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Elite Politics and Popular Rebellion in the Construction of Post-colonial Order. The case of Maranhão, Brazil (1820–41)*

MATTHIAS RÖHRIG ASSUNÇÃO

Abstract. This article seeks to explain the breakdown of post-colonial order in the northern Brazilian province of Maranhão that culminated in the Balaiada rebellion (1838–41). Interpretations usually do not take into account the intense political agitation of the previous decades, which already involved lower class participation, and they fail to recognise the major socio-economic differences between the areas touched by the revolt. The main arguments are, first, that the struggle for Independence in Maranhão, more violent than in most other provinces, opened the door to lower class involvement in politics under liberal leadership. Secondly, the struggle between local elites for regional power led to exclusion of peripheral elites within the province and fuelled lower class unrest. Significant moments of rupture between liberal leadership and popular movement occurred as early as 1823–4 and 1831–2. Thirdly, the main structural factor leading to the 1838 outbreak of rebellion was the resistance to military recruitment by the free lower classes, which provided a unifying slogan to otherwise heterogeneous groups of peasants, cowboys, and fishermen. Fourthly, the differences in social structure between the cattle producing South, the cotton plantation belt of the Itapecuru valley and the strong subsistence sector in Eastern Maranhão account for substantial differences in terms of support and leadership during the Balaiada. Whilst *fazendeiros* lead the struggle in Southern Maranhão, as well as in most of the neighbouring Piauí province, leadership in Eastern Maranhão was almost entirely of lower class origin. Finally, the dynamics of the movement could lead in Eastern Maranhão to a rupture with elite liberalism and envisage the alliance between free rebels and maroons.

The Brazilian path to Independence has traditionally been contrasted with the Hispano–American Revolutions, and presented as a rather ‘friendly divorce’ from the mother country, smoothed by a Portuguese prince who became the Emperor of the new Luso-American nation.¹ Even though this solution of dynastic continuity certainly helped the metropolitan Portuguese residing in Brazil to accept the new order, it also faced

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opposition from within the patriot movement, especially from republicans or radical liberals. An independent Brazilian empire was only achieved immediately in the core provinces of the south-east. It had to be imposed through armed force in the northern provinces of Bahia, Piauí and Maranhão.² Regional elites often preferred other solutions, ranging from the preservation of the colonial status quo (the Canadian or Cuban solution) to the formation of independent republics. *The Cambridge History of Latin America* does not even mention the armed struggle in Piauí and Maranhão, but this article will show how Independence was only achieved there after considerable civil strife.³ Moreover, the continued political upheaval of the 1820s set the tone for later political developments in the region.

It is now recognised that the victory of the patriot forces in Northern Brazil in 1823 did not lead to immediate political stability. The autocratic rule of the Emperor Pedro I and his favouring of the old Portuguese elite provoked a fresh liberal uprising, which forced him to abdicate in 1831. The liberal ‘Revolution’ of the 7th of April 1831 was considered by many patriots as the ‘true’ date of Brazilian Independence. However, the liberal Regents who ruled Brazil thereafter did not manage to achieve political stability either. On the contrary, their decentralising reforms, especially the ‘Additional Act’ of 1834, appear to have fuelled regional revolts against central authority to the extent that many politicians were sceptical about the possibilities of keeping Brazil united as a nation-state.

How, then, did the Portuguese colonies in America succeed in remaining united? Several factors contributed to this outcome, which contrasts so sharply with the Spanish American experience. The greater cohesiveness of the elites, mostly educated in one Portuguese university, Coimbra, was certainly crucial, as was the issue of slavery. With the prior Hispano-american and the Haitian experience in mind, Brazilian slave owners realised that only a unified Empire would be able to maintain that institution. Thus the emergent Brazilian nation owed to slavery, not only its wealth, but also its territorial cohesion, and perception of this toned

² The most important contribution on this point is José Honorio Rodrigues, *Independência: Revolução e Contra-Revolução* (5 vols., Rio de Janeiro, 1975). Unfortunately, his work has not been sufficiently absorbed into current historiography on Latin American Independence, especially the literature in English.

³ Leslie Bethell attributes the adhesion of Maranhão solely to the arrival of Lord Cochrane’s fleet. See ‘The Independence of Brazil’, in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. III (Cambridge, 1985), p. 190. Although the armed confrontations never reached the level of violence of the Hispanoamerican Wars for Independence, casualties in regular battles between patriots and pro-Portuguese forces did occur on several occasions. They amounted to over two hundred in the Battle of Genipapo, in Piauí. See Luís Antônio Vieira da Silva, *História da Independência da Província do Maranhão, 1822–28* (Rio de Janeiro, 1972), p. 91 [1. ed. 1862].

down the radicalism of most Brazilian liberals, preparing them for alliance with the conservatives (the ‘Portuguese’), known as the ‘Regression’. Centralising policies were adopted (1837) and consolidated by the enthronement of Pedro II (1840) and a new ‘Interpretation’ of the 1834 Reform Act (1841).

The central government dealt with regional unrest in different ways. For movements led by regional elites, such as the separatist Farroupilha republic in the South (1835–45), a gentlemen’s agreement, granting amnesty to former rebels, seemed the best way to restore order.⁴ However, in some provinces of the North, political turmoil had brought about a sharp challenge to elite power. Whilst popular rebellions in Pará (Cabanagem, 1835–40) and Bahia (Sabinada, 1837–8) still relied on elite or at least middle class chieftains, the Balaiada rebellion in Maranhão and Piauí (1838–41) was mainly headed by peasants, cowboys and slaves.⁵ They even took up arms against their former allies, the liberals, who had been leading the earlier struggle for Independence. The rebellion was only crushed when the central state conveyed many troops and substantial amounts of money from Rio de Janeiro under an experienced general, Luis Alves de Lima, the future Duque de Caxias.

What were the reasons for this progressive disruption of order in a province which had, prior to Independence, not known any major political unrest? Why was the regional elite here so unable to maintain political control? Why did rebels adopt a liberal discourse for their movement? Although a comprehensive answer to those questions would have to take into account the complex interplay of ecological, demographic, socio-economic and political factors, this article will focus only on the political dimension of what I consider to be a basic antagonism between plantation and subsistence economies in the region.⁶ My intention is to throw some new light on the origin of the movement, and to argue that the Balaiada was, in the core area of the revolt in Eastern Maranhão, first and foremost a peasant war against recruitment.

Maranhão, an Amazonian plantation society

In comparison with Northeast Brazil, the plantation economy in Maranhão developed rather late, from the second half of the 18th century, and was based primarily on the export of cotton (on average 75 per cent

⁴ Spencer Leitman, *Raízes Socio-Econômicas da Guerra dos Farrapos* (Rio de Janeiro, 1979), pp. 45–7.

⁵ The rebellion extended also to the neighbouring province of Piauí. For a discussion of the extension of the Balaiada see below.

⁶ For further details on land tenure, demography, economy and society see my *Pflanze, Sklaven und Kleinbauern in der brasilianischen Provinz Maranhão, 1800–1850* (Frankfurt, 1993).

of export value, 1796–1811) and rice.⁷ On the eve of Independence, the province had the highest proportion of slaves of all Brazilian provinces – as much as 55 per cent of the total population. The initial capital input for the acquisition of African slaves came from the Portuguese *Companhia Geral do Grão Pará e Maranhão*, which held the monopoly of colonial trade from 1756–78. Even thereafter, transatlantic trade was still controlled by a very small group of Portuguese merchants established in São Luís. High cotton prices on the world market induced planters to expand continuously their slave labour force, despite becoming heavily indebted to the merchants. General disenchantment set in when cotton prices started to drop steadily from 1814 onwards and support of the Independence movement against the Portuguese ‘oppressors’ in São Luís offered planters a possibility of escaping substantial debt payments.

The plantation economy did not develop evenly throughout the province but concentrated for reasons of transportation and ecology on the Itapecuru valley. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the vast centre of the province, containing most of the Mearim and Pindaré valleys – potentially exploitable because of abundant rain or gallery forests – was inhabited by groups of Indians who had not yet suffered colonisation or come under state control (see map). The savannahs in the South had been occupied and sparsely populated by cattle farmers coming from Bahia and Piauí. They also used slave labour, but to a lesser extent. The Western Coast produced some cotton, cattle on the swamped fields (a sub-region known as *baixada*) and manioc flour for the capital. Here, and in the eastern part of the province, a peasantry of Indian descent developed on the former Jesuit missions, living in a subsistence economy and only selling modest surpluses. This area between the Itapecuru and Parnaíba rivers, and Caxias in the South, having the highest proportion of non-white free population of the province, became the core area of the Balaiada.⁸ Drought and land concentration in the hands of *fazendeiros*⁹ in the neighbouring states of Ceará and Piauí had driven thousands of migrants into Maranhão from the late 18th century, first settling in the unoccupied areas of Eastern Maranhão. This peasantry was further swollen by blacks, who had by both legal and illegal means managed to throw off the yoke of slavery. Although the plantation economy was responsible for most state revenue of both the colonial and the national

⁷ José Jobson de A. Arruda, *O Brasil no comércio colonial* (São Paulo, 1980), table 31, p. 246.

⁸ For a definition and description of Eastern Maranhão (Maranhão Oriental), see the classical geographical account by Raimundo Lopes, *Uma região tropical* (Rio de Janeiro, 1970), pp. 147–54 (1. ed. 1916).

⁹ *Fazendeiro*, equivalent to the Spanish *hacendado*, means the owner of any large agrarian estate (*fazenda*).

periods through export and import taxes, it by no means involved all the population of the province. In fact, the free population was mostly occupied in production for the regional market and subsistence economy, whether as a cattle *fazendeiro* of the South, the manioc *fazendeiro* in the West or East, the producer of *andiroba* oil or the subsistence peasant. The peasant families of Maranhão, just like their Amazonian counterparts, were as much fishermen, hunters and gatherers as they were peasants. The importance of each activity varied greatly according to the specific area, the time of the year and the links with the market. Accordingly, the regional term *caboclo* is the most accurate description for them.¹⁰

Subsistence and plantation areas also experienced different demographic regimes. A natural increase characterised the former, whereas a decrease would occur in the latter unless new slaves were continuously imported. Yet, because of the crisis of the regional plantation economy and international pressure, the slave trade became insignificant after the 1820s. Moreover, plantation areas passed through a kind of ‘natural’ cycle, the ultimate stage of which was a shift to peasant production. Evidence for this is given by the records of the lower Itapecuru Valley parishes, where deforestation and the resultant exhaustion of the soil, together with the continuous subdivisions of the land by heirs of the original *latifundiários* show an increasing proportion of small and middle sized holdings. Large and productive plantation units became increasingly rare in those older plantation areas, and enterprising planters would try to sell property in those areas, take their slaves and move onward to frontier areas with unspoiled land.

Because of these combined factors of land tenure, ecology, demographics and economy, the balance between the export-orientated plantation sector and the other sectors of economy shifted continuously in favour of the latter during most of the nineteenth century, but this was never recognised by the elites ruling the province. Indeed, the failure of regional politics to recognise the legitimacy of the aspirations of peasants and *fazendeiros* producing for local markets contributed to political dissent.

