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River Guides, Geographical Informants, and Colonial Field Agents in the Portuguese Amazon

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Recent studies of colonial mapping, reconnaissance, and imperial science have emphasized the role played by local or native informants in the construction of European geographical knowledge of the interior of South America (Pratt 1992, 135–36; Burnett 2000, 2002; Raffles 2002, 137–46; Safier 2008, 2009). Scholars have, for example, identified native toponyms on colonial maps and detected elements of local myth and lore in geographical reports. Following Neil Whitehead (1995, 54–58), they have come to interpret such texts as ‘jointly produced’ by Europeans and their informants in the field. But as sensitive as it is to the presence of local knowledge in colonial texts, this literature tends to depict the informants themselves in undifferentiated terms, rarely identifying them as named individuals with personal histories or as members of specific communities. Were they so undifferentiated among the colonial contemporaries who relied upon them for information and expertise? The answer is yes and no, and I will argue that it tells us something about the range of interactions and transmissions of knowledge that took place between colonial agents and local people.

The published accounts of prominent outsiders in South America—foreign travelers, Enlightenment-era scientists, or visiting metropolitan authorities—typically contain few details about the individuals who guided their expeditions along the rivers and overland paths of the continent. These sojourners rarely selected their own guides and informants, being indebted to their local hosts for this type of provisioning, and they often referred to them en masse or anonymously. They also tended to minimize, in front of their European readership, the state of extreme dependence that characterized their travels through the interior, as well as the extent to which they could not personally observe all of the geographical features and phenomena that they reported. Explicit critiques of native-supplied information were common in this context, and some authors—including Charles-Marie de La
Condamine and Alexander von Humboldt—caricatured their South American guides as unreliable and even devious. Neil Safier (2008, 2009) and D. Graham Burnett (2000, 2002), writing about the Amazon Basin and British Guyana, respectively, have shown how these were rhetorical strategies that had much to do with travelers’ agendas of self-promotion and reputation-building overseas. Burnett, in particular, has turned to explorers’ unpublished expedition diaries and notes to detect the contributions of guides and informants (2002, 31–32). This approach reflects a broader shift in scholarly attention, away from the ‘artifact’ of the map and towards the spatial practices of Europeans in colonial contexts: exploring, naming, surveying, land-marking, and boundary-making (Burnett 2009, 216–17).

That most high-profile European sources reveal little about local informants may have had less to do with purposeful omission for publication—though this surely did happen—than with the kinds of expeditionary interactions and geographical exchanges that tended to occur between outsiders and locals. Europeans did, of course, enter into various types of contact with local populations: they exchanged gifts for geographical information, they traveled in the company of guides and crewmen, and they engaged in interpreter-assisted questioning wherever they went. These forms of contact, however, were often superficial and fleeting. Burnett’s observation that the royal surveyor Robert Schomburgk framed his journeys through the interior of British Guyana as passages through ‘an alien place among alien people’ (2000, 11) might be extended more broadly to foreign explorers in the interior of South America.

This article delves into a very different type of source material, in focusing on the mostly unpublished reports of those best described as ‘colonial field agents’: low-level administrators and other on-the-ground agents of colonialism, such as settlers and military men, who spent most of their lives and made their careers in the Portuguese Amazon. These sources offer a more complete and nuanced view of the individuals behind the native toponyms on colonial maps or the geographical ‘discoveries’ touted by prominent travelers. They also shed light on the variety of geographical exchanges that occurred with local or native informants, many of which were long-term collaborations; and, more broadly, they illuminate the multiple ways in which Europeans (in this case, the Portuguese) came to know something about the most remote spaces of the continent.

Reporting from scattered villages, garrisons, and expeditionary camps across the Amazonian interior, colonial field agents distinguished among different types of guides and geographical informants, often with reference to the past experiences that were thought to make those individuals more or less ‘expert.’ With an apparent conviction that expertise came in many guises, these authors sometimes recruited women, blacks, deserters, and former fugitives, the very sorts of people we might assume would be marginalized from such activities and distrusted as sources of information. They also attempted to cross significant linguistic and cultural barriers to communicate with autonomous native groups, in the hopes of obtaining
both practical navigational advice and coveted information about imperially contested territories.

The most promising time frame for an inquiry into geographical knowledge exchange is the eighteenth century and particularly its second half. This was a time of heightened interest—on both sides of the Atlantic—in the exploration, political demarcation, and commercial exploitation of the immense Amazonian territories claimed by Portugal, the Captaincy of Pará and the subordinate Captaincy of São José do Rio Negro (Figure 1). Crown reformers under the Marquês de Pombal sought to expand royal control over the northern colony—which for most of the colonial period was ruled separately from the main colony of Brazil—through secular administration of the colonial Indian population (in lieu of missionary, particularly Jesuit, control) and through a mercantile trading company. Documentation of these pursuits flowed along the interior rivers to the sea, as village administrators, settlers, and military men, stationed all along the Amazon River and its main tributaries, sent their reports to the colonial governor in the Atlantic port city of Belém. In this wide-ranging, low-level correspondence, we find repeated references to the so-called práticos do sertão: Indians, and a smaller number of non-Indians, who were recognized by their contemporaries as experts on the interior river routes of the Amazon Basin.

These práticos were recruited for a variety of (sometimes overlapping) purposes in the Portuguese Amazon. Some piloted the canoes that searched for groves of

Figure 1 The Portuguese Amazon, consisting of the two captaincies of Pará and the Rio Negro. Approximate captaincy boundaries are based on late-eighteenth-century maps of the region. (Adapted by the author from Bakewell 1997, xxiii; courtesy of Blackwell Publishing.)
wild cacao and other valuable products of the interior, the main economic activity during the colonial period. Others were familiar with the ‘heathen’ routes, and they guided expeditions to the interior to negotiate resettlements with autonomous native groups. As the century progressed, práticos and other types of informants—some of whom had no allegiance whatsoever to the Portuguese Crown—played increasingly visible roles in the reconnaissance and border demarcation expeditions that operated along the northern and western frontiers of the Portuguese Amazon.

Riverine Geography and Geopolitics

Even a glance at a colonial-era map (Figure 2) will suggest that rivers shaped European knowledge of Amazonian space, but surprisingly little ink has been spilled on this point. Three aspects of how rivers shaped colonial spatial knowledge deserve further consideration, if we are to understand the context in which práticos operated. First, rivers opened up some, but not all, areas of the Basin to colonial exploration and settlement, and they offered only seasonal access to many places. Second, rivers might potentially serve as ‘natural’ delineations of imperial possessions in the Amazon, but a host of geopolitical controversies arose from the fact that the

Figure 2 Map of northern South America, with the Amazon River and its major tributaries featured prominently. Based on the 1707 map by the Jesuit Samuel Fritz (‘Cours du Fleuve Maragnon autrement dit des Amazones,’ in Lettres édifiantes et curieuses 1741, 212).
river network shrank and expanded dramatically from one season to the next. Finally, and most pertinent to the topic at hand, Amazonian rivers required a level of navigational expertise that most Europeans did not have, thus leading to a heavy dependence on práticos—canoe pilots, river guides, and other geographical informants—for the duration of the colonial period and beyond.

