



Elciene Azevedo, **Orfeu de Carapinha: A trajetória de Luiz Gama na imperial cidade de São Paulo**. Campinas, Ed. da Unicamp, 1999.

by Nancy Priscilla Naro

As Brazil commemorates its fifth centenary in 2000, the Centro de Pesquisas em História Social da Cultura of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas launches a new series, *Várias Histórias*, an exploration of the diversity of Brazil's cultural formation. This publication, based on painstaking archival research, focuses on the trajectory in imperial São Paulo of Luiz Gonzaga Pinto da Gama (1830-1882), an outstanding Afro-Brazilian social and political satirist and activist.

Luiz Gama was born in the northeastern port city of Salvador to Luzia Mahin, a freed African street vendor who fled the province as suspicions of her collaboration in slave rebellions intensified in the 1830s. Gama's father, a Portuguese nobleman, sold him into slavery to pay off gambling debts and, as a small boy of ten, he departed Salvador on board a slaveship destined for the southeastern ports of the coffee-producing region. There he might have suffered the brutalisation and oppression of hundreds of thousands of slaves whose destinies were shaped by the 'peculiar' institution. His birthplace, however, proved a partial salvation from the arduous and debilitating routine of plantation labour in the coffee fields. Bahaman slaves have the reputation for rebelliousness and, failing to sell Gamma and another Bahaman slave, the slave trader took them to the city of Sao Paulo where they became his household servants. Gama not only learned the craft of shoemaking but was taught to read and write by a boarder in the household.

Mysterious circumstances surrounded his escape and freedom but in 1848 he was a free recruit in the São Paulo police force, engaged as a copyboy in his spare time. He served as a scribe in the São Paulo Secretaria de Polícia until he was dismissed following his public criticism of a local judge over an escaped African slave (pp.110-119).

Azevedo initiates her sojourn into his professional life at Luiz Gama's funeral in 1882 where eulogies by prominent political and cultural figures like Raul Pompéia attested to Gama's multiple talents as a poet, writer, satirist, solicitor, militant abolitionist and ardent advocate of a Republic. Through Gama's book of poetry, *Primeiras Trovas Burlescas de Getulino*, first published in São Paulo in 1859, Azevedo advances insights into Gama's character from his poem, 'Quem Sou Eu? (Who Am I?)', a confession of humility and love for the poor, an oath of 'obedience to virtue and intelligence' that is unequivocal in its repugnance for 'folly, hypocrisy, and nobility' (pp. 45-46).

Azevedo examines Gama's growing political trajectory in São Paulo during the late 1860s to 1870s, highlighting his articles, political satires, and his eventual editorship of the satiristic journal *O Polichinello* in 1876. Gama was also gaining recognition as a prominent debater, familiar with laws and legal statutes involving slavery. For Azevedo, Gama's compassion towards aggrieved slaves who sought his advice was forged by his personal experience with slavery. But his commitment was not limited to individual slaves. A 'son of the people', Gama was all-encompassing in his embrace of freedom and solidarity, advocating a common African identity that Served to unite slaves around their common roots and origins.

In 1869, he advertised in the local papers his willingness to 'take on any criminal cause in the city, defense before a jury in any town in the province, and administrative matters in the capital'. A self-proclaimed solicitor, Gama proved formidable in his exposure of ambiguous legal clauses and original interpretations of the law, always relying on legal bases to undermine court denials of emancipation to freedom-seeking slaves. Sometimes singularly, often in the company of prominent

lawyers, he took on cases that involved the great and the prominent. One involved a local bishop who had freed seven slaves only to offer them for sale years later (p. 198). Gama also targeted local, often police, authorities for irregularities such as illegal imprisonment, arbitrary actions, civil actions and causes that offended what for him were the 'rights of the wretched'.

Gama's interpretation of the meaning of conditional freedom for slaves centred on the case of Narciso, a slave whose mistress in her will stipulated that "after her death Narciso was to serve her heiress for ten years after which time he would be free" (p. 207). The heiress's legal spokesman, her husband, rejected outside offers to pay for Narciso's freedom and soundly beat the slave to 'cure him of his aspirations for freedom'. Gama publicized the incident, arguing that in terms of his conditional freedom, Narciso was no longer the property of another. In addition, Gama took issues with the husband's defense of his liberal right as a slaveowner, attacking the liberalism of arbitrary violence. Gama's final offensive was to offer Narciso a place of refuge to assure him 'protection from further punishment' (pp. 206-214).

Gama's view on republicanism also made him a controversial political figure. Seven years after his silent response to the First Congress of the Paulista Republican Party in 1873, he was marginalized by party stalwarts for associating republicanism with abolitionism. In his letter to the *Gazeta do Povo*, he stated: Let the evangelists of Positivism recall that we do not ATTACK RIGHTS; WE PERSECUTE CRIME, for love of the salvation of the unfortunate; and let them remember in the sweet tranquility of their peaceful chambers that the felicity of the slave is likened to a dark cloud that rises to its pinnacle only to be transformed into tears (p. 187).

Gama's recognition by lettered men gained him acceptance into the São Paulo Academy of Letters and support by prominent local figures and institutions such as the Masonic Loja América who provided funding for the emancipation causes he undertook. Whereas political adversaries and critics saw him as a dangerous opportunist who was given to turning slaves against their masters, supporters acknowledged his legal acumen and unwavering dedication to the causes of freedom and republicanism.

Few details emerge of Gama's private life in this study. He lived modestly with his wife, Claudina Fortunato Sampaio, and their son, who were kept away socially ostracized from the elitist circles of lettered men and politicians. These took priority over Gama and in his 42 years was one of Brazil's foremost orators, abolitionists, militant satirists and republicans, his trajectory in the courtrooms and presses of São Paulo proved vital to the abolition of slavery in 1888 and to the transition from monarchy to Republic a year later. To date, this is arguably the most comprehensive approach to Luiz Gama and a welcome advance to the historiography of slavery, abolition, political and social satire and politics in Brazil and in Americas.

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