

# “Medieval” Islands on the Amazonian Coast: Medieval Remains in the Amazonian Popular Culture and Culturally Interlarded Myths

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**Abstract:** In which sense could we possibly catch a glimpse of “Medieval Islands” on the Amazonian coast? This paper aims at unravelling and explaining how some old medieval Portuguese mythical matter and mythemes do still exist and thrive in terms of popular culture on the “Island of Maranhão”, i.e. *Upaon Açu* or the “Isle of São Luís” until the present time, in comparison to some mythical elements to be found on the Island of Marajó, in Pará. Both Pará and Maranhão are Amazonian federal states of Brazil and this paper emphasizes the historical permanence of medieval mythemes, of course combined with other very complex and cross-cultural heritages pertaining to nowadays population of Maranhão, to which the Island of Marajó shall be a term of historical and archaeological comparison. We expect to arouse scholars’ interest to our subject in a Global History perspective, which takes into account the links and unexpected cultural traits of Middle Ages still thriving in Brazilian popular culture as the upshot of a long-term and complex cross-cultural process that has been taking place in American countries since the late 15th. century. Little attention has been paid to the role of medieval mythemes along this complex process and I should like to endeavour to fill this historiographic gap by proposing the present paper. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to highlight and discuss the evidence of a medieval past transposed to the Portuguese Amazon, whose legacy is up to our days a very plentiful popular culture in terms of medieval references, such as the phantom barks and “Mothers of Creeks”, as we pinpoint along the text. This essay is keen to address this polemic topic by drawing on some authors and theorists who, in our view, must be brought back to the proscenium of scientific discussion concerning Social Sciences. The first and main one is Luís da Câmara Cascudo, a major folklorist and researcher whom we should like to introduce to international academic readers. Hence, this little essay aims at wreaking new academic discussion on the formation and colonization of the Amazon in cross-cultural terms.

**Keywords:** Medieval Heritage, Amazonian Coast, Atlantic Connections

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## 1. Introduction

Brazil has long been defined as a historiographical enigma, which challenges traditional paradigms and permanently demands new hypotheses in order to unravel its cross-cultural reality. In this sense, the traditional and long-term interpretation and assertion that the Portuguese colonization must be regarded as a thoroughly modern historical process turns out to be insufficient to uncover many aspects of Brazilian roots. Certainly, there were Capitalist ideological and economic determinants and social moves, as the great Marxist historian Caio Prado Júnior pointed out, such as the

plantation exploitation system in colonial Portuguese America, phenomenon which this historian nominated “the meaning of colonization” (“sentido da colonização”) in his masterpiece *Formation of Contemporary Brazil*, of the year 1942 [16].

Another major theorist from recent times, the economist Celso Furtado, defined Brazilian economic history as a sequence of varied exploitation cycles, the beginnings of which would lay on the sugar plantation, followed by other expropriation activities performed by the Portuguese

Crown, as explored in his book *Economic Formation of Brazil*, of 1959 [9]. The decline of sugar plantation, whose focus of concentration relies on the Northeast region of the former colony, has been followed by the cattle raising cycle, firstly along the São Francisco River, that comprises a grand portion of the nowadays Brazilian territory, and with a focus to be found in the Southern Portuguese possessions close to the border with Spanish domains in nowadays Rio Grande do Sul (Capitania de São Pedro do Rio Grande do Sul).

The third cycle was that of gold and precious gems exploitation in the region of nowadays Minas Gerais and later Goiás, which wreaked the economic integration of distant and scarcely intercommunicated regions of Portuguese America during the 18th century. Likewise, the gold exploitation cycle was to be preceded by the coffee cycle, which provided richness accumulation in the 19th century, starting from the production crisis brought about by the Haitian emancipation process in 1814. The coffee cycle would hence course to what was to be denominated substitutive industrial process during World War I and World War II, as well detailed by Celso Furtado [9].