The Amazon River’s drainage basin constitutes the largest and densest network of navigable waterways in the world, presently estimated at around twenty-thousand kilometers. During the dry season, however, the network typically contracts by more than half, cutting off large swaths of the basin to communication (McGrath 1989, 86). Colonial-era settlements were exclusively founded on waterways with year-round access, and by the mid eighteenth century, the Portuguese had established forts at strategic river junctions, as well as some sixty missions and a handful of settler towns along the banks of the main tributaries. Some of these settlements traced their origins back to the seventeenth century and became well-established riverine entrepôts. Yet all around them were seasonal creeks, waterways broken by dangerous rapids, and thick interfluvial forests. These were the blank areas on colonial maps. Nearly terrae incognitae to Europeans, they served as paths of escape and places of refuge for fugitives, military deserters, and autonomous native groups. As Lauren Benton (2009) has explored in her recent comparative work, a pattern of colonial control that followed particular routes (‘corridors’) and networks of settled enclaves was typical of European overseas empires. While the rest of the territory might be claimed formally by imperial powers, it remained incompletely known to metropolitan officials. The term used in Brazil for these backlands was sertão, and it connoted impenetrability and danger for some, but opportunities and freedom of movement for others (Langfur 2006; Kok 2004; Roller 2010a).

Colonial officials in South America often envisioned rivers as boundaries between empires or as discrete regional units in the form of drainage basins. Along the northern frontiers of Portuguese Amazonia, however, rivers made particularly ambiguous—and thus more contested—limits, as waterways that drained into the Amazon converged seasonally with waterways that emptied into the Atlantic (Cleary 2001, 66–67). During the second half of the eighteenth century, Portuguese authorities investigated the extent to which Spanish, Dutch, and French colonial subjects used these seasonal routes to travel further inland from the Orinoco Basin in present-day Venezuela, the Essequibo in modern Guyana and Suriname, and the Oiapoque in French Guiana. Tensions ran particularly high with Spain, as a result of controversies around the implementation of the Treaty of Madrid (1750) and the demarcation of political boundaries in what is now the west and north of Brazil. Negotiations between those two imperial powers continued throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, with both sides paying close attention to what happened on the ground. More specifically, they looked to the rivers, which were seen not only as avenues of penetration into territories, but as a means of claiming those territories. The Iberian Crowns’ adherence to the central principle of uti possidetis,
or possession through effective occupation, meant that the competition for territory would be decided by people whose interests were not always well aligned with imperial ones: incorporated and autonomous native groups, slavetraders, soldiers, and missionaries. These individuals traveled, exploited, and settled the interior rivers largely by their own means and for their own ends, though they might fly Spanish or Portuguese flags from the sterns of their canoes. They became intimately familiar with the fluctuating physical boundaries of the space, but paid little heed to the lines drawn on imperial maps.11

The geographical complexity of the Amazonian riverscape helps explain why práticos were so heavily recruited by colonial authorities during this period and why they were involved in almost every kind of expedition to the interior. On smaller waterways and near the headwaters of the main tributaries, expeditions contended with numerous rapids, waterfalls, shoals, and islands whose contours changed from one season to the next.12 Even expeditions that plied the ‘fluvial highways’ of the Portuguese Amazon, such as the Rios Amazonas-Solimões and the Rio Negro, had to navigate through the elaborate paranás, or networks of alternative channels, that run parallel to the main waterways and offer much-needed shelter from currents and winds. Based on a calculation of current river conditions, canoes heading to the same destination might therefore take very different routes (McGrath 1989, 157; also Chambouleyon, Bonifácio, and Melo 2010, 24). The French Enlightenment scientist Charles-Marie de La Condamine recalled his disorientation upon passing through a labyrinthine area of the Amazon delta, the Furos (Channels) Region:

Without being consulted as to my choice of a path, [I was taken] between islands and through narrow, winding channels that pass from one river to another and thereby avoid the danger of crossing at the mouths. What constituted my security and the comfort of any other traveler became extremely frustrating for me, as my principal goal was the creation of a map. It was necessary to redouble my attention, so as not to lose track of my route through this tortuous maze of innumerable islands and channels. (2000 [1745], 102)

The Amazonian riverscape would not have seemed disorienting, of course, to those who lived within it or traveled regularly through it, as implied by La Condamine’s comments about the deftness with which he was conducted through the maze.13 Nor is there any evidence that La Condamine’s geographical frustration and alienation from his crew was typical of the various colonial field agents who circulated through the Amazon with the assistance of práticos.14

Local Relationships and Geographical Knowledge

Writing about Alexander von Humboldt’s travels through South America, Mary Louise Pratt reminds us that an ‘interactional history’ between Europeans and locals would ‘turn up only as traces’ in conventional European travel writing (1992, 136). As the earlier example of La Condamine suggests, at issue was not only whether
interactions would be documented, but whether they would be sustained and meaningful for both sides. But what about those colonial agents who considered the sertão their own backyard—albeit a vast, overgrown, and relatively unknown backyard? Two counterpoints, both from the Portuguese Amazon, point to a deeper (and better documented) ‘interactional history’ between colonial field agents and local informants. The first counterpoint to the foreign traveler is the figure of the colonial administrator of an Indian village—a local bureaucrat, in other words, who typically occupied his post for years—and the process by which this type of field agent might go about obtaining and documenting geographical information about the interior. The second counterpoint is the figure of the non-Indian settler of the interior, himself intimately familiar with the people and products of the sertão. To what extent did these low-level officials and interior settlers draw on their experiences and relationships with local populations? How did they represent their sources of information in the variety of geographical texts that they produced?

The first case, that of the local village administrator, requires some background on the purposes to which colonial Indian villages were put during the second half of the eighteenth century. During the Indian Directorate (1757–1798), a Pombaline reform project that outlasted the Marquês de Pombal, some sixty-one former
missions fell under the administration of a secular administrator, or ‘director.’ In addition to facilitating the distribution of the indios aldeados (Indian members of the villages) for state labor projects and private service, the directors were charged with promoting economic development in Pará and the Rio Negro captaincies. A few attempts were made to stimulate agricultural production in the two captaincies, but the Amazonian economy had long revolved around extraction, and the comércio do sertão remained the primary economic activity during the Directorate.

