

From colonial lordship to territorial authority: the pursuit of Antônio Vieira de Melo in Ararobá Sertão (Pernambuco, 18th century)

De senhorio colonial a território de mando: os acossamentos de Antônio Vieira de Melo no Sertão do Ararobá (Pernambuco, século XVIII)

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RESUMO

O artigo analisa a ação de um capitão, Antônio Vieira de Melo, senhor de terras, que assolou o sertão do Ararobá, em Pernambuco no século XVIII, utilizando-se de violência para coagir pessoas a tornarem-se seus vaqueiros, uma vez que se autointitulava proprietário daquelas terras. Analisam-se três aspectos: o primeiro refere-se às denúncias dos moradores contra o capitão; o segundo, ao modo como ele conseguiu apoio de indígenas para a formação de sua milícia, gerando ondas de violência e perseguições; finalmente, o terceiro, à solução das autoridades para reduzir seu poderio, com base apenas na discussão sobre a legalidade da posse de suas terras.

Palavras-chave: conflito de terras; violência no campo; Brasil colonial.

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the actions of a captain, Antônio Vieira de Melo, a lord of a territory, who ravaged the *sertão* of Ararobá, Pernambuco, in the eighteenth century, using violence to coerce people and make them in to his *vaqueiros*, as he had self-titled himself lord of those lands. Three aspects are analyzed: the first refers to the inhabitants' accusations against the captain; the second, how he managed to get support from indigenous people to form his militia, creating waves of violence and persecution; finally, the third, the solution of the authorities to reduce his power, based on the discussion of the legality of the possession of his land.

Keywords: land conflict; violence in the countryside; colonial Brazil.

This article intends to analyze the actions of a Captain, Antônio Vieira de Melo, who ravaged the *sertão* of Ararobá, Pernambuco in the middle of the eighteenth century, threatening some people, apprehending others, capturing

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slaves, using a high degree of violence, with the support of numerous Indians, to coerce the local people to become his *vaqueiros* (cowboys or herdsmen), since he had self-titled himself as owner of those lands. The conflicts involving this group implied various dimensions, and the choice of this case, amongst so many others of violence in the *sertão*, were due to the solution found by colonial authorities to reduce his power. Moreover, the captain's form of action and the alliances he made reveal a process of the constitution of power whose analysis imposes challenges and calls attention to the complexity of colonial society. It is interesting to note that some studies have already drawn attention to the level of violence in the region, but have attributed it above all to various indigenous groups (cf. Marques, 2012; Leitão, 2011). The case presented here shows a captain carrying out violence with some of these Indians.

Antônio Vieira de Melo built up his property like most *conquistadores*. Although he had inherited land from his father, he was one of those most responsible for the penetration of the Pernambuco *sertões* and the Indian lands, receiving a rank and the recognition of his peers for his important contributions. In this way he managed to construct a *colonial senhorio* (lordship), a concept which can help to understand how, in the process of conquest and colonization, some *conquistadores* (and their *descendants*) contributed to penetrate the interior, obtaining rank and land, as well as managing to bring other *conquistadores* under their leadership, and later became large landholders, whose occupants (*posseiros* – squatters – or even Indians) came under their sphere of influence and dominion. Cases of *colonial lordships* were very present in Portuguese America, with the most exemplary cases being those of the Ávila family, the House of Torre, and Guedes de Brito, later renamed House of Ponte. However, many other similarities occurred (Santos, 2012; Costa, 2013; Pinto, 2014). The question raised in this article is: which circumstances led the lord of a *colonial lordship* to lose his legitimacy, having to impose violence to maintain his dominion, which culminated in the questioning of his actions, forcing the Crown itself to interfere, removing part of his land from him.

Before moving on to analyze the case, it is worth clarifying the concept of colonial lordship and differentiate it from other terms, such as *donatário*, *sesmeiro*, or potentate, as well as the actual medieval lordship. The colonial lordship was constituted in colonial society at the beginning of the process of colonization, as some colonizers received *mercês* (graces) of land in the captaincies of Bahia and Pernambuco, in which they were supposed to start the planting of sugarcane and to establish social relations of dependency, above all slavery. These lordships were large and covered a relatively wide group of

people. To a certain extent, the concept differed from the medieval lordship, which existed in Portugal, since during the process of changes which occurred after the Expansion, it was transformed. Medieval lordship implied the sovereignty of the lord over his land, over which he also had his own jurisdiction. However, from the fifteenth century onwards, the lordships in Portugal suffered a gradual retrenchment and a reduction of powers (Martins, 2015).

In Brazil during the colonial period, the *donatarias* or hereditary captaincies were in a way equivalent to the medieval lordships, used by the Crown at moments of need to guarantee conquests and to propel colonization, or even as a form of recognition of some subject, through a donation which implied broader rights (Saldanha, 2001). However, in this case both the *donataria* and hereditary captaincy have to be differentiated from the lordships established in Brazil, which were principally constituted through *sesmarias* (Alveal, 2007).

The colonial lordship can thus be defined as the dominion which one person has over a determined portion of land, exercising authority over the area and the people in it, socially constructed through recognized social relations between those involved. Based on the colonization process, it is necessary to understand how these meanings were constructed, since very often the lordship estate had to be socially recognized in order to be perpetuated. In this construction there are relations of power involving the Crown, but also disputes about the legitimacy of properties and their forms of appropriation (Santos, 2012).

When there was an extrapolation of property rights or even conflicts in the social relations constructed previously by the colonial lordship, and there was no longer recognition among the actors involved in the established agreement, even in an indirect form, it can be said that the lordship became a territorial authority, a concept developed by Célia Nonata da Silva (2007).