Nevertheless, economic basis for explanation and this classical paradigm defining Brazilian past as a modern time Portuguese enterprise seems to be, in turn, not enough to solve some cultural, historiographical mysteries still taking place in contemporary Brazilian popular culture, specially considering the Northeast region and the Amazonian region, as this article shall attempt to analyse in more detailed terms. In this paper, the principal goal is reviving the insistence in the thesis of a late-feudal transposition to Portuguese America, focusing the Amazonian region, according to the combined contribution of Luís Weckmann [18] and Hilário Franco Júnior [8]. The paper addresses two Amazonian islands which seem emblematic to provoking a more profound and long-term reflection about the enigmatic nature of Brazilian cross-cultural historical shaping. These isles will not coincide with the well-known isle of Lençóis Maranhenses, on the also Amazonian location of Cururupu in the federal State of Maranhão, Brazil. As we know, Lençóis is the place of enthrallment of Dom Sebastião, the charmed missing monarch of Portugal, who stands for a historical update of the mythical return of King Arthur of Camelot from the magic isle of Avalon. For a rather in-depth discussion on this subject, we would forward our readers to our article *The charmed bull in the night of times: Sebastião, the sacrament of Arthur*, which can be reckoned as a complement to the present paper [2].

The present paper, furthermore, shall approach and compare some nowadays thriving mythical aspects of São Luís do Maranhão (the island of *Upaon Açu*) and Marajó, both situated on the Amazonian coast. Therefore, we raise the main query of this essay: in which sense could we possibly look upon existing or surviving “medieval islands” on the very Amazonian coast? For this purport, the essay is going to emphasize two major myths nourished by popular culture on the Isle of Maranhão and on Marajó.

## 2. *Mães d'Água* (Mothers of Creeks and Lakes)

There has long been a legend – which could rather be nominate *myth* by dint of the veracity convention around<sup>1</sup> it in terms of popular culture – going that many fishermen usually gaze at very wondrous women who entice and inveigle men, caught unawares, to the deep soil of rivers and draws them to dwell in aquatic palaces at the bottom of such streams. In Portuguese popular language, they are called *Mães d'Água* (“Mothers of the Water”) and do trace their roots to a complex matching of the European medieval mytheme of the *Mouras Encantadas* (“Enchanted Moorish maids”) in 15th-century Portugal and the native American myth of the snake-canoe (“Cobra Canoa”) tracing its roots to indigenous traditions. The *Mães d'Água* should not be confused with the ancient myth of the mermaid, whose Portuguese specific shape merges the female bust and head with a fish tail and dates to the very 15th century, as well as the already referred *Mouras Encantadas*. Although mermaids do show up in chivalric romances and novels, as well as in theatre plays such as Gil Vicente’s *Courts of Jupiter* (1521)<sup>2</sup>, *Mães d'Água* do not feature the same traits, demanding rather a cross-cultural explanation.



**Figure 1.** Lady dressed as a Mãe d'Água, Photograph taken by Fernando Sette Câmara.

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we draw on the concept proposed by Mircea Eliade in his famous *Aspects of a Myth*, dating to 1963. As a matter of fact, a myth stands for a veracious explanation for some present reality or aspects of it, which appeals to supernatural beings to elucidate a present reality of the world or a certain social formation in essential features. Although presently countered, mainly by the so-called Italian History of Religions, Eliade’s conceptualization looks congruous for our scope in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> This play was performed to King Manuel, o Venturoso, em 1521, by the marriage of the *Infanta* [Portuguese princess], Dona Beatriz, to Charles III, Duke of Savoy.

However, according to the non-negligible ethnographic research led by Brazilian folklorist Luís da Câmara Cascudo in *Geography of Brazilian myths*<sup>3</sup> of 1947 [5], Brazilian nowadays *Mães d'Água* do appeal to a complex convergence of distinguished traditions, which could only have taken place in a cross-cultural historical context, such as occurs in American countries. Let us grant the word to Câmara Cascudo in the first place:

Yet Portugal possesses another mythical element of utter emotional popularity. It is the Enthrallled Moorish Maids. They stood for daughters of Moorish kings or princes kept hostages of Christian sovereigns, left behind in Portuguese lands in order to guard concealed treasures until they could rule once again. The Moorish maids used to sing within the sinistre battlements of ruined castles and mainly in descrete fountains, streams and creeks, demanding that a man of courage would break the century-long charm. They are guarded by awkward animals. Whoever was able to overthrow the enchantment would be granted unbelievable wealth and the Moorish maid, turned into a woman, would be a faithful and sweet spouse. The chant of the Moorish girls was a long allusion to gold, precious gems and mighty weapons which rested inside rocks or attacked bastions. These Moorish maids remained charmed or appeared under dreadful shapes. Almost always giant serpents. Alentejo [Southern region of Portugal] was the region of the Moorish luring girls. It was proceeded by Minho, Trás-os-Montes, until the Beiras. Once upon a year, they were released from the shape of fierce animals e used to chant, promising everything to whom would free them from the spell [5] (translation of mine).<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, Câmara Cascudo perceives the cross-cultural fusion between the European, medieval *Mãe d'Água* and the native American *Ypupiara*, a sort of fishman or seaman identified and melted with European imaginary projections. Native indigenous group named *Tupi*, who comprised Amazonian coast regions by the time the Portuguese settlers arrived, nurtured this mytheme and European colonization provided the fusion with ancient European ones, wreaking a cross-cultural narreme in the voice of many colonists, such as Father José de Anchieta in the *10th Letter of São Vicente* (X

*Carta de São Vicente*), the first Portuguese village to be founded in South-American territory [1].

A not little number of European settlers have followed the Jesuit priest in such depiction, as is the case of Pero de Magalhães Gandavo in *History of the Province of Santa Cruz* of 1576 [10], or the Jesuit priests Fernão Cardim in the *Treatise of the Land and People of Brazil*, of 1583-1601 [4] and Simão de Vasconcelos, who compounded corographies with allusions both to the European *Mãe d'Água* – in the Portuguese case, the *Mouras Encantadas* – and to indigenous *Ypupiara*. Colonial written production turns out to be an authentic cultural translation code, which appeals both to the chevaleresque and local imaginaries, without which one would not be able to comprehend and dissect nowadays Brazilian still flourishing popular culture (CASCUDO, 2010: 150-151).

Moreover, Frei Vicente do Salvador, well-known in colonial times for his *History of Brazil*, of 1624 [17], asserts that he was able to discern the *Ypupiara* from sea sharks because the first ones only devoured eyes and noses belonging to drowned people [5]. We quote the assertions of Câmara Cascudo once again:

Up to this point, there is no example of the Ypupiara taking luring features and enticing youngsters by its magic and gold ever-lasting seduction. What we read in Colonial Brazil's chronists is the existence of a fishman, [which is] fierce, beast-like, coming out of the water in order to slay, always slay. There is no seducing aspect in such monster. It is ghastly, always in hunger and awkward. Those who have endeavoured to depict it have evoked a man granted with sunken eyes. Concerning female ones, only Father Simão de Vasconcelos has uncovered their skulls and has scouted the orifice through which they breath.

[...] The Yara (ig-water, iara-lord) stands for a European cultural garb. There is no indigenous legend which has traced Yara with long hair and wondrous voice. More ancient indigenous legends do always trace the old seaman. Never Yara [...] [5] (translation of mine).<sup>5</sup>

Should one trace down the origins of the old Portuguese/European *Mãe d'Água*, such research would straightly lead back to the Celtic *Banshees*, or creeks and mainly fountain deities, such as the renowned Melusine, the mythical ancestor of the Lusignan lineage in medieval France or the cockatrice-woman whom the Plantagenet dynasty claim as their ancestor, about whom we learn in Jacques Le Goff's brilliant books *The Medieval Imaginary* [13] and *The Daily and the Wonderful in Medieval Western World* [14].

<sup>3</sup> I certainly need to remark that Câmara Cascudo's work is plenty of dated prejudices and ethnocentric Western assumptions, yet all these regrettable, though comprehensible, traits do not elide his huge contribution to list popular mythemes pertaining to contemporary Brazilian society.

<sup>4</sup> Mas Portugal possui outro elemento mítico de extrema popularidade sentimental. Foram as Mouras Encantadas. Eram filhas de Reis ou príncipes mouros, reféns de soberanos cristãos, deixadas na terra portuguesa para vigiar tesouros escondidos até que voltassem a dominar. Cantavam as Mouras em ameias sinistras dos castelos em ruínas, e, em sua maioria, nas fontes tímidas, nos rios e regatos, pedindo que um homem de coragem lhes quebrasse o encanto secular. Animais terríveis guardam-nas. Quem vencesse, teria fortunas incriveis e a Moura, tornada mulher, seria a esposa doce e fiel. O canto das Mouras era uma longa alusão ao ouro, pedrarias e armas espelhantes que dormem dentro de rochas ou de torreões esborcinados. As Mouras dormiam encantadas ou estavam sob formas apavorantes. Quase sempre serpentes enormes. O Alentejo era a região das Mouras tentadoras. Seguiu-se o Minho, depois Trás-os-Montes também, até as Beiras. Uma vez por ano deixavam a forma de animais ferozes e cantavam, oferecendo tudo para quem as libertasse da magia.

