

A Place without Frontiers?

Changes and Continuities in Interethnic and Power Relations in the Southwest Amazon in the 19th Century

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This study presents a range of research into interethnic and power relations in the upper Madeira area in the southwest Amazon over the course of the 19th century. After providing a preliminary evaluation of the impact of both international treaties and internal political changes at the end of the 18th century, I proceed with my main purpose: to point out changes and continuities in the dynamics of interethnic relations and highlight their subjection to shifts in the power balance between private and public “agencies.” At the same time, I propose a deeper analysis of the role of intermediaries, who emerged as key actors in the development of these relations and were often prescribed by socio-political alliances and also undoubtedly by economic ones. My ultimate objective is to provide not only voice but agency to these intermediaries, who expressed the relationships between external and (multiple) internal frontiers.

Keywords: borders, multiple frontiers, upper Madeira, interethnic relations, power relations, intermediaries.



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Introduction

The history of the upper Madeira region has been written and told as if it solely consisted of *hitos* and *hiatos* (milestones and hiatuses). In other words, it has been expressed in a way which reflects not only the lack of primary sources available but also a general historiographical negligence in this area. However, revisiting existing ethno-historical doc-

uments reveals another complementary feature of the upper Madeira: the region is a stronghold of sorts, a word that refers not to its pristine nature, but to the subsistence of the space and its inhabitants despite various governmental efforts. Crossed by major rivers – the Madeira, the Beni, the Guaporé and the Mamoré – and boxed in by its rough orography, the upper Madeira is configured as a distinct cultural and historical geographic area. It is an integrated space which undoubtedly overlaps with both sides of emerging national borders.

As Werner and Zimmermann observe, Barth has already drawn our attention to the importance of human interactions within borders.¹ Based on the work of authors such as Robert David Sack, we may begin with the concept of territoriality, which is defined as an interrelationship between space and society, that is to say, as a primary geographic expression of social power as well as a geographic strategy of power and control.² In considering this definition, I would, however, propose an inversion since in the region under study, this strategy relies on the geographic control of manpower rather than of land *per se*. Keeping this in mind and drawing on the work of the Portuguese historian and anthropologist Ângela Domingues,³ I intend to shed light on the underlying role of various intermediaries. Thus, I ask how they positioned themselves as key communicators of both the external borders of two explicitly identified nations and – more particularly – of their multiple internal nation-subdivision.

As far as methodology is concerned, this study adopts a transdisciplinary approach based on postulates from the areas of cultural history, ethnohistory, anthropology and geography. The aim here is to achieve a more comprehensive viewpoint and – by confronting instead of contrasting these fields of study – to search for new and emerging data. As such, this work begins with a preliminary attempt to analyse the history of the upper Madeira during the 18th century from the viewpoint of the region's interethnic relations. This analysis is mostly based on my review of primary sources. In the second (and ongoing) stage of this research, I deal increasingly with secondary and ethnographic sources.

The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which relationships in the upper Madeira region were affected by territorial agreements and by internal political changes that had failed to achieve their goals by the turn of the 19th century. To this end, I aim first to demonstrate that there was, in fact, continuity in the dynamics of interethnic relations over the course of the 18th century; those dynamics were,

however, subject to shifting power relations between private and public “agencies” and the reassignment of roles. Intermediaries played a key part in developing these relationships and were often controlled by social and political alliances and also – undeniably – by economic ones.

This work presents a possible explanation for these developments—based on the premise that the region established itself as a ‘complex frontier’⁴ (not to mention a “peripheral” space) as opposed to a central area of colonisation. As a result, the strategies, negotiations and asymmetries in this area were developed with regard to ethnocultural borders and not political-administrative ones. According to Boccara, a “complex frontier” transcends the concept of a border *strictu sensu* and takes in a broader notion of multiple frontiers and their respective hinterlands.⁵ However, the existence of these internal borders did not necessarily create barriers; on the contrary, the relationships along these multiple frontiers were fluid and recurring.

