

The Malê Revolt

João José Reis

In the early morning hours of January 25, 1835, a group of African-born slaves took over the streets of Salvador, capital of the province of Bahia, in what was the most effective urban slave rebellion in the history of the Americas. Led by African Muslims, called Malês in nineteenth-century Brazil, the uprising took place after months of careful organizing. The planning was facilitated by Malês' strong African identity, their Arabic literacy, and their prestigious position within Afro-Bahian society, as well as by the relative physical mobility of urban slave life and symbolic power of Islam as a source of non-European solidarity.

While the rebels managed to take control of the streets for a short period of time, they were eventually defeated. Suspects were tried and punished with death, whippings, prison terms, and deportation. The insurrection caused a prolonged panic among the local population, which led to legal and informal persecution of freed Africans, hundreds of whom decided to return to Africa. The most prominent specialist on the Malê Revolt is João José Reis, a historian from the Federal University of Bahia. The text below, authored by Reis, shows how enslaved and freed Africans were not mere victims of the system but also protagonists in fighting for their emancipation.

On January 25, 1835, an African slave revolt occurred in Salvador. This movement is known today as the Malê Revolt, as the Yoruba Muslims who led the revolt were known as Malês, from “Ìmàle,” a term that signifies Muslim in the Yoruba language. Although numerous individuals belonging to more densely Muslim ethnic groups—such as the Hausa, Nupe, and Borno—were initially indicted, just a few actually took part in the revolt. And although its leaders and perhaps most of its rank-and-file were Muslims enslaved in wars of Islamic expansion and other political conflicts in Africa, the movement also had a pronounced ethnic, namely Yoruba, dimension. The revolt was the last of a cycle of more than twenty African revolts or plots that had begun with a carefully planned conspiracy that was nonetheless crushed in the cradle in 1807.

In 1835, close to six hundred men participated in the uprising. Although this number seems small, as a proportion of Salvador's population it would be the equivalent of close to thirty thousand people today. The rebels had

planned the uprising to occur in the early hours of the morning of the twenty-fifth, but news about the plot reached the authorities in advance. A patrol that was sent out to check several suspect addresses arrived at a house where a group of conspirators was meeting, and while they were trying to force open the door, nearly sixty African warriors came out shouting and fighting with swords and knives. A small battle ensued in front of this house, following which the rebels headed to the City Hall, located a few yards away.

The rebels attacked the City Hall because its basement prison held one of the most respected Malê leaders, the aged Pacífico Licutan, also known by his Muslim name, Bilal, and his Yoruba name, Licutan. This slave had been imprisoned not for rebellion, but for being property: his master's possessions had been confiscated in order to be auctioned off and thereby repay his creditors. But the attack on the prison did not succeed. Both the prison guards and the provincial government's palace guards, located in the same plaza, fired upon the group.

This first group of rebels then marched through the city streets, fighting and shouting in an attempt to awaken the city's slaves to join them. They headed to Vitória, a district where there lived numerous Muslim slaves belonging to foreign traders, particularly Englishmen. After gathering in the areas surrounding a nearby field, they crossed in front of an army barracks, São Pedro Fort, under its soldiers' heavy fire, and returned to the city's center, where they attacked two police stations, one adjacent to the Monastery of São Bento, and another next to the Lapa convent. The Muslims also fought in the Square of Jesus and in other parts of the city that bore Christian names. Next, they went down through Pelourinho (the heart of today's historic quarters) and reached the lower city—for Salvador was and still is divided into upper and lower districts, the latter located on hilltops, the former at sea level. From there, they attempted to reach the sugar plantation area where they had planned to meet with local slaves, many of whom had been forewarned about the imminent rebellion. However, the African rebels were stopped at the cavalry barracks in Água de Meninos, a beach formerly used (i.e., before the official but loosely enforced prohibition of the slave trade in 1831) for the disembarkation and accommodation of slaves in nearby warehouses. Here, the final battle of the uprising took place, resulting in a true massacre of the Malês and their non-Muslim allies, although many managed to escape into the bush; some tried to flee by swimming and succeeded, while others drowned.

The revolt left the city in turmoil for several hours, having caused the deaths of more than seventy rebels and some ten of their opponents or passersby. The alarm that another uprising could occur, however, was ingrained for many years in Salvador's free residents. This fear spread to other provinces of the Empire of Brazil. In almost all of them, and particularly in the capital of Rio de Janeiro, newspapers published stories about the events in

Bahia, thus helping the spread of panic, while local authorities tried to subjugate the African population, as well as Brazilian-born blacks and mulattoes, submitting them to cautious vigilance and often abusive repression.

At the time of the revolt, Salvador had approximately 65,500 residents, of whom 42 percent were slaves. The nonslave population was also primarily composed of Africans and their descendants, called *crioulos* when referring to blacks born in Brazil, as well as black and white mestizos, known as *pardos* [brown], mulattoes, and *cabras*. Together, black and mixed-blood free and freed people, along with slaves, represented 78 percent of the population. Among the slaves, the vast majority (63 percent) was born in Africa. In the Recôncavo, the sugar plantation region, this figure was even higher.

These slaves were brought from various ports along the African coast. A good number of them came from Luanda, Benguela, and Cabinda, but at the time of the revolt in the 1830s, the vast majority came from ports in the Gulf of Benin (Ouidah, Porto-Novo, Badagry, and especially Lagos), a coastal area known in Brazil as Costa da Mina, the Mina Coast. In Bahia the majority of these slaves were known by ethnic names different from those that they had used in Africa: those who spoke Yoruba were known as Nagôs; the Gbe-speakers were known as Jejes; and the Nupes were known as Tapas. The Hausas kept their original ethnic identification term. Some of the Costa da Mina groups were among those most directly linked to the revolt, mainly the Nagô/Yoruba.

In 1835, the largest group of African-born slaves in Bahia, constituting around 30 percent of them, was Yoruba-speaking Nagôs. While many among them practiced Islam, the majority of Nagôs worshiped the traditional Yoruba gods, the Orishas. Numerous devotees of the latter also joined the uprising led by their ethnic brothers and sisters, the Malês. Therefore, the Muslim revolt had an important ethnic dimension as well.

Translated by Molly Quinn