<sup>5</sup> Até aqui não há exemplo de o Ypupiara tomar feições encantadoras e tentar os transviados com a magia do canto e a sedução perpétua do ouro. O que lemos nos cronistas do Brasil colonial é a existência de um homem-peixe, feroz, bestial, saindo d'água para matar, matar sempre. Não há um só aspecto simpático no monstro marinho. É horrendo, esfomeado e apavorante. Aqueles que o tentaram descrever evocaram um homem de olhos encovados. Das mulheres apenas o padre Simão de Vasconcelos descobriu as caveiras e mirou o orifício por onde respiravam. [...] A Yara (ig-água, iara-senhor) é uma roupagem de cultura europeia. Não há lenda indígena que tenha registrado a Yara de cabelos longos e voz maviosa. Lendas indígenas mais velhas citam sempre o velho homem marinho. Nunca a Yara.

Within the cross-cultural experience of Portuguese America and nowadays Brazil, the European colonial presence has permanently acted out a cultural translation in terms of projecting their mythemes and their imaginary onto the new material reality experienced in the New World. In some locations of determinant presence of African ancestry, such as the federal State of Bahia, these Celtic *Banshees*, already culturally clad in Portuguese garb as the *Mouras Encantadas*, were as well to be casted on three major Yoruba *orixás* (deities), Anambucuru, Yemanjá and Oxum [5].

Since it constitutes our main purport in this paper, some words concerning African ancestry are here required in terms of Maranhão and Pará, or the Amazon as a whole. In the case of Maranhão, black slavery definitely took place during the 18th and 19th century, following up the decisions adopted by the Grão-Pará and Maranhão Commerce Company, founded under the command of Marquis of Pombal, the then lord chancellor of Portugal, in 1755. No sooner has this powerful African presence arrived, many new spiritualities began to occur, such as *Candomblé*, *Tambor de Criola*, *Tambor de Mina*<sup>6</sup>, *Terecô*, specifically in the town of Codó, and Umbanda in a lesser dimension.<sup>7</sup>

Besides, the European *Mãe d'Água*, as long as she displays an ophidic tail, would as well in the Amazon mingle with a very, very old myth of the Great Cockatrice, nourished by many local indigenous ethnic groups. I should now like to record some words on this Amazonian mytheme of the snake-canoe, related, since very ancient Pre-Columbian times, to the stilt villages of Eastern Amazon, precisely where Maranhão is situated. In this aspect, I appeal to the magnificent work of Professor Alexandre Navarro (The Federal University of Maranhão), who works in collaboration with the great American archeologist Anna Roosevelt. It is highly worthy reading his own words. I quote:

In Pre-Columbian America, the snake motif is associated with creation. In Cahokia, a Mississippian culture from the 10th to the 14th centuries, snakes were associated with the aquatic or underworld and fertility, and were being represented as fantastical creatures with deer horns, bird wings, and feline heads. Snakes would be protective animals. Ceremonial mounds are also shaped like snakes (Emerson 1997). In Teotihuacan (AD 1-650), in Mesoamerica, feathered snakes were associated with human and animal sacrifice (Ringle et al. 1998; López Áustin and López Luján 1999). In other Epiclassic sites in the area (AD 800-1000), such as Cacaxtla and Chichen Itza, feathered snakes are related to the context of the war, since the reptile's venom, often lethal, was linked to the

aggression of these animals. The serpentiform motif is also present in Andean civilisations. Among the Mochica, the sacred world is represented by animals that play an important role in the cosmic order. The nocturnal deity or god of the Milky Way is an anthropomorphic being that carries the celestial dome; it takes the form of a two-headed snake [15].<sup>8</sup>

On the Island of Marajó, the greatest one in Brazil, these cross-cultural serpent-women at times show themselves sailing across the Amazonian rivers transformed into boats or ships guided by no rudder or boatswain, looking phantom ships. In comparison to the Island of São Luís (*Upaon Açu*), it is rather recurrent that very modest and illiterate fishermen catch glimpses of phantom barks on the Bay of São Marcos. Were a specialist in Local History to fathom the background of such phantom vessels, he or she would forcibly encounter the Celtic tradition of the *imran*, by which some devotional keels could be regarded sailing with no live person at all.