On an annual basis, dozens of villages sent state-sponsored canoes after wild forest products. Each of these large expeditions counted upon one or two Indian pilots, who often served year after year, some working until an advanced age. Some had piloted the collecting canoes of the missionaries before the latter’s replacement by secular directors. According to João Daniel, a Jesuit who spent many years in the Portuguese Amazon, piloting was ‘a trade and art that among them [the indios aldeados] is one of the most dignified posts in their settlements, and they [the pilots] are respected and obeyed by community members (nacionais)’ (Daniel 2004 [c. 1758–1776], 1:343). Pilots built their reputations over years of steering expeditions to collect the same products within the same river basins: Amazonian clove in the forests bordering the Xingu and Tapajós, cacao along the banks of the Madeira and Solimões, turtles and their eggs on the beaches of the Amazon, and sarsaparilla (a root used to treat syphilis and rheumatism) in low, swampy areas near the Jari, to name just a few of the most popular collecting grounds. These men were recognized by both local authorities and their fellow expedition members as highly knowledgeable about the routes of penetration, the location of collecting grounds, and the proximity of independent native groups in those regions.

During the Directorate, the documentation of pilot-supplied geographical information became more common, for two reasons. One is that the directors were obliged to send annual reports on village extractive activities to the governor in the downriver capital of Belém. This paperwork requirement fit into a broader reform effort to standardize village production and to exert more oversight in the administration of the Indians. The second reason is that the village directors were granted, in lieu of salaries, one-sixth of the proceeds from the collecting expeditions. They were thus eager to obtain information that might lead to more profitable ventures in the interior, and to highlight, in their reports to the governor, their initiative in promoting extractive activities. Indeed, some directors built decades-long careers by convincing governors to award them directorships in villages of increasing size and productive potential.

It was in this context that directors consulted with pilots and other village prácticos during the planning stages of a collecting trip, to ascertain the best grounds and seasons for gathering forest products. Many months later, when the forest collecting expeditions returned to the villages, the pilots typically testified first among the crewmen as part of a formal inquiry, or devassa, carried out by each village director.
These inquiries, which focused on the behavior of the non-Indian canoe boss of each expedition, reflected higher authorities’ concerns about contraband trade, illicit contacts with autonomous native groups, and labor abuses (Roller 2010a). They also provided opportunities for expedition members to set the record straight before an important local powerbroker, the village director. The pilots might therefore use their testimonies to explain the causes of any delays, detours, or losses that had occurred on the expeditions, often with reference to treacherous geographical features, such as cataracts. They also made recommendations on how and where to conduct more productive expeditions in the future. The other crewmen, for their part, often blamed any expedition losses on the canoe boss’s disregard for the pilots’ navigational advice or collecting preferences.

Through informal exchanges with the pilots as well as through the officially mandated devassas, village directors were drawn into the process of determining expertise in the ways of the interior. They took sides in the devassas, opining on the culpability or competence of the individual pilots, crewmen, or bosses of the expeditions. Directors also learned to seek out, or be receptive to, diverse sources of geographical information within the village—not just the current pilots, but their predecessors and peers. Writing from his post in the village of Almeirim in 1785, one director reported the various tips he had gleaned from the ‘old prátics do sertão’—almost certainly Indians, since the village was almost entirely composed of them—on the growth patterns and seasonality of sarsaparilla. His informants, furthermore, had predicted that sarsaparilla could only be found on the Rio Jari during the coming collecting season. ‘But this River is big and intricate,’ they had advised the director, ‘and one cannot go there without prátics, who are only to be found in [the neighboring village of] Esposende and on that same River’ (António José de Freitas to governor, Almeirim, 12 October 1785, AEP, Cod. 424, Doc. 48).

In advocating the use of outside guides, the villagers themselves drew fine distinctions between the kinds of knowledge possessed by different types of people. Village directors had economic incentives to heed such advice, and it was politically advantageous to document it in their reports to the governor. The information in these reports might ultimately trickle into higher-level correspondence about the timing and geographical range of extractive activities. Perhaps in part because their feats of navigation were publicized by village directors, some índios aldeados developed reputations as prátics that spread far beyond their villages and also beyond the realm of village-based extractive activities. In their wider recruitment, these individuals went from exchanging information with their directors and community members to sharing expertise with a broad range of people. They also transitioned from participating in regular trips organized by their villages to serving on special reconnaissance expeditions for the state and a variety of privately funded canoe ventures. Much of what we know of this kind of participation comes from the sources produced in the territorial contest with Spain, during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. This documentation often consists of the opinions and summaries of higher authorities—such as captaincy governors.
and royal magistrates—but is accompanied by intriguing letters from lower-level officials and testimonies from locals.

When, in 1775, higher authorities in the Portuguese Amazon discovered that Spanish soldiers had established a garrison and two Indian settlements (Santa Rosa and Caya-Caya) on one of the tributaries of the Rio Branco, a royal magistrate was ordered to investigate the basis for Portuguese claims on that river. He summoned ten men to testify, among whom were two índios aldeados: Paulo de Oliveira, 65 years old, and Headman Theodósio José dos Santos, 53 years old, both residents of Barcelos, the captaincy seat of the Rio Negro. Their credibility derived from past participation in expeditions to the Branco, and particularly in one of the few licensed slaving expeditions to target that river, carried out in 1740 during the twilight years of the legal captive trade. In their testimonies, both índios aldeados affirmed that the Portuguese had discovered and exploited the Rio Branco (‘called Quesseuena by the Indians, and also Paraviana’) and that they had participated in the expedition of 1740. They described the extent of their exploration of the Basin, and named the various white settlers who had accompanied the expedition, some of whom were also called to testify in 1775 (‘Auto de justificação,’ Barcelos, 19 April 1775, in Nabuco 1903, 1:106–7).

The following year, when the Portuguese governor of the Rio Negro wrote to his Spanish counterpart on the other side of the Amazon-Orinoco watershed to denounce the Spanish ‘invasion’ of the Rio Branco, he, too, invoked the names of the two índios aldeados, along with six other Indians, eleven settlers, and one enterprising missionary. These diverse Portuguese subjects and allies had been ‘the first ones to facilitate and discover that navigation, by which the legitimate possession [of the Rio Branco] is well justified’ (Nabuco 1903, 1:149). The governor’s acknowledgement of the native prácticos recalls Edney’s description of the British conventions for establishing the reliability of their geographical surveys in India (1997, 81–82, 83): it was an assertion of legitimacy. But the supporting documentation—such as the testimonies described above—suggests the extent to which official knowledge was shaped by local knowledge: in this case, knowledge derived from long-term exchanges and collaborations between Indian guides or informants and the non-Indian laymen who traveled through the interior in the name of Portugal.