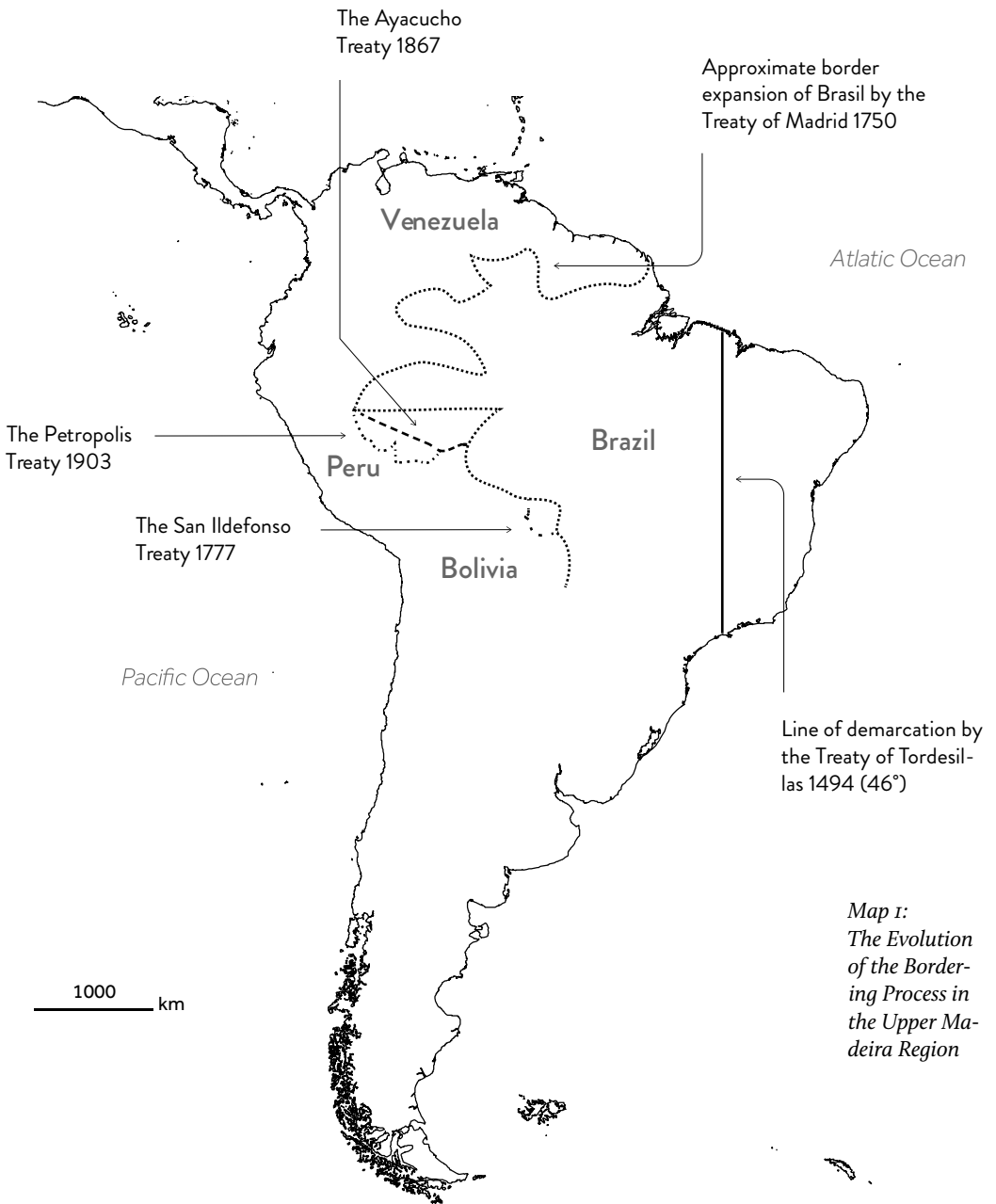
Much as 16th-century Europeans experienced the overthrowing of their cultural codes and understandings of frontiers and space once they acknowledged that Amerindians inhabited an undefined, incomprehensible and floating space,⁶ readers are invited to shake off their preconceived notions.