In addition to this ancient *imran* heritage, it is widely believed by specialists, by following the traces endowed by the ethnographic investigation of Brazilian myths, that these boats have to do with the late-medieval phantom bark of Portugal, the so-called *Nau Catarineta*. The theme is dealt with in other regions of Brazil, principally in places where there has been an intense Portuguese immigration from the Azores Islands. In the South of Brazil, the shipwreck of the *Nau Catarineta* and its persistent apparition are also a subject of the *fandango* dance tradition. Relying on Câmara Cascudo, one can assert that parallels of the *Nau Catarineta* can be identified among other European sailing peoples, such as the French, the English and the Spanish. Albeit the shipwreck date is still a subject of specialists debates, the most probable one is thought to be 1565, when the watercraft transporting Jorge de Albuquerque Coelho from Olinda to Lisboa was taken by this lethal misfortune [6].



**Figure 2.** Picture of the *Nau Catarineta*, the Archetype of Phantom Vessels. By Fausto Bordalo Dias – Cifra Club.

<sup>6</sup> It may be of interest to many readers the brief remark that, according to the worldly renowned Anthropologist and cultural photographer Pierre Verger (1902-1996), the first *Terreiro da Mina* in São Luís do Maranhão would have been founded by the enslaved queen of the former African Kingdom of Daomeh, Nã-Agotimeh herself.

<sup>7</sup> For a more profound and dense reading concerning this African-Brazilian intense presence in the State of Maranhão, I would refer the readers to the excellent studies of the Anthropologists Professor Marilande Martins Abreu and Professor Martina Ahlert, both from the Federal University of Maranhão.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to greatly thank Professor Alexandre Navarro for having bestowed me the file containing his article, published in *Brasiliana: Journal for Brazilian Studies*.



Still addressing the snake-canoe and its mythological significance, Alexandre Navarro believes that it is a pan-Amazonian mytheme. Let us read his appointments one more time. We quote:

Despite the distance between different indigenous groups along the Amazon basin, Barreto (2008) points to the fact that certain iconographic elements are pan-Amazonian; their symbology is based on the relationship between animals and human beings, elements of which generate narratives and myths among the indigenous groups. In this sense, these mythological histories, which inhabit both the past and the present of indigenous groups, make us think of a “general Amazonian indigenous art with regional variations and regional styles” (Barreto 2008: 22) [15].

The works and archaeological exploration of Professor Navarro and the LARQ – Laboratory of Archaeology pertaining to the Federal University of Maranhão (UFMA) – indicate a shamanic nature of the snake, specially the Anacondas, in the Amazon. It is about time we followed his conclusions about this Amazonian cross-cultural myth of the Great Cockatrice and finally understood why, in terms of Amazonian cultural interchanges, the Celtic-Portuguese *Mãe d'Água* reveals her true nature of an entire serpent. We quote:

Among the Tukano, Hugh-Jones (1979) notes that the songs of shamans allude to the Amazon River as the terrestrial Anaconda and the Milky Way, the supernatural creator. Many Amazonian peoples compare the supernatural milk of the Anaconda with the milky colored sap of hallucinogenic plants of the *Banisteriopsis* genus, whose tree trunk is a metaphor for Great Anaconda's body (Hugh-Jones 1979). This magical world is enhanced by music and dance. According to Barcelos, snakes are part of a myth-musical repertoire among the Wauja, in which Kamalu Hai stands out, “the gigantic snake-canoe that carries on its back a long series of singing pots” (2011: 1003). This ceramic cookware comes in a range of different sizes and produce various polyphonic counts. In this sense, the snake-canoe could imply the origin of ceramic activity among the Wauja [15].