This brings us to the second counterpoint to the foreign traveler or colonial outsider. Many non-Indians who operated in the interior of the Portuguese Amazon were known as sertanistas: laymen who scoured the forests and rivers of the sertão for wild products; engaged in slaving expeditions as long as these were legal (until 1747) and sometimes even when they were not; and made their careers on the westward- and northward-moving frontier. The sertanistas were usually Portuguese creoles, and some were known to be the sons of European men and Indian women; the latter, as mamelucos, may have had more privileged access to native sources of knowledge. Others had first come to the Amazon as soldiers, to serve out banishment sentences at the Portuguese forts that dotted the main river junctions (Amado 2000), and their military forays as well as their desertions from
service provided ample opportunities to explore the interior. Success in either the extractive economy or the Indian slave trade depended on the mastery of routes in the *sertão*—hence the label *sertanista*—as well as on the formation of alliances with dispersed native groups. Some successful and versatile *sertanistas* also led, on the side, state-sanctioned war parties and missionary-sponsored expeditions to contact uncolonized native groups.

The scholarly literature on the *sertanistas* of the Amazon—or the *bandeirantes* of other parts of Brazil—is extensive. The examination of their conflicts and collaborations with other colonial subjects and with independent native groups has greatly advanced our understanding of the process of interior colonization in Brazil (Monteiro 1994; Kok 2004; Karasch 2005; Metcalf 2005; Langfur 2006). The freelancing aspect of *sertanistas*’ careers has also been emphasized: these were people who straddled the European and indigenous divide and who were difficult to control, though crown reformers as well as Portuguese Inquisitors occasionally tried (Sommer 2005, 2006). What has not been adequately discussed in the literature is the *sertanistas*’ contribution to European geographical knowledge, not only through their own travels, but through their frequent and long-term collaborations with Indian guides and pilots.

Francisco Xavier Mendes de Morais, for example, had come to the Rio Negro in 1725 as a teenage participant in the licensed slaving troop led by his well-known brother, Belchior Mendes de Morais. He went on to become a renowned slaver and explorer himself, even leading the expedition that first confirmed (for Europeans) the existence of the Cassiquiare channel linking the two great basins of the Negro and Orinoco Rivers, in 1744. After the end of the legal trade in Indian slaves, Morais seems to have settled down in the colonial village of Moreira, on the Rio Negro frontier. In 1755, he was described as an ‘*homem muito prático destes sertos*’—an expert in the ways of the backlands—who provided advice to royal expeditions as they passed through Moreira on their way to even more remote destinations. Twenty years later, Morais testified in the aforementioned inquiry about the legitimacy of Portuguese claims to the Rio Branco. And in his old age, around 1780, he co-authored an extensive geographical report on the communication of the Rio Negro with other river systems in the Spanish-Portuguese borderlands, at the behest of the captaincy governor. This report, like others produced by *sertanistas* during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, became part of Portugal’s diplomatic dossier for its territorial claims in the borderlands.

In this last contribution to Portuguese knowledge of the interior, Morais skillfully distinguished between the kinds of information to be gathered from the wide variety of guides and informants who lived in the Rio Negro captaincy. He implied that his own knowledge of those rivers was only one of many sources to be mined by higher authorities. Thus, for one river route, he noted that ‘The Indians of the settlements [located] on the falls of this Rio [Marié] are the most apt and experienced’; regarding another river junction, ‘From here onward, only the Indians of the settlements on the Solimões are known to have traveled, particularly those of
the Miranha nation.’ If one wanted to know more about navigational conditions on a particular river, ‘one could find out from the commander of the Rio Branco Fort, and from some soldiers who went to those parts.’ Information could be corroborated, he suggested, by various residents of the captaincy seat, including the Headman Theodósio José dos Santos, one of the other witnesses called to testify in the 1775 inquiry into Portuguese claims to the Rio Branco, who had participated in an expedition alongside Morais back in 1740 (‘Memória,’ c. 1780, AHI, Lata 288, Maço 5, Pasta 5).

Morais was clearly considered a prático in his own right, and one who, in his later years, had made himself useful to the colonial state. Much of his usefulness, however, derived from his ability to identify more specialized sources of geographical information among his contacts in the interior: specific Indian groups, individual soldiers, residents of the captaincy seat (who could easily be summoned for questioning), and past expedition mates. His approach, like that of the village directors, was highly pragmatic: he recognized expertise in many guises and was eclectic in his recruitment of informants. Those informants, in turn, gave him privileged insights into everything from river shortcuts to overland routes through hostile native territory. The next section of this article will explore the eclecticism of colonial field agents in more detail. How far were these Portuguese laymen, officials, and military men willing to go in their pursuit of practical and strategic knowledge about the Amazonian interior? What distances, physical as well as cultural, would they successfully cross? And what do their records tell us about the ‘interactional history’ of colonial agents and the wide range of guides and geographical informants whom they recruited?

Recruitment and Collaboration on the Territorial and Social Margins

In the Portuguese Amazon of the eighteenth century, colonial field agents came to depend on guides and informants of marginal social statuses and questionable loyalties. Fugitives and ex-fugitives, women, blacks, and members of autonomous Indian nations were all recruited as informants. Most setanistas, military men, and other non-Indians who traveled in the interior evidently did not see this dependence as problematic; it was, rather, a means to an end. Individual guides and informants, for their part, had a range of motives for cooperating with such inquiries and ventures. Apprehended fugitives might hope for a reprieve from punishment or for gentler treatment in Portuguese custody, if they revealed to their interrogators what they knew of escape routes and refuges. Unincorporated native groups might simply have sought to hedge their bets, aiding Portuguese-sponsored expeditions (or Dutch, French, or Spanish ones) in exchange for gifts and temporary goodwill. Most commonly, these interactions were recorded as part of officially mandated inquiries or interrogations conducted in custody, and thus they cannot be compared with informal conversations or more open collaborations. But the fact that geographical knowledge was nonetheless transmitted effectively suggests that prior
experiences had prepared both parties to communicate with one another: for all their differences, these people were not alien to one another. The three examples that follow place these interactions in a broader geopolitical context and consider how individuals managed to communicate across cultural and social boundaries and from unequal positions of power.

In 1783, a Portuguese reconnaissance expedition set off to explore the coast of Cabo Norte, a borderland region between the captaincy of Pará and French Guiana. It responded to the alarming news, transmitted by a Spanish military deserter, that the French were building a fort only twelve days by sea from the Portuguese fort at the mouth of the Amazon River. The leader of the Cabo Norte expedition was a soldier named Leonardo José Pereira, about whom little is known except for his language abilities. When he and his crew intercepted a small group of Indian fishermen, he reported that he chose to question one of the women, Arcangela Rufina, because he knew her language. This was almost certainly the Jesuit-devised, Tupian lingua geral, still spoken by many colonial Indians at the time as well as by non-Indians who had significant contact with those communities.

