

Emilia Viotti da Costa, "Masters and Slaves"

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The ending of the trade doomed slavery because of the high rate of mortality among slaves. After the abolition of the trade planters recognized the need to improve the living conditions of the slaves and at the same time to consider other solutions for the problem of the labor force.

Before the suppression of the slave trade, the lives of slaves in rural areas had been quite precarious.¹² Their work day was long, often reaching sixteen or eighteen hours, including additional night work. They lived in wattle and daub huts thatched with palm leaves or *sapé* grass—generally windowless or equipped with barred windows. The slaves slept on mats spread over wooden platforms two and a half or three feet wide. They received at most two or three changes of clothing a year. Men wore pants and shirts of coarse cotton with a *surtum*—a sort of sleeveless jacket of rough cloth lined with baize. On the majority of plantations these clothes were replaced only once a year and slaves went around in rags. Municipal ordinances aimed at preventing their being seen dirty or half-naked in the streets of the towns imposed fees on careless slaveholders but they seem not to have had great success since they constantly had to be renewed. In any case, such measures did not extend to the plantations where the will of the master was law.

The slave diet did not vary: beans, gruel, manioc flour, from time to time a piece of jerked beef or salt pork, more rarely yams, cassava, pumpkins, or sweet potatoes. In the sugar-growing areas, molasses and white rum accompanied meals, and in the coffee regions, coffee. On the poorer plantations the diet was reduced to beans and a little manioc flour. Slaves often suffered from parasites, fevers, tuberculosis, and syphilis; they also were subject to the epidemics of smallpox, cholera, and yellow fever that periodically swept the country.

Medical treatment on the plantations was inadequate. Planters used medical manuals and also resorted to folk healers and curers who used



FIG. 10. Master's house and slave's quarters (*senzalas*)

magic and sorcery along with remedies made of herbs. With these they sought to cure everything from venereal diseases to snakebites. Both blacks and whites, slaves and masters commonly believed that saints provided protection against certain illnesses, and they invoked Santa Luzia, protectress of the eyes, Santa Ágata for the diseases of the chest, Santa Apolonia for toothaches, São Lázaro for leprosy, and São Tomé for worms. Medical science itself was not far removed, in the countryside, from the primitiveness of the folk healers. This was the age of miraculous remedies: of Leroy's Purgative to treat pneumonia, dysentery, dropsy, and poisoning. It was the time of purges and bleeding, of home remedies, of balsam and absinthe teas, of orange and elderberry blossoms, of guava and nettle leaves.

The religious hospitals, or *santas casas*, performed a substantial service for the planters, taking in their ill and disabled slaves. Still, old and invalid blacks, abandoned by their masters, could often be seen along the roads or begging in the towns, and frequent attempts to restrict such abuses—in both the local and national legislatures—met with little success. In 1854, in São Paulo, a provincial law provided that “any master who, having adequate means, abandons his leprous, insane, crippled, or incurably ill slaves, and who allows them to become beggars,” should pay a fine of 30\$000 and be obligated to care for them properly, support them, and clothe them. The legislature's

efforts, however, were futile. Though Parliament complained and the press protested, throngs of old, sick, and hungry free blacks continued to be seen along the roads, begging alms from travelers or wandering on the streets of the cities. Since they were no longer of any value in the labor force, their maintenance constituted a burden that many masters were happy to dismiss.

In short, many factors contributed to the high mortality rates of the slave population: insufficient medical knowledge and primitive treatment, poor sanitary conditions in the slave quarters, inadequate diet and clothing, harsh working conditions, dust inhaled in the preparation of coffee, the heat of the furnaces in the sugar mills, and the bites of poisonous snakes and insects in the fields. But most of all, high mortality was due to the hazardous sanitary conditions in the country as a whole.

In the 1870s it was said, probably with some exaggeration, that if a planter bought a lot of one hundred healthy slaves, after three years he would find twenty-five of them, at best, still able to work. On the plantations there were always some slaves—perhaps as many as 10 or 20 percent—temporarily unable to work, and pessimistic observers estimated the working life of the labor force to be fifteen years. Planters often complained about the high infant mortality, which according to some reached more than 80 percent. It was common to say that it was easier to raise three or four white children than one black—a situation attributed to “the greater fragility of the black race.” The owner of one of the largest sugar mills in the province of Rio de Janeiro, and one of the first to introduce steam-operated machines—a measure of her progressive spirit—told the English traveler Maria Graham that not even half of the blacks born on her plantation lived to the age of ten. The baron of Piabanha, a planter in Paraíba do Sul, in the province of Rio de Janeiro, confessed some years later that, despite good treatment and care, the number of his slaves declined about 5 percent a year.