The Upper Madeira at the Turn of the 19th Century

Reflecting on the 18th century, the Brazilian historian Maria Almeida makes reference to the ‘fallacy of the existence of rigid borders within spaces and peoples either inside or outside the Spanish and Portuguese administration in the Americas.’⁷ At the turn of the 19th century, the political borders in force between Iberian-monarchs in the southwest Amazon were those prescribed in the Treaty of San Ildefonso, which was signed in 1777. This treaty, whose borders are largely the same as those observed today, represented a second attempt after the short-lived Treaty of Madrid (1750), which, in turn, overwrote demarcations under the almost 300 year old Treaty of Tordesillas on this region. The map below (Map 1) roughly depicts the evolution of this bordering process in the upper Madeira.

Nevertheless, for a critical understanding, it is important to draw attention to the huge gap between the theoretical and practical frameworks of these treaties. In fact, there were many obstacles that would hinder governmental intentions and efforts in this area, and the big-

gest of these was the lack of knowledge and actual control of demarcated areas.



Map 1:
The Evolution
of the Bordering
Process in
the Upper Ma-
deira Region

To begin with, the postulates of the treaties were based on geographical landmarks such as rivers and their sources, whose precise locations and courses were often unknown. As an example, the Javari River headwaters – located on the opposite side of the East-West borderline that stemmed from the Madeira River – were not determined until the end of the 19th century. The course of the Beni River and its connection with the Madeira were also disputed points among geographers until the 1860s, and their neglect in the Treaty of San Ildefonso met with strong criticisms from others.⁸ By 1795, the parties in charge of demarcation were reportedly encountering obstacles to begin, let alone conclude their task.⁹ Less than a decade later, their work was suspended.¹⁰

At the same time, the limited colonial presence and sovereignty of either Iberian Empire in this area made it difficult both to ascertain and to secure borders. Portugal's construction of the Príncipe de Beira Fortress on the Guapore's right bank was a frustrated effort to pursue these goals. The cornerstone of the fortress is said to have been laid in 1776, conveniently prior to the signature of the treaty that sought to prohibit such belligerent demonstrations. The Treaty of San Ildefonso did not represent a deep reform, however, since it maintained many of the shortcomings and inaccuracies of the Treaty of Madrid. Moreover, it did not resolve the border issue. Rather, as Beerman points out, it brought an end to political hostilities, replacing armed peace with agreement on the *status quo*.¹¹

The final quarter of the 18th century was also marked by political events, including the end of the 27-year mandate of the Portuguese secretary of state, the Marquis of Pombal. The Pombaline reforms responded to a wider political agenda of control and/or suppression of state competition, referring here to missionary orders along with private initiatives represented by *sertanistas* (hinterland dwellers¹²) and *regatões* (private fluvial traders) among others. These reforms are regarded as an effort to overturn the balance of power relations – a step which did not endure due to the creativity of adaptive responses.

At the end of the 17th century and during the first half of the 18th the *sertanistas* assumed an important role due to their exploration and penetration of the Amazon basin and because they established relations with indigenous groups and maintained a supply of slave workers to colonial society.¹³ These interethnic relations arose through com-

mercial and militant alliances, which were often reinforced by (multiple) marital bonds. The *sertanistas* were present, and their services often required, on both sides of Iberian borders.¹⁴ Portuguese primary sources tell us about their livelihoods:

They enter through the neighbouring *sertões* [hinterlands] where they identify

signs of there being indigenous groups, and then [...] they take them as prisoners [...] reserving the best for their own use, sell off the surplus to the villages through *passadores* [intermediaries] living in the swamplands [...].¹⁵

These practices imply the existence of a much broader and more complex commercial network in which the buyer and goods stood at either end of the chain with at least two intermediaries between them: the *sertanistas* and the “passers,” who were often *mestizos* or indigenous people themselves. Among the latter groups, we find the *cunhamenas* (a Tupi word for male in-laws).¹⁶ The more powerful of these *mestizos* were able to assemble private armies of up to 700 men.¹⁷ From the mid-18th century, the central powers sought to reverse the course of transformations in the interethnic relations of indigenous and non-indigenous people that were developing at the margins of state control. This occurred just as intermediaries were becoming increasingly powerful as voices of these changes in the trading of both goods and Amerindians.