Based on the idea of territorial authority, Silva analyzes a unique political culture, based on complex forms of command, differentiating them from an irrational use of violence. The vast dominions occupied by these potentates were territorial authorities, whose leaders were respected by the group of residents. This social relationship was based on practices of domination, which involved the resort to vengeance to mark an exercise of private power something at times disguised as the public order. It is exactly this ambiguous character of relations between the private powers and those of the public order which Célia Nonata refutes, stating that there was an incompatibility between the actions of these potentates and those of the authorities, since, for this author, these potentates were only thinking of their own benefit.

For this reason, agreeing with Célia Nonata, care must be taken with use of the term *potentate*. It has been used just to designate that those being discussed were powerful people supported by client networks – not necessarily linked to a territorial dominion – which maintained the public order. Sometimes the term *régulo* (a minor king or chief) was also used (Fragoso, 2005). Other authors have taken greater care with the use of the term *potentate* (Costa, 2013), though the majority use it in a generic manner, such as a powerful man, a landowner, who exercises almost complete power over their dominion (Pinto, 2014; Costa, 2013).

In this paper, the term ‘territorial authority’ is preferred, in the understanding of Nonata da Silva, to analyze the cases in which there was an extrapolation of the powers of the landholders, as seen in the example of Antônio Vieira de Melo.

The difficulties of the colonial authorities and the Portuguese kingdom in curbing the actions of Antônio Vieira de Melo and his group were so great that the solution found to try to undermine his power was a political measure with a legal covering to remove part of his lands through institutional mechanisms. In this paper it will be highlighted how, through actions and arguments, land which was initially legally occupied, though without following later obligatory judicial procedures – with a somewhat dubious legality due to the fact that the new legislation emerged after its concession – was transformed into an occupation considered illegal in the judicial understanding. Added to this was the fact the concession was a *mercê*, a grace, with the king being responsible for deciding to repossess it and if this repossession needed a plausible justification. Also from the point of view of the legitimation of the actions of the captain, this only occurred through force and coercion, which provoked contestations about the legitimacy of his power and ended up leading to the denunciation of his activities. Antônio Vieira de Melo tried to impose himself socially and politically through his land and the control of the surrounding area, provoking questions about the legitimacy and legality of his actions which culminated in an inquest held in 1759, the principal document in the analysis of this conflict.²

Three aspects of this episode will be analyzed. The first is related to the complaints and accusations of the inhabitants of Ararobá *sertão* against Captain Antônio Vieira de Melo, by means of representations sent to the colonial authorities. The second is the way the captain achieved the support of some indigenous groups who helped to form his militia, creating a wave of violence and persecution in the region, which weakened his *colonial lordship*.

Finally, the third aspect is that the solution which the colonial authorities found to reduce the power of the captain was based on the pure and simple discussion of the legality of the possession of his lands, avoiding mention of the violent acts caused by him and his band.

THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE RESIDENTS OF
ARAROBÁ AGAINST CAPTAIN ANTÔNIO VIEIRA DE MELO
AND CORONEL CRISTÓVÃO PINTO DE ALMEIDA

In 1764, the governor of the captaincy of Pernambuco, Luis Diogo Lobo da Silva, wrote to Francisco Xavier de Mendonça Furtado, appointed Secretary of Overseas Possessions by his brother Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, the future Marquis de Pombal. In this letter, the governor reported that he had barely taken office when he had received various representations from the residents of the Ararobá sertão, in the Captaincy of Pernambuco, complaining about Antônio Vieira de Melo and Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida. The former answered to captain, though the title had not been confirmed by the Crown in Lisbon. However, the latter was a Coronel, with royal confirmation.³

The situation of dominion and terror imposed by Antônio Vieira de Melo and Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida had begun some time before. However, the current governor alleged that his predecessors had been amiss in resolving the problem. These complaints were old, dating from the 1740s, and repeatedly included complaints that the authorities had done nothing to resolve the disturbances experienced by local residents.⁴ Antônio Vieira de Melo had arrogated to himself the dominion of an extent of almost 30 leagues, although a large part of this had not been approved. More serious was the fact that he had claimed for himself areas cultivated or used by others who, in the face of threats, ended up accepting the condition of *arrendatários* (tenants), paying him to remain there and subjecting themselves to his dominion.

Furthermore, the governor also reported that in the areas of Monte Alegre and Águas Belas the ‘powers’ of Antônio Vieira de Melo were well known, as he had considered himself immune to any punishment, destroying “all the regularity which had been imposed by royal orders,” judging supposed criminals at his own account. The governor also reported that the director of Indians of Monte Alegre, in perceiving the failure of all the measures taken against the duo of transgressors and in the imminence of losing his life as had happened to the director of Águas Belas – who had not let himself be corrupted by Vieira

de Melo –, abandoned the region. At the same time, Vieira was accused of having various Indians around him, as part of his band. The governor equally declared in the letter that Vieira de Melo had an extensive network of informants, which provided him with privileged information, especially related to colonial authorities based in Recife, Pernambuco.⁵

The worst accusation was made by Maria Paes Cabral. In her statement, made in 1750 in the house of the notary – at the time of Governor Marcos de Noronha –, she stated that in May 1749, when she was going to Recife, a coastal city, and had left her son and daughter in her home. Forty soldiers from Porto das Palmas went to her home “without any position, just guided and engaged with a *cabra* called Antônio Vieyra de Mello, a resident of that *sertão*” who robbed everything there, such as silver, “money in coin,” breaking her roof, as well as burning fences, cutting down crops and banana trees, and other fruit trees. At the end of this stage, they left for another ranch, called *Agrote*, where they stole cattle, carried off five slaves and a group of animals. According to the Maria Paes Cabral’s statement, Vieira de Melo publically stated that he was doing this at the order of the Governor Marcos de Noronha and that his purpose was to find the son of Maria Paes, Antônio de Amorim, since he had an order to arrest him, although in the documents there was no mention of why. According to Maria Paes, however, there was no arrest warrant, and for this abuse she asked that the said Antônio Vieira de Melo be arrested.⁶

There is no record of the result of this conflict. Nor was there found in the archives any record of the name of Maria Paes Cabral or her son in the *sesmaria*, and it is impossible to verify if she had the deeds to the land she occupied. Perhaps it was in the name of her husband, which unfortunately was not mentioned in the documents consulted, or had obtained the land through a land purchase document which was not located by the research.

