

Victoria Reifler Bricker includes a useful account of the uprising in *The Indian Christ, the Indian King: The Historical Substrate of Maya Myth and Ritual* (Austin, 1981); and in Spanish there is J. Daniel Contreras's *Una rebelión indígena en el partido de Totonicapán en 1820* (2d printing, Guatemala, 1968). Severo Martínez Peláez treats the rebellion topically, together with a dozen others, in the first chapters of *Motines de Indios (la violencia colonial en Centroamérica y Chiapas)* (Puebla, n.d.) and promises in the future a chapter specifically on the events at Totonicapán.

Good treatments and bibliographies in English of late colonial Guatemala include those in W. George Lovell, *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala: A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500–1821* (Kingston, Ontario, 1985); Thomas Thorstein Veblen, "The Ecological, Cultural, and Historical Bases of Forest Preservation in Totonicapán, Guatemala" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1975); and Miles Wortman, *Government and Society in Central America, 1680–1840* (New York, 1982). William B. Taylor's *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, 1979), although it does not deal specifically with Totonicapán, sets the rebellion in perspective.

4

Maria Antônia Muniz: Frontier Matriarch

John Charles Chasteen

As noted in the introduction to Part 1, Dom Pedro I proclaimed Brazil's independence from Portugal in 1822 with a minimum of conflict or bloodshed. Yet the imperial ambitions of Dom João VI (1808–1820) and Dom Pedro I (1820–1831) caused considerable trouble for the inhabitants of the region far to the south, the *banda oriental*, or eastern bank, of the Plata River. Both the Spanish and the Portuguese coveted control of this magnificent river system. During the colonial period the Spanish saw the river as a vulnerable path to the famed *plata* (silver) mines of Potosí in Bolivia. The Portuguese saw the Plata River as the most convenient way to reach their western inland regions of Mato Grosso. After Argentina's independence in 1816 and Brazil's in 1822, the two Latin American behemoths continued to press for advantage in the area; both ignored the challenge of the Uruguayan caudillo José Artigas, who fought for independence of the region. In 1828 the British forced Argentina and Brazil to recognize an independent Uruguay as a buffer state between them, but for years both of the larger nations continued to intervene in Uruguayan politics.

The people who lived in the disputed territory suffered and profited in their no-man's-land. Maria Antônia Muniz lived in the region for an incredible ten decades, from her birth in 1762 to her death in 1870. She married, brought up thirteen children, and, after the death of her husband in 1824, indirectly managed the family estates.

John Chasteen's essay raises various historical issues. For Maria Antônia, the frontier was a land of opportunity, much as the U.S. frontier was portrayed by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Frontier families, like most families in Latin America, were large and extended. Maria Antônia's experience suggests, however, that among family members competition may have been as common as the more idealized notion of cooperation. The Indian and mestizo *gauchos*, or cowboys, contrast strongly with members of more settled indigenous communities under Atanasio Tzul in Guatemala. Did they have more personal autonomy and opportunity than their Guatemalan counterparts? Issues of royalism or patriotism, of empire or independence, seem to have been less intense in this region, overshadowed by the competition between Brazil and

Argentina and by the harshness of day-to-day life. Political independence per se apparently affected Maria Antônia's family only slightly. We might ponder also the lives and roles of women on the frontier. Chasteen paints Maria Antônia as a tough survivor, but he leaves open the question of whether she ruled over her family like a strong-willed matriarch, or more passively allowed her husband and sons to shelter and protect her.

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In the summer of 1866 news from Paraguay arrived at a ranch house in southern Brazil. The allies (Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay) had lost four thousand dead and wounded in an attempt to take the Paraguayan stronghold at Curupaití. The wife of the house learned, to her relief, that her two sons with the army were all right, and one of her nephews had become a hero. But another of her nephews had died. At the spinning wheel sat her mother, Maria Antônia Muniz, the grandmother of these four soldiers. She had lived already over one hundred years and had seen too many wars. She had presided over a family divided by the struggles of the period, the formative years of Brazil's southern borderland. Hers was a family that had turned upon itself, on one occasion family members killing one another before her very eyes. To her, the present carnage of Curupaití and the name of its hero were merely echoes of the past. As the wooden wheel whirled and the woolen yarn twisted between her calloused fingers, she sang to herself. Her children and grandchildren had often heard her songs, which she had made about her own life. "Twas in the village of San Carlos that I was born and raised," she sang, "and it's noble blood of Portugal I carry in my veins."

