama Cataract a black woman who had been living alone for three months. She and her husband, both slaves at Camapuá, had run away, traveled down the river Pardo and back up the Parana and the Tietê, finally taking refuge on a little island where they built a cabin. They had six happy months together, hunting and fishing, until one day the husband drowned while trying to swim across the river. An hour after being discovered, the woman was returned to her master.

We have no idea how many slaves ran away. It must have been more difficult to flee a plantation than a job in the city. Escapes were probably easier during wartime. Running away probably became quite tempting in the 1870s, by which time a fair proportion of the free population subscribed to abolitionist ideas and was willing to aid fugitives. What about slaves who saved enough money to buy their freedom but whose masters refused to manumit them? Did they then attempt to gain their freedom by running away? If so, they did not often succeed. One slave, for example, had made a fortune while working on his own, away from his master, and owned six slaves of his own. In exchange for his freedom he offered four of those slaves to his owner, when he was recognized and arrested by the police. The master flatly refused to free the man and, to add insult to injury, took possession of his six slaves.
Fugitive slaves were almost always captured. Informers were attracted by offers of reward. Those who might help were deterred by fear of punishment. The Brazilian church offered no right of asylum. Captured fugitives often refused to give the name of their master. They rotted in prison, and some slave owners were hardly eager to have them back, for it was often more expedient to "forget" about a fugitive than to pay the costs of his capture and upkeep. In 1876 the Aljube prison in Bahia held 403 unclaimed fugitives. Throughout Brazil prisons were crowded with abandoned runaways.

The slave who fled an unbearable situation had nothing to lose and hoped to improve his luck. But, for others there seemed to be no exit, and in their despair they resorted to suicide. Suicides were more common in the cities than in the countryside, even though the urban slave enjoyed greater autonomy than his brother in the fields. Police reports, in their cruelly crisp style, tell us some things that drove slaves to suicide: the impossibility of complaining to the authorities about unjust treatment, inability to pay the master the sum due under the terms of a contract for a slave de ganho, false accusations, fear of being sold and forced to move long distances, a failed escape attempt, a discovered theft. It was always fear that led to suicide, for which many means were found: asphyxia from swallowing one's own tongue, hanging, strangulation, eating dirt. It was common to punish slaves caught eating dirt by forcing them to wear zinc masks. But what could be done about the slave who let himself die of consumption? Slaves who decided that they wanted to die stopped eating, lost weight, and faded away: this was the so-called banzo, or slow suicide, a kind of terminal nostalgia. Slaves committed suicide far more often than free men: in 1865, for example, four out of five suicides in Sergipe involved slaves. In Rio in 1866, it was sixteen out of twenty-three. And in Bahia in 1848, it was twenty-eight out of thirty-three, including two creole slaves. These figures may be misleading: if an angry master killed a slave, he might try to disguise the death as a suicide, whereas conversely, suicides by free men or women might have been declared to be natural deaths so as to obtain a church burial.

Sometimes slaves reacted to their plight not by running away or committing suicide but by resorting to violence. With the same shovel, hoe, spade, or knife he used on the job a slave could kill the master or the overseer who was always punishing him or his mother or his friend. Recalcitrant slaves, or those reputed to be recalcitrant, were sometimes subjected to terrible punishments. Repression led to rebellion, a vicious circle from
which the slave could escape only by invoking the law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The least punishment that a master could inflict on a slave was to confine him, usually in chains. Every plantation had its iron collars and bracelets and masks and trunks (see Glossary) for holding slaves fixed by the neck or ankle or torso for days at a time. In the nineteenth century even free European colonists were subjected to the trunk on coffee plantations. Until 1824 it was legal to mutilate disobedient slaves—they could be branded with hot irons, their fingers could be crushed with thumbscrews, and their ears and toes could be cut off—and such punishments were not uncommon. But the whip remained the primary instrument of repression. Its use was not abolished until 1886. To be sure, in 1830 a regulation prohibited administering more than fifty lashes at a time. As a result, punishments of 300–400 lashes were spread out over several days, which lessened the danger of killing the slave, the likely result if the entire punishment had been meted out at one session. Reaction to such punishments sometimes took the form of collective violence, as was the case with eleven slaves from Campinas near São Paulo, who murdered the overseer Malaquias in 1868. This overseer detested the slave Raphael and used any pretext to whip him or tie him to the stake. One day the slaves begged the overseer to pardon Raphael. When he refused, they killed him with shovels. A case of unpremeditated murder? That is not clear: these slaves meted out their own justice, because the courts were closed to them. They could not take complaints to court directly but had to be represented either by their master or by a third party, which was not easy, particularly in the countryside.