Nevertheless, in the statement of the witness Francisco Pereira da Silva, in an investigation a few years later, in 1759, the name of Antônio de Amorim was mentioned as deceased.⁷ There is no mention of Antônio Vieira de Melo having murdered him, although the last record of Antônio de Amorim was being removed by force by his house, as Maria Paes and other witnesses of the inquiry had reported.

Complaints about Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida were also longstanding. In the representation made to Governor Luís Diogo Lobo da Silva (1756-1763) there is an indication that his predecessor, Henrique Luís Pereira Freire (1737-1746), had ordered Captain Manoel Monteiro da Rocha in 1740 to collect more information about the acts of this Coronel, denounced in a representation by

the residents of the *sertão* of Garanhuns and Ararobá. The representation highlighted that Pinto de Almeida oppressed his soldiers, terrorizing them with threats of prison, making his house into a prison and arresting fugitive slaves. Since Almeida was Coronel of the *ordenanças* cavalry from the *freguesia* of Ararobá, there was a *group* under his command, and they had joined with Antônio Vieira de Melo for “being able and powerful [and] acting with so much pride.”⁸

Captain Manoel Monteiro da Rocha confirmed the veracity of the facts contained in the representation and sent the statement of Maria Paes, written in 1749, to Governor Marcos de Noronha. The captain complained of the difficulty of resolving the problem, since he lived twenty leagues from there, around 132 km. This captain, however, appeared not to have been exempt from the contribution to the consolidation of Antônio Vieira de Melo’s dominion, since a witness of the above mentioned 1759 accused him of participating in illegal actions.

In 1757 it is known that was minor litigation between Vieira de Melo and Pinto de Almeida. After almost two decades working together, it appears that the duo no longer got along. Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida had a petition accepted to take possession of a ranch, donated by him to Antônio Vieira de Melo. Taking possession, Cristóvão called the captain of *ordenanças* from another *freguesia* and told him to send dispatches to the magistrate in order to remove some residents who were there, which was done in the presence of the judge and some officials. Some people were thus expelled and their cattle confiscated, a practice carried out by Antônio Vieira de Melo against residents on other occasions.⁹

What is most interesting is that Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida came to be the son-in-law of Antônio Vieira de Melo.¹⁰ The connection is mentioned in the petition of Fr. Francisco Ferreira da Silva to the governor, in which he said that at the heart of the crisis in the region was the litigation between Antônio Vieira de Melo and his son-in-law, since the former wanted to take some land he had given as a dowry to Pinto de Almeida,¹¹ an action aimed against the latter, in which Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida called another captain to take possession of his land – using the same means as his father-in-law.

The kinship relationship between Antônio Vieira de Melo and Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida highlights the family links, while the dowry given by the father-in-law to his son-in-law could also be a form of transmitting assets, allowing his daughter through marriage to receive a portion of land. However, as well as the affirmations contained in the declaration made by Antônio Vieira

de Melo, dated 1757, also found was a royal letter of confirmation of the *sesmaria* for Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida and Domingos Bezerra Cavalcante, dated 1751, six years previously.¹² It is not known if the land contested by Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida in 1757 belonged to the *sesmaria* received previously. In the confirmation letter there is no mention of the dowry, so it is probable that they dealt with different areas. But the evidence corroborates the idea that Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida possessed a vast amount of land.

In the same letter from the priest, it is reported that there were around twenty Indian couples living from the raising of goats and from nature itself, and that a missionary was lacking to save their souls and prevent them from being manipulated by Vieira de Melo.¹³ A family fight, which began over lands promised as a dowry, could have caused more tension in the region, which will be analyzed below.

It is probable that these lands, alienated as a dowry, belonged to the 'dominion' of the *colonial lordship* of Antônio Vieira de Melo, since he immediately wrote to the governor, annoyed, stating that such violent acts against his possessions should not have been carried out. Shortly afterwards the captain submitted a petition asking that a judge be sent to the *freguesia*, in order to show that the ranch in question did not belong to Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida, and that an inspection be carried out in order to reduce his losses. He also said that the previous judge was incapable, ignorant, and that all his judgments were signed by the clerk, "a perverse *mangano* (fraudster)."¹⁴ Nor could he resort to the commander, since he was the father-in-law of the judge. Finally, aiming to redress so many absurdities and injustices, where people were at the mercy of terror and impoverishment, he asked that a *corregedor* or magistrate be sent to the *freguesia*.

It appears that, finding his interests opposed, Vieira de Melo had not managed to resolve this problem with his own means, since the formal paths of the law were being used. The fact that Coronel Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida was of the same status as Antônio Vieira de Melo was an important factor preventing the latter from implementing his dominion with his usual means. As a result, it was necessary to follow legal paths at times.¹⁵

Captain Manoel Monteiro da Rocha suggested that both men be called before the governor. However, this must not have happened, since there are no records of this meeting. Captain Manoel Monteiro da Rocha said that he did not know who was in the right in these disputes, but perhaps he did not want to expose himself to two men known to be violent, since he had been the

target of an order of prison by Vieira de Melo, according to the witnesses in the inquiry.¹⁶

In 1758, a year after these complaints, Antônio Vieira de Melo wrote again to the governor and upon signing the letter referred to himself as an “obedient servant.” Vieira alleged that he had “in these my lands” a ranch called Caruru, enjoyed by various Indians, defending himself from the accusation that he controlled them. According to Vieira de Melo, they were living at their own expense due to his generosity in letting them live there.¹⁷

Given the hostile reference to the possession of two ranches by Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida, supposedly donated by his father-in-law Vieira de Melo and now denied, the target of greatest concern of the authorities became the supposed *sesmaria* of thirty leagues which Vieira had arrogated. Both the governor, Luís Diogo Lobo da Silva (1756-1763), and Minister Francisco Gonçalves Reis Pereira said that they would not permit a *sesmaria* of thirty leagues, but only what Vieira de Melo and his overseers had cultivated. The violence exercised by Vieira de Melo and also by Pinto de Almeida was not mentioned as the basis for action against both. Colonial authorities wanted to limit their territories, principally those of Antônio Vieira de Melo, as an attempt to remedy their dominion and influence in the region.