**Figure 3.** Turenko Beça *A Viagem da Barriga da cobra*, Dessana Myth of Creation, oil on canvas, 100x110cm, de 1997. Source: Helaine Dias.

### 3. Carolingian Knights in *Terreiro da Turquia*

On the Island of São Luís (Maranhão), in turn, another much notorious “medieval” phenomenon befalls. The *Tambor de Mina* is, according to the wide ethnography led by one of Brazil's major anthropologists, Mundicarmo Ferretti, the hegemonic and most typical African-Brazilian spirituality in the State of Maranhão. What draws our attention to this very enigmatic liturgy is the apparition and manifestation of the characters to be found in the most pristine writing believed to have founded the archaic Francic language in Early Middle Ages, the *Chanson of Roland* (c. 1084). Adapted into medieval Portuguese through a chronicle named *História do Imperador Carlos Magno e os Doze Pares de França*, chevaleresque characters such as the muslims Ferrabraz of Alexandria and his sister Floripes, among others that fought Charlemagne and his closest vassals are manifested during the ritual [7].



**Figure 4.** Celebration of *Tambor da Mina* at the *Terreiro da Turquia*. By Maracá Cultura Brasileira, on October, 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

Much as this sort of manifestation seems enigmatic to scholars used to the historiographic belief that Portuguese America stands for a completely modern process, some medievalists have begun to pay some more attention to this phenomenon in Maranhão. Characters like Ferrabraz de Alexandria or King Louis of France (Saint Louis) have, as a matter of fact, inaugurated the so-called “Turkish lineage” of non-African deities in *Tambor da Mina*. The temple-place called *Terreiro da Turquia*, still in activity at nowadays São Luís do Maranhão, was founded by Mother Anastácia in 1899, an African-Brazilian priestess who was widely respected and usually sent for in order to prepare other *mães-de-santo* (priestesses) and *pais-de-santo* in *terreiros* in Belém (the capital city of Pará, in the Amazon), Manaus, or Teresina, along with some other towns in the region [7]. The temple is presently run by Mother Anastácia's daughter, Dona Zeca, also a *mãe-de-santo*, who reports that her mother would have been the first person for whom the “King of Turkey”, Ferrabraz's epithet in

*Tambor da Mina*, has manifested his presence. Up to our days, the *Terreiro da Turquia* is the main temple in which non-African entities show up, which is the case of the King of Turkey, his three spouses and offspring.

According to Mundicarmo Ferretti, besides, the King of Turkey is very well-known in the *Cheganças* and *Cavalladas*, very widespread popular staging in which Christian warriors defeat Muslim soldiers. In order to enter the *Tambor da Mina*, Ferrabraz had got to manifest himself already converted to Catholicism, not as a defeated warrior, yet rather associated to Christian Saints, specially Saint John, the Baptist. In our view, this feature confirms the hypothesis that cross-cultural translation in the Portuguese colonial experience in America beckons to power relationships, a symbolic reproduction of political hegemonic transatlantic power relationships.



**Figure 5.** “Turkish” princesses at the *Terreiro da Turquia* in São Luís do Maranhão.

There are, by the way, three slightly different mythical explanations for the presence of medieval entities in the mythology of *Tambor de Mina* in Maranhão. On the one hand, according to Pai Jorge Itaci, Ferrabraz would have been brought to Maranhão as a Crusade prisoner by Saint Louis (Louis IX of France, the Crusade king) and manifested himself at the *Terreiro da Turquia* by the time Saint Louis showed up at the *Casa de Nago*.

On the other hand, according to Pai Euclides, a not long ago deceased *pai-de-santo* who ran the *Casa Fanti-Ashanti*, both Saint Louis and Ferrabraz would have arrived on Maranhão’s coast as visitors and got detached when visiting the *Outeiro da Cruz* in São Luís. As he was walking about without a clear destination, Ferrabraz de Alexandria bumped into a voodoo village whose chieftain was Caboclo Velho. No sooner has he gazed the local celebrations, than he fell in love with that place and has made up his mind to stay in Maranhão. Remaining in Maranhão, Ferrabraz, already a Christian knight – which actually occurs in the plot of the *Chanson of Roland* – fought other battles, taking part in the most important local riot, the *Balaiada*, and even enrolling as a soldier in the war against Paraguay (1864-1870) [7].