Slaves who committed murder were always sentenced to death until 1876, when the death penalty was abolished for everyone in Brazil. Brazilian historiography and legal anthologies stress this problem. The masters never felt entirely secure. Even when the danger of overt violence was small, they still worried about being poisoned. Repeated small doses of certain poisons were known to cause death. So great was the fear of slow poisoning that when a master found out that one of his slaves was a “sorcerer” or “witch doctor” who knew something about herbs and magic, he often hastened to sell him. He also knew that the slave who hated his white masters had his own ways of taking revenge, such as voodoo magic that could make people sick or kill as surely as a poisoned arrow. Whites trembled before the dark forces that they believed Africans capable of unleashing. It is difficult to say whether crime was more common in the slave
than in the free population: the few existing studies of the question are not very convincing. It appears, however, that the crime rate was lower among slaves, probably owing to tight surveillance and strict regimentation.

Subtle forms of opposition, not quite criminal, were extremely common, however. Forced to labor, buffeted back and forth between white and black leaders, between the masters and their friends, the slave—obedient, loyal, and humble as he was, and utterly devoid of power and authority—had his own means of protesting against his situation. He was capable of many kinds of sabotage. Some acts the master eventually discovered, such as thefts of food, clothing, money, and above all merchandise, which was constantly spirited away from coffee fazendas and diamond mines. Other forms of protest undermined the authority of leaders: slowdowns, repeated work stoppages, spoiled work, harassment of blacks and creoles who served the master. Protest began in the master’s own house. A cook ordered to do a chambermaid’s work by a tactless mistress would never do the job properly. The queen of the household was the old black nurse, one of the senior members of the black community, the “uncles” and “aunts” of whom the slaves were sometimes more wary than they were of their white masters. Deceiving the master was a game justified by the oppression of which the slaves were victims. Slaves sang the following song with anger in their voices:

Branco diz o preto furta
Preto furta com razão
Sinho branco tambem furta
Qunado faz a escravidão

The white man says: the black man steals.
The black man steals for good reason.
Mister white man also steals
When he makes us slave

One form of collective resistance was for a group of slaves to make off with a portion of the harvest and sell it to a dealer in stolen goods. In a system based on forced labor, rebellions—some organized, some not, some spontaneous, others planned—were inevitable. It may have seemed less risky to slaves to rebel as a group or to hide in so-called quilombos than it was for individuals to run away or disobey orders, and collective action was certainly less desperate than suicide.
COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE: QUILOMBOS AND INSURRECTIONS