Based on these recent complaints and the growing seriousness of the problems in the region, this inquiry was finally ordered in 1759, around nine years after Maria Paes’ statement. In the home of Judge Coronel Teotônio Monteiro da Rocha, in Cachoeira, in the sertão of Ararobá, the governor presented the solicitations made by the residents and with the magistrate and appellant judge Bernardo Coelho da Gama Casco, ordered that all the Indians who had been *misplaced* from their villages located in that region be brought together.

Furthermore, a list of witnesses was made to investigate the truth of the previous representations, which allowed practices, discourses, and strategies to be clarified and reconstituted. Denouncing the violence used by Antônio Vieira de Melo, the report of the witnesses confirmed the power which he had attributed to himself.

In the document it was only mentioned that it was ordered that Antônio Vieira de Melo be sentenced according to justice and submit himself to the governor and the captain general of Pernambuco, Luis Diogo Lobo da Silva, marked for the end of the final day of the testifying of the witnesses. Nevertheless, there is no report of any sentence. Probably Vieira de Melo was sentenced, since he was considered a “fugitive from Recife.”¹⁸

Table 1 – List of Witnesses of the 1759 Inquiry

Witness Name	Age	Color	Address	Civil Status	Occupation
Stely da Costa Soares	+/- 43	White	Castanha Ranch	-	Captain and lived from his cattle ranch
Felix Neri da Cruz Teixeira	+/- 42	Mixed	Mucambo Ranch	Married	Lived from raising cattle
Francisco Pereira da Silva	+/- 51	White	Cego Ranch	Married	Lived from raising cattle
Domingos das Neves	+/- 55	Mixed	Sapucaia Ranch	Married	Lived from his crops
Gabriel da Fonseca Leal	+/- 80	White	Pau Ranch	Married	Lived from raising cattle
Jeronimo de Basto (Castro) e Silva	+/- 44	White	Gracia Ranch	-	Lived from pension
João Mendes Branco	+/- 50	White	Juazeiro Ranch	Married	Sergeant-Major and lived from his cattle ranch
Domingos Vieira de Melo (or Lima) signed with a cross	+/- 59	Mixed	Jardim Ranch	-	Lived as a cattle drover
Vinicimo Caetano de Amorim	+/- 40	White	Buraco Ranch	Married	Lived from his cattle
Matias da Costa Soares	+/- 43	White	Buraco Ranch	Married	Lived from his cattle
Frutuoso Dantas da Costa	38/39	White	Tigre Ranch	Married	Alferes (Ensign) and lived from raising cattle
Francisco Xavier Rodrigues Pereira	+/- 30	Mixed	Santa Rita Ranch	Married	Tailor
Lino Correa Bezerra de Araujo	+/- 30	White	Plantation of Pedra do Poxinarem	Single	Lived from pension

Source: AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Cx. 96, Doc. 7571.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that all the witnesses were male, since the testimony of women was only taken in the last case, or if the woman was a victim, the situation of Maria Paes Cabral. Of the 13 men, three were members of local forces – the captain, sergeant-major, and ensign – and probably had a lot of contact with both Captain Antônio Vieira de Melo and Coronel Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida. In this case proximity did not inhibit witnesses from testifying against both, perhaps because they had been their victims or were tired of their attitudes.¹⁹

The majority were married and living from raising cattle, either as the owners of the cattle or taking care of them, as was the case of the *vaqueiros*. Only four were mixed, the rest were white, aged between 30 and 80. Unfortunately it was not possible to determine if these cattle ranchers were tenants subjugated by Captain Antônio Vieira de Melo, but it is possible to suppose that either they paid him something or had been coerced, and in this case they also testified against the accused.²⁰

In relation to the statements, in all of them it was stated that Antônio Vieira de Melo had burned the corrals of Carlos Azevedo Caldeiras and João Alvares Vidal, as well as others not specifically named. It was further reported that he had confiscated the goods of Antônio da Silva Portugal and other persons. One of the witnesses confirmed that for years he had seen the persecution to which Antônio Vieira de Melo subjected those living inside and outside the *freguesia*, carrying out incursions with the pretext of doing justice, as was the case of Antônio de Amorim, son of Maria Paes.²¹ The mentioning of Antônio Vieira de Melo's implementation of 'justice' was indicative of the legitimacy that he once had, taking into account his role as captain.

Witnesses also stated that both Antônio Vieira de Melo and Coronel Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida hunted the fugitive slaves of third parties, punished them, and exercised atrocious violence, such as nailing the tongue of a slave to a tree trunk, a fact cited in the majority of statements. Both were accused of arresting people and keeping them in captivity in their own house, although they had no legal warrants for this.²²

In addition the statements show that the relations between Antônio Vieira de Melo and his 'household' were constructed on a daily basis through a relationship of personal domination, in which were present multiple tensions and confrontations, based above all on coercion and violence. The many arrests made by the duo were justified by the refusal of those arrested to become Vieira de Melo's *vaqueiros*, or in the case of soldiers the refusal to obey his orders.²³

Based on the reports, statements, and reactions to Antônio Vieira de Melo, it can be stated that in some form he accepted to be contested.