Contrary to these pessimistic evaluations, recent research has demonstrated that mortality, although high, was not as high as planters said, and certainly not much higher than mortality among the free lower classes.¹³ Measuring infant mortality in a coffee district, one author has arrived at the conclusion that it reached 470 per 1000. Of the 36,807 children registered as born to slave mothers between 1871 and 1887, 8,454 died, which gives an index of 229 per 1000. If mortality was not as high as planters said it was, certainly it was high enough to make the balance between birth and death negative. Mortality as well as fertility seems to have differed widely from one province to another. Attempts to measure fertility have resulted in figures that vary from

210 per 1000 in Rio Claro, to 61 per 1000 in Rio de Janeiro, 160 per 1000 in Rio Grande do Norte, and 150 per 1000 in São Paulo.

While fertility in Brazil was lower than in the United States, slave mortality in Brazil was apparently much higher. The higher rate of mortality has been attributed to the general health and epidemiologic conditions that prevailed in Brazil at the time. On the other hand, the lower fertility rate has been attributed to the imbalance between males and females and to the higher instability of the slave family in Brazil.

Indeed, during the nineteenth century, particularly in areas of new settlement, there were always fewer women than men. In some regions the proportion was as low as one to five. This difference—more striking before the interruption of the slave trade—tended to diminish after that, sometimes disappearing completely in areas of old settlement.

Throughout the nineteenth century, travelers, slaveowners, priests, politicians, and abolitionists, all talked about the “promiscuity” that reigned in the slave quarters. We could argue that the documents are inherently biased, that priests were overconcerned with moral problems, that puritan travelers went out of their way to make slavery look evil, that politicians were merely debating points, that abolitionists always exaggerated the corruptions of slavery, and that slaveowners were prejudiced against blacks. In fact, recent historiography seems to contradict the testimony of the contemporary. Perhaps influenced by recent trends in United States historiography, historians found that the monogamous family was not uncommon among Brazilian slaves. It is often difficult, however, to reconstitute the slave family because common law unions were not registered and slaves in Brazil as well as most of the lower class often did not marry. The census of 1872 counted only 9 percent of the total slave population as married, compared to 27.1 percent of the free population. The situation did not seem to improve very much as time passed. In 1888, only 10.6 percent of the slaves were listed as married, though an additional 2.2 percent of the slaves were enrolled as widows and widowers. The figures for the nation as a whole can be very misleading, since there were marked variations from region to region. In Pará and Santa Catarina, only 1 percent of the slave population was registered as married in 1888. In Minas the figure was 17 percent, in Bahía 4.5, and in São Paulo 22. The figures for the city of Rio de Janeiro are particularly striking. In a total slave population of 7,488, there were only 38 married slaves. These variations are difficult to explain. Demographic imbalance between male and female does not correlate to marriage rates as one might expect. São Paulo, for example, which showed a predominantly male population of 62,688 males for 44,641 females, was also the province with the highest pro-

portion of married slaves, while in Pará and Rio, where the marriage rates were lower, the male-female ratio was nearly one to one. It seems, thus, that only when the demographic imbalance was acute, as in the case cited by Stanley Stein in Vassouras, where 77 percent of the slaves were men, might demographic factors have any bearing on marriage. Nor does the number of priests and churches correlate to the number of marriages. There were more married slaves on plantations than in the cities, where there were more churches.

It is thus difficult to make generalizations about the slave family that are valid for the country as a whole, and one should not dismiss too quickly the testimony of contemporaries when they commented that sexual freedom, which for them was licentious behavior or promiscuity, was common in the slave quarters. It is also difficult to dismiss the tales about how masters, overseers, or other free whites used their position of authority to have affairs with slave women. Although we cannot measure how widespread these practices were, it is impossible to deny that from these unions emerged a large mestizo population. These situations created problems that concerned not only jealous wives and pious missionaries but also zealous legislators. By the time of independence, unsuccessful attempts had been made by some politicians to put into law a measure requiring slaveholders to free a slave who gave birth to her master's child. Such a law would have required a public admission of the slaveowners' responsibility. The ambiguous situation of many planters, who kept their children, their siblings, and even their mothers enslaved, seemed to them to be preferable to public scandal. Only in 1871 did a judicial ruling following the Free Birth Law of that year hold that a slave mother owned by her own son would have preference under the newly created Emancipation Fund. But, oddly enough in this same period, an appeals court prohibited a master from selling his illegitimate children, requiring him to continue to keep the mother and children as his own slaves.