A quilombo was a hideout where fugitive slaves gathered. To flee to such hiding places was not the same thing as to engage in organized insurrection against white power. The slaves hiding in the quilombo wanted no trouble and resorted to violence only if attacked by the police or army or if necessary for survival. Quilombos and mocambos (forest hideouts) were found all over Brazil from the sixteenth century on. Does this indicate a reaction against the slave system? A return to African ways of life far from the masters’ rule? A protest against the conditions of slavery more than against slavery as such? A desire to practice African religions in freedom? The quilombos were all these things. They were a product of the instability of the slave system, of an unimaginative work regime, of harsh discipline, injustice, and mistreatment. They offered a resolution to the problems of slaves torn between the white and the black community. They appeared suddenly in large numbers in a society in which blacks were in the majority and the police were totally incapable of preventing the establishment of such marginal communities. The quilombolas, as the slaves gathered in the quilombos were called, found the support they needed to live on the fringes of society. Yet quilombos were never planned. They grew up spontaneously. A single hideout might shelter black Africans and creoles, slaves and even free men victimized by some discriminatory law. Among the free and freed men in the quilombos were often deserters, thieves, murderers, sometimes joined by men who had been forbidden to practice a certain trade. Thus the inhabitants were quite a varied lot. Most quilombos were hidden in hard-to-reach rural areas, far from the cities, the highways, and the plantations. This was the case, for example, with the celebrated quilombo dos Palmares, which was established in the seventeenth century in the interior of the present-day state of Alagoas, then attached to the captaincy of Pernambuco. It was also true of the very famous mocambo of Pará, established around 1820 northwest of Manaus in the forest along the Trombetas River. But some quilombos were established just outside of large cities. The army did not manage to destroy the Bahian quilombo of Cabula, hidden in the heavily wooded recesses of the woods around Salvador, until the early nineteenth century. A royal “provision” of 6 March 1741 laid it down that a quilombo was any clandestine group of more than five fugitive slaves. Nineteenth-century provincial laws reduced the number to two or three. But there were enormous differences between a quilombo inhabited by hundreds or even thousands of fugitives and a hut
that offered refuge to a handful of slaves. The larger quilombos created whole new social organizations, with their own hierarchies and economic and political authorities, while the smaller ones were shifting, unstable alliances among fugitives who lived by pillage and behaved rather like guerrillas. It is said that when the quilombo of Palmares was destroyed in 1695, thirty thousand fugitive slaves resided there, and that when the mocoambo of Trombetas was destroyed in 1823, it was home to some two thousand people! Most quilombos were inhabited by a few hundred men and women. Their population varied with time and circumstances. The only ones we know much about are those with which the forces of law and order came into contact. All signs suggest that hostility from the outside forced these communities to organize and become truly independent centers of production. To delve a little more deeply into life in the quilombos, I have chosen three that seem to me typical.

My first example is the quilombo dos Palmares, mentioned earlier: in 1630 Holland established a base in Pernambuco. The Portuguese recruited a black regiment led by the black hero Henrique Dias, who helped them fight the Batavian invaders. But other blacks, such as Calabar, organized to fight their former masters and collaborated with the enemy, while still others simply fled, thereby bringing down upon themselves the fury of both the Dutch and the Portuguese. Hiding in the lush, impenetrable forest of Palmares, where resources were abundant, these fugitives established a “republic,” sixty square leagues in area and containing several towns: Zumbi, Arotirene, Tabocas, Dambrangaga, Subupira, Osenga, and Macaco, the capital, a fairly large town of some 1,500 dwellings. In 1643 the republic of Palmares had a population of six thousand. By 1670 it had climbed to twenty thousand. Subupira, the military training center, was a fortified village of eight hundred huts. The first elected leader of this republic was “King” Ganga-Zumba, who was murdered in 1678 because he had agreed to negotiate with the whites and to sign a peace treaty. His successor, the legendary Zumbi, embodied the idea of black resistance. Each king governed from his own village, which became the capital of the quilombo. They were assisted by a council of elders, chosen from among the heads of other villages. The king and village leaders had their own bodyguards. In Palmares one could find priests of all religions, Catholic and African. Any fugitive slave who sought refuge in the quilombo dos Palmares was considered a free man. On the other hand, a slave captured and brought to the quilombo remained a slave, though he was allowed to purchase his freedom. Only the leaders were well dressed. Ordinary people
were not allowed to carry arms. Murder, adultery, and theft were severely punished. Palmares, like all quilombos, lacked women, and residents did not hesitate to embark on female-hunting expeditions to remote engenhos and towns. People lived by fishing and gathering as well as by raising corn, manioc, sweet potatoes, beans, and sugar cane, all of which were grown within the republic’s borders. Hunting provided meat. Cattle and other livestock were not bred, but chickens moved around the huts. Masons, carpenters, tinsmiths, weavers, and potters all practiced their trades, and Palmares traded with the Dutch and even with the Portuguese. It took eighteen Dutch and Portuguese expeditions in all before Palmares was subdued, and historians still argue about whether the experiment should be seen as a novel but rational attempt to create an elective monarchy or as an expression of cultural resistance, of “tribal regression.” Was this a “flight to Africa?” And if so, to what Africa, since Palmares was home to men from so many different backgrounds and social classes?