Reform and continuity of the institutions

After 1822 Brazil was characterised by the continuity of colonial socio-economic structures, the new Empire being, in this regard, more of a neo-colonial than a post-colonial society. The major change which

¹⁰ The term *caboclo* has at least three different meanings: Originally *caboclo* designated a person of mainly Indian descent and Indian customs. By extension it has come to designate in Maranhão and Amazônia any peasant of whatever ethnic origin. *Caboclos* are also divine entities of Indian features worshipped in several Afro-Brazilian cults.

Independence brought was the creation of national institutions, which provided the basic framework for relations within the elites and between the elites and the lower classes based upon compromise between continuity and reform. The former governors of the captaincies were now called presidents of the provinces, but were still appointed by the central government and had similar far-reaching powers. They were responsible for the nomination of most civil servants and could suspend them from office. Provincial laws could not be passed without their prior consent. One major difference from the colonial period was that the post of commander-in-chief was now usually held by another authority, rather than in combination with the presidency. This feature has traditionally been seen as the major reason for the civil wars of the Independence period in Maranhão. One of the major functions of the president of the province was to represent the interests of the central government, for which reason the interior secretary in Rio de Janeiro would as a rule choose someone from outside of that province. Political instability in the first decades after Independence resulted in a rapid turnover of the presidents, who usually stayed in office one or two years, but no longer. They had for the most part no prior knowledge of the province they were supposed to administer. In opposition, the members of the Government Council (*Conselho do Governo*) were chosen from the main families of the province and could, therefore, have substantial weight on the president's decisions. This influence became crucial during interim periods, because vice-presidents were appointed from members of this body.

The creation of regional legislatures in every province in 1834 constituted a major reform.¹¹ The provincial deputies (28 in Maranhão) elected for periods of two years, could legislate on all provincial matters, but were expressly forbidden to impose export taxes, a faculty reserved for the central government. However, their laws had to be ratified by the president of the province. Local government was represented by the municipal councils (*câmaras municipais*), the local judges, local military and police chiefs. Here major reforms took place which reshaped the rules of the game of local politics. On the whole, the new Brazilian Empire tried to multiply local government bodies in the vast hinterlands as a way to increase state control. Long before Independence municipal councils in Brazil had lost the extensive powers some had enjoyed in the early colonial period. Nevertheless, in larger cities like São Luís and Caxias in Maranhão, they constituted bodies where local elites not only acquired experience in administration but also found a forum for debates on political issues. As in Spanish America, they regained major significance for the short period

¹¹ The General Councils of the provinces, created by the Constitution of 1824, had no real legislative powers, but could only pass on recommendations to the National Assembly.

of the Independence War, when they had to decide whether or not to support the patriots. Usually participation was reserved to the local elite but on special occasions they could be enlarged to ‘open councils’ including ‘all citizens’.¹² After Independence, municipal councils contributed to shape many aspects of local life through extensive legislation (*posturas municipais*).

Professionally trained magistrates (*juizes de fora*) were literally absent from the vast interior of Maranhão during the whole colonial period, whereas São Luís housed the Court of Appeal (*Relação*) with 12 senior judges (*deseembargadores*). In the interior, non-professional magistrates (*ordinários*) would judge minor cases in the first instance. Imperial law continued to rely on Portuguese legislation; a new criminal code was introduced in 1831, but a new civil code was only passed under the Republic at the end of the century. This reflects the extent to which the preoccupation with law and order stood higher than citizenship in the priorities of the new nation’s elite.

An attempt to diminish the power judges held at Independence was made between 1828 and 1837. This sought to strengthen and decentralise local justice by creating lay justices of the peace with enlarged functions (even subjecting the local police to their directives) in every hamlet of the province and lay juries in the main towns. They were to be elected locally by all ‘passive citizens’.¹³ Despite its democratic appearance, this reform multiplied the possibilities of illegal enrichment by local notables.¹⁴ Abuse of power by local elites in turn gave the conservative centralisers good excuse to attack the whole system, and they did not fail to do so. In 1838, a system of prefectures was introduced in Maranhão which abolished many prerogatives of the justice of the peace, thus opening the conservative and centralist reaction in this province. The representative of central government in São Luís would now control the most lucrative prebends of the interior.

The colonial professional military consisted of a rather small body of officers commanding conscripts who had to serve up to 16 years. The bulk of the military establishment was constituted by the locally recruited militias of the ‘2nd line’. They were not considered to be very reliable and

¹² That is *homens bons*, and after 1828 citizens with the minimal entitlement to vote (income of more than 100,000 réis).

¹³ ‘Passive citizens’ were entitled to vote in primary elections, but only ‘active citizens’ – with higher property qualifications – were eligible to stand for office. This distinction is derived from the French Constitution of 1791.

¹⁴ The corruption of the justices of the peace was a major theme in regional politics. See for example the annual reports delivered by the Presidents of Maranhão, (*Relatórios, Discursos* or *Falas* which in the following are quoted with a short title only): ‘Discurso do Presidente da Província’ from 1838, reproduced in *Publicador Oficial*, 1838, p. 4302, and *Relatório do Presidente da Província*, [São Luís] do Maranhão, 1854, p. 7.

often existed only on paper. The provinces were divided into military districts, each headed by a *comandante geral*, responsible for recruitment and all police tasks, many of whom were notorious local tyrants. During the War of Independence, most officers had, because of their Portuguese origins, supported the *ancien régime*, and the recruits had sympathised with the patriots. To avoid the manipulation of the military by both conservatives and radical patriots in the post-emancipation struggles, the liberal governments of the Regency (1831–40) further reduced the professional army and tried to create a strong new body to support the new order. Following the French example, a national guard constituted by ‘proprietors’ seemed to be the best guarantee against the ‘horrors of anarchy’. And indeed the national guard played a major role in the streets of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo from 1831 onwards, making a decisive contribution to the political survival of an often unstable national government. Yet in the interior of Maranhão, the creation of this body proved impossible. As late as 1837 the president of the province admitted in a report that the national guard only existed in the capital São Luís. He explained that:

In the first place the aversion the population of this province shows towards any kind of military service is great. [...] This repugnance has not diminished, but has greatly increased with the institution of the National Guard, whose discipline, much less severe than that of the militias, has contributed without doubt to bring about such bad effects. Therefore, it is nowadays public opinion, if not among the enlightened men, then amidst the general masses, that it is enough that the people pay tribute to maintain the troops, and the civil servants, and should in no case be forced to submit to personal and unpaid services, which keeps them from their ordinary occupations, and damages their interests: [...]. For that reason soldiers and even officers of the National Guard in the interior openly refuse even the lightest service, and never get their uniforms, and in the capital, when one asks for 10 or 12 men for the patrols, only three or four appear; any more zealous commander gets discouraged, and it is true that the punishments imposed by the regulations [of the National Guards], are not only weak but imposed by individuals who are in the same circumstances, and have the same prejudices as those they are supposed to punish. Moreover, it is common to see orders of arrest remain without any effect, not only because the sergeants of lower grades instructed to do so have for this service even more repugnance than for any other, but also because those who fail to serve can easily escape prison by hiding themselves in their houses and fazendas [sic], and invent many other artifices, which you can only imagine when you live in permanent contact with them.¹⁵

As a partial solution to the problems of policing the immense territory of the province a rural police force was created into which individuals could

¹⁵ Letter from 13.11.1837, in: Correspondência do Presidente da Província do Maranhão com o Ministério da Justiça, Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro (thereafter AN.), IJ¹, 745.

be conscripted. A product of the liberal administration, this was suppressed under conservative rule. However, in 1838 the conservative president Camargo created the appointed prefectures mentioned above, which took over police functions, including the responsibility for recruiting, from the justices of the peace and *juizes de direito*. Responsible only to the regional executive, prefects were less inclined to respect local susceptibilities on the crucial issue of law and order, sometimes drafting ruthlessly. It was precisely against the prefects that the free poor and middle classes rose in the Balaiada rebellion.

The struggle for local power

Struggle for power involves complex dialectics of social, geographical and ideological factors. In the case of Maranhão, as in many other parts of Latin America after Independence, this struggle overlapped with the strategies of extense elite families to grant best access to resources for their own members and clientele. On the local level, therefore, personal factors could matter more than ideological positions. The multiplication of offices due to the establishment of new municipalities and posts, as well as their continuous redefinition, was a further factor contributing to struggles between members of the local elite. In this respect, elite families from the interior had common ground against centralist policies implemented by both provincial and central government. As in the colonial period, elite families also agreed on crucial issues when confronting lower class interests. Representatives in the council, for instance, could pass municipal laws which favoured their collective *fazendeiro* interest against those of the peasants, such as privatising the access to lakes and rivers for fishing or banning pig-breeding. Posts in the municipal council continued to provide personal profits, for example from concessions for building on behalf of the council to members of one's own family. Also very common in the 1820s and 1830s was the traditional – although now illegal – concession of a monopoly of the local meat market to one *fazendeiro*. This provided huge profits for the monopolist, whilst eliminating all possibilities for smallholders to sell surpluses. Not surprisingly popular resentment against those monopolies was strong. Following its creation in 1828, the office of justice of the peace developed quickly into a very profitable business, making those years 'the disgraceful period of scandalous acquittals'.¹⁶

After Independence, conflicts within the local elite tended to identify

¹⁶ See *Relatório do Presidente de Província* (1854), p. 7. For a splendid description of their venality see the satirical dialogue between Cosme and Damião by the liberal journalist Lisboa in *Pharol Maranhense* (1833), p. 1618–9.

with broader political struggles, because these provided opponents with stronger arguments against each other and better possibilities to request intervention from above. A case in point was the conflict of 1827 between the municipal council and the *comandante geral* of the coastal town of Tutóia. The council wanted to use the cheap labour of the so-called domestic Indians paying them the ‘usual’ wage. The *comandante* protested against what he considered an arbitrary recruitment of free citizens, and insisted that the Indians had complained to him. He might be seen, therefore, as a typical Brazilian patriot, active supporter of the struggle for Independence, who aimed at a clear break-up of colonial labour relations. On the other hand, those twenty Indians were soldiers under his orders. His involvement clearly served the purpose of defending his lower class clientele from being used by others. In fact, most of the cases of lower class people in the records conceal an intra-oligarchical conflict.

In the core plantation areas, the number of large plantation owners was relatively high, making it easier to substitute one exposed member of a family by another. In the areas dominated by subsistence economies or production for the regional markets, however, the wealthy elite was a very small group and it faced a growing number of coloured, small-scale *fazendeiros* or peasants, who were increasingly hostile to neo-conservative elite power. In Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the nation-state could rely on the smaller and middle-sized *fazendeiros* for support of the régime; this was not the case in Maranhão, as the unsuccessful attempt to create a national guard demonstrated.

For the Brazilian patriots, Independence meant the replacement of the Portuguese elite by Brazilians. Yet in the areas peripheral to the plantation economy, this often proved to be illusory. The best example is the case of Severino Alves de Carvalho in Brejo, the main town of the lower Parnaíba valley. He had been the last *comandante geral* (police chief) before Independence, and had defended the colonial government as late as 1823. For that reason he was replaced by Caldas Ferreira in 1824. But in 1826 Alves de Carvalho managed to remove Caldas Ferreira through an intrigue – accusing him with the aid of false testimonies of having fomented republican disorder in the area – and became *comandante* again. Subsequently, he held office as counsellor, major and colonel of the national guard. When Alves de Carvalho finally put on the green sash of a prefect, the political continuity with colonial times could not have been more evident. For that reason the Balaiada-rebels in the Parnaíba valley would reproduce, in 1838–41, the patriotic discourse associated with the struggle of 1822–3, as if Independence had not been achieved. The insurrection became very much an act of revenge against the wealthy Carvalho family. Severino Carvalho managed to escape, but his mother

Euzébia Maria was killed and parts of her body – her genitals, according to oral tradition – were carried in triumph through the streets of Brejo.