The legislation aimed at the protection of slaves was always of dubious effectiveness, especially in the countryside, where the master's authority went unchecked. In the plantation, he represented the church, the law, and the police. His dominion was unhindered and his will limited only by his own benevolence.

Nevertheless, cases of kindness and paternalism on the part of the masters and examples of loyalty on the part of the slaves could always be found. In Brazil as in the United States, many a woman of the slaveholding class maintained all her life and passed on to her children the affection she retained for the nursemaid who had raised her and watched her children grow up. Many sons of planters kept throughout

their lives sentimental childhood memories of the old black who had initiated them into the arts of hunting and fishing and the mysteries of nature. More than a few young students, on the day of their graduation, freed black boyhood companions who had accompanied them as servants during their years in school.

The images of the devoted "Black Mammy," of the loyal "Old Black Joe," of the childhood mate—these are not just inventions of romantic literature or artificial constructs of the planter's mind. They were found in real life. But equally real was the vengeful slave who tried to kill his master or overseer, who burned the fields, who ran away, or who incited rebellion in the slave quarters. And the truth is that most of the slaves probably did not fit in either of these extreme and opposite categories. Pictures of the faithful slave and the benevolent master—pictures fixed in Brazilian literature and history—represent not so much the actual behavior of slaves and masters, but myths created by a slaveholding society to defend a system which that society regarded as indispensable. They affected people's behavior only as much as any other idealization does.

Too much has been said recently about the paternalism of the slave-owners.¹⁵ Historians have argued that paternalism was more than just a myth—an actual practice regulating the relations between master and slaves—a means of social control. This opinion, however, seems questionable when contrasted with the overwhelming evidence suggesting the violence of the system. Masters may have resorted to rewards as well as to punishment; they may have tried to impose order and discipline by presenting themselves as father figures. But all this should not blind us to the ultimate violence of a system which made slaves the property of their masters—a property that could be bought and sold and whose fate depended on the master's whim.

The forms of ritual kinship (*compadrio*) and the paternalistic relationships that slaveholding society developed as mechanisms of accommodation and social control could not eliminate the barriers that separated the two opposing and irreconcilable worlds of the slave and the master. Racial prejudice always separated the owner from the owned. Most whites, even those who considered slavery an economic and political aberration, believed in the moral inferiority and political and social incapacity of the African race. Racial prejudice served to maintain and legitimize the distance between a world of privileges and rights and one of deprivation and duties.

Even if the slaveholders often rewarded good behavior by granting manumission or conferring to their most loyal slaves a position of prestige within the slave community, (more often) they resorted to threats or

punishments to keep up the rhythms of work, prevent escapes or revolts, and keep slaves obedient and submissive. Physical punishment was universally accepted as a method of coercion, although society disapproved of both the masters who were excessive in their punishments and the ones who were overly benevolent. Leniency and cruelty were considered equally dangerous.

Religion was another means of social control. Since the colonial period, the Church had undertaken to reconcile the masters' financial interests with the dictates of religion and philanthropy. Discipline on the *fazendas*, according to one traveler in the mid-nineteenth century (who did not include paternalism as one of the means of social control), had two forms: the whip and the confessional. Patience, resignation, and obedience were the catechism the priests taught the slaves. Some went as far as to say that blacks were "cursed" and constituted a condemned race whose salvation depended on their serving whites patiently and with devotion. Others played the role of mediators between masters and slaves, preaching moderation and benevolence to the masters and obedience to the slaves. But whatever the priests' role was, most people believed that religion and the confessional were the best antidotes to insurrections.

When rewards, admonition, and advice did not produce the desired result, slaveholders resorted to punishment. The most common methods were the *palmatória*, the stocks, and various kinds of whips and lashes. Rare, but not absent, were neck shackles, manacles, iron rings for squeezing fingers, brass masks, and imprisonment. Whipping and the *palmatória* were common disciplinary punishments, recognized and authorized by law. Slaves were not alone: soldiers and sailors were also whipped when they committed certain offenses, and children were subjected to the *palmatória* in school. Sometimes lower-class free men were also beaten when they displeased a slaveholder or failed to treat him with "proper" respect. In the nineteenth century, social relations were based on dominance and oppression; on the power of father over son, of husband over wife, of master over slave, of the rich over the poor. Physical violence was an integral part of most people's lives.