Arcangela’s answers to Pereira’s (unspecified) questions were full of provocative details about the formation of viable communities of Indian fugitives from Portuguese territories, aided by the French. She reported that after running away from her village of Salvaterra, on the Island of Marajó in the Amazon delta region, she had found refuge in the borderlands to the north. There she had joined many other groups of former índios aldeados, each with their own native headman. In her new community on the Rio Guani (or Guanani), she said that the French had installed a priest two summers ago. Rumored to be a Jesuit expelled from Pará, he had indoctrinated the villagers in French or the lingua geral, but never Portuguese. Since his arrival, furthermore, the headmen of her village had been summoned to the French colonial capital of Caiena (Cayenne), though Arcangela claimed not to know the purpose of this visit. She also reported that at the headwaters of the Rio Guani, there was another community of runaway índios aldeados from Pará who did not want to submit to the priest’s teachings, and who insisted on continuing their heathen ways. ‘One could go and apprehend them,’ she suggested, ‘without the inhabitants of the village in which the priest resided ever knowing’ (‘Relação do que [...] respondeu a India Arcangela Rufina,’ appended to Manuel da Gama Lobo de Almada’s report to the Overseas Secretary, Macapá, 6 August 1783, AHU, Pará Avulsos, Cx. 90, Doc. 7323).

Arcangela’s interaction with Pereira probably occurred while she and her companions were in Portuguese custody, fearing for their lives. It was, however, an evidently successful communication between people who spoke the same language and who had a common frame of reference, despite their very different loyalties. Pereira was able, for example, to accurately record the names of the ethnic groups named by Arcangela as having fled Portuguese colonial settlements (such as the Ariquenas of the village of Portel), as well as their leaders, at least one of whom was a notorious fugitive
Bazilio, who appears in numerous contemporary sources from Pará). Pereira’s report of Arcangela’s testimony was so compelling that it ended up on the desk of the Overseas Secretary in Lisbon. Along with similar types of documentation, it motivated reconnaissance expeditions and military patrols in the Guiana borderlands for the rest of the colonial period (Gomes 2002; Marin and Gomes 2003). Ten years later, soldiers who spoke the **lingua geral** were still being sent to conduct similar interrogations among groups of fugitive Indians and blacks who lived in those same borderlands (‘Diário Roteiro do Arrayal do Pesqueiro de Araguari até o Rio Ouyapoko [Oiapoque],’ 1794, APEP, Cod. 500, Doc. 42). 29

The questioning of a black fugitive slave—and a woman, no less—by a wealthy, white plantation owner provides another avenue for understanding how and why people communicated about geography across vast social divides. The planter was Hilário de Morais Bitancourt, known for his ambition to pacify native groups along Pará’s southern frontier and for his rapport with the new captaincy governor. In 1790, Governor Souza Coutinho ordered Bitancourt to question a slave woman named Maria as to the geographical situation and customs of the Apinagé, a notoriously hostile Indian nation with whom she had lived as a fugitive on the Rio Araguaia. Although the circumstances of Maria’s recruitment as a geographical informant remain unclear, it seems likely that she had been apprehended by colonial authorities after perhaps several decades of residence with the Apinagé: we know that she had raised seven children and five grandchildren with the Indian nation, ten of whom were still living in tribal territories. Bitancourt identified her as the slave of one Manoel da Silva de Carvalho; this may have been the owner from whom she originally had fled, or the one with whom she had been placed upon her return to colonial society.

According to Bitancourt’s report to the governor, Maria shared information that would enable colonial authorities to reach the territory of her former hosts and her own family members. After explaining that the Apinagé were organized into kin groups with no higher authorities, and that the reason they continued their attacks against the Portuguese was to steal tools, Maria detailed how and where they lived in the **sertão**:

Their village, which has no formality whatsoever, consists of a few small thatched huts, and is only for the winter season. They spend all summer on the beaches; one is located at the mouth of the Rio Araguaia, called Muruxituba, [and that is] where they also have huts, and where they send off their canoe parties (**bandeiras**); some stock up on provisions, and others come to make their customary hostilities. The site […] is close to the mouth of the Rio Araguaia, about two or three days’ travel up the river, and on this all the **práticos** agree.

This passage (concluding with Bitancourt’s aside) makes clear that Maria’s testimony was checked against what Bitancourt already knew, from his earlier inquiries among local **práticos** with regard to the Apinagé territories. And although he did not include his questions in the report, it is obvious from Maria’s testimony that
Bitancourt asked her about the logistics of mounting an expedition to the Rio Araguaia. ‘To go there,’ she told him, ‘one must go now, in the beginning of the summer, because of the cataracts, and before they [the Apinágês] begin their travels’ (Bitancourt to Governor Francisco de Souza Coutinho, Carmelo Plantation, 22 July 1790, APEP, Cod. 447, Doc. 33).

Follow-up documentation suggests that both Maria and Bitancourt had incentives to collaborate in this potential venture to the Rio Araguaia. Maria had apparently been promised a manumission letter if she facilitated Bitancourt’s campaign to pacify and resettle the Apinágês. Bitancourt, for his part, clearly wanted to sponsor the expedition: he proposed to the governor that he be licensed to mount a four-month trip to the Rio Araguaia, with twenty soldiers, several times as many Indian paddlers, and large quantities of manioc flour, gunpowder, and trinkets for gifting, and he offered to cover these substantial costs himself (ibid., 8 August 1790, APEP, Cod. 447, Doc. 34). At a time when privately sponsored resettlements were being selectively reauthorized by captaincy authorities—after more than half a century of prohibition—it is likely Bitancourt hoped to obtain some of the rewards associated with such a costly and risky undertaking, such as a resident labor force for his plantation (Roller 2010b, 253). The governor recommended instead that Bitancourt first send Maria back to Apinágês territories to persuade a group of them to make a diplomatic visit to Belém. Only if this diplomatic visit came to pass would Bitancourt be licensed and funded to mount an expedition to the Rio Araguaia (Governor Souza Coutinho to Bitancourt, 1790, APEP, Cod. 466, Doc. 17). The collaboration between a female ex-fugitive slave and a powerful planter would thus likely continue, until the latter had no more use for her—until, perhaps, the Apinágês either accepted or definitively rejected colonial overtures.

Some of the most unlikely collaborations occurred between local people and the Portuguese military engineers or surveyors engaged over multiple years in the massive border demarcation project of the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In the remote corners of the continent—precisely those places where the lack of effective colonial settlement opened up the possibility of imperial dispute—demarcation teams went beyond the recruitment of práticos from the downriver colonial settlements. They increasingly turned to unincorporated native groups in the target areas, consulting with them ‘in their malocas [multifamily dwellings]’ and persuading high-ranking individuals among the Indians to accompany their canoes as guides. This type of recruitment followed earlier precedents set by the sertanistas and was widely viewed as pragmatic, albeit risky. The risks were further offset by the fact that a successful collaboration with autonomous Indians could serve as a strategic asset in the imperial contest for territory. Portuguese authors gleefully reported cases in which their unincorporated native informants helped them precisely because they hated the Spanish (Hemming 1990, 312). In 1781, Portuguese expedition members took this strategy to an extreme when they recruited an Indian guide whom they knew to have participated in the murder of several
Spanish missionaries (Ricardo Franco de Almeida Serra and Antonio Pires da Silva Pontes to João Pereira Caldas, 19 July 1781, in Nabuco 1903, 1:158).