**Figure 6.** Pai Euclides, runner of Fanti-Ashanti House. Photograph by Revista Continente.

There is still a third, yet less spread, version, narrated by another *mãe-de-santo*, Rosário Santos, according to which the King of Turkey would have come to Maranhão in search of his three missing daughters, Mariana, Jarina and Erundina. They had been welcomed to the underwater Court of Dom Sebastião, on the Island of Lençóis. Since Jarina was earstwhile a little girl, she was adopted by King Sebastian and remained with his adoptive father. Mariana, the most aged one, has decided to set up a fleet as to get back to Turkey [7].



**Figure 7.** “Turkish” minstrel of *Tambor de Mina*, at the *Terreiro da Turquia*, São Luís. Photograph taken by Mr. Márcio Arthur, São Luís – Maranhão.



Some theoretical words are here required. Our analysis and conclusions rely on the idea that, within cross-cultural interchanges, there has been what the Indian scholar Homi Bhabha has called *cultural translation* in his already classic book *The Location of Culture* (1994) [3]. However, as this very author points out, in the kind of *menudo soup* brought about by colonial cultural exchanges in Portuguese America, some very typical, singular and non-equivalent *chunks* remain in this soup – a metaphor that Homi Bhabha draws on rather than “melting pot”.

#### 4. A Possible Key to the Enigma in the Amazon

In Brazilian case, the *chunks* in Bhabha's *menudo soup* appeal to a relatively concealed medieval heritage of Brazil, regarding specially the popular, most of the time illiterate, culture. Not at all discrediting the classic, canonical interpretation of Brazil proposed by the great Marxist historian Caio Prado Júnior (1907-1990) [16], which has proved correct in many aspects, we need to explore some combined historiographical strands to achieve the dialectic synthesis called logical totality.

Firstly, it is needful to baste some considerations about the demand for the terrestrial Paradise, which directly refers to Brazil and the merged imaginary of colonization. One primary trait is the name granted to the new amount of land in the Southern part of the American continent. Therefore, we should once again pay some detailed attention to the Celtic roots entailed, perhaps in a concealed manner, in the History of Colonial Times.

In spite of the official Portuguese names, starting by Ilha de Vera Cruz and then Terra de Santa Cruz, European settlers never abandoned the habit of relating to the new Portuguese territory by the name of *Brazil*. It is, as Luís Weckmann pointed out in his book *The Medieval Heritage of Brazil* (1993) [18], a Gaelic epithet which bears the meaning of *Fortunate Isle*, upon which old Celtic narratives, such as the *Navigatio Sancti Brandanis Abbatis* (9th century), situated the lost earthly Paradise. The *Isle of Brazil*, in this sense, stood for a complex interconnected kind of interpolation between the old, pre-Christian Land of the Ferries (*Land of the Sidh*) among many Celtic populations, and the Christian, Biblical Eden [18].

According to Professor Adriana Zierer, this imrann navigation in search of the island where the lost Paradise would be located can be regarded as the very mythical archetype for the medieval traits unconvered in São Luís do Maranhão and Marajó [19].

Hence, this telluric quest for the Paradise would in the late-15th century be transposed to the former *Pindorama* – Tupi word for “Land of the Palm Trees” – fact that enabled the then Portuguese king Dom Manuel, o Venturoso (1495-1521) to apply for the title of King of Jerusalem in 1502. The study of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Vision of the Paradise* (1959) is still decisive on this topic [12]. No sooner has

*Pindorama* turned into the conquest land of *Brazil*, than it was supposed to match the traditional rethorical *topoi* identified with the whilom *Insulae Fortunatae* of Classical Civilizations [12]. The narrative motifs that have unveiled the heavenly condition of *Brazil Island* since the 9th century are basically the *eternal spring* (*non ibi aestus, non ibi figus*), the plenty of unknown fruits and flowers along with the exuberence of nature and rivers, eternal youth and finally, with the Christian interpolation that followed up the conversion of Celtic populations in Europe, naked people living in an Adamic condition of innocence before the Original Sin [12].