Shortly before 1760 an aristocratic but impoverished ancestor had come to the vast no-man's-land between the New World empires of Spain and Portugal. The Portuguese Crown had built a citadel, Colônia do Sacramento, deep in territory claimed by the Spanish. This wide expanse of rolling and well-watered grassland was still a wild frontier, occupied only by dwindling tribal bands of nomadic Charrua Indians, by a few thousand drifting gauchos, and by tough longhorn cattle that had run wild and thrived, their herds numbered in the millions. A son of this noble ancestor had married the daughter of the garrison commander at Colônia do Sacramento, and the young couple went to claim

land and cattle in no-man's-land at a place called San Carlos. Mario Antônia was born there in 1762.

Soon after Maria Antônia's birth, a Spanish army arrived to push the Portuguese out of San Carlos, which lay in the disputed territory. Her parents fled with the baby and three older children to the citadel at Colônia. The Spanish army besieged and captured the town, and Maria Antônia's mother died during the fighting. Within a few years, Spanish authorities allowed her father to resettle in San Carlos, where Maria Antônia and her three brothers grew up in the care of their unmarried aunts. Always in search of unclaimed land, the Muniz family left San Carlos about 1773 and occupied land farther north at a place called Herval, many miles from the nearest neighbor but much closer to the major Portuguese settlement at Rio Grande. In 1784 a mixed Spanish and Portuguese expedition passed by the Muniz house, surveying a strip of neutral territory between the competing empires. Once again, as in San Carlos, the Muniz claim fell in no-man's-land.

Life in no-man's-land was dangerous. Maria Antônia's father kept his blunderbuss loaded in case a party of Spanish soldiers, freebooting gauchos, or hostile Charruas should appear. But the land was there for the taking, and Muniz could have the meat and sell the hide of any longhorn he could catch. He could also brand all the cattle and horses that he found on his land and try to tame them, but for these operations he needed the help of gauchos.

The gauchos were mostly Guaraní Indians who had become Christians in the Jesuit missions on the edge of the disputed territories. The missions had sent men out to harvest the wild herds of no-man's-land, and these men had learned the skills of mounted herdsman. When the missions were destroyed in the 1750s, many Guaranís had come to live on the rolling plains, where they could easily survive by killing wild cattle. Maria Antônia's father had lived on the plains for years, but he could never ride, rope, and brand the way a gaucho did. He probably never learned to throw a *boleadora* (the three tethered stones that a gaucho could send whirling through the air to entangle the legs of a running animal). Muniz knew that the gauchos might be enticed by the offer of good wages to come for a week or two and help him. Although it cost them nothing to live from the wild herds, they liked to have some silver coins to buy the few amenities they wanted, or to gamble, which they passionately enjoyed.

It was hard to get a gaucho to stay for long, however, even with good pay, so Muniz almost certainly had a few slaves. They would have sown wheat, which grew well in the soil of Herval. They also raised mules, which men from the north bought to take to the distant mines of central Brazil; in the fall, Muniz took some of the mules to carry his wheat and hides to a riverbank. There, twenty-foot sailing boats passed on their way to Rio Grande where Muniz could sell the wheat and hides to buy sacks of salt and sugar, cloth and ribbons for Maria Antônia's feast-day dress, a fine beaver hat, and a bottle of wine or two. He could also buy Paraguayan tea if he already had learned to appreciate its bitter taste and stimulating effects. Sooner or later, almost all newcomers did come to like this tea, and besides, Brazil did not yet produce much coffee.

By the 1780s, five or six other Portuguese families had settled within a few miles of Muniz. The Amaro da Silveira brothers were the first of these. They were sons of one of many poor Azorean families sent by the Portuguese Crown to populate the disputed lands. Maria Antônia married Manuel Amaro da Silveira when she was fourteen years old. To find a priest the wedding party had to ride to a Spanish outpost two days away, and when they did not return for a week, those who had stayed behind to prepare the wedding feast began to fear a calamity. Almost a century later, Maria Antônia still enjoyed telling the story of how the wedding party had waited at the outpost, delayed for days by the absence of the priest, who finally appeared to perform the ceremony.

Manuel built a house for his bride on one of the highest hills in no-man's-land. From there, one almost could see Portuguese territory to the north and Spanish territory to the south. Manuel set about rounding up and branding the wild longhorns on his claim, and Maria Antônia spun and wove, washed clothes and cooked (almost certainly with the help of one or two slave women), and began to bear and raise children. Her first son, José, was healthy, but the second died in infancy. Then she had two more sons, Hilário and Jerônimo, and a daughter, Maria Antônia. João, Vasco, Dionísio, Manuel, Balbina, and Francisca followed. The last of these was born in 1788, and Maria Antônia then stopped having children for ten years, but when her son Dionísio died in adolescence, she began again. She had three more girls, and a boy, whom she named Dionísio. In all, thirteen children survived to become adults.