The harshest punishments were applied to slaves who committed murder, led other slaves to run away, or instigated rebellions. A murderer was condemned to death if the crime was carried out against the planter or his family and to chain gangs or prison otherwise. Runaways received three hundred lashes, administered over several days. For a long time it was the custom to brand slaves with a hot iron. Even on the eve of abolition, the newspapers carried advertisements of runaway slaves who could be indentified by those brands. All these devices for

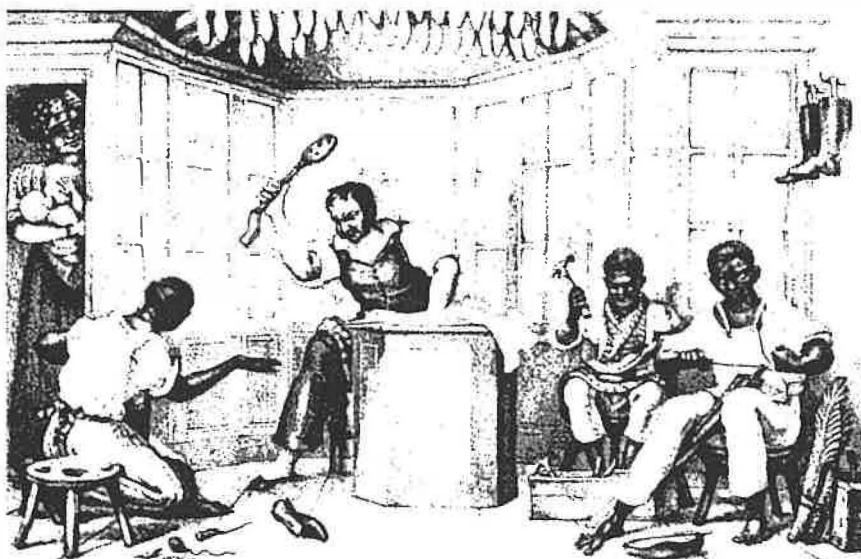


FIG. 11. A master punishing his slave with the *palmatória*

torture and punishment were in frequent use until the middle of the nineteenth century. Such practices declined thereafter, but the history of Brazilian slavery is replete with cases of death or permanent injury from excessive punishment, enough to make us doubt the paternalistic pretensions of the masters.

Various travelers in nineteenth-century Brazil praised the excellence of the legislation that sought to protect the slave. They forgot, however, that the effectiveness of a law always depends on compliance and enforcement. And it is difficult to believe that these laws were implemented when, as we have seen before, slaveowners often interfered with the action of the courts. Before the abolitionist campaign, the slave was always seen as guilty by the jury, while the master always seemed to be in the right. Thus, most of the time the law was ineffective in the defense of the slaves but quite effective on behalf of the slaveholders.

In spite of all the mechanisms conceived to keep the slave population submissive, the planters lived in perpetual fear of slave insurrection. At the least rumor, severe measures were taken to prevent an uprising. The news spread swiftly: troops were mobilized, slaveholders warned, suspects arrested and interrogated, and the guilty severely punished. Laws were enacted to strengthen security measures. Both municipal and provincial legislatures reinforced the legal provisions that limited the slaves' movements. In the towns, every slave found on the street after curfew without his master's authorization was arrested.

Slaves were prohibited from congregating in shops or public places, and they were forbidden to enter gambling houses or taverns. The sale of arms or poison to slaves was severely punished, as was the renting of rooms or houses to them. It was illegal to buy any merchandise from slaves, unless they showed authorization from their masters. This was intended to reduce thefts, but neither vigilance nor repressive measures worked. Masters constantly complained that roadside stores traded in goods stolen by the slaves.

Despite the rumors of insurrections that periodically alarmed the slaveholding class, large-scale revolts were rare in nineteenth-century Brazil. Some of those that did occur, however, were quite impressive. The most famous slave revolts of this period had a religious character and were provoked by Muslim blacks. They occurred in the cities, where communication among the insurgents was easier than in the country and the concentration of slaves from the same part of Africa was greater.¹⁶ Those revolts took place principally in the Northeast, where many Muslim blacks were to be found. The Malê revolts in Alagoas (1815) and Bahía (1835) were of this type. In Minas Gerais a famous uprising occurred shortly before independence. Some 15,000 slaves assembled in Ouro Preto and another 6,000 in São João do Morro. They spoke of a constitution and freedom and spread the rumor that in Portugal a constitution had already been approved in which blacks had been made equal to whites. Revolts of such size, however, were rare in the coffee areas and only occasionally took on the frightening aspects of the one that broke out in Vassouras in 1838, when about three hundred slaves, mostly Haussás, rose in revolt and troops had to be summoned from Rio de Janeiro to suppress them.