These *topoi* were all present in the main corographies dating back to the 16th century, principally the renowned report of the scrivener pertaining to Pedro Álvares Cabral's fleet, Pero Vaz e Caminha, to the then Portuguese monarch Dom Manuel, o Venturoso (*Carta de Pero Vaz e Caminha, 1500*) or the appeal composed by the Azorian New Christian Simão Estácio da Silveira in 1624, calling for the presence of new Portuguese amounts of colonists to Maranhão, the *Relação das Cousas do Maranhão*, relating to the lushness of the newly found territory, which could provide Portuguese settlers the opportunities to enrich as plantation owners and endow their offspring with the possibility of acquiring the two main requisites to uprise to Portuguese Court nobility, once nobility titles were being sold by the Portuguese Crown as to finance the costs of the kingdom's overseas expansion and the organization of a regular army.

The first one would be the so-called “purity of hands” (*Pureza de Mãos*) or the condition of never having worked manually, i.e. not possessing what used to be called “mechanical defect” (*defeito mecânico*), in late medieval period. The second requisite was the “purity of blood” (*Pureza de Sangue*), which meant not being a New Christian or having Moorish ancestors in the metropolitan case and, in Portuguese America, not having any indigenous or African ancestry as well. These were the requisites demanded both by the Castilian *Statute of Purity of Blood* of 1449 and its Portuguese counterpart dating back to the late feudal law of King Manuel's *Ordenações do Reino* (1514/1521).

Since the ideological move of many colonial settlers was precisely becoming a member of Court's ascended nobility, following up the venality of titles, both the Spanish and the Portuguese Crowns were obliged to negotiate these titles in America as long as the settlers remained in the colonial territory. Henceforth, in Portuguese America a sort of administrative Court was instituted in order to gage whether a certain candidate was able to be bestowed a noble title, usually belonging to the Portuguese gentry, such as baron or earl. These were called *Mesas de Consciência e Ordem* (“Courts of Consciousness and Order”). In case of approval, the candidate was normally granted the condition of knight of a religious and military order of medieval roots, such as Calatrava or the Order of Christ.

## 5. Conclusion

This text hopes to have provided good reasons in order to arouse the readers' and scholars' attention to the latent medieval aspects of Portuguese America and nowadays Northeastern Brazil. Our essay would thereupon even dare to look upon the overseas expansion as a second feudal expansion on the part of Portugal. All corographies, beside describing the wonders of a heavenly place with people dwelling in an innocence condition, like Adam and Eve before the Original Fall, appeal to the appropriation of newly found lands in the New World as a typical Crusade conquest. This piece of evidence does not disregard the undeniable constitution of a colonial exploitation system based upon the plantation and, in Portuguese case, enslaved workforce [16].

The paper's very aim has always been to pinpoint that Brazil is a result of an interpenetration of distinct temporalities, which determines a dual temporality in America's colonization. As far as one can ascertain, both capitalist and late feudal traits were transposed to whole American continent conquest and colonization.

We then resort to Antonio Gramsci's appointments in his renowned *Prison Notebooks* (1937-1941), concerning what the Italian philosopher called "morbid landscapes", i.e. historical transitional periods in which old times have not totally been overcome and new times are still to be consolidated [11].

We actually hope to have drawn some more attention to the very relevance of Medieval Studies in historical realities that supposedly came about in modern, post-Renaissance realities as our continent's history.

Thereupon, why not regard the Portuguese colonization of the Amazonian islands, at least partially, as a sort of revived *imran*, a sacred circumnavigation in search for the long ago lost medieval Paradise, where the medieval imaginary could concretely come true? Cultural translation, according to Homi Bhabha's splendid and provocative lecture, is the space for projecting old and usual categories onto a new, enigmatic experience [3], and, on the other side, negotiating and resisting hegemonic powers such as the colonization process itself.

As a matter of fact, some persistent medieval elements within the popular culture of Amazonian islands, such as the above-mentioned phantom keels, the "mothers of creeks" and Carolingian knights at the *Tambor de Mina* celebrations can provide sufficient evidence that Brazil was not endowed with a merely modern and capitalist foundation process, yet there was actually a friction of temporalities, which appeal to Portuguese colonial experience in America as a Gramscian "morbid landscape". This seems to us as a powerful argument and sound evidence of this offscreen medieval heritage of Brazil, distinctly in the North-west and Amazonian regions in the North.

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