Innumerable expeditions were also required to subdue the quilombo of Trombetas in Para. In the Para region Indian workers were plentiful and there were relatively few Africans. The quilombo was established in 1821 when the *cafiga* (mixed black and Indian) Atanasio, a slave of Major Martinho da Fonseca Seixas, took to the forest with forty companions. It took in survivors of two other well-known quilombos—Inferno and Cipotema, which were destroyed in 1812—along with other fugitives, who arrived in groups of twenty, thirty, or even a hundred. Atanasio was a despot who liked to sow fear everywhere. He had his subjects grow manioc and tobacco of good quality. His men gathered cacao and *salsaparilha* (sarsaparilla), a spice used in cooking and as a medication. These products were traded in large quantities in the port of Obidos, where the quilombolas of Trombetas did not hesitate to show themselves. Their commercial contacts reached as far as Dutch Guyana and remote regions inhabited by scattered Indian tribes. The police managed to destroy Trombetas in 1823, but Atanasio, taken prisoner, escaped and established a second quilombo in the same region which endured until 1835. Survivors of that quilombo then moved farther upriver and founded the hamlet of Cidade Maravilha, the “marvelous city,” a city so peaceful that its itinerant merchants could travel freely downriver to sell their wares. We know that in 1852 some of them came to have their children baptized in Catholic churches. If they happened to encounter their former masters, they asked for a blessing and were allowed to go unmolested.

Our final example is the quilombo known as Buraco do Tatu, near
Salvador, founded in the middle of the eighteenth century. It lived by theft, preying mainly on blacks who came to town from nearby plantations to sell food on the open market. This quilombo had confederates in the free as well as the slave population of Salvador, who provided it with food and weapons. To avoid possible reprisals, white planters preferred to collaborate with the fugitives of Buraco do Tatu, who, because they were not inclined to make total war on the whites to liberate their captive brethren, were not felt to be particularly dangerous. The village of Buraco do Tatu consisted of thirty-two rectangular houses arranged in six rows separated by a broad central street. Each house sheltered a monogamous couple, to judge from the lists drawn up when the quilombo was destroyed, which show sixty-five adults, including one creole black and two “sorcerers,” one a mandingue, the other an old woman. The lists do not mention children, because children found in the quilombos generally became the property of members of the expeditionary force sent out to crush the fugitives. The village was quite similar to Bantu villages in northwest Africa, with its ramps reinforced by a series of twenty-one traps, cleverly camouflaged with leaves and branches, a booby-trapped entrance, and a central house. Inside the village were a few fruit trees and herb gardens. Two leaders shared power: Captain Antonio de Souza, the military leader, and Teodoro, the administrative head of the community. Each leader had a wife who was given the title of “queen.” In 1763 it took two hundred men, mostly Indians, to destroy this quilombo. During the attack four quilombolas were killed. None of the prisoners was sentenced to death. The leaders were sent to the galleys, the rest received corporal punishment. Thirty-one slaves were returned to their masters and branded with the letter F for fugitive, as set forth in the royal ordinance of 1741. The story of Buraco do Tatu is truly exemplary: like nearly all the quilombos of Brazil, it had fewer than one hundred residents and was established near a town in which it had many confederates. It was a community of rebels, welded together by the solidarity born of insincerity in the face of oppression.

These groups of hard-core intransigents naturally provoked a reaction by the forces of law and order. As early as the seventeenth century we find mention of an official known as the capitão-do-mato or capitão-do-campo (bush captain), generally a free man of color whose job was to capture fugitive slaves. He went from plantation to plantation inquiring whether any slaves had escaped. Accompanied by trained dogs and perhaps one or two men, the bush captain was adept at man hunting. If he captured a fugitive, he received an amount proportional to the distance covered. The
law required the master to retrieve his slave from the prison of the nearest town, where he had to pay the costs of captivity plus the amount due to the bush captain. Quite a few of these bush captains neglected their duties. Some hired other people to do the job, while others put captured slaves to work for their own benefit. Often they were paid by the mother, concubine, or wife of a fugitive to look the other way. Since this system did not work very well, various quasi-military organizations were set up in the nineteenth century: “companies” of forest patrols, infantry, and militia. For major expeditions the army and Indians were brought in. Yet the number of quilombos continued to grow rapidly, even in the nineteenth century when the forces of order were well organized; this suggests that Brazilian society was unable to quell the rebellion in its midst, and indeed that many Brazilians served as its accomplices.

