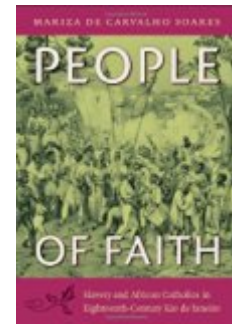


Mariza de Carvalho Soares. *People of Faith: Slavery and African Catholics in Eighteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Illustrations. xiii + 321 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5023-1; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5040-8.

Reviewed by Carolyne Ryan (University of Wyoming)

Published on H-Empire (January, 2013)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed



## Slavery, Religion, and Ethnic Identity in Colonial Rio de Janeiro

Historians of the Atlantic slave trade and the lived experiences of enslaved peoples often share the difficult task of seeking elusive historical answers in a fragmented, far-flung, and indirect body of historical evidence. In this book, Mariza de Carvalho Soares examines lay brotherhoods and the religious and ethnic identities of African slaves in eighteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, focusing particularly on slaves from the Mina coast, in order to draw out new complexity in, as she describes it, the existing literature's focus on economic relations and the Angola-dominated image of African culture in this region of colonial Brazil. The book is organized as a wide-to-narrow analysis of a very specific group of slaves in Rio de Janeiro, beginning with a chronologically and geographically sweeping discussion of Portuguese explorations of the west African coast and entry into the slave trade in chapter 1, and ending with an analysis in chapter 6 of a group of Mahi, one ethnic subgroup from the Mina coast operating within the Brotherhood of Santo Elesbão and Santa Efigênia, the lay brotherhood that lays at the center of the study. The intervening chapters narrow the analytical focus progressively inward from the Atlantic world to Brazil; to Rio and the African slave community within Rio; to the lay brotherhood itself; and finally to ethnic and religious identity, diversity, conflict, and dynamics within the brotherhood.

For scholars interested in the slave trade on either side of the Atlantic, this book offers a highly useful consideration of the existing secondary literature and the

known primary records. Soares also provides insightful original arguments and commentary on areas yet to be studied. Soares's analysis is centered around a series of baptism records of enslaved and freed Africans from eighteenth-century Rio de Janeiro. Her analysis of these records is quantitatively nuanced and thoroughly explained as to its strengths and limitations as a data set (see pages 8-9, for example). Her analysis is also qualitatively imaginative and flexible, as for example on page 67, where she observes that the names given to slaves at their baptisms reveal the "personal values or social calculations of their masters, who gave them those names." In addition, she analyzes a wide array of other carefully amassed records with impressive feel for both statistical significance and historical imagination, and when it is appropriate she employs different methods to shed light on her subject.

Among the original arguments and ideas that Soares develops, one of the most interesting and potentially most valuable to other scholars is her notion of "provenience groups." Soares constructs this idea to understand the ethnic identities of African slaves in Brazil, emphasizing a processual experience of identity building based on slaves' original cultural backgrounds in Africa and on their experiences of displacement during the slave trade and of community building in Rio de Janeiro. She argues that provenience groups require the self-grouping of individuals who share self-identified traits of individual and group identity, and an externally applied identity, in

this case one applied onto Mina coast slaves by Brazilian society, which the provenience group then appropriates, acting “in society as some reflection of that identity” (p. 86).

This book is full of rich analysis and thoughtful argument. One potential drawback, however, especially to readers coming to the text from outside of this direct sub-field, is the internal organization of each chapter. Some of the author’s most important and insightful conceptual arguments—which would arguably be most useful to other scholars—are buried deep within her chapters, and not framed in the beginning of her chapters (or separate sections) as a way to understand the material they accompany. Her organization, in short, demands total immersion of the reader. Undoubtedly, many of her insights reward such careful attention, and yet these arguments might have been better used to set up her rich documentary analysis, rather than following it, asking the reader to reflect back on her sources and apply these ideas in retrospect.

Another unfortunate omission here is an analysis

of the images in the center of the monograph. Soares includes a series of highly interesting images as a series of plates, including title pages from important documents that she analyzes and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings by two European artists (Carlos Julião and Jean Baptiste Debret) depicting African culture in Rio. These images, however, are not referenced in the text in any way, which is disappointing since the author actually discusses the two artists in her text, opening up perfect opportunities to weave the images into the text as documents, rather than simple illustrations. Given Soares’s expression of regret in her introduction at her inability to find images to analyze for this project, this failure to take full advantage of the visual documents she does have at her disposal is perhaps especially regrettable.

Despite these critiques, Soares’s monograph is an impressively researched and thoughtfully written study that makes an important contribution to colonial Brazilian history and to studies of the Atlantic slave trade. Historians in these fields will find this an important and insightful book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-empire>

**Citation:** Carolyne Ryan. Review of Soares, Mariza de Carvalho, *People of Faith: Slavery and African Catholics in Eighteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37516>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.