It is interesting to emphasize that in some works the perspective endorsed is of Antônio Vieira de Melo as an important figure for colonization. As well as Pereira da Costa (1951) and Borges da Fonseca (1935), the recent study by Alexandre Bittencourt Leite Marques presents him as one of the most responsible for opening roads, facilitating communications with the interior, and also contributing to the capture of fugitive blacks. According to Marques,

Antônio Vieira de Melo carried out a series of colonizing actions which were described years later by some of the residents of Ararobá. These actions included fights against indigenous groups who did not accept submission to the colonizers, and also involving support for the capture of fugitive blacks from Palmares who penetrated the *sertões*, and even the alteration of natural spaces through the opening of roads, creation of cattle ranches, and the establishment of settlements. (Marques, 2012, p. 79)

This reconstruction, by a man from the Republic, contrasted with the witnesses of the 1759 inquiry. However, there are two plausible hypotheses for the apparent discrepancy. The first is related to the time of the events. Although the documents used by Marques were inaccessible, perhaps they refer to a period prior to the 1740s, when Antônio Vieira de Melo – at that time a *colonial lord* then still legitimate in a colonial society in formation and the Crown itself – perhaps did not use violent methods to coerce and terrorize local residents, since the representations against him began after 1740. Only ‘rebel’ Indians and fugitive blacks were their target. The second hypothesis is that in the documents used by those scholars, which differ from the reports of the witnesses presented here, contained the opinion of people who valued the role of the captain, even knowing the form in which he acted, preferring his supposed effectiveness in controlling the region, irrespective of how he did it.

If the first hypothesis is correct, this situation demonstrates the loss of legitimacy of Antônio Vieira de Melo for some motive. This transmutation of *status*, from *colonial lord* to usurper, could be due to a change of target: from Indians to ‘whites’ or ‘owners of land’ with ‘legitimate’ possession. The targets changed but the actions remained the same. It cannot be proved, but it is believed that the actions of this captain must not have changed, but there existed something which disrupted ‘harmony,’ leading him to use violence against determined people who sought the colonial authorities and denounced the

abuses committed on his lands, which now become territorial authorities (cf. Silva, 2007).

VIOLENCE AS A FORM OF DOMINION OF THE *SERTÃO*

What were the forms of legitimation and justification of the use of violence? Violent conflict is a form of human interaction which requires a conception of action that incorporates both agencies and structures.²⁴ The colonial administration, with its dense organization, although present in urban centers, reached rural areas in a precarious form. In the latter areas, people with a certain influence derived from local positions of authority exercised private power which clashed with the interests of the crown; or they then occupied a vacuum of power, despite there being a (small) degree of integration and of having the recognition of the central authority.

Carla Anastasia has analyzed zones of *non-droit* as spaces in which there occurred an exacerbation of violence. Although this arbitrariness was present in the *vilas* and *arraiais* of the Captancy of Minas Gerais (Anastasia, 2005), there was also a similarity with the case presented here. By using official mechanisms, the conflicting parties expressly demonstrated this integration, which the local authorities also did when they met (the governor of Pernambuco, the magistrate (*ouvidor*), and the judge (*juiz ordinário*). Perhaps what the Crown saw as a problem was the ‘disruption of the harmony’ of the social order. The colonial administrative and bureaucratic structure allowed Antônio Vieira de Melo to take advantage of this complexity to impose his will or point of view (Lara, 1988; Lara; Mendonça, 2006).

Antônio Vieira de Melo was an instrument of colonization of the Crown. But what changed? Or rather, did anything change? Did he increase violence because he had lost local control?

Violent conflicts emerged as a result of concrete decisions taken by agents located in specific social relations. They involved defined incompatibilities which sustained the questions of conflict and the assessments of the effectiveness of the means used to achieve the desired results. Violence was not only an instrument, it needs to be inserted in the extensive fabric of social life which, historically located, defines the conditions for the actions to be reproduced in the process of interaction. It is also seen as an aspect of the social system, reproduced by the continuity of its structures, through its practices (Silva, 2007).

In the case of Antônio Vieira de Melo, given the refusal of people to submit, burning their corrals and confiscating their goods was the principal

strategy used to make clear the need for compulsory enlistment. In this way it guaranteed the local inhabitants protection – a relevant question, since at this time there was still the risk of conflict with various indigenous groups. Although the areas were occupied by third parties, who raised cattle or grew crops there, if those submitted were under his dominion it confirmed his status as the possessor of the region, in his own ‘privatized’ jurisdiction. This logic of the construction of relations of power led to the extreme the idea of a *colonial lordship* (Silva, 1990; Bandeira, 2000; Alveal, 2012; Pinto, 2014).

The conflict constituted an act of exclusion, based on an identity construction which involved separation, classification, and well defined frontiers: either people adapted to the parameters established by Antônio Vieira de Melo or suffered the consequences of a contrary decision, as must have been the case of Maria Paes.

While expressions of identity were constructed on the basis of a variety of individual experiences, the emergence of dominant constructions of identity, within a specific location and period, points to the emergence of dominant structures which end up generating a collective hegemonic identity capable of defining discourses. According to Maria Regina Celestino de Almeida, identity is always a dominion of selection and contestation and it is through domination and control structures that the dominant identity discourse emerges, becoming highly defined in times of conflict with a constructed enemy (Almeida, 2001).

However, the conflict established social relations of resistance, accommodation, and solidarity. This was the case of the Indians who lived with him. All the witnesses confirmed that there was a large number of people, almost always identified as Indians, living under the same roof as Antônio Vieira de Melo. Whilst some statements did not elucidate the reason why so many Indians lived with him, in others it was clearly declared that Antônio Vieira de Melo had them for his own defense, as a private *army* for his incursions. This indication is confirmed by the report of witnesses who reported the presence of seventy or eighty well organized Indians to receive a troop of horsemen sent to arrest him.