A large family brought advantages in the early days of settlement. The Amaro da Silveira girls helped their mother and eventually married sons of the families settled nearby. The boys learned to ride and rope and throw the *boleadora* better than their father or grandfather ever could. They also learned to use guns. In 1801 there was a war, and the oldest three boys learned to use a sword and a lance as well. José and Hilário were captured by the Spanish in that war, but relatives of their grandfather in Spanish territory managed to win their release. The war had gone very well for Portugal. The Portuguese army had captured all of the no-man's-land where Herval lay and had pushed the Spanish far to the west. From now on, Herval would be part of Brazil. Families that were already well established there got title to the property they claimed, especially if the family had aristocratic pretensions like Maria Antônia's. The Crown rewarded the officers of its victorious army with more grants of land. The Amaro da Silveira family profited in both ways.

The half-century that Maria Antônia spent raising her thirteen children (roughly from 1775 to 1825) were the formative years of the Brazilian borderland. During this time, families of settlers were brought in from the Azores, virtually all the pastureland was distributed and settled, and the settlers were able to push the Spanish out of land that they had claimed for three hundred years. The strength of the Portuguese settlement in the borderland was its homogeneity and greater sense of attachment to an imperial purpose. Although they acquired the gauchos' skill and eventually abandoned the cultivation of wheat altogether, families like Maria Antônia's maintained a strongly European community life that distinguished their society from that of their Spanish-speaking neighbors. Symptomatic was the greater importance of the state religion in the Brazilian borderland. Maria Antônia had a heavy Bible bound in leather and wood, and on Friday evenings it was customary for one of her sons to read aloud from it. Occasionally, she led family and slaves in singing a repetitive *terça*, one third of the rosary. Churches were more frequent on the Brazilian side of the border, and periodically they sent traveling revivals through the countryside. Three-day caroling trips were popular for January's feast of the Three Wise Men.

By contrast, the Spanish borderland remained less populated, and its inhabitants had more diverse racial and geographic origins. Land title there was not granted to the occupants but was sold in huge tracts to speculators at the viceregal court, and

conflict frequently arose between the absentee landlords and the actual occupants of the land. Spanish authorities envied the thriving settlements of the Portuguese borderland and recommended the adoption of Portuguese methods. But they had accomplished little when the Spanish-American wars of independence began in 1810.

Turmoil in the Spanish borderland meant opportunity for the Portuguese borderlanders. Herval became a permanent military camp, the starting point of repeated invasions of Spanish territory. These expeditions brought back hundreds of thousands of cattle as the spoils of war. Finally, in 1820 the Brazilian borderlanders conquered the entire area of present-day Uruguay. The families of Herval and other borderland areas of Brazil flooded into the occupied territory and acquired large areas of land there. Maria Antônia's family profited in this way, too.

The Amaro da Silveiras received at least four royal grants in the names of various family members. They used their income to buy more land, cattle, and slaves, and with the added income they bought still more. By the year 1824, when Maria Antônia's husband Manuel died, their family owned about one hundred and fifty square miles of pasture, seventeen thousand semiwild longhorns, four hundred tame longhorns, almost one thousand horses in various stages of domestication, and fifty-four slaves. (By now, fifty years after Maria Antônia's father had come to Herval, the slaves had learned all the skills of the *gauchos*.) The widow's house, described for the purposes of the probate inventory, was solid but plain, and the family had few luxuries of any kind despite their large holdings. For the Amaro da Silveiras, cattle and land were not means to an end but an end in themselves. Like most of the lords of the borderland who would follow them in the nineteenth century, Maria Antônia and her children had lived in the backlands all their lives, and their aspirations were those of rural people in a traditional culture.

Maria Antônia was sixty-two years old when her husband died. She was proud of the wealth she and her family had built. But troubled times lay ahead for the family. To begin with, this huge collection of pasture and animals was the work of more than one generation. Maria Antônia's oldest sons, José and Hilário, were in their fifties by the time they inherited legal title to the land on which they lived. And there were problems with the distribution of the inheritance. After her husband's death, Maria Antônia's sons and sons-in-law quarreled so terribly that she preferred to entrust the administration of her remaining property

(half of the total at Manuel's death) to a neutral party: Domingos Amaro da Silveira, her husband's son by a slave woman. Manuel had always taken a special interest in Domingos, who could read and write (something Maria Antônia could not do), and the old man's will had manumitted him and left him land and cattle. The other Amaro da Silveira men liked and respected Domingos but did not feel they had to compete with him. He managed the huge estate for eight years, sending his sons to study in Rio Grande and eventually becoming a slave owner himself.