A 1787 report by José Simões de Carvalho, an experienced military surveyor in the colony, sheds light on this complex ‘interactional history’ in the borderlands. One of the many expeditions in which Simões de Carvalho participated aimed to investigate routes of communication between Spanish territories in the Orinoco Basin and the Portuguese-claimed Rio Branco. He described how a small team of Portuguese soldiers and indios aldeados, led by a headman from the colonial hamlet of Conceição, had gone ahead of the main expedition to recruit a guide among the autonomous native groups of the upper Rio Branco tributaries. The party soon encountered an elderly headman of the Pecocota nation, who lived on a minor waterway with his family. He was persuaded ‘in all peacefulness’ to serve as the expedition’s guide, and the crew considered themselves fortunate to have found someone not only born and raised in the region, but also well acquainted with the routes to Spanish territories. Some years back, the Pecocota headman had lived at the Spanish reducción of San Vicente, on the other side of the Pacaraima mountains that separated the two river basins; his wife, Rita, had been baptized there. (The headman had not been baptized; his name, probably unpronounceable for the Portuguese, never appeared in Simões de Carvalho’s report.) Although the Spanish at San Vicente had assured the headman that the Portuguese were few in number and bad in character (poquitos e malos)—in contrast to what they described as a multitude of good Spaniards (muchitos e buenos)—he and his relatives were unhappy with their treatment at the reducción. He recounted how they had fled across the mountains and downriver to a stream called Tuctú, where they had lived ever since. (And where, no doubt, he hoped to be left in peace by the Portuguese.)

The group and its new guide, along with his wife and two brothers, joined up with the rest of the expedition and its leader, the Portuguese commander Manoel da Gama Lobo de Almada, who began to question the old Pecocota headman. Communication involved three stages of translation, from the headman’s language (Caripuna) to the one spoken by the headman from Conceição (Peraviana or Paravilhana); then to the língua geral, spoken by one of the lieutenants on the expedition; and finally to Portuguese. The expedition members had some difficulty understanding the guide’s pronunciation of river names, but Simões de Carvalho noted that that the old man was entirely consistent in his reports about how to reach the headwaters of the Rio Orinoco. As the party made their way upriver in small canoes, the headman also seemed particularly keen to show them what they most wanted to know: ‘The old guide told us that he had wanted to travel along this stream in order to show us where the Spaniards passed through when they came to establish themselves at Santa Rosa and Cayaya (Caya-Caya),’ the by-then-defunct Spanish settlements on a tributary of the Rio Branco, whose discovery had provoked such annexation hysteria among the Portuguese in 1775. The guide also pointed out the faded vestiges of cut trees along the route, which indicated that many years had passed since the
Spanish had used it. The expedition finally halted when it reached a river identified by the guide as a Spanish one, since it drained into the Orinoco.

In his formal report on the expedition, Simões de Carvalho concluded that everything revealed by the guide—translation problems notwithstanding—had persuaded him that this was indeed the route of communication between the Branco and the Orinoco (Simões de Carvalho to Manoel da Gama Lobo de Almada, 27 April 1787, APEP, Cod. 448, Doc. 9). He went on to draw a map, the ‘Carta do Rio Branco e suas confluentes’, that incorporated the waterways named by the guide (Figure 4). At least one of these, the Anucaprá—its ‘name given by the old guide’—was probably a new addition to the European cartographic record.

This documented collaboration in the field was, however, only a brief interlude in the longer story of the colonization of the Rio Branco. His services no longer needed, the old Perocota headman may well have returned with his wife and brothers to their home on the Rio Tuctú, one of the innumerable small waterways of the Amazonian sertão. Only a few years later, in 1790, the colonial villages on the Rio Branco were abandoned once again by most of their native residents, following several bloody skirmishes, and the Portuguese presence on that river shrank, for the

![Figure 4](image_url)

**Figure 4** Detail from José Simões de Carvalho, ‘Carta do Rio Branco e suas confluentes’ (1787); the Rio Anucaprá, the river named by the Indian guide, appears in the upper left quadrant. Courtesy of the Acervo da Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Brazil. A larger section of this map is reproduced in Safier 2009, 174–75.
duration of the colonial period, to a small military garrison (Farage 1991, 164–68; Hemming 1990, 320–22). For all their effective communication in the field, and despite the fact that both sides often perceived the exchanges as beneficial, there is, after all, no clear evidence that Portuguese colonial field agents held their local informants in greater esteem than did other types of European travelers. The fundamentally practical and strategic nature of their recruitment comes across most clearly in these reports from the Amazonian frontier.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to shed light on the range of interactions that unfolded between on-the-ground agents of Portuguese colonialism—village administrators, sertanistas, and military men—and their local river guides and geographical informants. Many of these colonial authors had accumulated considerable field experience of their own, over years of residence in (or passages through) the Indian villages and colonial base camps of the interior. In their expedition reports, geographical inquiries, and routine correspondence about the lands and peoples of the Amazonian sertão, they showed an acute awareness of the different kinds of geographical knowledge possessed by different types of people. This awareness was missing from the accounts of most foreign travelers and colonial dignitaries, who were ill-equipped or little inclined to write about the identities, backgrounds, or expertise of their guides and informants.

The aims of colonial field agents were often highly pragmatic: they wanted, for example, to ascertain the location of a rumored stand of cacao; to find out whether Spaniards had established themselves on a particular river; or to discover the route to an Indian nation that might be amenable to resettlement in the colonial sphere. As a result, they selected guides and informants on the basis of experience. Even when that experience had been acquired illicitly or was possessed by people of dubious loyalties, colonial field agents were both eager and able to tap into the information and knowledge that underlay it. Indians and non-Indians, free people and slaves, close collaborators and renegades, even former fugitives served as river guides and geographical informants. That their interactions with colonial field agents were often more sustained and meaningful than with foreign explorers should not be taken as evidence of mutual respect; rather, it speaks to the benefits perceived by both sides in the exchange, and to the opportunities they saw for exchanges in the future. The geographical knowledge produced in these contexts was ephemeral by nature. If it appeared in high-level correspondence at all, it was mostly likely in the supporting documentation; it more often remained in Amazonian, rather than metropolitan, archives; and it was very rarely marshaled in support of elite science.

Portuguese field agents were not the only ones to seek expertise in many guises and to develop lasting relationships with local informants. Their imperial rivals in the interior of South America evidently did the same. When, in 1781, the Spanish
and Portuguese boundary demarcation commissions established their long-term base of operations in the Portuguese village of Ega (modern Tefé), on the Rio Solimões, the Spanish camp of engineers, cartographers, and soldiers included two controversial members: Juan de Silva and Francisco Rojas, black men who carried the title of ‘Capitanes de Conquista.’ Rumored to be fugitive slaves from Pará, they had been recruited for their knowledge of the Içá (Putumayo) and Japurá (Caquetá) river basins, where they had carried out collecting expeditions, pacification campaigns, and resettlement negotiations for many years in the service of Spanish missionaries and the state. Both men were fluent in the língua geral as well as in several of the indigenous languages of those rivers (Sweet 1987; Domingues 2000).

