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Brazil: The Troubled Rise of a Global Power by Michael Reid

Chapter 3: The Forging of a People

The Portuguese had become very politically stable under the House of Aviz after its Christian kings terminated five centuries of Islamic rule. During this time the Portuguese learned of the most advanced maritime technology from the Arabs. Although Christopher Columbus and his pioneers are emphasized in history, the Portuguese were the leading seafaring nation of the 1400's. During the year 1500, King Manoel of Portugal sent a fleet of 1,500 men into the Atlantic Ocean. The country began to form colonies on the Atlantic Islands. Expanding further, they traveled the African coast into the Indian Ocean, returning with spices and other riches. Along the way Portugal set up many trading posts, to their advantage. The capital of the time, Lisbon became a busy port within the country (Reid, 27).

Cabral, on another journey to sea, landed in Brazil; however, the true mission was to return to India, still causing confusion today. Upon arrival the Portuguese had a brilliant and pleasant encounter with the Tupi. The Portuguese were in awe at the lives of the natives. They were beautiful and naked hunters and gatherers (Reid, 28). "The recorded history of Brazil begins with a misleadingly idyllic encounter between Europeans and Amerindians," (Reid, 27). As harmless as they were, the men were already thinking of religions conversion among the Tupi. They were a bit less "civilized" as they were somewhat nomadic because they raised no domestic animals. This kept them living without any large scale political system among the many villages within the continent (Reid, 29).

After finding no precious resources, the Cabral continued onto India. The next year, a small fleet was sent to further explore the coast of Brazil, and over the next three centuries the

Portuguese began to colonize the country. The Tupi and the Portuguese maintained a steady, friendly relationship. The Portuguese even married the native women, unlike Spanish America: partly because generally just men immigrated to Brazil. There existed minimal racial pride, uncommonly seen throughout history. This is probably because the Portuguese has culturally mixed roots, coming from Europe and Africa (Reid, 30).

Although the Portuguese Amerindian relationship was sound for a while, things eventually turned sour. This might have been because sugar production boomed within the country, leaving a need for laborers. With this new need, the Portuguese settlers saw the Tupi as slave laborers. The best way to make this acceptable, for themselves and for the public, is to make them seem less than human. To some extent, many of the Tupi people were already in a state of slavery, as the Jesuits were forcing groups of the Amerindians into “ghettos” where they were forced to practice Christianity (Reid, 32). As enslavement grew, many of the Amerindians began to die off from maltreatment, enslavement, and disease (Reid, 32). Brazil was the biggest exporter of sugar during the 16th and 17th century (Reid, 36). Sugar, with its addictive properties, began to sweeten the world’s diet, calling for its growing production. However, this was not an easy task, as sugar production is arduous work (Reid, 36). Its foundations were on forced labor, as the country of Brazil had easy access to, first, the Amerindians, then the African slaves.

Brazil, in the business of slave trade, had the biggest advantage as Lisbon was closer to Africa than other demanding countries. For most of the slave trade era, Brazil was a top mover of slaves. They even invaded Africa’s coast with the business, setting up a permanent internal trade centers (Reid, 38). It was much cheaper for them to import slaves than the new Americas and the Caribbean. Although slavery was not nationally accepted, intervention was timid. This was

because sugar production was a huge market, stimulating Brazil's new economy. At the time those merchants were dominant forces within society (Reid, 40).

During the late 17th century Brazil's economy stagnated as sugar production moved. The Dutch, French and British were planting with bigger and more efficient systems, booting Brazil out of the business (Reid, 47). Luckily, approaching the turn of the century, the country struck gold. Initially, the crown sent bandeirantes (a violent group of the 16th century who set out to capture people as slaves and find gold) to conduct searches (Reid, 33). Once found, the gold rush of Brazil began and an influx of people crowded mining areas (Reid, 48). Although there were slaves used, free Africans outnumbered them at this time. As the country's wealth physically shifted from sugar plantation areas to gold rich areas, Rio de Janeiro became the capital (Reid, 49).

Brazil is made up of a very diverse group of people. Initially, it was populated with the blending of Amerindians, Portuguese, and Africans. Continually, there is a growing blend, driven mainly by the escape of persecution. To name a few, Koreans, Japanese, Italians, and Syrians are all examples of immigrants who entered the accepting country of Brazil (Reid, 52). By the beginning of nineteenth century, an estimated 2 to 3 million people lived there. During the country's initial years, it had lots of quick and easy wealth. This might have been detrimental to the foundations of its economy as they gained no rewards of persistent work. Through slavery and gold mining, Brazil quickly gained unstable wealth.

Brazil was an unusual country, as it never initially aimed to rid the Tupi. Its acceptance of different people led it to become a melting pot. This ended up including Africans, only after slavery finally faded with the failure of sugar production. Because the country was never built with solid mercantilist foundations, it almost had to start all over after the gold was exhausted.

This was, and still is, a difficult task. Making things more difficult, the people of the country were largely without labor ethic, as slavery initially dominated.