Historian Manuel Dias argued that Pombal’s fall was the worst thing that could have happened to the Amazon.¹⁸ This view is probably understandable taking into account that this descent culminated in the destruction of the monopolist Grão Pará and the Maranhão General Trading Company.¹⁹ However, these entities’ deterioration was already evident given many shortcomings and excesses, including navigation difficulties, the lack of an indigenous workforce and the absence of competition.²⁰ An alternative theory would, thus, suggest that the end of this monopoly reopened the way – or rather, the causeway – to the activities of independent fluvial traders (i.e. the *regatões*) whom I will discuss below.

The importance of the indigenous workforce for maintaining the local and regional economies of the Amazon was highlighted by Domingues.²¹ This asymmetrical relationship was almost one of dependence, a dynamic that was especially clear during mapping expe-

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ditions and in cases of increasingly tense international relations, state failure to secure the private sector its due share or even community work.²²

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It becomes easier to understand why one of the underlying goals of the Trading Company was to introduce an African slave workforce to the Amazon. Ruiz-Peinado notes that the company aimed to introduce 100,000 African slaves to the Amazon over a period of 20 years.²³ We now know that even after its 23-year monopoly, this goal was not achieved. Of the 25,365 slaves brought over by the company, one-third, that is to say, 8,455 were redirected to Mato Grosso.²⁴ According to Domingues, this can be explained by the poverty that they encountered locally, however, we should also consider the fact that the Mato Grosso captaincy was a point of attraction for African slaves.²⁵ By 1775, at least three-quarters of the area's population consisted of black people, mulattos and *mestizos*,²⁶ as may be observed from the chart below (Chart 1):

75% Black people, mulattos and mestizos	Girls	385
	Boys	564
	Women	998
	Men	3117
25% Other		

Table 1,
Demographics
of the Mato
Grosso Cap-
taincy, 1775

The arrival of this workforce in the Amazon produced important social and economic transformations. Nevertheless, when considering the Mato Grosso region, it is also important to emphasise that the introduction of black slaves can be traced back to the 1730s when a southern route was explored for the development of mining in the

monsoon-affected south. In fact, we may infer that the disproportionate women/men ratio shown in the chart above (Table 1) reflected not only a slavery-oriented population but also one linked to mining activities although these too were in decline by this time.

Concurrent with these developments, and intrinsically related to them, was the formation of *mocambos* (multiethnic and multicultural communities started by runaway slaves) situated mainly in the hinterlands of the Mato Grosso captaincy in the lower and middle sections of the Guaporé River. The historical records tell us of a *mocambo* named Quariterê,²⁷ which was located in the Piolho River, a tributary on the right side of the Guaporé.²⁸ After a first attempt to disassemble this community in 1770, 54 of its members appear to have been imprisoned in 1795, of whom

six very old black people acted as the patriarchs of this remote village, eight indigenous men and nineteen women, 27 individuals in total, 10 of whom had been born in that *quilombo* [...]. These black men and others since deceased fathered twenty-one robust *Caborés* after marrying indigenous women [...].²⁹

As a result of the establishment of these communities of runaways, new internal ethnocultural frontiers took hold and people subsisted on the fringes of governmental intervention. Eventually, governor João Albuquerque de Mello Pereira emancipated these prisoners on condition that they set up a village and the ex-prisoners were baptised.³⁰ They were also given seeds, tools and animals and the site of Carlota was founded.³¹ This shift in the government's strategy clearly reflected a concern with ensuring the populating of the region. Furthermore, the dismantling of the *mocambos* would have disrupted the economic circuitry of the region, including production, commerce and – undoubtedly – social relations. It was in this context, that black slaves and *mestizos* emerged as intermediaries between Amerindians and colonial society, shifting from interpreters to agents of commercial networks and marital alliances.³²