The problem was rather different when it came to dealing not with relatively peaceful quilombos but with open rebellion that posed a threat to the established order. Although the government could tolerate reasonably inoffensive marginal communities, it was terrified of organized insurrection. The law defined the enemy: “A gathering of twenty or more slaves intending to secure their freedom by means of force.” Fear of mutiny was endemic in areas where there were large numbers of slaves or descendants of slaves. This was the case in the agricultural and mining regions and even in some parts of northern Brazil where natural crops were gathered. Actual insurrections were rare; most of the time it was just a matter of rumors that an insurrection was being planned. Conspirators were almost always arrested before they had time to act. If a spontaneous, unplanned uprising occurred, it was generally disorganized and easily put down.

The best-known (as well as the most studied) insurrections occurred in Bahia between 1807 and 1835, that is, at the end of the colonial period and in the early days of independence. Decolonization and the establishment of a nation state (1808–1840) created two kinds of tension in Bahia: tension within the slave class and tension within the class of free men, where there was conflict between the interests of the most powerful groups and those of the less fortunate. Each white mutiny and slave rebellion had its unique characteristics, shaped by specific but ever-changing economic and political circumstances. In the uprising of 1807, the plan was for the slaves from the engenhos of the Reconcavo to join the slaves of the city at the city gates. Together, these slaves, led by Hausas, were supposed to attack the whites, kill the masters, poison the public fountains, seize several ships anchored in the harbor, and sail for Africa. But the plot
was betrayed and the rebellion nipped in the bud. Its leaders were sentenced to death. The secret was better kept in December 1808, when Nago and Hausa slaves organized a similar uprising: it took a pitched battle fifty kilometers outside of Salvador to put down the rebellion. Another plot was foiled by troops in 1810. Four years later, slaves attacked a fishery in the Itapóia region, killing the administrator, his family, and several whites who happened to be on the premises and setting fire to the buildings. Troops were sent up from nearby Salvador, and after a battle lasting several hours the rebellion was quelled. Of the fifty-six dead found on the field of battle, nearly all were, once again, Hausas. Witnesses reported that their battle cry had been, “Freedom, long live the Negroes and their King, death to whites and mulattoes.” A court condemned four men to be hanged on the square of the Piédade and twenty-three others to be deported to Mozambique after a public flogging.

The wave of rebellions nevertheless continued in the towns as well as on the engenhos of the Bahian Reconcavo. Between 1816 and 1835, for example, there were five major uprisings. In 1830, twenty armed slaves de ganho attacked the slave depot belonging to the merchant Wenceslau Miguel de Almeida and freed one hundred newly arrived captives before they were taken by the police. But the last, most serious, and best organized of all the insurrections, which caused genuine panic in the white population of the city, took place on 25 January 1835. It came close to succeeding. The twenty-fifth of January was the date of the very popular festival of Our Lady of La Guia, which was celebrated in the church of Bonfim. The time set for the uprising to begin was the hour when slaves left their homes to fetch water from the public fountains. The plan, simple yet clever, was to distract the police by setting fires, which would also force the troops to leave their barracks. The insurgents, abetted by the ensuing confusion, would then disarm the soldiers and join the slaves from the Reconcavo. The plan had more chance of success than its predecessors, for previous rebellions had for the most part begun outside the city and the troops had been able to crush them fairly quickly. But once again, the plot was betrayed and the revolt cut short, despite a promising beginning: a small group of slaves did manage to intimate the guards of the provincial president’s palace for several hours and to hold off an entire battalion of infantry.

