

RESENHAS

HIGGINS, Kathleen J. *A Licentious Liberty: in a Brazilian Gold-Mining Region*. Slavery, Gender, and Social Control in Eighteenth-Century Sabará, Minas Gerais. University Park, PA, The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

*Ernest Pijning**

This publication is a major contribution to our knowledge on colonial slavery. In her well-researched book, Kathleen Higgins analyzes the complex society of eighteenth-century Sabará, Minas Gerais. Her book is very gendered, and she makes a persuasive case for the special position of both female slaves and female slave owners in this urban community amid the gold mines.

Higgins stresses the negotiability of slavery in urban Sabará, where she claims that female slaves had a stronger position than their male colleagues. However, Higgins points out that this situation was created by local circumstances and the specific interests of the slave owners, rather than any Amildness of slavery in Brazil. She also clarifies that as the local situation changed over time, the terms of negotiation also modified.

The author specifically analyzes trends in inheritance, concubinage, baptism and manumission based on local notarial and church records. Basic is the changing character of the Sabará urban society from a Portuguese born bachelor slave owning population during the gold boom (to 1760) to a more gender balanced mixed white and colored slave owning population at the time the gold mines started to deplete (as of 1760).

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Higgins' findings on manumission are surprising. White male slave owners did not manumit their concubines, rather their children. This is explainable as the Portuguese bachelors did not have any heirs, and they manumitted their illegitimate mulatto offspring as a consequence. If their female slaves wanted freedom, they obtained it either conditionally or after paying a stiff price. Their bachelor slave owners could subsequently invest the money in buying new, mostly male slaves who could be used in gold mining.

Although the manumission rates remained relatively low (1/3 % a year), the urban society of Sabará started to count a large free black mulatto and colored population by 1800 (2/3 of the free population). By then about one third of the urban slaves were owned by female owners and the economy became less based on gold mining. Higgins argues that these two circumstances changed the pattern of manumission in Sabará.

In these changing conditions, female slave owners continued to manumit their female slaves and children. These manumissions were not out of charity, since their women owners ask for large sums of money. Higgins explains the female owners motivations with economic gain. Slave children are a large financial investment, and female slaves could be better controlled once they knew the price of freedom. The male slave owners acted differently. Female slaves and mulattos lost the advantage they had over other slaves in the beginning of the century. Since the economy of the comarca became more urbanized, and thus female slaves were more in demand, and the limited supply of new slaves limited their leeway to free their mulatto children.

Decisions among Africans could also be gender based. This was especially the case with baptisms and the choice of godparents. Urban female slaves were more likely to be baptized and have non-black godparents. Higgins explains that female slaves sought social and economic gain. Male slaves on the other hand, had a resistance motive. They more often had other slaves as godparents, but not of the same owner. Thus they could foster alliances with fellow slaves, which was more important outside the urban area.

The authors final argument is that owners were unable to control their slaves in the urban and mining areas because they pursued their private rather than common interests. In some occasions they formed alliances with quilombados or with free black or mulatta itinerant traders

against all regulations. Slavery in Sabará should be characterized as Acontract slavery: since the owners control over their slaves always remained incomplete, and therefore negotiable.

Higgins book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of female slaves and female slave owners. She sees the Mineira society not as static, but as changeable, and slavery not as strict, but flexible. Higgins' study on urban Sabará is a major contribution to the literature on slavery in Minas Gerais. However, one should not forget that the urban area of Sabará was quite different from the mining areas themselves.