Introduction and document translation by Heather F. Roller

Petition from the town council of Alter do Chão, 1824

Introduction:

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, cacao plantations expanded in the Lower Amazon region around the lower Tapajós and Tocantins Rivers and the main channel of the Amazon between Cametá and Óbidos. Land became more scarce and more expensive, and local villagers shouldered much of the burden of the plantations’ rising labor demands. At the same time, the legitimacy of the colonial government was weakening. The Napoleonic Wars in Europe provoked the transfer of the Portuguese court to Rio de Janeiro in 1808; the ports of Brazil were opened to all nations in that same year; and revolutionary ideals flooded into to the Amazon. By 1822, Independence from Portugal had been achieved and a Brazilian emperor had been enthroned. That new government, however, had to be imposed by force in the Amazonian captaincy of Pará, where a strong separatist movement had developed.

Independence-era tensions found expression in a series of attacks by small, mobile bands upon employers and landowners throughout the cacao-growing region, beginning around 1820. By 1824, groups of rebels had managed to occupy Monte Alegre and Alenquer, both former Directorate villages in the Lower Amazon, before being repressed by government troops. The rebels’ goals remain unclear, as do their backgrounds and origins. Most were identified as Indians in the surviving sources, but there is no information on whether they claimed an Indian identity themselves. Nor do we know whether they were members of the communities that served as their bases of operation, or whether they shared the grievances of people who identified themselves as Indian villagers of the old Directorate towns.

The document below dates from that tumultuous post-independence year (1824) and provides a glimpse of what villagers sought for themselves and their communities when they perceived a political opening around the time of Independence.

It is a petition, written in colloquial language and signed with the crosses of the illiterate, by some thirty men from the village of Alter do Chão, on the Tapajós River. Three of the names can be found on the village’s last collecting expedition crew list of the Directorate era, from 1798, indicating that at least some of the petitioners were former Directorate Indians.

Like so many stories from the Amazonian archives, there is no ending. We do not know if the petition received any response, or whether the villagers tried other forms of political negotiation to improve their lot. But when full-scale rebellion came to the Amazon in 1835 – more than a generation after the end of the Directorate, and a little over a decade after Independence from

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1 I thank Mark Harris for sharing a copy of this document with me. His own analysis of the petition can be found in Rebellion on the Amazon: Race, Popular Culture and the Cabanagem in the North of Brazil, 1798-1849 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 193-195.

2 Harris, Rebellion on the Amazon, 136-138.

3 Harris, Rebellion on the Amazon, 190-193.
Portugal – the villagers of Alter do Chão joined on the side of the rebels. Most of the other former Directorate towns in the Lower Amazon also participated in the rebellion, helping to make the Cabanagem Rebellion the bloodiest and most protracted revolt in Brazilian history.

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We the undersigned would like to make it known to Your Excellencies in the central government that this village has been very poor in recent years. We know that the beloved Emperor Dom Pedro I has urged us to engage in commerce and farming. For this reason, we want from today onward for the collector of tithes to be a native son (filho da terra), rather than the contractor, who does nothing but promiscuously rob our widowers and widows. We spend all year giving tithes, and we always end up owing [more].

Another thing is that this town council [of Alter do Chão] is always receiving orders from the Village of Santarém to provide Indians to serve them, which is a great loss to this Village. Freedom came for all those who are sons of Brazil, not the Europeans, who say they defend the Fatherland only to deceive the native sons….They do nothing but harass us, taking away our wealth and property, and that is the way that it has always been in this Village.

Another thing is that we took up arms against some supposed rebels, on orders from Santerém, but we were then bombarded with threats [as if we ourselves were the rebels].

We also imprisoned two Europeans who came from Santarém, because they did not present a guia [official cargo list] when the town council president requested it. We took this action because they [the Europeans] do nothing but threaten us, saying that we are Monkeys and Macaws. To those who say that Independence is only for them, and not for the Indians: we, who have [been granted] freedom by our august Emperor, would say that even though we are Indians, we are baptized as well as they are. From today onward we will seek to obtain from Your Excellencies an order to keep them from interfering with this Village…

Finally we hope to receive from Your Excellencies a new [militia] captain; we do not want the one who has been here for a moment longer, for he is libertine. And when there is an order for some [labor] service to be provided, it should be this honorable town council that decides who is ready to serve.6

(30 names follow, signed with the X’s of the illiterate)

Source: Arquivo Público do Estado do Pará, Cod. 789, Doc. 2. Translation by Heather F. Roller

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4 The new emperor of Brazil, enthroned two years earlier upon the declaration of independence from Portugal (1822).
5 This was a reference to the imposition of a tithe collector who, it seems, had purchased a “contract” – an exclusive right for a given number of years to carry out the task, undoubtedly for some financial benefit. During the Directorate, native officials and village directors had conducted the annual tithe collection. Now it had been put in the hands of an outside contractor, and the villagers felt that they were being extorted.
6 This would have restored some of the control that native officials had exerted over labor distribution under the Directorate, when they had been responsible for recruiting eligible village men and delivering them into service. In the post-Directorate period, this task fell to the local militia captains.