The rebellion of 1835 was organized by slaves adhering to Islam. Was it a kind of “holy war” against the Christians? J.-J. Reis, in his study of insurrections among Bahian slaves, has shown that the role of the Muslim slaves
was one of organization, of enforcing discipline and setting an example. The way Muslims helped one another inspired other Africans deprived of family, home, and community. Yet the 1835 uprising, like its predecessors, remained a “prepolitical” movement. It was political only to the extent that its goal was to seize power in order to redistribute it. Islam functioned as a common language, a catalyst. It welded together the slave community. The rebels’ battle cry was, “Death to the whites, long live the Nago,” and the fighting had no religious overtones. After 1835, moreover, the masters, seeing the situation as it was, declared war on Africans, and above all on freed Africans, large numbers of whom had been found among the rebels. Those who were arrested were deported to Africa. The government attempted to encourage Africans who wished to return to their native lands to do so. For the rebels looked upon whites, mulattoes, and creoles as so many enemies to overcome. Here we touch upon one of the reasons that all these attempts at rebellion failed: the slave community lacked cohesion and unity in its struggle against the authorities. It was unable to overcome its internal conflicts, its divisions between creoles and Africans, blacks and half-breeds, freed blacks and mulattoes.

Another reason for the failure of the rebellions was the effectiveness of repression: the army was strong and informers were plentiful. By attacking the entire free population—whites, creoles, and mulattoes—rebel Africans ultimately aroused a united “Brazilian front” against them. Solidarity born of intransigence came and went as slaves lived their daily lives. And the white authorities knew how to take advantages of every chink in the rebels’ armor. Eventually the uprisings became the pretext for new proscriptions. Every rebellion led to more and more minute regulations. In 1807, for example, slaves were forbidden to move about freely after nine o’clock at night without written authorization from their masters. In 1814 batuques, songs and dances accompanied by a drum, hitherto considered innocuous, were banned. In 1832 a municipal ordinance provided for a fine of 8,000 reis or four days in prison for any slave owner who allowed a slave to loiter in town “for longer than required to make necessary purchases.” Regulation after regulation was established, the combined effect of which was to limit slave movements so effectively that rebellion became impossible after 1840. Exploiting the panic created by the insurrections, the ruling classes terrorized the rest of the free population, cowed as it was by the black avalanche. The rulers exploited tensions between slaves and freed men of different ethnic stock and prevented the formation of a unified group bound together by common interests.
Thus those who rejected the slave system, from inhabitants of peaceful quilombos to members of secret associations of would-be rebels, never succeeded in rousing the entire slave population. The intransigents remained marginal and for the most part led precarious lives. To dissatisfied slaves they represented an almost mythical possibility of escape. But the dissatisfied were never able to unite and so to give force to their dream of freedom. For most slaves that dream eventually faded; the maladjusted managed to adjust and in many ways those who should have come together drew apart. This socialization created new men whose hopes were not incompatible with the organization of society as a whole. In the next section we shall discuss the new dreams of manumission and assimilation and try to understand how these affected the daily lives of humble men and women.

**The Hope of Manumission**

As we have seen, Brazilian society was able to afford its slaves limited but real areas of freedom—freedom essential for allowing slaves to forge new individual and social identities. The slave’s life had two sides: a dual hierarchy, a dual morality, dual rules of behavior. To accept this dual life was really the only viable solution, since escape and rebellion nearly always ended in failure. Socialization eventually integrated the slave into this Janus-faced world, but his integration was ambiguous. The slave adapted by accommodating himself to his new surroundings. But insofar as he remained a slave without any possibility of individual advancement, he was imperfectly integrated into the larger society. Not until he became a free man, or at least envisaged the possibility of becoming free, did the slave complete the transition from wretched captive to hopeful citizen, cleverly and ambitiously seeking to improve his lot. Only then did the slave truly adapt to his environment, like the spider, the tortoise, or the chameleon; only then did he make use of cunning, that arm of the weak and oppressed, to make himself seem humble, loyal, and obedient to his masters and yet a worthy brother to his companions in servitude. The slave thus experienced his dual life as a temporary state of affairs, which would eventually lead to a better life, not the remote paradise promised by the priests but the life of freedom to be gained through manumission.