The longtime Portuguese boundary commissioner, Henrique João Wilkens, was incensed to see the two black prácticos walking through the town in full uniform and bearing arms, often in the company of the Spanish commissioner, a military engineer named Francisco Requena (Figure 5). But the perceived breach of racial codes was not Wilkens’s main concern. Having made his own career as the leader of

![Figure 5](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 5** Watercolor by Francisco Requena, ‘Cascadas del Río Cuñaré’ (c. 1780s). The members of the Portuguese border demarcation commission stand on the spit of land in the center of the painting; the Spanish commissioner, Requena, appears on the right side of the painting, consulting with a native informant. The black man standing behind Requena, called the ‘Negro interprete’ in the caption, is surely either Juan de Silva or Francisco Rojas, the famous prácticos of the Upper Amazon region. See also Smith 1946, 63. Courtesy of The Catholic University of America, Oliveira Lima Library, Washington D.C.
reconnaissance expeditions along the frontiers of the Portuguese Amazon, he was well aware of ‘the utility of the information that the Spaniards, by means of these blacks, obtain about the languages, ways and customs, and discoveries of the many nations of this sertão, inhabitants of the forests between rivers’ (Wilkens to Governor João Pereira Caldas, 1 May 1784, APEP, Cod. 406, Doc. 37). Wilkens tried for several years to have Juan de Silva returned to the Portuguese camp, for there was some documented basis for his identity as an escaped slave from Pará. Requena, however, adamantly refused to relinquish his right-hand informant, and both de Silva and Rojas remained in the service of the Spanish into the 1790s (Sweet 1987). Had Wilkens been successful in his efforts, we can speculate that the two práticos might have been recruited to serve for similar ends, on the same contested rivers, only under a different flag.

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**Archives**

Arquivo Público do Estado do Pará (APEP), Belém, Brazil
Arquivo Nacional (ANRJ), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Biblioteca Nacional (BNRJ), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Arquivo do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (AIHGB), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Arquivo Histórico do Itamaraty (AHI), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (AHU), Lisbon, Portugal
Caixa (Cx.); Códice (Cod.); and Documento (Doc.)

**Notes**

1. Two exceptions are Safer (2009, 171–73 and 181) and Domingues (2000, 238–45), who describe the contributions of a number of individual guides and informants in the Amazon Basin. A few studies of colonial mapping and reconnaissance in other parts of the colonial Americas have also profiled individuals and particular communities that participated in European exploration or mapmaking enterprises; see Mundy 1996; Offen 2007; and Mapp 2011. I am grateful to Kris Lane for bringing my attention to the latter.

2. La Condamine 2000 [1745], 92–93; Humboldt 1852–1853, 2:377; Schomburgk, as described by Burnett 2000, 234, 236, 239; and Biard 1862, especially 479; on the last, see Figure 3. Note that, per Crown policy, no non-Portuguese travelers were permitted in the Portuguese Amazon from c. 1750–1810.
3 For an example of this new approach, focusing on European exploration of the North American West, see Mapp 2011; on Peru, see Scott 2009. Further afield, on British India, see Edney 1997, especially 81–83, and Arnold 2006, 176–84.

4 There were, of course, exceptions in the category of foreign travelers, some of whom fell into Shiebinger’s category of ‘long-term resident naturalists’ (2004, 53). Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira (1972, 1994), a Portuguese naturalist appointed by the Crown to study regional flora, fauna, and ethnography, spent nearly a decade (1783–1792) visiting different parts of the Amazonian interior and working closely with a range of local informants. In the nineteenth-century, another naturalist, Henry Walter Bates (1899 [1863]), spent eleven years in the region. Despite their outsider status, it seems likely that both of these naturalists developed, over time, more complex and even intimate relationships with their informants, though they still tended to refer to these people generically. For reflections on Bates’s intimacy with local people and places, see Raffles 2002, 137–46.

5 The Amazonian captaincies of Pará and the Rio Negro were ruled directly from Lisbon for much of the colonial period, along with the captaincy of Maranhão to the east, with which they were administratively linked. The vast northern captaincies only joined the main Estado do Brasil in 1774 (Mansuy-Diniz Silva 1987, 253–54).

6 The Portuguese term práctico (or the Spanish práctico) refers to one who is recognized as experienced or expert in something; more specifically, it denotes a pilot or navigator. It should be noted that some of those I have described as prácticos in this article were not, in fact, identified as such in the sources; instead, they appeared as pilotos or jacumábas (canoe pilots), sertanistas (backwoodsmen), guias (guides), captaes do mato (bush captains), or simply as people who provided detailed geographical information about the interior. In other parts of Brazil, they might have been called bandeirantes (frontiersmen).

7 As McGrath notes elsewhere (1989, 47), these navigability estimates would be even higher for the shallow-draft vessels of traditional Amazonia.

8 For two contrasting interpretations of cartographic ‘silences’ on early modern maps, see Harley 2001 and Valverde and Lafuente 2009. On Europeans’ ‘geographic ignorance’ about Western North America, see the recent study by Mapp 2011.

9 I thank Tamar Herzog for reminding me that the legal debates provoked by riverine change were not unique to the Amazon (personal communication, 2011). I do hold that these issues were intensified by the size and volume of the river system.

10 These routes had been used by native groups long before the arrival of Europeans (Arvelo-Jiménez and Biord, 1994); during the colonial period, they were also used by maroons and other types of fugitives (Pérez 2000).

11 On the geopolitical importance of Amazonian rivers during this period and the intensification of efforts to turn those strategic routes to state purposes, see Davidson 1970. On the role of sertanistas and missionaries in Portuguese colonization of the Basin up to the mid eighteenth century, see Sweet 1974, Hemming 1990, especially 301–7, and Sommer 2006. Whitehead (1996) provides a useful overview of indigenous societies caught between empires in northeastern South America between 1500 and 1900.

12 A classic treatment of the risks of travel along Brazil’s interior rivers is Holanda (1945, 124–84).

13 I am grateful to Mark Harris for urging me, some years back, to think along these lines (personal communication, 2006). For his ruminations on modern-day ribeirinho communities and the seasonality of life on the Amazon, see Harris 2000. On Amazonians’ sophisticated manipulation of the fluvial landscape, see Raffles 2002, and Raffles and WinklerPrins 2003.