The repressive mechanisms that slave society had developed against uprisings were usually quite effective, and when a revolt did break out, it was quickly put down by the police or the army. But even careful vigilance could not prevent slaves from escaping to the forests and raiding plantations and villages. Communities of runaway slaves, known as *quilombos*, had been widespread since the colonial period, and in the nineteenth century some became famous, such as Jabaquara in São Paulo and Gávea in Rio de Janeiro. *Quilombos* grew in importance during the final years of slavery because slaves could count on the help of abolitionists and on the goodwill of the urban population.

Insurrections, crimes, work badly done, orders not fulfilled, lies, negligence were the many ways slaves fought oppression. But most of all, they ran away. The newspapers of the period are filled with advertisements dealing with escaped slaves and promising rewards to anyone who captured them. In 1855, up to 30\$000 was offered. Twenty



FIG. 12. Punishment in the public square

years later, when slave prices had risen to two and a half *contos* (2 : 500\$000) or even more, some owners would offer up to 400\$000 for the capture of a runaway slave.

The profession of *capitão do mato* (hunter of runaway slaves) had existed since the colonial period. In the nineteenth century, *capitães do mato* did not hesitate to put advertisements in the newspapers offering their services. But with the spread of abolitionist ideas they gradually became targets of popular satire and sometimes even of physical attacks.

The slaves' potential for rebellion was contained not only by repression, but also by the rivalries and enmities that divided the slave community. In rural areas, the household servants often considered themselves better than slaves who worked in the fields. Maids, cooks, seamstresses, coachmen, pages, washerwomen, and nursemaids received special treatment and had greater opportunities to gain their freedom through manumission than did fieldhands. The household servants often lived more or less separated from their fellow slaves. Their apparent superior status tended to separate them from their natural group and imposed on them a code of etiquette full of prohibitions. They did not belong to the slave quarter, but they were not accepted in the world of the masters. Their position was not without am-

biguities, and ambiguous was their behavior. Some were bound by ties of affection to the master's family; others hated their masters to such an extent that they did not hesitate to eliminate them. The accounts of crimes committed by household slaves kept the master class apprehensive and watchful as long as slavery lasted.¹⁷

Many other forms of rivalry further divided the slave population. In the cities blacks often organized themselves by "nations" (their places



FIG. 13. Capitão do Mato

of origin). And sometimes they kept old hierarchies. Some African princes are said to have maintained the respect of their subjects in slavery. To the traditional African hierarchical positions, new distinctions were added based on occupation. As one traveler noted at midcentury, ("A well-dressed and well-turned out high-class female slave feels no compassion or sympathy for her ragged and dirty fellow." The master's position also reflected on the slave, and one who belonged to a plantation owner felt himself superior to another who worked for a modest official—even though he might be subject to a more rigorous discipline. In spite of these divisions, feelings of solidarity also developed among slaves. And in the second half of the nineteenth century the activities of the abolitionists were important not only in spurring the slaves to join together in winning their freedom but in providing them with the means to do so.

African traditions had an important role to play in keeping the slave community united. Cultural traditions were apparently more easily retained in the cities than in the countryside. In urban areas, blacks from the same parts of Africa had at least the possibility of seeing one another and forming groups. On the plantations, where masters tried to prevent the formation of homogeneous groups, such contacts were more difficult. People of different cultural traditions were mixed together. The family or kin that had constituted the basis of the social structure in Africa fell apart. The traditional collective symbolic systems took on new meanings. Cults and rituals brought from Africa underwent a process of interpretation based on new circumstances imposed by slavery.

Music, religion, and magic were intimately related and played an immense part in the life of the slaves. Some masters permitted their slaves to dance and sing on Saturdays, Sundays, or holidays. In the cities and towns, African songs and dances were usually prohibited, out of a fear that any gathering of slaves could degenerate into a subversive movement. The only authorized celebrations were those of a Christian character, such as that of Nossa Senhora do Rosário, patron saint of blacks, and a few dances, such as the *congadas*.¹⁸

For the most part, however, Christianity was little more than a veneer over African traditions and practices. Few masters made much effort at Christianizing their slaves. Although most plantations had chapels, mass was rarely celebrated. Priests were in short supply, and the few who appeared from time to time had no opportunity to initiate the slaves in the real practices of Christianity. Household rites and family prayers prevailed. The master would lead prayers, aided by the slaves, who repeated them mechanically often without understanding

their meaning. In practice, African and Christian traditions became thoroughly mixed, and African deities survived under Christian guise. The inclusion of African cultural elements in Catholicism made possible their preservation under a Christian exterior. But in this process, many African deities acquired a sinister character and often the warlike ones came to be preferred. The Muslim slaves, who were heavily concentrated in the Northeast, were the most resistant to Christianity, and some even managed to maintain their own places of worship. Nevertheless, slavery often made it impossible to observe religious requirements strictly, and it was mainly among free blacks that African traditions survived, however modified.