In the historiography, there are some studies about the creation of militias formed by former slaves who helped guarantee the social order (Ferreira, 2005; Costa, 2013). Ana Leitão (2011) has analyzed the action of the Oratorians in the *Nossa Senhora das Montanhas* mission, in Ararobá, which was transformed into the *vila* of Monte Alegre in 1760, where the presence of the Xucuri was preponderant. Violent acts by various indigenous groups led the governor, Luís Diogo Lobo da Silva, to carry out another inquiry to investigate the

conflicts between these groups, some of whom were arrested and faced as a penalty forced integration in Monte Alegre mission. In addition, Ricardo Pinto de Medeiros stated that some Indians from the *sertão* had been brought to the mission of *Nossa Senhora das Montanhas do Ararobá* around 1761, when the Directorate of Indians was established. Although no mention of the use of Indians by captains was made, de Medeiros stated that many Indians fled from the missions and became involved in banditry (Medeiros, 2015). Antônio Vieira de Melo could have taken advantage of these rivalries to forge alliances which gain him the support of a militia.

The solidarity of the Indians with Antônio Vieira de Melo can be seen as reciprocity to the importance he attributed towards them, but principally due to the inclusion of Indians in his system of dominion. For the few Indians in the Pernambuco region, and not many groups survived, the difficult insertion of the new society left few options. The *aldeamentos* (government villages for Indians) created by the crown were very limited and placed in such adverse conditions that many wanted to leave (Almeida, 2001).

It can also be argued that Antônio Vieira de Melo used them, which should not be denied at all. But to visualize these relations from this angle alone is to victimize them and ignore their options. By placing them under the shield of his dominion, a bond in which protection played a part, Antônio Vieira de Melo, offered them a role in their system of domination, which led them to actively participate in the acts he commanded. Perhaps it involved the reproduction of an old system, one determined that they follow the command of an indigenous chief, who emerged in counterpoint to the apathy in force in the *aldeamentos*. The Indians came to construct another identity, even if this was as vassals of Vieira de Melo. Furthermore, perhaps it was the use of Indians which 'broke' the harmony of local control, since they were also seen as threats to colonial society in formation.

In relation to the case of Maria Paes and her son Antônio de Amorim, the witnesses added little. Nor was it clear why Antônio de Amorim was a specific target of Antônio Vieira de Melo. The reason could have been the former's refusal to become a *vaqueiro*, given the various examples cited by the witnesses, or also it could have been that Antônio de Amorim had defied Antônio Vieira de Melo, since, as has been mentioned above, the latter never accepted refusals. Apart from this, all that is known is that in the year of the statements, 1759, Antônio de Amorim had already died, although the cause of his death was unknown.

THE ATTEMPT TO REDUCE THE POWER OF ANTÔNIO VIEIRA DE MELO THROUGH HIS PROPERTY

According to Pereira da Costa, in 1761 a term of assessment was made of the ranches of Jupi and Chatinha, lands belonging to Antônio Vieira de Melo, both of which had been impounded by the Royal Treasury. This occurred after the disturbances of the two previous decades, in such a way that the motive of the confiscation is not exactly known. Supposedly the ranches were worth 150\$000 (Costa, 1951, p. 217). In the archives researched nothing was found about these lands. Nor could it be affirmed that this term of assessment was part of the judicial process waged between Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida and his father-in-law because of what he was owed as a dowry, or if the confiscation was due to the productive limitation of the supposed *sesmaria* of thirty leagues, which was not completely cultivated. Since the complaint made by the governor Luis Diogo Lobo da Silva is dated 1764, it is believed that Antônio Vieira de Melo remained on his land for some time, only being considered a fugitive this year.²⁵

Why had Vieira de Melo arrogated for himself the extent of thirty leagues in the region?

The question of the construction of the identity of a lord of land is raised in this analysis, and evidence of it appears in the history of the *sesmaria*. According to Pereira da Costa, the land which ‘Captain’ Antônio Vieira de Melo possessed was part of a *sesmaria* measuring twenty leagues donated to his father Bernardo Vieira de Melo on 23 December 1671.²⁶ Antônio began exploration and colonization there only in 1698 (Costa, 1951, pp. 236-237). Bernardo Vieira de Melo was one of the three grantees, along with Antônio Pinto and Manuel Vieira de Lemos, opening roads, establishing ranches with livestock and crops. The entire *sesmaria* ended up in the possession of Bernardo Vieira de Melo, who bought out Antônio Pinto and took possession of the land which Manuel Vieira de Lemos never actually occupied (Costa, 1951, pp. 236-237).

Also according to Pereira da Costa, when he established himself in the area, Bernardo Vieira de Melo came into conflict with some Indians from the region, but also wove alliances with others from Ararobá, and perhaps it was these who allied with his son. It was not clear, but it appeared that Bernardo Vieira de Melo had entailed his estate, since according to the Pernambuco historian, the former had left as his administrators his two children, Alexandre Moniz de Melo and Antônio Vieira de Melo, in a will dated 22 October 1764.²⁷

This date is much later than – almost one hundred years later - the original granting of the *sesmaria* –, which leads to believe that there may have been a third member of the family between Bernardo Vieira de Melo and Antônio Vieira de Melo. Furthermore, Pereira da Costa also says that the land belonging to the primordial *sesmaria* had been divided into various lots, also serving for the *aldeamento* of the Indians; moreover, he confirms the existence of litigation with the heirs of Antônio Vieira de Melo, around 1767, after the complaints made by Governor Luis Diogo Lobo da Silva (Costa, 1951, pp. 237-238).