14 On the multiple causes of geographical frustration among Spanish explorers in western North America, including their inability to communicate effectively with Indian informants, see Mapp 2011, 29–98.
Canoe crew lists from the Directorate period (1757–1798) can be found scattered throughout the annual reports of village directors from Pará and the Rio Negro, in the Correspondência de Diversos com o Governo series at APEP. Pilots were listed as either pilotos or jacumaiás, from the língua geral word for the piece of wood (jacumá) typically used in place of an oar. Pilot ages were usually recorded when they testified in the formal inquiries, or devassas, that occurred upon the conclusion of the annual forest collecting expeditions. There are no comparable sources for the pre-1757 period of missionary administration, but Padre João Daniel’s descriptions of the expeditions indicate many continuities in the way expeditions were organized and conducted (2004 [1758–1776], 2: 79–94).

These testimonies are rich sources for colonial Amazonian history but pose a number of interpretive challenges, as discussed in Roller (2010a, 448–451).

Pilots’ explanations can be found in the devassas from Santa Ana do Maracapucu in 1765 (APEP, Cod. 157, Doc. 10); from Souzel in 1774 (APEP, Cod. 268, Doc. 66); and from Alter do Chão in 1775 (APEP, Cod. 284, Doc. 17).

Cases include Joseph Luís da Cunha to governor, Fragoso, 20 August 1764, APEP, Cod. 141, Doc. 44; Joseph Bernardo da Costa e Asso to governor, Serzedelo, 29 July 1773, APEP, Cod. 260, Doc. 16; Manoel Gonçalves da Silva to governor, Veíros, 26 September 1775, APEP, Cod. 283, Doc. 115; Francisco Roberto Pimentel to governor, Portel, 13 October 1779, APEP, Cod. 346, Doc. 21; and João Euqueiro Mascarenhas Villa Lobos to governor, Alenquer, 26 October 1793, APEP, Cod. 470, Doc. 70.

For a case in which villagers did not approve of the recruitment of an outside guide, whom they saw as incompetent, see the Devassa of Custódio de Souza Azevedo, Melgaço, 5 September 1775, APEP, Cod. 284, Doc. 33.

See, for example, the case of a remarkable índio aldeado named Angelo de Morais, from the village of Almeirim, who served for more than twenty years as an officially licensed guide for expeditions to negotiate resettlements (descimentos) with independent native groups in the interior, beginning in the early 1760s (APEP, Cod. 131, Doc. 56) and continuing into the late 1780s (APEP, Cod. 442, Doc. 55). He also explored the course of a previously unknown waterway for some eight months, a feat that earned him a recommendation for an official post in his village (APEP, Cod. 346, Doc. 17). For a case study of an Indian woman involved in descimento efforts in the captaincy of Goiás, see Karasch 1981.

Before 1775, the possibility of a Dutch annexation attempt had been taken more seriously, for the Spanish in the Orinoco River Basin were assumed to be unable to cross the mountain range that separated them from the Rio Branco. News of the Spanish establishments on a tributary called the Rio Uraricoera, obtained from a French deserter, shocked Portuguese authorities as well as local práticos: the royal magistrate Francisco Xavier Ribeiro de Sampaio reported that the incredulous residents of the captaincy seat, ‘who had some knowledge of that same river, immediately began to ask where, and how, they [the Spaniards] had come’ (Nabuco 1903, 1:96). The region turned into a strategic priority for the Portuguese for the rest of the eighteenth century (Hemming 1990; Farage 1991, Chapter 4).

Two additional índios aldeados testified that the Branco had always been recognized as Portuguese territory: Alberto Parente (45 or 46 years old) and Matheus Lobo (35 years old),
both residents of Carvoeiro, the colonial village at the mouth of the Rio Branco, where they had been resettled as children (‘Auto de justificação,’ Barcelos, 19 April 1775, in Nabuco 1903, 1:110–11). Although it is not clear why these two men were selected as witnesses among the many Indians in Carvoeiro who hailed originally from that river basin, we do know that Parente led descimento expeditions to populate the Portuguese villages along the Rio Branco during the latter half of the 1770s (Ferreira 1994 [1786], 87).

Before the 1750s, some of these non-Indian explorers were missionaries. See, for example, Sweet’s discussion of a Mercedarian missionary named Theodóso da Veiga, ‘a special kind of transfrontiersman who went to the seturão primarily or at least partially for profit and adventure,’ and who often collaborated with Indians and non-Indian laymen in mounting expeditions (1974, 319); and the documentation produced during the contest for the Rio Branco, in which Portuguese officials invoked the explorations of a Carmelite missionary named Jerónimo Coelho, who had travelled far up on the Rio Tatuacu, a tributary of the Branco, to trade with the Dutch back in the 1720s (Nabuco 1903: 1:104, 106, 149; also Sweet 1974, 656–58).

On non-Indian laymen and the various kinds of expeditions they led in the seturão, see Sommer 2005, 407–8, 419, and Chambouleyron 2008, 44.

Morais’s trajectory can be traced through various sources: Antonio José Landi’s ‘Extracto do Diário de Viagem ao rio Marié em Setembro de 1755,’ in the Biblioteca Digital Fórum Landi; the 1775 ‘Auto de justificação’ in Nabuco (1903, 1:104–6); and Morais’s own c. 1780 geographical ‘Memória,’ in AHI, Lata 288, Maço 5, Pasta 5. A biographical sketch can be found in Sweet 1974, 766. For additional examples of slavers-turned-informants after midcentury, see Sweet 1974, 656–58.

Arcangela herself disappeared. She may well have been forced to return to Pará, without even arousing the suspicions of the French-installed priest or her fellow villagers. At the end of her questioning, perhaps ingenuously, Arcangela had indicated that none of those villagers knew where she and her companions had gone to fish, and that they would have been assumed dead—‘caught in the tidal bore, or drowned at sea’—if they did not return (‘Relação do que […] respondeu a India Arcangela Rufina,’ appended to Manuel da Gama Lobo de Almada’s report to the Overseas Secretary, Macapá, 6 August 1783, AHU, Pará Avulsos, Cx. 90, Doc. 7323).

For a description of standard practices along these lines, see Manoel da Gama Lobo de Almada, ‘Descripção relativo ao Rio Branco e seu território,’ 1787 (Nabuco 1903: 1:253–71, especially 254).

Reports of independent natives refusing to cooperate with colonial reconnaissance efforts are perhaps scarce for this very reason. One exception comes from the Portuguese official Henrique João Wilkens, who in 1800 denounced the coordinated secrecy among independent native groups and fugitives in the interfluvial zone bordered by the Rios Negro, Solimões, and Japurá (ANRI, Cod. 807, Vol. 13, 230–34).

A useful overview of Europeans’ efforts to verify information supplied by native North Americans can be found in Lewis (1997, 105–14); these efforts included repeated questioning to evaluate consistency.

A transcription of Simões de Carvalho’s report and other supporting documents appear in Nabuco (1903, 1:227–31), but without the crew list appended to the original.

Bibliography