The termination of the Trading Company's activities in the late 1770s was caused by the declining flow of goods and people in upper Madeira. Scarcities, combined with the rising costs and dangers of the company's transport, led to the emptying of the region and a period of decline.³³ Ethnohistoric sources also suggest that intensifying hostilities from indigenous groups contributed to the reduced exploration of both the Madeira River and its settlements.³⁴ Menéndez cautions,

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however, that this increased violence must be analysed in the context of a change in interethnic dynamics caused by the movement of the Mundurukú Indians from the Tapajós River towards the west and southwest Amazon.³⁵

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This so-called expansion of the Mundurukú may be understood in conjunction with the movement of the Mura. From the 1770s onwards, there is evidence of intensifying hostilities between the Mundurukú Indians and their indigenous neighbours in the area of the Tapajós River, which provoked not only the movement and migration of other groups, but also the re-establishing of intertribal alliances.³⁶ These conflicts with the Mundurukú gradually drove some Mura groups to migrate west in what the colonial discourse called their *redução voluntária* (voluntary retreat) between 1784 and 1786 in the area of the Japurá River, a tributary to the left of the Madeira.

However, the increasing conflicts with the Mura can also be traced back to the 1750s via colonial records. The cause relates, I believe, to the inclusion of not only the Amazon but more specifically the Madeira region in the government's colonisation agenda. To begin with, state efforts to expunge competition by expelling groups like the Jesuits and *cunhamenas* disrupted the alliances between colonial and Amerindian societies. In addition, the previously feared Mura – whom the government had conveniently used in its strategies for interdiction of the route to the Mato Grosso mines and against the Spanish advance – became another obstacle in the already tough journey up the Madeira River.³⁷

In the case of the Mundurukú, a peaceful alliance was established around 1795 between some groups of the tribe and the colonial government.³⁸ Nevertheless, despite the legal freedom decreed for indigenous people under the Law on the Directory of Indians – and, in fact, coinciding with this law's abolition in 1798 – the Mura and the Mundurukú were given a status of *exceção de liberdade* (“excluded from liberty”) that justified their confinement and slavery.³⁹ Primary sources also mention the existence of a various ethnic groups apart from the Mura and Mundurukú – among them the Karipuna, Pama, Arara, Sanabó, Jacaria and Parintintin – who were seen in the upper Madeira region over the course of the 19th century.⁴⁰

Although it was officially withdrawn, the Directory of Indians would still be used as a parameter in many spheres of interethnic relations between Amerindians and colonial society.⁴¹ Key factors behind its

abolition were the poor administration of village directors and the abuses committed by parish priests. In fact, both Spanish and Portuguese legal sources point to accusations by Amerindians and *mestizos* of physical and sexual abuse, smuggling, excessive work, late or withheld work compensation and lack of respect for community members of high social rank, etc.⁴²

On both sides of Iberian borders, such disputes were often heard through institutionalised methods of legal representation. This was the case, for example, among the Cayuvava Indians in the village of Santa Ana in the Llanos de Moxos⁴³ as well as among the inhabitants of Borba in the lower Madeira, who were organised into associations of both indigenous and non-indigenous individuals.⁴⁴ This also highlights the awareness of Amerindians of the advantages of accessing the legal system and appropriating it in terms of rights.⁴⁵