Furthermore, the *sesmaria* charter actually exists. In 1671 it was granted by Governor Fernando de Souza Coutinho to Captain Bernardo Vieira, Antônio Pinto, and Manoel Vieira de Lemos. What was granted was twenty leagues, not thirty as proclaimed by Antônio Vieira de Melo a century later. The *sesmarias* could be demarcated “in blocks, scattered, together, or separate, as seems best and deemed sufficient, as it is vacant and not prejudicing third parties.”²⁸ Nevertheless, this *sesmaria* charter never received royal confirmation,²⁹ since no register was found in the Lisbon archives in either the name of Bernardo Vieira de Melo or Antônio Vieira de Melo.

There are no registers or information about Bernardo Vieira de Melo’s services at the time he received the *sesmaria* in 1671, which hinders the comprehension of why such an area was given to these three people.³⁰ It is known that the twenty league size established for *sesmarias* existed in the seventeenth century (the first limitations were established only in the final decade of the same century). Pereira da Costa stated in his book that Bernardo Vieira de Melo had opened trails in the captaincy of Pernambuco.

The case of Antônio Vieira de Melo illustrates how the heir of a *sesmaria* involved himself in a web of disputes related to the ratification or spatial re-definition of the initially conceded area. It can also be perceived that the fact of having inherited a *sesmaria* did not give him the stability desired in colonial times. Much to the contrary, the process of granting *sesmarias* and its complex implementation led to conflicts over land, in the middle of which the litigants sought diverse mechanisms to defend their interests, such as using the law, making demands from designated authorities, or even force (Motta, 2006; Alveal, 2007). The *sesmaria* institute and the agents involved did not compose a linear or even homogenous context. What can be observed is the malleability with which *sesmeiros* and *posseiros* (those who occupied and claimed land) defended their interests, by recreating a lordship society in different molds from Medieval Portugal, which allowed different perceptions of land lead to reiterated disputes.

Although the colonial authorities condemned certain actions considered abusive and illegal, it should be highlighted that this happened when it was convenient for them (Bandeira, 2000; Alveal, 2012). The Crown was not interested in the rise of subjects such as Antônio Vieira de Melo, and it was difficult to coordinate actions to resolve problems. It has been shown that the colonial authorities discussed the size of Antônio Vieira de Melo's *sesmaria*, but little has been discussed about the violent acts of imprisonment and the undue appropriation of agricultural production, slaves, and livestock raising of others. The focus of attention was only to 'limit' the power of Vieira de Melo, through the reduction of his extensive *sesmaria*. The confiscated goods of Antônio Vieira de Melo must therefore have been auctioned like part of the lands removed from his dominion.

A relevant detail about the concession of the *sesmaria* inherited by Antônio Vieira de Melo is the form in which he was given the land. It can be noted that, on being donated, it was clear that the land "could be scattered, together, or separate," there were no greater specifications – which perhaps a royal confirmation could have requested. Perhaps this open character of the donation is what led Antônio Vieira de Melo to support himself with his idea of a *colonial lordship*, believing that even the areas which he did not directly occupy, and which were occupied by third parties, were part of his dominion, since he was a captain considered a great pioneer, hunter of Indians and fugitive slaves, the builder of roads, thereby consolidating his role as an agent of the Republic. After the receipt of the twenty non-continuous leagues granted, these could have given rise to the thirty leagues which Antônio Vieira dominated. He just failed to consider that the changes in his actions would lead him to be denounced.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

By grounding his self-defensive argument on such an old and supposedly legitimate document; basing it on the antiquity of the occupation and reconstituting the chain of descent, Antônio Vieira de Melo provided the colonial authorities with the possibility of deconstructing his supposed legitimacy, making the possession of his *sesmaria* illegal, principally through the use of the counter-argument about the size of the land he possessed. Moreover, unlike the *sesmaria* of Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida, his *sesmaria* never obtained royal confirmation.

Although in the seventeenth century large *sesmarias* were common, in the eighteenth century witnessed the authorities tried to put into practice a modification.³¹ According to Márcia Motta, a scholar who discusses how many litigants from the nineteenth century sought to attest their *sesmarias* with the most remote evidence they could find – generally a concession letter –, and the old became confused with the legal. What she calls the ‘myth of first occupation’ became sufficient in the view of *posseiros* when they wanted to construct the initial point in a historic process of occupation of an area (Motta, 2004). In the case of Antônio Vieira de Melo, however, the opposite of what was expected occurred, since the authorities took advantage of an old document to argue that his lands were outside current legislative standards. In this case, the size of the *sesmaria* disobeyed the royal order of 27 December 1697 and under this allegation they attempted to remove part of the land from him. In this sense what was involved was an deliberated action to reduce his power, since the Crown had to respect the graces and rights acquired.

According to Antônio Manuel Hespanha, respect for graces was a basic principle of the monarchy (Hespanha, 1994). In the case of Antônio Vieira de Melo, although he affirmed that the Crown had ‘rode roughshod’ over the rights of Vieira de Melo, contemporary historiography has significantly deepened the discussions about the concepts and political practices of monarchies and administrative agents in Portuguese society in the modern epoch. Studies referring to the political mechanisms of the exercise of Portuguese sovereignty in the vast Lusitanian marine empire have highlighted the importance of client networks and the system of the exchange of favors/services/graces to reinforce ties of belonging, extend the royal domain, and make governability possible. Nevertheless, this principle, should not be conceived as a ‘right’ of the vassal, but rather a retribution and recognition of services rendered to the monarchy in a determined historic context. When the services ceased and the contexts changed, as was the case of Antônio Vieira de Melo, or when other people came on stage and interests altered, the distribution of graces was also altered.

Furthermore, in the situation of Antônio Vieira de Melo what was in question was the occupation of land and the idea of the creation of lordships based on effective coercive dominion over residents. The *colonial lordship* was put into doubt not only because of the violence mobilized, but also for extrapolating the limits of what locals considered his dominion. His perception of his property went beyond the simple idea of land for cultivation. In this way he expanded his area of action, initially obtaining reinforcements among local

Indians and afterwards extending this to the residents of the region. Antônio Vieira de Melo was convinced, notwithstanding the infringing of a series of established rights, that he was protecting his interests, justifying his acts in the name of the authorities.

