

José Lingna Nafafé, *Lourenço da Silva Mendonça and the Black Atlantic Abolitionist Movement in the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

This book radically challenges the traditional narrative of the British origins of abolitionism, highlights the long-term protest of African rulers against the European slave trade, and studies in a systematic way the abolitionist African movement that created a legal case at the papal courts in the 1680s. It is an excellent book that should be obligatory reading for all historians and students interested in the early modern Atlantic, slave trade, and slavery.

The strength of the book lies in the research in the Vatican, Portuguese, Spanish, Angolan, and Brazilian archives, which provides new and extensive information on the case, showing its historical relevance. There are also intelligent references to the interrelated historical context of the Iberian world, while the long-term West Central African rulers' opposition to the Portuguese slave trade is well analyzed.

This case was revealed by Richard Gray in 1987, but he did not identify the origin of Lourenço da Silva Mendonça, the attorney of the abolitionist movement, and he studied the case raised at the papal courts in a very limited way.¹

Now we know that Lourenço da Silva Mendonça was a member of the Ndongo royal family in Angola, with close family relations with the kings of Kongo and Queen Njinga (1624–1665) of Matamba. He was exiled to Brazil with other relatives by the Portuguese authorities in 1671, after the defeat and murder of King João Hari II and the destruction of Pungo-Andongo. The surviving members of the royal family were sent to exile, part of them to Salvador of Bahia, then the capital of Brazil. They were not slaves but free people.

The background of this family is important since it highlights the permanent conflict around enslavement in Angola imposed by the Portuguese. Nafafé highlights the protests of the kings of Kongo Afonso I (1509–1543) and Garcia II (1641–1661), the ambiguous position of the Ndongo kings, the grandfather and father of Silva Mendonça, who sided with the Portuguese in several wars, and finally the refusal to pay the tribute in slaves by King João Hari II (1664–1671), the ruler of Ndongo, which cost his life and his kingdom.

The imposition of the tribute in slaves (*baculamento*) to the political entities and local rulers subordinated to the Portuguese in 1626 is studied solidly. Its impact on internal wars and wars conducted by the Portuguese to enslave people is undeniable. It challenges previous visions of slavery as an African

1 Richard Gray, "The Papacy and the Atlantic Slave Trade: Lourenço da Silva, the Capuchins and the decisions of the Holy Office," *Past and Present*, 11, 1 (1987): 52–68.

institution and highlights the importance of European impositions of taxation through enslavement.

However, the statement that there was no slavery in Central West Africa and West Africa before the arrival of the Portuguese is disputable. Slave trade from sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean and the Middle East is well-documented long before European expansion. Nafafé briefly mentions different forms of bondage in Central West Africa; this path might have been more convincing to argue for the dramatic expansion of chattel slavery with the arrival of the Portuguese. The advantage of his statement is to inspire more research on this issue.

The period of the royal family exile in Brazil did not last long, two years and eighteen months in Salvador and probably six months in Rio de Janeiro, because the Portuguese authorities became worried about the possible links of these members with the powerful and extensive political entity called Palmares, based on a significant number of quilombos, created in the 1630s and 1640s by runaway slaves, which grew in strength along the years despite several colonial military expeditions until defeat in 1694.

This significant autonomous territory in the interior of what is now Alagoas was ruled in the period of Ndongo royals' exile by King Gana Zumba, who was recognized by the governor of Bahia. A peace treaty established in 1678 between the colonial governor and the African king was well-studied by Silvia Hunold Lara.² Palmares absorbed a permanent flow of runaway slaves, which threatened the colonial foundations but at the same time developed commercial relations with colonial society and accepted a significant number of farms with slave labor run by colonizers, namely the wealthy former judge Cristovão de Burgos.

The possible involvement of the Ndongo royal family with Palmares would further legitimize the political entity and constitute a major threat to the colonial rule. Therefore, the Angolan exiled were transferred to Portugal. In the meantime, Lourenço da Silva Mendonça became involved with the confraternity of black people in Salvador, which had a role, like similar confraternities, in promoting the manumission of enslaved members. He was certainly aware of the brutal practices imposed on slave labor and the supervision of enslaved people in sugar plantations.

There is very little information on Silva Mendonça's precise activities in Portugal. He was placed in the convent of Vilar de Frades, Braga, the congregation of the secular canons of St. John the Evangelist, which had specialized

² Silvia Hunold Lara, *Palmares and Cucaú. O aprendizado da dominação* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 2021).

in the education of African youth of royal houses. He probably studied theology and law for three or four years. Then he was placed in Lisbon for four years, where he obtained a recommendation letter to Rome from the apostolic notary Gaspar da Costa Mesquita, a New Christian.