The struggle for regional power

The breakdown of the old order between 1820 and 1823 led to an intense struggle for regional power. From the very beginning, local elites of São Luís and the lower Itapecuru valley managed to monopolise regional power by eliminating other competitors. The first challenge came from the patriot army in the interior. Until early 1823 the Portuguese-controlled Junta in São Luís had held firm control over the core areas in opposition to the dissident southern provinces. However, the invasion and destruction of loyalist plantations by a patriot army from the neighbouring provinces Piauí and Ceará, convinced the bulk of Brazilian *fazendeiros* in Maranhão, who had so far kept a position of prudent neutrality, that Independence was inevitable. The balance of power shifted definitively when the *comandante geral* from Itapecuru-Mirim, José Felix Pereira de Burgos, joined the patriots, and the arrival of the fleet under Lord Cochrane precipitated the final capitulation of the Portuguese Junta in São Luís (28 July 1823). Burgos was astute enough to be the first to proclaim a provisional government in Itapecuru, a Junta of five members, later enlarged by three additional members from São Luís. Nearly all belonged to the influential families of Burgos and Belfort. The leaders of the large patriot army camped in Caxias realised that they had been deprived of the fruits of their victory. They demanded participation in a new Junta, open to ‘all peoples of the province’, but this new Junta, by sending to Caxias a substantial amount of money raised through exceptional taxation, contributed to the demobilisation of the army in Caxias, and most officers returned to their home province Ceará. Maranhão, therefore, did not have to experience a new order of caudillos of the Spanish American type.

The monopoly on regional power by elites from the capital and the lower Itapecuru was maintained after Independence by the continuous exclusion of local elites from other areas of the province. Because of electoral manipulation the second Junta was, in the same way as the first, formed by dignitaries from the core plantation area, and the capital and main port, São Luís. The petitions, drawn up by single citizens or groups, sent by the council of Caxias to the National Assembly, show that local elites did not feel themselves represented. Caxias was the capital of the cattle *sertão*,¹⁷ trading with neighbouring Piauí and the Brazilian

¹⁷ *Sertão* means the distant hinterland and, by extension, the semi-arid interior of the Brazilian Northeast. It is used here in the first sense. ‘Sertão de Pastos Bons’ was the usual denomination for the savannah grasslands of Southern Maranhão.

Northeast. It is therefore not surprising that we find requests by *fazendeiros* to change taxes on cattle, to build roads or to create new parishes. Seven out of ten petitions went much further, clearly advocating a subdivision of the province and the creation of a new one, the capital of which would be, unsurprisingly, Caxias. The new province was to include the whole South of Maranhão and the lower Parnaíba valley (Brejo District) allowing direct access to the sea.¹⁸

Natural circumstances favoured exclusion from regional power. Planters from the area around the Gulf of Maranhão (Alcântara, Icatu, Rosário and Itapecuru-Mirim) could reach the provincial capital in a day or less, whereas the trip from Caxias down to São Luís took a week, and up-river 10 to 12 days. In the stormy days of Independence, that was long enough to be out of touch with the capital, and proprietors usually disliked long absences from their plantations or business. Even thereafter, elites from the *sertão* seemed to have been unhappy with the politics of the capital. As late as 1839 the council of Caxias complained that

[the city of Caxias,] which weighs so heavily in the financial balance of the province, is the most despised municipality, even if it deserves the attention and enlightenment of the Provincial Assembly. Meanwhile other municipalities such as Alcântara and Brejo receive substantial sums, Caxias only gets an amount which is as small as the difficulties to receive it effectively are huge.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, only in the South of the province did *fazendeiros* support the Balaiada revolt.²⁰ If local elites from the *sertão* remained marginalised from regional politics for decades after Independence, the same did not apply within the core plantation area and São Luís. Here, the struggle for power began immediately after the ‘Adherence’ of the province to the Brazilian Independence. Excluded elite families were not ready to accept the Burgos coup without resistance, and as early as August 1823 Lord Cochrane warned the central government that,

with all respect to the Individuals composing the new junta, and to those from whom succeeding Juntas might be chosen, they do not appear to me to possess either the talent or acquirements necessary for the good Government of Maranhão. I may add too that connections and private and political friendships

¹⁸ See copies of the petitions in: *Ofícios expedidos de Câmaras Municipais de várias Vilas e da Capital a Junta Provisória do Maranhão, Caxias, 12.12.1823* in the Arquivo Público do Estado do Maranhão, São Luís (thereafter APEM).

¹⁹ Letter from 7.4.1839, in: *Ofícios das Câmaras Municipais ao Presidente de Província do Maranhão, 1839*, APEM.

²⁰ Eventually provincial frontiers were altered through the successful challenge by the local elite and Maranhão came to incorporate the vast municipality of Turiaçu, belonging to Pará until 1852.

and enmities exist here in a degree which can hardly fail to involve the Province in internal dissensions.²¹

Although Cochrane himself greatly contributed to increasing internal strife, he could not have been more accurate. The following year saw a major confrontation between elite families trying to monopolise regional power and is quite accurately known in regional historiography as the ‘War of the three B’s’, – the families Burgos, Bruce and Belfort.²² All tried to attract to their side the four main elements of power: the council and the people of São Luís, the naval power of Lord Cochrane, and the remains of the patriot army in the capital. The theatre of operations was restricted to the core area around the Gulf of Maranhão.

Both professional soldiers and militiamen remained in the capital, many of the latter aspiring to become part of the ‘First Line’ (professionals). Some of the former, especially the senior officers, had growing political aspirations. The first two commander-in-chiefs after the ‘Adherence’ of the province to the Brazilian nation-state both aspired to the presidency, but the heterogeneity of military interests and political allegiances weakened their position. When attempting a coup, they could never be sure of the support of all commanders in the Military Council.

During the major crisis of June and July 1823 the council of São Luís was opened up to include not only every *homen bom* but also representatives from the ecclesiastical and military authorities.²³ As a *câmara geral* it claimed to be the expression of the general will which could lead to open confrontation with the provisional Junta, and could in fact serve as an alternative power base in the competition for the presidency. The people (*povo*) of São Luís comprised the middle and lower classes that were usually excluded from the *câmara*.²⁴ Here both Portuguese and patriots could mobilise support, given that São Luís had not only a significant poor or petty bourgeois Portuguese population mainly engaged in trade (*caixeiros*) or office holding but also a substantial coloured population. The latter

²¹ Letter from 14 August. See ‘Ofícios do Lord Cochrane’ (Agosto-Setembro 1823), AN, Rio de Janeiro, SPE, Caixa 741.

²² The classic account of the Independence period is Vieira da Silva, *História da Independência*. See also Mário Meireles, *História da Independência no Maranhão* (São Luís, Rio de Janeiro, 1972).

²³ Eventually even the highest authorities such as the Junta members or later the President of the Province attended the meetings of the *câmara geral*. See Vieira da Silva, *História da Independência*, p. 164–7, and documents no. 51, 76–9 in apêndice.

²⁴ In this respect, it is interesting to see how the term ‘citizen’ began to be used as a synonym for ‘homen bom’, whereas ‘people’ (‘povo’ or ‘póvos’) clearly refers to the mass of non-citizens. The session of the *câmara geral* which adhered to Independence, for instance, was signed by 157 authorities and citizens, and thereafter acclaimed by ‘troops and people’ (‘tropa e povo’) gathered outside on the square of the governor’s palace. See Vieira da Silva, *História da Independência*, Documentos Apensois, Documento no. 51, pp. 89–92.

were scornfully called ‘goats’ (*cabras*) by the former, whereas ‘seaman’ (*marinheiro*) was the slightly denigrating term patriots used to describe the Portuguese.

Lord Cochrane’s fleet was not permanently present but the weeks or months it remained anchored in the bay of San Marcos were always crucial in the balance of power. Granted an imperial title as the Marquês do Maranhão, Cochrane represented the central government, though in fact he was mainly defending his own interests. Thanks to his control of the sea, which enabled him to blockade the harbour, he was able to depose the first president of the province, Miguel dos Santos Freire e Bruce, and replace him with a subservient interim president. He subsequently even delayed the assumption of office by the new president designated by the Emperor, withdrawing from the province only after undertaking a substantial plunder of the provincial treasury. Only after Cochrane’s final departure and the assumption of power by President Costa Barros in 1825 was some political stability achieved, but without settling the distribution of power among the elite. As in other parts of Brazil, the remaining Portuguese colonial elite now managed to win back wealth and offices, building upon the fact that in Rio de Janeiro the Emperor was relying on the Portuguese as well.

Formally, all European-born Portuguese living in Brazil at the time of Independence could become Brazilians, if they so wished. As ‘adoptive Brazilians’ (*brasileiros adotivos*) they could hold any post, and they did so in Maranhão, especially in the military and judiciary. Antonio José Meirelles, the informal leader of the Portuguese elite, for instance, succeeded in being indemnified for his cattle which had been seized by the patriot army, and eventually received even more than his cattle was worth.²⁵ This kind of episode explains why as late as 1831 ‘the people’ of São Luís rose in arms to ‘expel the Portuguese’ from offices and the province. To be ‘Portuguese’ meant being the conservative ‘whitey’ called *cabano* in Maranhão – who still exhibited all the arrogance of the former colonial ruler. At that stage, the term could include the Brazilian-born, like the two members of the Court of Appeal whom the rebels of 1831 wanted expelled from office, a fact that the president of the province did not fail to point out when refusing to comply with that rebel claim.

The balance of power between region and centre was conditioned by three factors: the relative strength of the national state; the relationship

²⁵ This at least was suggested by his political opponents. See for instance the liberal *Crônica Maranhense* published in São Luís, in 1838–40. *Crônica Maranhense. Artigos de João Francisco Lisboa*. (Estudos e Documentos, III, 2 vols., Rio de Janeiro 1969), vol. I, p. 43–6. Meirelles was reputed to be the owner of the biggest fortune in São Luís and to live in the most luxurious house of the city. See Clóvis Dunshee de Abranches, *A Setembrada ou a Revolução Liberal de 1831 em Maranhão* (Rio de Janeiro, 1933), p. 22.

between government and National Assembly at Court; and the actual policy followed by the Executive, that is, whether the national government pursued centralist or federalist policies. Emperor Pedro I enforced a centralising policy after his dissolution of the National Assembly in 1824. After the 7th of April [1831], however, the Assembly brought forward decentralising measures which were implemented in 1834. Thereafter, the conflict between the regents and assembly resulted in an even greater weakening of the already weak central state. From 1837 onwards the Regent, Araujo Lima, spearheaded the centralist reaction. In times of greater weakness of the central state, especially 1822–4 and 1831–6, central government had to compromise with regional elites and make appreciable concessions. In those periods the presidents of the province were often *maranhenses*, and members of the *maranhense* elite were even co-opted into the national elite. In fact, never were *maranhenses* so influential at Court as during the Regência.