Cases similar to Antônio Vieira de Melo's are relatively frequent in the documentation. They indicate how many people usurped land or the production of third parties and did everything possible to transform them into 'their' property according to their point of view, transcending the social relations of the *colonial lordship*. The official land distribution policy promoted by the Crown, as well as the grace distribution system due to conquest, provided a margin in various scenarios which led to situations similar to those presented here. And the strategy of colonial authorities to resolve the situation was to ratify *sesmarial* dominion, reducing the *colonial lordship*, in an attempt to also reduce the power of those who expanded their dominions at any cost.

In 1760, "according to the captain of horse and commandant in the *freguesia* of Ararobá, Manuel Leite da Silva, Antônio Vieira de Melo was a resident and lord of many lands in that *freguesia*" (Marques, 2012, p. 79). Nothing more is known of Antônio Vieira de Melo after 1764, only that he was considered 'fugitive.' The fact that there were no further complaints against him could come from the possibility that he no longer terrorized the local population, had fled and disappeared from the reach of the authorities, or even that the documents had not survived over time. Antônio Vieira de Melo lost his *colonial lordship* for wanting to go beyond what was acceptable in the *sertões* of Ararobá.

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NOTES

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² This article is based on the documents contained in AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571. OFÍCIO do [governador da capitania de Pernambuco], Luís Diogo Lobo da Silva, ao [secretário de Estado da Marinha e Ultramar], Francisco Xavier de Mendonça Furtado, sobre as queixas feita pelos moradores do sertão de Ararobá contra Antô-

nio Vieira de Melo, fugitivo da praça do Recife, relativas às irregularidades em atribuir sesmarias.

³ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571. The letter patent appointing Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida was confirmed by the king and registered in *Chancelarias de D. João V*, Livro 101, fl.28.

⁴ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.3.

⁵ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.7. The position of director of Indians was created in Pernambuco in 1757, replacing the administration of indigenous groups who had previously been the responsibility of regular priests (COSTA, 1951, pp. 123-124).

⁶ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc. 7571, fl. 13.

⁷ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc. 7571, fl, 15.

⁸ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc. 7571, fl. 10.

⁹ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc. 7571, fl. 13.

¹⁰ Borges da Fonseca, researching the genealogy of the trunk of Antônio Vieira de Melo's family, grandfather of Antônio dealt with in this article, stated that the captain from Ararobá was single around 1740. (FONSECA, 1935, pp. 197-203). Nevertheless, in document 7571, the object of the analysis, in addition to this indication that Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida was his son-in-law, showing that there was a daughter, there was also mention of a son who helped him in the violent incursion from the *sertão*. AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Documento 7571, fl. 17.

¹¹ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.21.

¹² ANTT, Chancelaria de D. José I, Livro 64, fl. 160-163.

¹³ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.18.

¹⁴ *Mangano* signifies a war machine, a type of catapult.

¹⁵ It is worth emphasizing that Cristóvão Pinto de Almeida was the most conscientious in relation to the documents, since it was possible to find royal confirmations about his position and of part of his land, while for Antônio Vieira de Melo there is nothing registered in Lisbon.

¹⁶ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.17.

¹⁷ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.20.

¹⁸ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.19.

¹⁹ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.23.

²⁰ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.19.

²¹ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.17.

²² AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.18.

²³ A case which analyzes the social process through the incorporation of free men as va-

queiros (cowboys or herders) on large ranches was also analyzed by Francisco Carlos Teixeira da Silva in his master's thesis (SILVA, 1981).

²⁴ For a discussion about the violence, see: JABRI, 1996; VRIES; WEBER, 1997.

²⁵ AHU – Pernambuco, Papéis Avulsos, Caixa 96, Doc.7571, fl.17.

²⁶ Antônio Vieira de Melo was the son of Bernardo Vieira de Melo and Catarina Camelo. The couple had eight children, including his namesake Bernardo Vieira de Melo, who became Captain-General of Rio Grande. The father of Antônio Vieira de Melo was a *fidalg* knight, also like his uncle Dionísio Vieira de Melo, who was also a knight of the Order of São Bento de Aviz. The genealogical information appears in: FONSECA, 1935, pp. 66-68; COSTA, 1983, p. 217. It should be noted that the grandfather of Antônio Vieira de Melo, with the same name, also received a *sesmaria* (with another 15 people), but this was in the captaincy of Paraíba, in 1680, nine years after his son received one. Arquivo Nacional do Rio de Janeiro, Códice 427, fl.121.

²⁷ Pereira da Costa must have confused the names of the sons at this moment, since in Borges da Fonseca's data (1935), the name Alexandre does not appear in the Vieira de Melo genealogy.

²⁸ "Carta de sesmaria que se passou a Bernardo Vieira, Antônio Pinto e Manoel Vieira de Lemos" (FREIRE, s.d., I, pp. 74-75).

²⁹ Both Costa Porto and Carmen Alveal highlighted the need to obtain royal confirmation in Lisbon, in order to guarantee definitive title. See: PORTO, 1965; ALVEAL, 2007.

³⁰ The charter of the *sesmaria* donated in 1680 to the father of Bernardo Vieira de Melo along with another 15 people is based only on the allegation that they intended to raise cattle. Nothing is mentioned about them being *conquistadores*, a justification frequently used and to an extent valorized by colonial authorities, to certify engagement in colonization. Nor were any important deeds presented, although greater investigation into the titles conferred by the orders is required, which has not been possible to do yet.

³¹ The final decade of the seventeenth century was marked by numerous royal orders which sought to fill gaps in the *sesmarial* legislation not covered by the *Ordenações Filipinas* (PORTO, 1965).