When Domingos retired in 1832, Maria Antônia had to find a new administrator for her property. These were conflictive times in the borderland. The Uruguayans had recently broken free from Brazil (itself now independent from Portugal), and they repaid their old enemies by raiding destructively into the Brazilian borderland. No more could Uruguayan cattle be extracted by the thousands with impunity, and the Brazilian government itself exacted a tax on the animals imported legally. In addition, passions ran high throughout Brazil as Conservatives and Liberals disputed key questions of the country's political organization. When Firmina Amaro da Silveira married Juca Teodoro Braga, a famous war captain from the glory days of 1811–1827, old Maria Antônia thought her new son-in-law was just the man to defend the family's interests, and she made him administrator of her property.

Braga stopped the fighting over land, but the family found other things to fight about. One night in 1833, Maria Antônia's eldest daughter (who had always been her favorite) knocked on the door in the middle of the night with her crying children. Her husband had just been killed by a group of men who came in the night to cut his throat. This death was the third in a series of revenge killings among the Amaro da Silveiras and their in-laws. So that her daughter's family would not have to return to the house where this episode occurred, Maria Antônia moved her own household to a new residence a couple of miles away, and the young widow occupied the original hilltop homestead. The old woman had barely gotten accustomed to her new house when another disaster struck. Enraged by her preference for Juca Teodoro Braga, her pampered youngest son, Dionísio, had awaited his chance and finally shot Braga in the back on a hunting trip.

The murder happened only days before the whole borderland was convulsed by the beginnings of the Farrapo War, a ten-year secessionist attempt led by the radical Liberals. In Herval, people

held divided loyalties. The Farrapos championed an open border favorable to the borderlanders, but a tradition of military service to the empire pulled the sentiments of the people of Herval in another direction. Maria Antônia's sons and grandsons enlisted on both sides. Her son Vasco became a Farrapo leader so devoted to the cause that he refused to spare the property of the family when the Farrapos ordered requisitions. Her recently widowed daughter, who maintained outspoken loyalty to the empire, soon suffered these requisitions. In 1839 men arrived to tell the old woman that her son Vasco had died at the hand of one of her grandsons, the eldest son of her favorite daughter and the future hero of Curupaití.

The Farrapo War dragged on, ravaging the family's herds and exacerbating old resentments. Maria Antônia's sons José and Hilário had become deadly enemies because of a dispute over their inheritance. Neither could tolerate the presence of the other without threat of violence. One day in 1844, Hilário went to visit his eighty-two-year-old mother at her house. After the midday meal, he and the two men with him lay down in a bedroom for a nap, and while they were asleep José arrived with his son João Pedro. Awakened by voices from the other room, Hilário arose and walked out to greet the visitors. The two brothers were stunned at having come unexpectedly into each other's presence in their mother's parlor. They mumbled a greeting and then sat down dumbly in front of Maria Antônia and the others. Later, the old woman recalled the terrible silence that fell over the room and the words that José cried when he suddenly leaped up: "Because of this heartless fiend I am ruined and miserable!"

The fight that ensued before her very eyes was a confused nightmare. Afterward, even the participants did not know quite what had happened. By that time José was on his horse, calling repeatedly for his son João Pedro. But João Pedro and his uncle Hilário lay dead in a pool of blood on Maria Antônia's parlor floor. Before Hilário's companions could reload their guns, José rode away and fled south into Uruguay where he would remain for many years.

Finally, in 1855, Maria Antônia gave up the matriarchal household that she had maintained for thirty years and went to live with her daughter Francisca. There she spent her last fifteen years, spinning wool and singing about her long life. She continued to grieve over the deaths of her children (she survived eleven of them) but could rejoice in the fertility of her

eighty-four grandchildren. One of her multitudinous great-grandchildren, born in the year of Curupaití, listened with special attention to the stories of his family. These were the stories that Maria Antônia had loved to tell about an aristocratic ancestor or about a wedding party that disappeared for one week, as well as the tragic stories the old woman seldom told but that could be collected from uncles and aunts on the long winter evenings of the borderland. Finally, during the first quarter of the twentieth century, this great-grandson wrote down these stories, more or less as they appear here.

SOURCES

The great-grandson who collected the family's oral traditions, and supplemented them with court documents and other archival materials, was Manuel da Costa Medeiros. His manuscript was published, many years after his death, as *História do Herval: Descrição, física e histórica* (Porto Alegre, 1980). The historical context for Maria Antônia's life was drawn from Chasteen's research on the nineteenth-century social and political history of the Brazilian-Uruguayan borderland in the nineteenth century, conducted at the Arquivo Público do Rio Grande do Sul and the Arquivo Histórico do Rio Grande do Sul, both in Pôrto Alegre, Brazil; and the Archivo General de la Nación, with its Sección Judicial, in Montevideo, Uruguay.