Due in part to the Balaiada uprising, the regional elite proved unable to resist the centralist take over under the Second Empire,²⁶ creating the factionalism bemoaned by Luis Alves de Lima when he assumed the presidency of the province in 1840: ‘More soldier than politician, I want to ignore the very names of the parties which by misfortune do exist among you’.²⁷

Why, though, did strife between the elites go so far in Maranhão? We have seen how local elites from the capital and the lower Itapecuru valley managed to exclude local elites from other areas and how they fought between themselves for regional power. This continuous struggle in an Age of Revolution ineluctably led to a growing ideological polarisation not only within the elites, but also within the formerly unpoliticised lower classes of the province.

The Ideological Polarisation of the Elite

The internal differentiation of the elites and their political affiliation in Brazil during the Empire has been the subject of some controversy.²⁸ José Murilo de Carvalho has shown that *fazendeiros* were represented in both liberal and conservative parties, but that liberals came from provinces less dependent on exports whereas the conservative party recruited best in the core export regions of Pernambuco, Bahia and Rio de Janeiro. In the cities, liberals recruited mainly among urban professionals while

²⁶ This is the usual Brazilian designation for the period corresponding to the reign of Pedro II (1840–89).

²⁷ Quoted in Astolfo Serra, *A Balaiada* (Rio de Janeiro, 1946), p. 41.

²⁸ For a summary of the different interpretations, see José Murilo de Carvalho, *A construção da ordem. A elite política imperial* (Rio de Janeiro, 1980), pp. 155–7.

conservatives received their greatest support from civil servants. Maranhão fits into Carvalho's scheme insofar as planters from the lower Itapecuru valley tended to be conservative. Planters from the major cotton producing area of Alcântara, however, had rather liberal inclinations, due to the traditional rivalry with São Luís. Liberalism was also strong among cattle *fazendeiros* of the South, because of the peripheral position of that area in the economy and politics of the province.

The constitution of political parties in Maranhão followed, on the whole, the national pattern characterised by a basic three-fold division between conservatives, moderate and radical liberals (*exaltados*). Yet some aspects of politics peculiar to the region ought to be stressed here. Contrary to many other provinces, there seems to have been no movement of any sort prior to the Constitutionalist Revolution in Portugal (1820). When the news of that revolution reached São Luís in April 1821, a first split between opponents and supporters (*conspícuos*) occurred. With the declaration of Independence in the South a further division among the *conspícuos* opposed Brazilians and constitutionalist Portuguese. The return of absolutism in Portugal (June 1823), however, convinced many Portuguese that they were better off with a Brazilian constitutional monarchy headed by a Portuguese prince. Because of the repressive legislation, only rescinded in 1823, no free press existed and patriot mobilisation occurred mainly in informal and clandestine meetings, in political clubs called 'Club Independente' or 'Club das Cajazeiras'. On the other side, absolutists would also gather in conspiratorial meetings, and both tried to gain control over the masonic lodges.²⁹

A second decisive moment for the constitution of political families in Maranhão was the presidency of Miguel dos Santos Freire e Bruce (July 1823–November 1824).³⁰ His radically anti-Portuguese policy culminated with two decrees expelling all non married Portuguese from the province.³¹ Furthermore, he did not, at least in the eyes of his opponents, undertake energetic action to prevent excesses (*lustrós*) by troops and coloured lower classes against the rich Portuguese. Those events raised general fears among the Brazilian elites as well, most of whom had some kind of connection with Portuguese merchants. When a group of officers tried to overthrow him, Bruce opened the prisons and attempted to raise a popular army by all means. This was a clear rupture with the intraoligarchical consensus not to involve the lower classes in politics. He

²⁹ In addition to the works quoted above on the Independence period, Dunshee de Abranches, *A Setembrada*, despite its romantic form, gives an excellent insight into politics in Maranhão between 1820 and 1832.

³⁰ Bruce, a lawyer of Scottish origin, was born in São Luís and educated in England. See Dunshee de Abranches, *A Setembrada*, p. 29.

³¹ They were published in *Censor* (São Luís, 1824), p. 107.

was also accused of having connections with the revolutionaries of the ‘Confederation of the Equator’, a major republican insurrection in Northeast Brazil (1824).³² His overthrow by Cochrane was therefore followed by a general relief among the property owning classes, but it constituted a dangerous precedent of lower class involvement in politics.³³

From now on radical-democratic liberalism and republican forms of government were discredited among elites. Bruce’s presidency became the disastrous example of ‘the horrors of anarchy’ and ensured a realignment between ‘exalted’ and moderate liberals in Maranhão. The conservative resurgence of the late 1820s in the province was also a result of changes in the national power balance. It brought not only a comeback of the old Portuguese elite, but also the persecution of exalted liberals. On the other hand, this was also the main reason for the 1831 uprisings in both Rio de Janeiro and Maranhão, which once again, inaugurated a new, although ultimately unsuccessful, attempt of the liberals to carry through their reforms.

As already noted, the National Assembly in Rio de Janeiro and ‘the people’ had brought about the abdication of Pedro I in 1831. Subsequently, radical liberals tried to use mass mobilisation to push through their claims for political reforms, such as the suppression of the ‘Moderating Power’ of the Emperor and other authoritarian institutions, and the enlargement of the franchise. This provoked fear among moderate liberals and led to the famous *regresso*, that is the latter’s tactical alliance with their former conservative enemies.

In similar ways radical liberals in Maranhão tried to push through the old demands of the Independence movement by pressure in the streets. On the 13 September 1831 ‘troops and people’ of São Luís led by radical liberal officers and politicians rose and demanded the removal of all Portuguese and ‘adoptives’ from offices and the Army (both officers and soldiers), and the banishment of all Portuguese and *adotivos* who were known to have opposed Independence.³⁴ Under the pressure of events, the president of the province negotiated with the rebels and avoided major bloodshed. Some very exposed Portuguese were removed or banished, but as soon as the provincial government had controlled the situation, it arrested two rebel leaders. Their detention provoked a second

³² On the Confederação do Equador see Antonio Mendes Jr, Luiz Roncari, Ricardo Maranhão, *Brasil História* (São Paulo, 1982) vol. 2, pp. 183–90, and Manoel Correia de Andrade (ed.), *Confederação do Equador* (Recife, 1988).

³³ Vieira da Silva, *História da Independência*, pp. 275–315; Meireles, *História da Independência*, pp. 133–147. See also the comments on the Bruce period in the conservative *Censor* (1825) and the moderate liberal *Argos da Lei* (1825). Both newspapers were re-published in facsimile by Jomar Moraes (São Luís, 1980).

³⁴ The best account is still Dunshee de Abranches, *A Setembrada*, pp. 387–8.

uprising, on the 19 November, which was crushed by the provincial government. The November rebellion marked the last attempt of radical liberals to force political change by using mass pressure. Subsequently, liberals in Maranhão confined themselves to legal strategies and more moderate goals, such as the defence of Independence, the Constitution and the liberal reforms of 1831–4. This shift was reinforced by the fact that liberal presidents governed the province from 1832 till 1837. On the model of the similar societies in the South, patriot societies were founded to fight against restoration from the right and anarchy from the left.³⁵ Yet because of their past struggles a strong identification existed among lower classes with the notion of ‘liberal’, ‘Brazilian’ interests.

An insurrection in the neighbouring province of Pará (Cabanagem), the social problems originated by the crisis of legal tender, and the general political instability of the mid-1830s convinced many *fazendeiros* that the main danger now came from the left. When the last liberal president of this decade, Costa Ferreira, refused to manipulate provincial elections in his favour, the conservative opposition took over the provincial assembly in 1836 and the presidency in 1837. His conservative successor Vicente Camargo, buoyed up by both the national and the provincial conjuncture, showed no scruples about distributing offices exclusively to the conservative clientele; Liberal influence on the state became insignificant. According to liberal journalist Lisboa, the opposition, despite counting a substantial number of the wealthiest planters of the province among its members, found itself outside the official country.³⁶ The murder of the liberal leader Raimundo Teixeira Mendes in Caxias, instigated by political opponents,³⁷ was symptomatic of the escalation of violence and intra-oligarchical conflict. In 1838, therefore, dissent among liberal *fazendeiros* was great, although not great enough for them to lend support or even take over the leadership of a movement initiated by lower class people, as rebel leaders of the Balaiada had hoped.

Disciplining the lower classes

To assess the efficiency of disciplining the lower classes we should look at both legal framework and concrete practice. With regard to the slaves, the state left it to the slaveholders to punish their own property. Caning on hands (*palmatória*), whipping, and being pilloried were the usual punishments of seigneurial justice in a slave society. Brandão’s view that ‘On the plantations there is no other law then the absolute will of the

³⁵ *Pharol Maranhense* (São Luís) 1833, pp. 1646, 1773 and *Brasileiro* (São Luís) 1832, p. 18.

³⁶ *Crônica Maranhense* (1969), I, p. 138 and II, p. 41.

³⁷ According to the confession made by the murderers. See *Publicador Oficial* (São Luís) 1837, p. 4203.

master [...]’³⁸ might overstate the position somewhat, but the fact remains that slaves on isolated *fazendas* in Maranhão had much less possibility of using the law in their favour than in the cities such as Rio de Janeiro. Only in cases of major offences such as manslaughter, murder or insurrection did the state intervene. Slaves were not allowed to give evidence in court, and for this reason alone they had little to expect of a trial. Due to growing criticism of the institution of slavery in Brazil and abroad, legislation after Independence attempted to protect the slave from abuse. After 1837 Brazilian police officers were not allowed to whip slaves without a formal court order. In Maranhão, a provincial law passed by liberals in 1836 tried to force slave-owners to care for their old and disabled slaves.³⁹ But this legislation produced little or no concrete change at all. Moreover, the great slave insurrection in Salvador (Bahia) in 1835 provoked the tightening of repressive legislation on a national level, such as the death penalty without appeal, not only for murder of the master, overseers and their families, but also in the case of injury to those persons.⁴⁰

Most repressive measures were issued by municipal councils, which were concerned with three areas of slave life: culture, possibilities for trade, and freedom of movement, which is of special relevance here. Slaves were supposed to carry permits from their master if they left, for whatever purpose, their plantation or district – a regulation which even masters found time consuming and complicated. Yet, in times of political turmoil those ordinances were tightened to the point that slaves were forbidden to loiter in public places. After the events of November 1831, slaves in São Luís were forbidden to gather in groups of more than three and were not allowed to linger in taverns and shops.⁴¹

The free, mainly coloured lower classes were also victims of a discriminatory legislation influenced by the institution of slavery. Freemen (*forros*), excluded from all public offices and elections, could be subjected to the same measures as slaves and be restrained in their freedom of movement.⁴² They were always under suspicion of being runaway slaves and could be kept in prison for months if they were unable to produce their freedom letter.

³⁸ This statement was made by Brandão Júnior F. A., an abolitionist and a son of a planter himself. See his *A escravatura no Brasil precedida d’um artigo sobre a agricultura e colonização no Maranhão* (Brussels, 1865), p. 30.

³⁹ Provincial law No. 16, art. 1, 19.5.1836.

⁴⁰ Decree of 10.6.1835, reproduced in *Publicador Oficial*, 1837, p. 4021.

⁴¹ See municipal laws No. 97 and 98: ‘As rondas terão todo o cuidado em não consentirem nas vendas ou quitandas, ou outra qualquer parte escravos parados, senão o tempo necessário para fazerem o serviço, a que forem, [...]’ (*Publicador Oficial*, 1832, p. 112).

⁴² For instance in 1832 in São Luís repressive measures applied to slaves and *forros* (See *Publicador Oficial*, 1838, p. 112, Art. 10).