In reality, very few slaves were set free because in the first place manumission was a matter decided by the master and beyond the slave’s control. Manumission could not be obtained unless the master wished to grant it.
A master might wish to free a slave who had worked for many years and brought sufficient return on the capital invested in him, or he might wish to realize his investment immediately. Manumission provided quick and easy cash and was less risky than selling the slave on the market, where the price depended on market forces and on the slave's condition. The master might also wish to reward a slave for services rendered by him or his parents. Finally, the master might wish to get rid of a troublesome slave who threatened to disrupt the tranquility of his family or his plantation or to dispose of a sick or elderly slave or of a child too young to work. On the eve of abolition many masters granted freedom to dozens of slaves on condition that they agree to work for free for seven more years—a legal means of prolonging the time of slavery. Some masters attempted to replace black workers with Europeans: this happened in coffee-growing regions, where the slave system fell apart earlier than it did elsewhere.

All slaves wished to secure their freedom, but how many had the means to do so? How many harbored in their heart of hearts that fear of the unknown that prevented them from making any real effort to make their dreams come true? The masters, as we have seen, were often adept at offering their slaves an environment in which they could feel secure. What did freedom mean to an elderly slave with no special skills, a field hand, who found himself liberated but without land and free only to go, not to stay on the plantation that he had come to know, whose white and black communities had become his second home? How heavily did the desire for freedom weigh in the heart of a timid urban slave, unsure of himself and in need of his master's assistance to find work in a highly competitive labor market? What did freedom mean to a crippled, sick, or suffering slave? And what about the bitterness of freedom for the slave who was forced to part from the white child she had nursed, raised, and loved? The reward of freedom had its pitfalls and could end in despair when manumission was imposed, as it sometimes was, by an all-powerful master.

If a slave really wanted freedom, could he obtain it? In more than 90 percent of the cases, freedom was bought for a sum of money which was difficult to come by. Slaves in the mines and cities had a clear advantage over field hands on the plantations, yet the field hands constituted the bulk of the Brazilian slave population. Field workers rarely sold any of the crops they raised on their private plots, which went first to supplement their daily rations. They produced for a subsistence economy, not for a market economy. Their best hope was to obtain their freedom free of charge by serving their former master as an agregado, or plantation supervisor. But
agricultural society seems to have been quite rigid. The slave who gained his freedom, who generally had no land of his own in the vicinity, became a marginal individual. Field hands were therefore less combative than city slaves, particularly in the traditional agricultural regions of the northeast, where sugar planters preferred to share their lands with free farmers rather than manumitted slaves. To tell the truth, our information about agricultural land ownership in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Brazil is too fragmentary to enable us to state with any confidence what the differences were between the various regions of this immense country. Clearly, however, in an agricultural society based on the large-scale plantation, the “white model” could in no way be imitated by the freed slave. Between the humble farm he might one day be able to possess and the engenho or fazenda of the master, the gap was enormous. What is more, the freed slave could not become a farmer without his former owner’s help. Near Salvador, for example, were abandoned fields worn out by sugar growing. These were often rented to freed slaves, who planted subsistence crops for sale in town markets. Other agricultural slaves—to be sure, a very small minority—were lucky enough to be assigned to sell the products grown on the plantation. Such slaves knew both the town and the countryside: they farmed the land but sold what was grown in town, something that whites looked upon as degrading but that enabled the slave to earn some money of his own. But it was mainly the urban slaves and the slaves in the mines who dreamt of emulating white models, of moving into a higher social class, of rising from servitude to freedom. Yet the figures suggest that freed slaves accounted for no more than 0.5 percent to 2 percent of the population of cities like Rio, Salvador, and Paraty (the only ones investigated thus far). The rate of manumission may have been higher in Minas Gerais, but that remains to be proven.