However, in many of the conflicts mentioned, the solution found was rebellion and/or desertion. The early years of the 19th century were marked by indigenous rebellions in the Llanos de Moxos. In 1811, for instance, the Canichana from the village of San Pedro avenged the murder of their leader by killing the governor of Trinidad and burning down his palace.⁴⁶ In 1830, the Cayuvava rebelled again against their *corregidor*. Keller relates how indigenous groups from Exaltación and Trinidad revolted against their own tribal chiefs, who had failed to pay indigenous rowers.⁴⁷ According to Keller, these chiefs were indebted to other contracting parties, who may have included explorers, traders or government expeditions, thus implying their own role as intermediaries in these labour relations.⁴⁸ Such rebellions accompanied a succession of all sorts of abuses in the context of interethnic relations. In 1855, the San Ignacio de Moxos *corregidor* was executed, and in the last quarter of the century, a messianic movement took over the village of San Lorenzo.⁴⁹

As for desertions, much like trafficking, they are a phenomenon intrinsically linked to borders. Evidence of desertions dates back to the first primary sources from the region and covers a variety of actors from missionaries⁵⁰ to indigenous people, *mestizos*, black slaves and soldiers on the run from military recruitment and/or compulsory work in villages or expeditions.⁵¹ From the mid-18th century sources record an increase in desertions related to an institutionalised competition between Iberian rulers, who each sought to motivate and attract deserters – often under false promises – in order to populate

and strengthen their new territory on either side of the border with a workforce and armed contingent. In this quasi-battle of propaganda, first missions and later villages, *mocambos* and even core multiethnic groups such as the Mura served to attract the said deserters. The Príncipe de Beira Fortress also played an important role given its strategic position in the Guaporé River and the scarcity of settlements in the upper Madeira region by the end of the 19th century.⁵²

There is both ethnohistoric and ethnographic evidence that this transmigration between the areas of Moxos, Chiquitos and Mato Grosso continued during the 19th century.⁵³ During the wars of independence in what was to become Bolivia in the late 1810s and early 1820s, the governor of Chiquitos province even made a brief and unsuccessful attempt to incorporate the ex-missions into the new Empire of Brazil.⁵⁴ During those long years in Hispanic America, the promise of emancipation was strategically extended to induce slaves to join liberation armies; this promise was not always honoured however.⁵⁵ While some historians claim that the abolition of slavery took place in Bolivia's early years as a nation when it established itself as "free soil," others argue that such effective eradication did not happen until as late as 1851.⁵⁶ One way or another, Senna reminds us that even while slavery existed in Bolivia, the relevance of the slave workforce did not compare with that of diverse forms of indigenous labour.⁵⁷

Considering that Brazil was one of the last slavery-supporting states in the Americas, Bolivia used abolitionism partly to construct a national identity opposed to the Otherness of its pro-slavery neighbour. However, the policy was also a political tool for boosting the population and attracting deserters. This caused some friction in the relations between the two national governments, especially since, in theory, Bolivia would not repatriate or deport runaway slaves who entered its jurisdiction.⁵⁸ The historical record, however, suggests a different picture, as can be seen from a diplomatic communication which reports that 'refugee slaves in Santa Cruz have been returned to the commissioner Mariano Apinajé, apart from others that have been handed over to the Empire through Moxos, passing through the Príncipe de Beira Fortress.'⁵⁹

For almost the entire 19th century, the navigation of the Amazon River and its tributaries was forbidden to vessels with foreign flags, yet

the Madeira River was navigated mainly by Bolivians, according to the upper Madeira region historians Teixeira and Fonseca. These Bolivians were engaged in both the import and export of goods related to extraction in the northeast region.⁶⁰ The commercial transport of products took place by rowboat up to the mouth of the Madeira in the Amazon, with vapour vessels operating from that point.⁶¹

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During the first half of the 19th century, commercial activity in the upper Madeira was mostly mediated by *regatões*, who were also referred to in the government discourse as ‘kings of the *igarapés* [small steams],’ a name that contrasts interestingly with the one given to *sertanistas* in the historiographic literature: ‘kings of the *sertão* [hinterlands].’⁶² These *regatões* were not only Brazilians; they were Bolivians, Peruvians, Europeans (etc).⁶³ This was largely because the *regatões* developed their activities and influence in a far broader and more complex commercial network that communicated with *mocambos*, indigenous groups, small producers and local traders at the margins of the government’s authority. This network often operated clandestinely, but nevertheless represented an alternative method of provision for many populations.⁶⁴