The racist hierarchy inherited from colonial society suffused the administration of justice. Local judicial records give clear evidence that colour was considered as sign of inherent ‘quality’ (*qualidade*), and therefore it was always easier to accuse a coloured person of a crime, than a white person. On the other hand, testimonies by coloured persons were not considered to have the same weight as those of white persons. Coloured people were as a rule subjected to more severe judgements and harsher sanctions. Degrading punishments were applied not only to slaves and free blacks, but also to ‘coloured’ persons in general, mulattoes, *cafuzos* or Indians. In particular, to be put in stocks (*tronco*) was considered degrading because of its obvious association with slave punishment. Humiliating punishments were one of the major accusations put forward by rebels when denouncing the harassment and arbitrariness of the prefects in 1838.

Abuse by authorities resulted from more than the caprice of local tyrants: it had a structural character. Neither planters and merchants nor the state perceived any positive aspect in independent *caboclo* life, seeing it as nothing but idleness: they paid no taxes; therefore the best thing was to use them in the army. That is why the *comandante geral* Alves de Carvalho wrote in 1826 about the ‘vagrants and thieves’ of his Brejo district:

[...] because with this kind of people there can be no hope at all. Corporal punishment doesn’t help, as I have experienced it. They are freed and soon get back to the same way of living with redoubled audacity and therefore make useless all the means I employ to clean my District from this plague of the human race. Your Imperial Majesty needs men for the Navy, and public works, and these individuals might be used for those purposes, which are of public interest.⁴³

As the Brazilian government faced growing regional dissent in the 1830s, the need for recruits increased, and because local troops were never trustworthy in the case of rebellions, soldiers were enrolled in other provinces. Yet this led to a vicious circle, as extensive drafting often provoked armed resistance. In the case of Maranhão, evidence from the records shows that recruits were raised mainly from among the free coloured population outside the main plantation areas, such as the South and the lower Parnaíba valley.⁴⁴ Young peasants were recruited for the police, militia and the army. In the latter case, their families were not likely

⁴³ See letter from São Bernardo, 27.12.1826, in: *Ofícios dos Comandantes Gerais ao Presidente da Província, 1826*, APEM.

⁴⁴ According to one ‘*Relação de Recrutadas*’ from 1834, those two areas provided 42 % of all recruits, but represented only 27 % of the free population of Maranhão. For details, see my *Pflanzler, Sklaven*, pp. 308, 458.

to see them ever again. They had to serve for seven years and had few chances to escape adverse climatic and sanitary conditions if sent South. The draft was therefore the major tribute imposed on the rural free in this period. It was, moreover, a further source of arbitrariness, where local chiefs could return favours to their clientele or take revenge on their enemies. The ruthless incursions of recruiting bands came to be feared throughout the whole province, partly because they were badly paid and therefore often lived on the country, as the prefect of Brejo explained to his superior:

This [financial] problem is, Your Excellence, not irrelevant, and a result is the theft, which the troops usually commit, from the peasants in the places they have to pass through to catch the young men [for the army].⁴⁵

As popular resistance against recruitment grew, local elites themselves backed away from the draft and had to be motivated with material incentives. In 1837, a judge in the South was offered 150,000 réis for the conscription of 50 recruits of ‘good moral political behaviour’, a sum which represented more than twice the annual wages of a soldier.⁴⁶

If disciplining the lower classes was arbitrary and brutal, it was often ineffective. The ecological conditions of the province and the weakness of the state ensured that the authorities had no control at all over one sizeable part of its territory and very little over the rest of it. This opened up unprecedented space for lower class mobilisation, which culminated in the Balaiada rebellion.

Popular unrest in the Independence period, 1822–1832

The nature of day-to-day slave resistance and the ways slaves tried to fool their masters have been passed down by oral tradition.⁴⁷ The daily violence slaves had to endure made it easier for the slaves to use violence themselves. Yet assassinating the master or overseer seldom proved to be a solution for the slave. It was easier to run away. Especially in Maranhão, the existence of extensive, partly uncolonised rain forests with many rivers made marronage a viable alternative.⁴⁸ From the beginning of the 18th

⁴⁵ Este embaraço [financeiro] Exm.o Sr., é de nao pequena monta, cujo resultado é o roubo que ordinariamente faz a tropa aos camponeses por donde tem de transitarem diligenciando a captura de moços solteiros, [...]’. Letter from 6.11.1838, in: *Ofícios de diversas comarcas ao Presidente de Província, 1838*, APEM.

⁴⁶ See *Publicador Oficial* 1837: 4042.

⁴⁷ For a sample see Matthias Röhring Assunção, *A Guerra dos Bem-te-vis. A Balaiada na memória oral* (São Luís, 1988), p. 113–22.

⁴⁸ For the latest overview on maroons in Brazil, see João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes (eds.), *Liberdade por um fio. História dos quilombos no Brasil* (São Paulo, 1996). My chapter ‘Quilombos maranhenses’ deals with early nineteenth century maroons in Maranhão on pp. 433–442.

century maroon groups managed to survive in the frontier area of Turiaçu until the 1870s, despite repeated expeditions against them. Political instability always increased the number of runaways. Hence maroons multiplied, especially in the Codó parish of the Itapecuru valley, after Independence. Moreover, the Age of Revolution clearly had mobilising effects on slaves in Maranhão. Although often deliberately kept in ignorance, slaves knew through many channels that emancipations had occurred elsewhere. As the provincial council recognized in 1834, ‘the word – freedom – imprudently and fatally pronounced amidst the slaves has introduced among them a certain spirit of insubordination’ which had spread throughout the province. Preoccupation with order was not restricted to one’s own plantation and had to be extended to neighbouring estates, as illustrated by the petition to the town council of Codó by a group of planters who complained at:

[...] the insubordination in which the *fazenda[s]* of Dona Maria Joaquina Brandão are to be found, and that her slaves walk around with arms and there is to be feared some sad incident, besides the bad example they give to the neighbouring *fazendas*, especially when because of the events of Bahia the slaves in general are losing their deference which is so necessary.⁴⁹

In at least one case there was an attempt by slaves to prepare an insurrection. The slave Martinho, administrator of a cattle *fazenda* in the Iguará valley, had, if we believe the testimonies, established contact with slaves from half a dozen of the surrounding plantations. A planter heard about this and interrogated his slaves. One of them admitted that Martinho had told him

[...] that soon the time would come when they would free themselves. The English would on behalf of the King of Congo protect their freedoms, and their allies had already taken Bahia and Pernambuco, and were on their way to Maranhão by land and by sea. They should join them, to exterminate all the whites who would oppose them.⁵⁰

This provoked the dispatch of troops to the Fazenda da Cruz. On their arrival slaves fled in panic but came back at night to release the cattle and take provisions. Although this conspiracy constituted no major threat to slave order, it showed the extent to which slaves in Maranhão drew their own conclusions from rumour in periods of instability.

The high level of violence among the free poor in a slave society has been shown for São Paulo by Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco, who notes that many cases of violence involved members of the same family. Often

⁴⁹ See letter from Urubú (Codó), 2.6.1835, in: *Ofícios de várias Câmaras Municipais ao Presidente da Província do Maranhão, 1835*, APEM.

⁵⁰ See letter from Iguará, 25.2.1827, in: *Ofícios expedidos dos Comandantes Gerais de várias vilas ao Presidente da Província, 1827*, APEM.

homicides were caused by apparently minor reasons, her explanation being that the poverty of rural culture gave violent conflict a recreational nature.⁵¹ Yet, in the case of Maranhão, many cases of violent crimes during the period considered here occurred between persons of different social origin. Especially frequent were murders of Portuguese merchants in the interior by ‘coloured’ persons. Old quarrels or general hatred of the Portuguese are given as grounds, underlining their role as intermediaries and ‘monopolists’. This fortified the prejudice that the coloureds were a ‘criminal class’, and this individual, reactive behaviour could, under favourable conditions, escalate into violent collective actions against ‘the Portuguese’, such as the *lustras*.⁵²

Another form of popular dissidence was banditry. Cattle rustling was easy and profitable, and therefore endemic in cattle areas, where special military units had to be stationed. The existence of zones far from any source of authority, such as Santa Helena on the Pará border or São José on the Piauí border made it easy for organised bands to subsist. If a territory was in dispute between several municipalities and controlled by none, such as the upper part of the Munim river, it was much easier to escape state control. The sources of the Munim (‘Cabezeiras do Munim’) became famous for being a refuge of criminals (*conto de malfeitores*). For decades, the authorities complained about the lack of police control over the area.

The most frequent type of resistance to state authorities was evading and deserting the draft. The easiest way was to escape to the forest while they were around. As one *comandante* put it:

...as soon as the people know that a message from your Excellency arrives, they already think it is draft and all of them leave for the woods, [...].⁵³

Residence in the forest was made possible most of the time by active support from relatives, who brought food to agreed places and kept the refugees informed of developments. Once enlisted, escape was more difficult because now the recruit faced legal prosecution as a deserter and

⁵¹ See Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco, *Homens livres na ordem escravocrata* (São Paulo, 1976), p. 24–6, 40.

⁵² On violence by poor Brazilians against Portuguese or ‘Europeans’, even those who supported Independence, see letter from Comandante Geral Joaquim Diniz Pereira de Castro, Tutoia, 10.1.1824, and letter from Comandante Parcial Antonio Garcia de Souza, 2.2.1824, in: *Ofícios de Comandantes Gerais de Tutóia, 1824*, APEM. See also, among many others, the letter by João Francisco de Sá to the Vice-President, Icatu, 6.7.1834, in: *Ofícios de Juizes de Paz de varias comarcas, 1834*, APEM. See also the newspapers *Argos* and *Censor* quoted below. Similar murders of Spanish traders and shopkeepers occurred in the Mexican provinces in the Independence period.

⁵³ Letter from 3.5.1827, in: *Ofícios expedidos dos Comandantes Gerais de várias Vilas para o Presidente da Província, 1827*, APEM.

had to live permanently in the forest, which some did for years. Others accepted their fate as long as they were not transferred to the capital.

[...] today the necessity arises to send recruits from the capital, because the individuals enlisted here stay, if one promises them that they will serve in a unit stationed here, but as soon as they have to serve in the capital, they desert, as can be observed in practice, [...].⁵⁴

This reaction reflects the extent to which the drafted men belonged to the peasantry: only with his transfer to army units far away from his residence was a son definitely lost to his family in terms of labour.

The period of mass recruitment is of particular importance in oral tradition and known as *Tempo do Pega* (Time of the Grasp). Old people in Maranhão remember quite well the many ruses the *caboclos* resorted to and which, allied to their greater knowledge of the forest, helped them to escape the draft. Yet, this resistance provoked retaliation by the authorities. According to oral history, recruitment provoked the final outbreak of the Balaiada rebellion.⁵⁵

Were there any attempts of all encompassing lower class mobilisation during the period under consideration? In fact, a strict separation between the resistance of slaves and that of free coloured poor seldom existed. Many deserters, for instance, had always found shelter in *quilombos*. For a peasant, trying to escape the recruiters, life in the forest was not so different from that of a slave runaway trying to hide from the bush-captains (*capitães de mato*). Significant involvement in politics by the free lower classes developed with Independence. Most of the time, though, free lower class mobilisation occurred under patriot and then liberal preeminence, from which slaves were excluded. Yet under certain circumstances control and exclusion could not be taken for granted, as illustrated by an incident involving mainly slaves and freedmen during the siege of Caxias by the patriot army. It is the first evidence for ‘multi-class’ political mobilisation crossing the line between slave and free in the province. According to one witness

several negro slaves came together in the houses of the shoemaker Felix and the tailor Fidelis and discussed the abolition of slavery. The same happened in other parts of the district, as in the house of Agostinho Xavier Freire. He persuaded two slaves, the overseers of the inheritors of the former Caetano José Teixeira, and told them they should not obey their masters any longer....⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Letter from 30.9.1838, in: *Ofícios de diversas comarcas ao Presidente da Província*, 1838, APEM.