Thus only a small number of slaves saw their dreams of freedom come true. Although manumission did provide some means of social mobility, it was only individuals who improved their social position, never whole groups. What good, then, were associations formed in the workplace or through lay and religious organizations if they benefited only certain slaves and never the whole group? This is an important question, and we must look to the freed slaves themselves for an answer. The third part of this book will be devoted to this subject.

What kind of slave could hope for manumission? Without undue generalization we can answer this question in part by examining rules of behavior. Let us look at a few black African slaves, a few slaves of mixed race,
some from the cities, some from the mines, with an eye to determining what strategies they adopted in the hope of crossing the threshold between slavery and freedom. The first thing an African had to do was learn Portuguese, a visible sign of his integration into Brazilian society. By exhibiting obedience, humility, and loyalty he could then win his master's affection. We must be careful not to think that the master's feelings for his slave ever grew warm. This would be to commit an anachronism: in the patriarchal Brazilian system the "father" never forgot himself so far as to compromise his authority. Affection in this context does not mean tenderness but esteem coupled with pride in owning a trustworthy slave. To please the master was to enter into a personal relationship with him. It was then up to the slave to cultivate the master's good opinion. By doing a good job, the slave pleased his owner, remunerated the capital invested in him, and sometimes earned enough of his own to purchase his freedom. In this respect, slaves in the mines and slaves de ganho in the towns were far better off than field hands. But domestic slaves could hope to obtain their freedom for nothing, though they had to wait longer for it. Patronage and godparenthood could strengthen the bonds between a master and a slave who did his job well. The master's family and, more commonly, the slave community and confraternities sometimes afforded slaves protection. Here again, the slaves imitated their masters and turned for assistance to tertiary orders, convents, lay and religious organizations that played the role of banks (there were no state or private banks in Brazil until the nineteenth century, and Brazilian banking was so poorly organized at first that deposit banking did not arrive until the second half of the century, and even then banks did not inspire much confidence). The slave who needed money could thus usually find a group willing to lend it to him. Or, if not, he could turn to a friend, a slave or freed man, to hold his savings or to lend him the money needed to purchase manumission, assuming that his master seemed willing to give it to him. Obviously, a skilled slave in good economic times would be more likely to earn the money needed for manumission than a general laborer who had to face competition from many other people without work. In hard times it was better to belong to a wealthy owner or to have friends (slaves or freed men) who were well established in business. For the government protected free workers, and the best way for a slave to earn money to purchase his freedom, apart from working in the mines, was to run a small business or work as an artisan. The slave who was a good businessman could secure a faithful clientele. This particularly true of cities in which slavery was an old tradition and
most of the free population had descended from manumitted slaves. It was not true of cities to which slavery had come more recently, or where large numbers of European immigrants competed for work as artisans and shopkeepers. This was the case with Rio de Janeiro, which, as the national capital, received a fairly large number of European immigrants, especially Portuguese. It was also the case with São Paulo, which became an important coffee-exporting center at a time when the abolition of the slave trade dried up the supply of new slaves and made masters extremely reluctant to grant manumission to slaves needed to work on the plantations.

The slave who really wanted freedom was not in a position to demand manumission. Certain factors were simply beyond his control. In short, the older the slave tradition, and the smaller the number of European immigrants, the more likely the humble, obedient, and loyal African was to secure his freedom, provided he had the necessary help to do so.

Creoles and slaves of mixed race had the great advantage of having been educated by their masters. They had learned a trade and enjoyed close relations with their masters from early childhood. Many were freed before they reached adult age, some as early as baptism. At a time when child mortality was high, all they had to do to grow up as free men was survive. Of course their mothers might remain slaves forever, but even they looked to their children to win their freedom some day. Creoles and half-breeds were not always lucky enough to be set free while still young. Those who were not had to be wary of the slave community, which always distrusted them. We shall see in the next chapter how difficult relations were between Africans and creoles. The slave born in Brazil tended to gravitate toward the masters; his life was more complicated than that of the Africans.

Whether black or half-breed, African or creole, the slave who came to Brazil was a new man. We have seen him living or surviving in the bosom of his family, his community, his job. And we have seen him dream of manumission. By looking more closely at this dream, we can gain a better idea of who the Brazilian slave really was.