These fluid interethnic relations based on commercial alliances can be seen in primary sources which report that ‘it is probably the *regatões* from Bolivia who provide these beads to the indigenous of the tributaries of the Beni River, who, in turn, negotiate with the Mateney indians.’⁶⁵ The *regatões* were the intermediaries in a commercial chain in which local traders, rubber storehouse owners and even other *regatões* stood at one end and creditors in the province’s capital remained at the other. Those creditors were sometimes large *casas aviadoras* (credit companies) which had negotiated their way out of government control in order to protect their own activities and profits.⁶⁶ These circumstances were an early reflection of those in the timber, mining and energy industries in the Amazon today.

By mid-century, when the government again felt threatened by the *regatões*, their activities were banned, and they were blamed for having failed to civilise indigenous groups in the Amazon.⁶⁷ The government then issued a decree declaring a monopoly over the Amazon basin that would last until 1872, when it was finally opened to international navigation.⁶⁸

Upper Madeira during the Rubber Boom (1850s-1910)

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The Madeira and the newly “discovered” Acre region not only boasted tremendous rubber reserves but were also the sites where the highest quality rubber that could be found in the region.⁶⁹ Due to predatory extraction and the resulting exhaustion of *hevea* trees, whole populations were driven up the Madeira River and inland in search of new sources of the product.⁷⁰ By the 1860s, rubber plantation owners occupied the whole length of the Madeira River, and this remained the case until the last decade of the 19th century. In the treacherous upper section of the Madeira settlements and rubber plantations belonged to Bolivians exclusively.⁷¹ Their rubber plantations extended as far as the lower Madeira, where they ran side by side with Brazilian ones. Villages in this area such as Borba and Itacoatiara grew into the expansive ports of the Amazonas province, overtaking its capital, Manaus.⁷²

The Bolivians had, however, been exploiting rubber plantations in the upper Madeira for a long time and this was all the more true of the extraction of other goods such as cocoa, which indigenous people from the Moxos villages had gathered since at least the early 18th century.⁷³ The rubber boom period was, thus, marked by the expansion of the Bolivian presence in the region, and by a growing Brazilian occupation and takeover of the area especially in the late 1870s. That takeover was helped by a large influx of migrants, who came from northeast Brazil (mainly Ceará and Maranhão), having been driven west by what was considered the most severe drought of the century.⁷⁴

The vast majority of rubber production was carried out by rubber plantation owners and credit companies using an *aviamento* (credit and financing) system. This was based on a system of worker dependence on the rubber plantation owner in which the workers went into debt to the owner so as to secure the necessary equipment to gather rubber as well as subsistence from the owner’s storehouse (*barracão*). The gatherer was not only the owner’s employer but also his client, and it was no accident that the Portuguese term for this person was *freguê*.⁷⁵ The rubber gatherer provided payment for this credit – or rather debt – in goods. The owner manipulated the prices of both the rubber and acquired provisions in a very unfavourable way for the workers.

Credit companies were usually based in province capitals such as Belém and Manaus, and they were financed externally, mainly by British and North Americans. These companies were also paid in return in rubber, whose export was monopolised and whose prices were manip-

ulated.⁷⁶ The bulk of the profits remained in the hands of international and national credit groups.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the main credit company in the Madeira region during this period was a Bolivian firm called Suárez & Hermanos. With branches in Belém, Manaus and even London, it managed to navigate around the European and North American exporters.⁷⁸ The origins of the village of Cachuela Esperanza lay in a move by this firm to a site closer to the Madeira River in 1881; it brought with it workers and administrators controlling up to 16 million acres.⁷⁹ In fact, the most thriving Madeira settlement where neither Spanish nor Portuguese was spoken was the village of Jumas near Humaitá. It is likely, however, that a Moxean language was used there.⁸⁰