⁵⁵ See my *Guerra dos Bem-te-vis*, pp. 165–76 for the escaping from draft and pp. 179–183 for the origins of the war according to oral tradition.

⁵⁶ See letter from the council of Caxias, 2.5.1823, in: *Ofícios expedidos de Câmaras Municipais de várias Vilas e da Capital à Junta Provisória do Governo do Maranhão*, 1823, APEM.

The early revelation of those meetings prompted the immediate intervention of the council, ensuring that it did not develop into a major threat. The episode shows that, just as in the better known ‘Tailors’ Conspiracy’ of 1798 in Salvador, slave and free black artisans were already imagining abolition as a possible outcome of Independence.⁵⁷ It also illustrates, once more, the ambiguous role played by slave overseers.

It was, however, immediately after Independence, particularly during the presidency of Bruce, that lower class mobilisation threatened seriously to escape liberal control and degenerate, as the liberals themselves put it, into ‘anarchic and revolutionary movements’.⁵⁸ Slogans such as ‘expropriation of all Portuguese’ appeared, and anti-Portuguese actions often provided a good disguise for personal retaliation and revenge. In the end, even Bruce had to accept the help of the Portuguese *guarda civica* to contain the increasing violence against the Portuguese, the *lustrós*.⁵⁹ Here we find the first rupture between liberal leadership and popular mobilisation. ‘Anarchy’ was easier to control then because of the absence of broader strategic perspectives and political aims of the lower class people engaged in it.⁶⁰

A second major rupture between liberal leaders and popular sectors came about in the aftermath of the September and November insurrections in 1831. These had been directed by radical officers and journalists. Yet, after the crushing of the November insurrection, resistance shifted to the interior under the leadership of Antonio João Damasceno. He was a peddler in Itapecuru-Mirim who had suffered persecution in 1825 because of his sympathies with the republican Confederation of the Equator.⁶¹ During his transportation to Rio de Janeiro he managed to escape with other prisoners and was seen in Ceará and Piauí, where he was awaiting

⁵⁷ On similar developments during the War of Independence in Bahia, see João Reis, ‘O jogo duro do Dois de Julho: o “Partido Negro” na Independência da Bahia’, in João José Reis & Eduardo Silva, *Negociação e conflito* (São Paulo, 1989), pp. 79–98.

⁵⁸ *Argos*, 1825, no. 9, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Reports on the *lustrós* can be found in the contemporary press, both the moderate liberal and the conservative. See Odorico Mendes, *Argos da Lei*, 1825 (facsimile edition by Jomar Moraes, São Luís, 1980); especially the no. 4 (18.1.1825), no. 7 (28.1.1825), no. 8 (1.2.1825), no. 13 (18.2.1825). The conservative and pro-Portuguese *Censor Maranhense*, written by the Portuguese Garcia d’Abranches, who entered in a polemic with the *Argos* about this topic, denounced in much more violent terms the ‘sanguinary system of persecution’, which, according to him, had been practised against the Portuguese after Independence. See the facsimile edition by Jomar Moraes (São Luís, 1980), no. 4, 26.2.1825, p. 63. A good description of *lustrós*, which recreates the atmosphere of hatred against the Portuguese, is given by Dunshee d’Abranches, *A Setembro*, pp. 58–68, 95–96, 117–120, 125–126.

⁶⁰ Only in Eastern Maranhão was the general excitement attempted to be channelled into support for the Confederation of the Equator by messengers from the Northeast travelling around the countryside.

⁶¹ See *O Brasileiro* (São Luís) 1832), p. 35.

the ‘outbreak of revolution’.⁶² After the November defeat of the rebels in São Luís, he tried to besiege Itapecuru-Mirim with 200 followers and later passed through Eastern Maranhão. For several months he and his followers developed a kind of guerrilla warfare against the Portuguese of the region. If we believe one of the officers assigned to fight him, he and his gang robbed not only Portuguese, but native Brazilians as well. Damasceno was killed during an assault on the town of Brejo in 1832 and his followers dispersed. Because of his struggle for simple survival his original aims might, ultimately, have shifted from republican revolution to social banditry. Nevertheless, his raids in Eastern Maranhão presaged what was to come.

The Balaiada-rebellion (1838–41)

The third, major rupture between the elite and the popular sectors occurred during the Balaiada revolt. Here, mass mobilisation reached new proportions in terms of participation, leadership and the achievements of a revolt.⁶³ Here I will concentrate solely on controversial issues and those points which have frequently been misinterpreted in the historiography, such as the origin of the movement, the extent of support both in terms of geography and class, and the relationship between slaves and free rebels.

The beginning of the movement is normally dated to the assault on the prison of the vila da Manga by a small group led by Raimundo Gomes, a cowboy at the service of a liberal priest and *fazendeiro*. They freed the prisoners, some of whom were part of Gomes’ crew minding the *fazendeiro*’s cattle. According to the *Cambridge History of Latin America*, this was only ‘a trivial incident’ in the factional strife between liberals and conservatives⁶⁴. The leader nicknamed Balaio (basket-maker), from which the name of the revolt was derived from, is said to have joined the movement later.

According to many sources, Balaio’s real name was Manoel Francisco dos Anjos Ferreira. His daughter was raped by a ‘Portuguese’ officer at

⁶² Letter from Brejo, 8.5.1826, in: *Ofícios expedidos dos Comandantes Gerais ao Presidente da Província, 1826*, APEM.

⁶³ The classical and detailed account of the Balaiada remains José Ribeiro do Amaral, *Apontamentos para a História da Revolução da Balaiada na Província do Maranhão* (3 vols., [São Luís do] Maranhão, 1900). Newer monographies are Odilon Nunes, *Pesquisas para a História do Piauí* (Vol. II, ‘A Balaiada’, Rio de Janeiro, 1975); Maria Januária Vilela Santos, *A Balaiada e a Insurreição dos Escravos no Maranhão* (São Paulo, 1983); Maria Amélia Freitas Mendes de Oliveira, *A Balaiada no Piauí* (Teresina, 1985); and my already quoted *A Guerra dos Bem-te-vis*.

⁶⁴ Leslie Bethell and José Murilo de Carvalho, ‘Brazil from Independence to the Middle of the 19th Century’, in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. III (Cambridge, 1985), p. 708.

an early stage of the conflict and therefore rose in arms to take vengeance. The first account of this version was published soon after the events in 1848 by Magalhães, who had been the secretary of the commander in chief Alves de Lima, but had only arrived in Maranhão once the insurrection had begun. Even though no evidence is given for the episode, it has been repeated throughout the historiography⁶⁵ – but with changing details as to profession, residence, colour and full name of the Balaio. Whilst Carvalho, for instance, depicts him as ‘white, tall, slim’, Dunshee de Abranches and others describes him as a mulatto (*pardo*) or coloured (*de cor*).⁶⁶

According to the oral memory in the area, the Balaio started the revolt not to avenge his raped daughter, but rather to free his son(s) drafted by force, linking the ‘Tempo do Pega’ directly to the Balaiada.⁶⁷ Interestingly enough, the evidence from the regional archives altogether confirms this version of oral history. Based upon the correspondence of the prefect from Brejo, it is possible to reconstruct the events as follows. On 30 October 1838, ten recruits aged 18 to 32 were sworn in as soldiers in the town of Brejo. Six of the ten were native *maranhenses*, two came originally from Piauí and two from Ceará provinces. Among them was Francisco Ferreira, son of Francisco Ferreira, nicknamed the Balaio. The ten were sent to the capital soon afterwards together with four deserters and four soldiers. One night a soldier disappeared and was not seen again; the others took it for granted that he had deserted, as he had announced on several occasions. On 22 November

Francisco Ferreira approached, armed with a rifle and two big knives, to free his son, the recruit Francisco Ferreira, who was marching in handcuffs together with the recruit Sebastião da Silva Franco. He took them both, without any resistance from the soldiers of the unit, because they [the soldiers] said they had no munitions.⁶⁸

It is clear that from that moment on the Balaio did not content himself with just having freed his son:

I have just been informed that Francisco Ferreira, who is nicknamed the Balaio, and who has taken his drafted son and has caused the flight of other recruits, walks around armed and together with others, bragging about that he will free all recruits whom he meets and that, moreover, he will kill the person responsible for the enlisting of his son; and I am without means to have him arrested because

⁶⁵ See Carlota Carvalho, *O sertão* (Rio de Janeiro, 1924), p. 124, Clóvis Dunshee de Abranches, *O Cativoiro Memórias* (Rio de Janeiro, 1941), p. 91, and Serra, *A Balaiada*, p. 140.

⁶⁶ Cf. the letter by the president of the province Camargo, 15.3.1839, Caixa 808, AN.

⁶⁷ For examples see Röhrig Assunção, *A Guerra dos Bem-te-vis*, pp. 182–3.

⁶⁸ Letter from the *alferes* Angelo Bastista Mendes, 29.11.1838, in: *Ofícios de diversas comarcas ao Presidente da Província, 1838*, APEM.

of the lack of troops: with militia it is impossible to achieve this because once they are called up, they already know before hand a patrol is about to be sent out, and in consequence they go into hiding, and nothing can be done.⁶⁹

Those actions raised peasant resistance from individual, passive opposition to an unprecedented level. And they took place even before the mentioned assault on the prison of Manga on 13 December 1838. In fact, by then the insurrection had already started. It only lacked a political declaration of aims to give the broad resistance against the draft an ideological justification. This was achieved by Gomes with his proclamation of 14 December, whereby in the name of ‘the people’ he demanded the dismissal of the president of the province and the suppression of the prefectures responsible for conscription. He did not therefore rather accidentally ‘find himself’ the leader of a rebellion, but took that position because he was one of the very few lower class persons able to put into writing political objectives.