In 1682, Silva Mendonça went to Madrid, where King Charles II recognized his role as an attorney of the black confraternities and wrote a letter on his behalf to the pope. This move should be better researched since it implies a refusal in Lisbon compensated by (malicious?) support in Madrid, reinforced by the archbishop of Toledo. He also received support from a native Peruvian, Lorenzo del Real, master of music at the royal court.

In Rome, where Lourenço da Silva Mendonça presented his case at the Congregation for the Propaganda Fide from 1684 to 1686, he teamed up with the Capuchins Francisco José de Jaca and Epifanio de Moirans, who had been campaigning for the emancipation of enslaved Africans in Venezuela and Cuba before being expelled to Spain. They strongly supported his legal case. Nafafé does well to highlight this relationship because it shows how interrelated were the Iberian empires.

The legal case in Rome defines the sale of human beings as tyrannical, a crime against divine and human law. Nafafé convincingly demonstrates that the abolition of the slave trade and slavery was the purpose of the case. Silva Mendonça invoked the legal status of indentured labor in French law, which imposed a limit of service. He suggested a maximum time of service for legally enslaved people and the immediate liberation of children. Moreover, he denounced the illegal conditions of enslavement by unjust war and kidnapping that would challenge the foundations of the Atlantic economies. He stated that “the colour of Black and White people is an accident of nature.” Slavery, in his view, was unnatural, and slaves were living dead under permanent terror. He ended up mentioning the oppression of New Christians and Native Americans when pleaded in favor of freedom for all human beings as defined by natural law.

The responsibility of all authorities in the acceptance of the illegal trade was exposed by Silva Mendonça. The merchants directly involved should be punished. Moreover, he classified slavery as a crime against humanity and basic justice. He requested it to be outlawed.

The black confraternities in Spain, Portugal, and Brazil not only sent memorandums reinforcing the position of Lourenço da Silva Mendonça, but they lodged other cases, for instance, the six confraternities of black people in Salvador of Bahia supported the grievance of Pascoal Dias, a freed Angolan enslaved in Brazil. They also protested the extreme misery and brutal treatment they suffered daily, demanding the abolition of slavery. These confraternities

claimed the right to equal treatment and underlined their common condition as Christians.

The decision of the congregation could have been better explained. It concentrated on two main issues, the condemnation of the brutal treatment of enslaved people, and the condemnation of trade on people illegally enslaved. The main issue of abolition of the slave trade and slavery was not addressed. In any case, Roman decisions triggered a major reaction from the Overseas Council of Portugal, which is well discussed, arguing misinformation of Silva Mendonça and the dependence of the colonial economy on slavery.

The impact of Silva Mendonça's legal case in Rome is convincingly analyzed. I agree that it influenced D. Pedro II's legislation issued in 1684, in which the slave voyages were regulated to avoid overcrowding, imposing minimum levels of food and water. The purpose was to reduce mortality and respond to the accusations of brutal treatment. Implementation, as usual, is another issue.

Nafafé rightly insists that Silva Mendonça brought a message of universal freedom that concerned all peoples. They should not be judged by their descent but by their faith in God. Nafafé mentions "human rights" several times in his analysis. I am interested in the history of rights, and I would like to know whether Lourenço da Silva Mendonça used these precise words (they are not in phrases quoted). Even if the evidence of coordination between Lourenço da Silva Mendonça with New Christians and Native Americans is very slim, his period in Rome, 1684–1686, follows the extraordinary legal case created by the New Christians in 1673 against their persecution and discrimination by the Inquisition, which I study in my new book *Strangers Within*. Some of the original arguments resonate here.

There are some problems in Nafafé's book with the definition of Catholic institutions (mainly the structure of papal congregations, but also the Inquisition and the confraternities), understanding of units of account (e.g. the sum of table 2, p. 122, is wrong), a dubious reference to Las Casas (p. 357), and sloppy chronology (e.g. pp. 287 and 311), which should be corrected in a second edition. These problems don't undermine the importance of this book, which confronts the ideological bias of conservative historians who reject the importance of African revolts and currently ignore the evidence brought by this book on African legal actions against the slave trade and slavery. It is a brilliant study of early African abolitionism.

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