The workforce, and its recruitment had great importance for the development of rubber extraction. The developers here were mostly Amerindians, *mestizos* and – from the end of the 1870s – migrants from northeast Brazil. In keeping with past practices, the Amerindian workforce was often regulated by the tribal chiefs themselves. As for recruitment, there were various models: indigenous people were bought then sold, or captured then sold, from one side of the border to the other; the main traffic, however, was from Bolivia to the plantations in the upper Madeira region.⁸¹ This continued to the point that in 1882, the Bolivian government grew deeply worried about the depopulation of the Beni region and prohibited both the trafficking of indigenous people and their recruitment to work on Brazilian rubber plantations.⁸² On the other hand, another law adopted a year later favoured the conclusion of recruitment contracts with indigenous rowers who were meant to navigate the Madeira River.⁸³ This measure, which reduced the government's already practically non-existent control over labour practices, reflected the importance of accessing and navigating the Madeira River for the northeast Bolivian economy.

Physical coercion was very common during the recruitment of the indigenous workforce. In fact, the confinement of indigenous people in the upper Madeira region not only continued during the early 17th century (re: the Llanos de Moxos) and the one that followed, but it increased.⁸⁴ The dependent relationships established among indigenous people and rubber plantation owners and gatherers led to a crisis of self-sufficiency in the Amazon, and indigenous communities were forced to abandon their own farming activities as they became more tied to storehouses.⁸⁵ Faced with the difficulty of finding indigenous rowers for his Amazonian expedition from 1848 to 1852, the British

naturalist Bates claimed that ‘it is impossible to find an indigenous or mestizo who is not indebted of money or work with a local trader or authority.’⁸⁶ These client-like relationships were expressed through fidelity bonds under which the client was protected in the event of hazards or sickness and received symbolic gifts – as Mauss describes them⁸⁷ – such as non-indigenous names and fictitious kinship bonds.⁸⁸

Under the 1867 Treaty of Ayacucho, a straight diagonal line was drawn from the Guaporé and Beni rivers to the headwaters of the Javari, turning the left bank of the Madeira River and the hinterland into Brazilian territory, albeit mainly inhabited by Bolivians. In exchange, Bolivia was entitled to carry out navigation and commerce free of charge on the border-crossing rivers leading to the Atlantic Ocean.⁸⁹ However, 40 years would need to elapse before the precise location of the headwaters of the Javari River was confirmed, alerting the governments that the territory of Acre belonged to Bolivia. The issue was finally settled in 1903 in the Treaty of Petrópolis, the most recent border agreement on this region; the Acre area, which unlike the upper Madeira was mainly occupied by Brazilians, was granted to Brazil. In return, a railroad was to be built over the long stretch of waterfalls at the upper end of the Madeira River in order to facilitate the trade of products with Bolivia and its access to the Atlantic Ocean.⁹⁰ This Madeira-Mamoré Railroad (EFMM) is, however, a subject for another study.

In the early 1910s, rubber prices dropped dramatically because of Asian competition, leading to the decline of activity and, most importantly, of the upper Madeira region itself. The latter continued to be disregarded by the republican government up to the middle of the last century as indigenous populations found new strategies to reinvent their livelihoods. Nevertheless, based on oral ethnographic sources, the violence perpetrated during the rubber booms remains lodged in the memories of many indigenous groups in the upper Madeira, and these periods are recalled as a time of slavery.⁹¹

Conclusions

This work evaluated the main political and territorial reforms that were meant to take effect in the upper Madeira and that region’s failure to achieve its goals at the turn of the 19th century. We have been able to observe three points: first, interethnic relations were affected by an almost cyclical shift in the balance of power relations. Second, those

power relations were expressed in the management and control of the workforce in the region. And third, the underlying dynamics of these interethnic and power relations were perpetuated by intermediaries, who were taken over by different actors over the course of history.

Finally, I believe that this work has argued successfully that the notion of an effective government presence in the region was as fictitious as that of external national borders. In this way, I hope that it has brought to light a far more complex and diverse scene involving multiple ethnocultural groups, relations and frontiers.

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Notes

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de Mello*