As to the Balaio, was he then the avenger of his raped daughter or the liberator of his recruited son? I could not find any archival evidence for the former, but this is no reason to discard the story altogether. Rapes of free coloured women certainly happened at that time, and under slavery the rape of black slave women was virtually institutionalised. Yet, one might wonder why this should have such a decisive impact for the outbreak of the Balaiada. Given that the existence of the liberator of the drafted son, Francisco Ferreira Balaio, so important in oral memory, is also clearly supported by archival evidence, my hypothesis at present is that there were two rebels nicknamed Balaio (Manoel Francisco dos Anjos Ferreira and Francisco Ferreira), which would explain why so many details referring to him (them) differ. The interesting question is why was only the first highlighted by official historiography whilst the second remained so important in the oral tradition of the peasants of the area? In my opinion, the version of the Balaio as avenger of his raped daughter was used by the elites to explain popular anger as a result of the individual misconduct of a soldier – nothing more. The more profound conflict between the state and the free coloured poor was thereby evaded. The Balaio’s reputed cruelty was the reason for which his sobriquet was used by the elites to name the whole movement in a clear intent to associate the rebellion with the perversity they thought was the inevitable result of uncontrolled lower class passions. In the oral history version, in contrast, the structural conflict between peasants and the state is exemplified by the Balaio’s conduct. Forced recruitment was crucial for the outbreak of the rebellion not only because it crystallised social conflict between elite and

⁶⁹ Letter from the prefect of Brejo, 12.12.1838, in: *Ofícios de diversas comarcas ao Presidente da Província, 1838*, APEM.

free poor but also because it was able to fuse resistance from very different groups within the lower classes and provided thus a common denominator for subsistence peasants, fishermen, gatherers, cowboys and artisans alike.⁷⁰

The geographical extension of the revolt has also been misunderstood and seldom analyzed. In many text-books the Balaiada is said to have happened in Maranhão only.⁷¹ Yet it extended not only to a substantial part of that province but also to the neighbouring province of Piauí, and even into the western part of Ceará. The core area of the revolt was eastern Maranhão, the area between the Atlantic Ocean, the Itapecuru and Parnaíba valleys and Caxias in the South, where the proportion of the free coloured population was highest. It extended into the main plantation area of the lower Itapecuru, recruiting here mainly among slaves and the smaller free population, such as the free Indians and Blacks from São Miguel and Pai Simão. Although the Parnaíba river was the political divide between Maranhão and Piauí, its lower reaches constituted one socio-economic micro-region, where the Revolt found support among the free poor, the slaves and, especially on the Piauí side, among some prominent *fazendeiro* families, such as the Castello Branco from Campo Maior.⁷² Elite support in Piauí was even stronger in peripheral areas of the South, such as Parnaguá.⁷³ As various scholars have pointed out, in this province the Balaiada was more of a movement against the autocratic rule of the President of Piauí, the Barão de Parnaíba.⁷⁴ In the South of Maranhão, many liberal cattle *fazendeiros* also took up arms against the government, the most pre-eminent being Militão Bandeira de Barros, a freeman resentful of discrimination he had had to endure from the conservatives. In Eastern Maranhão, elite backing for the revolt was timid or non-existent. Some liberal *fazendeiros* had been forced by the rebels to adhere or even function as emissaries to the government, for example, after the capture of the city of Caxias, by transmitting the rebel claims. But all of them defected as soon as it seemed safe to do so. Many *fazendeiros*

⁷⁰ One of the few contemporary writers to emphasize the importance of draft for the eclosion of the rebellion was João Francisco Lisboa. See his articles in *Crônica Maranhense*, especially from 4.1.1839 and 14.1.1839, 2a parte, pp. 3–10.

⁷¹ Bethell and Carvalho, for instance, state: 'It's battlefield was the southern part of the province of Maranhão, close to the border with Piauí'. This is misleading since the main battlefield in this province was the Northeast of the province, and because the border with Piauí runs rather on the Eastern edge of Maranhão, all along the Parnaíba River, from South to the coast in the North. See Leslie Bethell and José Murilo de Carvalho, 'Brazil from Independence' p. 708.

⁷² Odilon Nunes, *Pesquisas para a História do Piauí*, vol. 3, 'A Balaiada' (2. ed., Rio de Janeiro, 1975) p. 134. Lívio Lopes Castello Branco was the most prominent elite leader of the Balaiada in Piauí.

⁷³ Nunes, *Pesquisas*, p. 145.

⁷⁴ For a summary, see Oliveira, *A Balaiada no Piauí*, p. 63–9.

from the Itapecuru valley, who had adopted a prudent neutrality at the beginning, vehemently denounced by the president of the province Sousa e Mello, were quickly convinced that this revolt was not theirs. Often liberal planters would only pay lip service to the rebel cause in order to avoid being ransacked. Therefore, and in sharp contrast to most of Piauí and the South of Maranhão, leadership in Eastern Maranhão was almost entirely popular.

Why did the revolt not involve the western districts of Alcântara, Viana and Guimarães? Liberal agitation had been strong here as well, but two decisive features distinguished this part of the province. There had not yet been any substantial migration from *cearenses* into the area, and it had not experienced the previous political upheavals. The Balaiada took place in almost the same area which had already been the stage of the War of Independence and Damascenos uprising in 1832. This striking coincidence reflects the fact that many rebels had already taken up arms on the patriot side in the War of Independence, the most well known examples being both Balaios (Manuel Francisco Ferreira dos Anjos and Francisco Ferreira) and the Indian chieftain Matroá. Similarly, the fact that refugees from the Confederation of the Equator had taken shelter in the South of Maranhão certainly helped to maintain the spirit of liberal agitation in that area.⁷⁵ The geographical extent of the revolt confirms the importance of the War of Independence in Maranhão for the political mobilisation of lower class sectors in the subsequent period. It also helps us to understand why the ideology of the rebels was so impregnated with the liberal discourse of the Independence era – almost twenty years after Independence had been achieved.

The eventual alliance between free rebels and slaves is another critical point, and not only for the history of Maranhão, since this almost never happened in the history of Brazil. Again, the differentiation between the various areas of the revolt is crucial. There is no point in quoting manifestos from elite rebel leaders from Piauí or the South, if we want to know anything about intentions and relations of slaves and rebels in Eastern Maranhão.⁷⁶ The problem of course is that only literate or half-literate rebels could write manifestos, unless they were able to get hold of a literate secretary, but this was rather the exception.⁷⁷

During the initial phase of the Balaiada, slaves were involved in two different ways in the struggle. In Piauí, many elite rebel leaders took slaves along with them into the woods. Nunes estimates that almost two

⁷⁵ Carlota Carvalho, *O Sertão*, p. 91–4.

⁷⁶ This is done, for instance, by Santos, *A Balaiada*, p. 90.

⁷⁷ Among the popular rebel leaders, only Gomes and Cosme could read and write.

hundred slaves were serving rebel armies in the camps of Curimatá, but that they were not used as soldiers.⁷⁸ In Maranhão, marronage, already endemic in the Codó parish before the outbreak of the Balaiada, increased dramatically with the disruption of order. One maroon chief, Cosme Bento das Chagas, reunited up to two thousand runaway slaves. He established his headquarters on a former plantation in Eastern Maranhão, Lagoa Amarela, where he forced the former plantation owner to sign freedom letters for all his slaves and had a school established. Yet, despite his efforts, the free rebel leaders in the area were reluctant to cooperate with him. As long as they wanted to get support from the liberal elite in the province, even offering chiefs from liberal headquarters in the capital the leadership of the movement, they were not likely to depart from the mainstream liberal principles, which included respect for the institution of slavery.

But the liberal leaders in São Luís refused to recognise the political character of the revolt – even though rebels used their own language and called themselves after a popular radical liberal newspaper *Bem-te-vis*. They would not support what to their eyes seemed anarchy, and they were not willing to accept the idea that lower class people could participate in politics. Defection of the liberal planters and leaders, and the growing pressure of the imperial army led to a radicalisation of the revolt, and the eventual dropping of some elite taboos, such as the involvement of slaves. The initial conservative argument stating that by the constant use of the words *slavery* to describe the colonial status quo and *freedom* for the aims to achieve, liberal symbolism had undermined the institution of slavery. This seems to have become true in Maranhão. There was still no explicit rebel text aiming at the abolition of slavery, but writings by Gomes during the later stage of the revolt offer some insight into the growing egalitarian aspirations of at least one part of the rebels, who revindicated equal rights for all ‘people of colour’, *cabras* (dark mulatto) and *caboclos*. Santos concludes rightly that this might have included the slave, but that the omission still persisted.⁷⁹

It is important to look beyond the rebels’ written manifestos. Since most of the lower class *balaios* were illiterate, the greatest part of letters and proclamations found in archives were written by elite rebel leaders more likely to stick to the liberal principles. However, in Eastern Maranhão, cooperation between slaves and free rebels started to take place on the ground. This meant that slaves on plantations provided rebels with

⁷⁸ Nunes, *Pesquisas*, p. 105–6.

⁷⁹ Santos, *A Balaiada*, p. 90. On Gomes’ egalitarian views, see also M. Röhrig Assunção, ‘Popular Culture and Regional Society in Nineteenth-century Maranhão, Brazil’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1995), pp. 281–3.

precious information on the movements of the loyalist army;⁸⁰ or that rebels tried to instigate slave rebellions on plantations outside the area of the revolt;⁸¹ and, more important still, the fact that slaves were, during the year 1840, systematically integrated into rebel bands in Eastern Maranhão. This is clearly stated in the official correspondence, and even by the commander in chief Luis Alves de Lima:

There was an attack on 8th of this month upon the place called Carnaubéiras [near Tutóia on the Coast]: at three o'clock in the morning of that day, rebels united with insurrectionist slaves, 300 in numbers, suddenly attacked that point; but 100 of our soldiers who were placed there drove them back completely. 28 slaves and nine rebels died, and many wounded escaped.⁸²

In August 1840 a detachment of the army

fell upon a numerous group of rebels, and negroes, who were hovering around the Preto river committing murders, and robbery, and dispersed them completely at Coroa Grande, killing three [free rebels] and capturing 23 slaves, some horses, and arms, and the rest of the destroyed group jumped into the river....⁸³

Free rebel/maroon cooperation in Eastern Maranhão is attested by many other documents.⁸⁴ Precisely because Luis Alves de Lima was aware of the danger, he chose to divide up free rebels and slaves systematically. He astutely linked the concession of the new imperial amnesty⁸⁵ to the condition that repentant insurgents should themselves catch the runaway slaves:

As one of the objectives, to which I gave particular attention, in order to avoid further insurrections, is to excite the hate between the slaves, and this people [the free rebels], I ordered that those rebels should hunt down the new quilombo of Cosme, which they did, turning me over the captured slaves...⁸⁶

⁸⁰ See the letter by the lieutenant Joaquim Fonseca, where he relates how he discovered that slaves from the *fazenda* of João Sabino da Fonseca e Castro were in touch with the rebels, in the appendix to the Ofício de Feliciano Antonio Falcão a Luis Alves de Lima, 4.7.1840, Caixa 808, AN.

⁸¹ For the rebel's intention to instigate a slave rebellion in the district of Alcântara, see Carta de Luis Alves de Lima a Joaquim José Rodrigues Torres, 7.8.1840, Documento 9, Caixa 808, AN; and Carta de Luis Alves de Lima a Antonio Carlos Ribeiro d'Andrada Machado e Silva, 22.10.1840, Documento 17, Caixa 808, AN.

⁸² 'Rebeldes unidos a escravos sublevados'. Carta de Luis Alves de Lima ao Conde de Lâges, Ministro e Secretário de Estado dos Negócios da Guerra, 16.5.1840. Carta 24, Codice 927, AN.

⁸³ Carta de Luis Alves de Lima a Salvador José Maciel, 8.8.1840, Carta 13, Cod. 927, AN.

⁸⁴ For more examples, see Santos, *A Balaiada*, p. 92–94; Nunes, *Pesquisas*, p. 122.

⁸⁵ The newly enthroned emperor Pedro II had, advised by the new liberal central government, conceded an amnesty on the 22 August 1840, which would be granted for all 'political crimes', provided their authors would surrender to the authorities within 60 days.

⁸⁶ Carta de Luis Alves de Lima a Francisco de Paula Cavalcante de Albuquerque, Ministro e Secretário de Estado dos Negócios da Guerra, 3.12.1840, Carta 18, Cod. 927, AN.