The fate of the slave actually depended as much on the prosperity of the master as on his benevolence and humanity. And it varied from region to region, from one plantation to another. It was said that Rio was better than Maranhão and that the worst masters were to be found in Campinas. "I will sell you to Campinas," said masters in western São Paulo to rebellious or lazy slaves. In Bahía, unruly blacks were threatened with being sent to the south. In Pernambuco the threat was to sell them to Maranhão. There was considerable mystification in this insinuation, but slave treatment did vary with the productivity of the various regions. In areas suffering from soil exhaustion—but still productive—such as the Paraíba Valley after 1870, the planter demanded longer hours and the care of a larger number of trees from his slaves to compensate for the decline in productivity of the coffee trees. In totally decadent areas, poverty sometimes brought slave and master closer together, and when slaves were not sold, master and slave relations became somewhat more civilized as they both struggled for survival. In the most prosperous areas, where productivity was higher and labor abundant, living conditions for the slaves were usually better.¹⁹

On the whole, living conditions seem to have improved after the abolition of the slave trade in 1850, when the price of slaves increased and slaveowners became more concerned with keeping their slaves in good health. In the twenty years from 1855 to 1875, slave prices almost trebled; going from one *conto* to two and a half and even three. While slave prices in Rio and São Paulo (in the coffee areas) maintained an upward trend from mid-century to about 1880, rising abruptly in the 1850s and then more gradually during the next decades, in the sugar areas prices began to decrease from the late 1850s on, reaching their lowest point in the 1870s. The fall of slave prices was related to changes in commodity prices; while sugar prices tended to decline, coffee

prices reached their highest levels during the 1870s.²⁰ The difference between slave prices in the Northeast and in the South and the higher demand for slaves in the South led to a dislocation of the slave population from the Northeast to the South. The majority of bondsmen sold in the southern provinces, however, seem to have come not from plantations but from urban areas or small farms less dependent on slave labor.

During the first years after the interruption of the slave trade, there was a movement of slaves from the less productive regions to the more productive, from the cities to the countryside. Intra- and interprovincial trade replaced the external trade. Slave traders scoured the Northeast, offering high prices for slaves whom they then sold to the coffee planters of the South. Concerned about this loss of labor, the governments of the northeastern provinces tried to limit departures by imposing high taxes on them. A report by the president of the province of Maranhão in 1853 noted that the tax on the export of slaves had brought in more than in prior years because of the high slave prices prevailing in the Rio de Janeiro market. In Pernambuco, the tax on slaves leaving the province, which was 5\$000 in 1842, reached 200\$000 in 1859. In 1866 the provincial president reported that from 1855 to 1864, 4,023 slaves had been transferred to other provinces. In Bahía in 1860, over 2000000\$000 was collected in taxes on slaves leaving the province. The situation was similar in Alagoas, where the largest source of revenue in 1862 was the tax on the export of slaves. Wanderley, representing the planters of Bahía, tried unsuccessfully in 1854 to secure approval in the House of Representatives for a bill prohibiting the interprovincial slave trade. The interests of large-scale agriculture in the South were stronger. The northeastern provinces, suffering from chronic crisis, thus lost much of their slave population.

It is impossible to calculate the exact number of slaves transferred to the coffee-growing areas from other provinces. Ferreira Soares provides data that permit an estimate of slightly over 5,000 slaves imported annually from the Northeast to Rio. Tavares Bastos writes of around 37,000 slaves entering Rio between 1850 and 1862. Recent scholarship has evaluated the internal slave trade at between 6,000 (Klein) and 9,000 (Slenes) a year.²¹ Using port records of Rio de Janeiro and Santos, Slenes arrived at the conclusion that between 1873 and 1881, 71,000 bondsmen entered the coffee areas. This does not include slaves brought through other ways or to other ports.

Internal trade followed the pattern of external trade. More men than women were traded and more young men than adults. The major-