Given that at this stage the Balaiada was already declining, a number of rebel leaders, fearing for their future, accepted Lima's offer. Because of their knowledge of the terrain, they contributed substantially to the final demise of the movement. Confusion among rebels was enhanced by the fact that some of them, such as Pedrosa, did not disband their troops and join government camps. They remained in the woods as if they were still rebels, but now took their orders from the government.

Not all rebel leaders accepted the inglorious mutation from freedom fighter to slave-catcher. Why some did and others did not can be explained in part by the different social backgrounds of the rebels as well as their individual biographies. Changing sides might have been easier for the 'quisling' Coque for example, who had been a *pistoleiro* in a conservative planter's pay. Meanwhile other leaders, such as Matroá, resisted until the very end because they had been fighting for liberal ideals since the days of Independence. Also Raimundo Gomes showed a firm commitment to his radical liberal ideals. He could not be convinced to turn against the slaves, but was the most pre-eminent of those leaders who tried systematically to recruit slaves and foment insurrections on the plantations:

Raimundo Gomes, who until now [...] claimed that he did not want to ally himself to the insurrected negroes, now, without resources and always persecuted, tries to attract them, and all my effort is to prevent the junction with the maroons in Miritiba [today Humberto de Campos, on the coast], who exceed a thousand in number and on various occasions he has stirred up revolts among many slaves of different *fazendas*.⁸⁷

Yet according to Magalhães, when Gomes' troops suffered a major defeat, and attempted to take refuge with Cosme, the maroon chief had him arrested, and he was nearly executed.⁸⁸ The source for this episode is Magalhães himself, who claimed that Gomes personally told him so after his surrender. There is almost no other evidence for this alleged animosity between Gomes and Cosme.⁸⁹ Magalhães' testimony is obviously far from

⁸⁷ Carta de Luis Alves de Lima a Joaquim José Rodrigues Torres, Ministro e Secretário de Estado dos Negócios do Império. Doc. 8, Caixa 808, AN, also reproduced in Santos, *A Balaiada*, p. 110.

⁸⁸ Magalhães, *Memória*, pp. 332–3.

⁸⁹ Lima's letter refers to the episode of Gomes taking shelter with Cosme as follows: 'Raimundo Gomes porém, (...) evadiu-se sem armas, sem bagagem, e indecentemente vestido, foi se oferecer ao negro Cosme, que o reduziu a ser fabricante de pólvora, e o tem em guarda; talvez que Raimundo Gomes não se entregue por se reconhecer assaz criminoso, e indigno de perdão.' Letter to Francisco de Paula Cavalcante de Albuquerque, 1.9.1840, Carta 14, Cod. 927, AN. This letter was written shortly after Gomes' defeat and so relied on information the legalist camp had, at that stage, from spies or other informants. The similarity between some of Lima's letters and Magalhães' *Memória* are either due to the fact that Magalhães, as Lima's secretary, was probably also responsible for drafting them, or that he used that correspondence when

being objective. His main aim when writing his *Memória* was to show the excellence of Lima's policies and actions, including success in playing off rebel leaders against slave rebels, and contrast those with the disastrous policies of his two predecessors, Camargo and Souza e Mello. He also suggested that Gomes was not able to launch the rebellion on his own, but was driven by an 'invisible hand', the liberal party in Maranhão. The latter interpretation has been carefully refuted in Amaral's voluminous work, showing that there is no evidence for it at all.⁹⁰ Whilst Magalhães' version fits with both his underlying aims when writing the account and Gomes' eventual need to distance himself from Cosme once the rebellion was over, it does not fit the logic of the events or tally with the other existing records. Cosme himself, once arrested, claims that he had been, on the contrary, under the orders of Gomes: '(...) that the army which accompanied him was of Raimundo Gomes, on behalf of whom he had reunited it.'⁹¹ This also cannot be considered a convincing explanation since his intention was obviously to be treated as a rebel in order to avoid execution for instigating a slave insurrection. Gomes' and Cosme's testimonies must be regarded with circumspection, because both were made under the circumstances of detention.

We can understand matters better if we look at the facts prior to their arrest. Here we have the clear evidence, on one side, that Gomes enrolled slaves as soldiers in his army and tried to incite slaves on plantations to rebel, and that he took refuge with Cosme when his army had suffered severe defeat. On the other side, Cosme had systematically pursued a policy of alliance, even if he had not been very successful. The second part of his self-styled title 'Tutor Emperor of Freedom, Defender of the Bem-te-vis' is one indication of his ambitious political vision and his clear conviction that the slaves' struggle could only advance through an alliance with the free rebels. Very instructive in this respect are the letters he wrote to other (free) rebel leaders, inviting them to join his 'brotherhood of Rosario' in the fight for 'Republican Freedom'. In one of them, he refers explicitly to Gomes, as an example of a rebel leader who had already

he wrote his *Memória*. Yet this information is not confirmed in later letters, one of which for instance rather suggests that Gomes simply 'left' Cosme's army: 'Raimundo Gomes, deixando (sic) a companhia do negro Cosme, uniu-se ao Pedrosa, em tempo que este chefe rebelde ainda não me obedecia, mas verificando-se isto depois, fugiu com uns 300 homens, que a ele se ligaram incluso o Matroá, (...)' Carta de Luis Alves de Lima a Francisco de Paula Cavalcante de Albuquerque, 3.12.1840. Carta no. 18, Cod. 927, AN.

⁹⁰ Amaral, *Apontamentos*, vol. I, p. 42. But he still endorses the imprisonment of Gomes by Cosme as described by Magalhães (vol. III, p. 64).

⁹¹ Autos do processo de Cosme Bento das Chagas, reproduced in Santos, *A Balaiada*, p. 137.

accepted his appeal to join forces: 'Raimundo [Gomes] put me under fire but afterwards adopted the party and joined Black troops'.⁹²

Conclusions

If there can be no doubt that free rebel leaders such as Gomes tried to attract slaves in Eastern Maranhão, the relationship between Gomes and the main maroon leader Cosme is not entirely clear. Evidence allows us to question the Magalhães version. In any case, the alliance between maroons and free rebels did not have the time to develop: 'the highest degree of junction between the two movements happened when both were agonizing'.⁹³ This ephemeral alliance marked the extreme point of what was at that stage historically possible, and it shows that although the Balaiada did 'not escape from the ideological and political trappings of upper and middle sector conflict',⁹⁴ this was on the verge of being passed over by the dynamics of the movement.

The Balaiada movement failed in the end for several reasons. Rebels had not expected the liberal elite to abstain and were not prepared – and in fact did not even intend – to overthrow the government. Although rebels controlled large parts of the province and took the city of Caxias twice, they made no effort to occupy the capital, São Luís, following the example of the rebels in Pará four years earlier. The attempt to create a provisional government in Caxias seems not to have been followed up. The lack of a clear central leadership meant that chiefs tended to disperse and wage their own wars, which might be seen as typical for a peasant war without a politically experienced leadership, but also reflects the varying agendas of socially diverse leaderships. These differences should not, however, lead to the conclusion that the Balaiada in Maranhão was, in comparison with the Cabanagem in Pará, 'the product of a less polarized social structure'.⁹⁵ Such a statement fails to take into account that antagonism between rebel leaders mirrored the regional differences in social structure between the cattle economy of the South, the cotton plantations of the Itapecuru and the peasant production of Eastern Maranhão.

Although the outcome of the Independence process in Brazil was quite

⁹² Ofício de Cosme Bento das Chagas ao Maior Pio Rodrigues dos Santos, APEM. Reproduced in Santos, *A Balaiada*, p. 112.

⁹³ Santos, *A Balaiada*, p. 93. Her conclusions remain valid on this point, although she fails to discuss the problems of the relationship Gomes/Cosme.

⁹⁴ Bethell and Carvalho, 'Brazil from Independence...', p. 709.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* Social structure could hardly be more polarised than on the cotton plantations of the Itapecuru valley. On the contrary, slavery was less important in Pará (slaves representing only between 26–31% of the provincial population in the 1820s) and coexisted with different forms of free and coerced (Indian) labour.

different from Spanish America when seen from a national perspective, the case of Maranhão shows that regional power struggles were in many ways similar to processes elsewhere on the continent. It is striking that Maranhão, just as in the case of those Spanish American regions with ‘most outstanding instances of popular participation during the 1810s and early 1820s’, did not correspond to areas involved in late colonial protests.⁹⁶

The crisis of the late 1830s in Maranhão was a result of both the internal struggle for power among the elites and the attempt to impose a neo-colonial order on a population which had just learned that a colonial order could be challenged. The internal struggle resulted in the monopolisation of regional power by the local elites from the core plantation area and the city of São Luís in 1823. This was followed by the removal of the liberal elites from the state after 1837. As a result, dissent grew among peripheral and/or liberal elites, which were no longer willing to back up the regional government. Their indifference provided the space for lower class unrest to gain momentum. On the other hand, this disruption was only possible because of the relative weakness of the central state during this period. Central government was frequently unable to act as a mediator in inter-oligarchical conflicts, and so often had to rely on one faction in order to ensure some presence in the province. Yet, with the restoration of order by Luis Alves de Lima and his troops, the definitive subjugation of the province to central authority was achieved. The end of the Balaiada also marked the end of relative provincial autonomy.

The Independence period had for the first time opened the door to lower class participation in politics, even though under liberal leadership. The fact that no real social change for coloured freemen or slaves followed Independence, and that radical liberals were excluded from power, explains why liberal claims continued to be relevant for the lower classes. The liberal discourse was abstract enough to provide a unifying credo for the otherwise heterogeneous free poor population, and therefore the fight against harassment by the ‘Portuguese’ could still become a common denominator, even two decades after formal Independence.

In the post-emancipation period, therefore, liberalism had a substantial popular base in Maranhão, as it had in some other Brazilian provinces, notably Pernambuco. Popular liberalism reproduced elite liberal discourse to a certain extent. By emphasising issues such as the equality of citizens, the expulsion of the Portuguese and the end of harassment of the free

⁹⁶ For an innovative comparison between Latin American regions, including Brazil, during this period see Brian Hamnett, ‘Process and Pattern: A Reexamination of the Ibero-American Independence Movements, 1808–1826’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 29 (1997), pp. 279–328. The quote is from p. 317.

poor, popular liberalism developed its own agenda, which made it all the more unacceptable to elite liberals supporting the ‘Regression’ of 1837. In this respect, the importance of popular liberalism and nationalism has hitherto been underestimated for Brazil, just as it had been for other Latin American countries. Florencia Mallon has shown the degree to which the incorporation or exclusion of popular political cultures is crucial for the understanding of state formation in 19th century Mexico and Peru.⁹⁷ In Brazil, interventions by central government in the period 1822–1848 meant closing the door to lower class involvement in politics and the non-absorption of regional political culture. As a consequence, the politics of exclusion could be maintained in Brazil and particularly in Maranhão for decades to come. As Carlota Carvalho wrote in her pioneering study of 1924, once order was restored by the national ‘Pacifier’, the Duke of Caxias, ‘all ideas of freedom and moral integrity had evaporated from the territory’.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Florencia F. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation. The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995). See also Guy Thompson, ‘Popular Aspects of Liberalism in Mexico, 1848–1888’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 10 (1991), 3, p. 265–92.

⁹⁸ Carvalho, *O Sertão*, p. 147–8.