

# Reis, João José; Gomes, Flávio dos Santos; Carvalho, Marcus Joaquim de. *O alufá Rufino: tráfico, escravidão e liberdade no Atlântico negro (1822-1853)*

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Rufino's history ... was not at all typical. The interest in narrating it is because history is not only made from what is the norm, and can frequently be much more assimilated in combination and in contrast with what is not common. In fact, this is what we seek to do here: our character serves us as a guide to a history much greater than that of his own personal experience. It escapes with enormous regularity from our field of vision to give space to the colossal drama of slavery in the Atlantic world in which he played his small but interesting, and at times nefarious, role. (p.360)

In studying the trajectory of Rufino José Maria, João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes and Marcus de Carvalho offer us an extraordinary panel in the micro- and macro-social space of the transatlantic trade of African captives in the Brazilian empire in the nineteenth century. Certainly the question is not new, but the manner in which it is approached is undoubtedly innovative. While there really has been a considerable increase in the amount of research on the subject since the end of the 1980s, which culminated with the first centenary of the *Lei Áurea*, as well as setting new landmarks in the analysis of the slave system and the related policies in the country, the question of the slave trade has also been significantly revised, as in works such as Manolo Florentino's *Em costas negras*.

In the United States, as in Brazil and the Caribbean, the question of the slave trade and the slave system has been rethought, as shown by Gerald Horne in *O sul mais distante*. Diverging from the studies mentioned, the authors of

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*O alufá Rufino* leave aside quantitative data except as a complement, to deal with the trajectory of one of these Africans who became a captive in the Americas, where he would be emancipated. Rufino also became a slave owner and trader and in this transatlantic journey learned to read and write and to follow religion in accordance with the rules of Koran, practicing this in the Brazilian Empire, the reason for his arrest. It is presumable that the choice of the object is due not only to its documental wealth and exemplarity, but also to the evidence that João José Reis showed in *Domingos Sodré, um sacerdote africano*. Nevertheless, unlike this book, in *O alufá Rufino* the authors take better advantage of what the character offers and based on this reconstitute certain nexuses between the social actors who people the world of the slave trade. They detail the large traders of the period, describe their principal vessels and show how they broke the English blockade along the coast of the African continent, how they acted when they were captured and the type of goods they brought from the Americas to make the business even more lucrative. In this point the authors skillfully demonstrate that almost all the crew of vessels were part of this trade, with their own boxes and items, as was the case of Rufino – although in as far as they have accompanied him they have not found his initials among the merchandise. As a cook Rufino took advantage of the opportunity to trade sweets – and probably even to purchase slaves – in Africa. Another difference between the two books is in this one the affirmations are based more on assumptions than on documentary proof.

As the authors show the “history of Africans in Brazil in the time of slavery,” as well as that of Rufino, is “to a large extent is written based on police documents,” (p.9) which have been more systemically examined in recent decades by Brazilian researchers. With the history of Rufino, the authors present us with the profile of some of the buyers of slaves in the Brazilian empire, such as João Gomes da Silva, a *pardo* (a man of mixed blood) who exercised the trade of apothecary. Rufino was probably his apprentice for a period, before going to Porto Alegre and being sold there, because it is “possible that his abilities in the kitchen came to have some value in the preparation of medicines of an animal and mineral origin” (p.31). At the beginning of the 1830s Rufino went to Rio Grande do Sul in the company of his young master, Francisco Gomes, who some time later would sell him to José Pereira Jardim, a trader in Porto Alegre, where “Rufino would meet ... some people from his land either enslaved or already emancipated” (p.52). In 1835 some months after the *Malê* Revolt in Bahia, Rufino would ironically achieve his emancipation paying the sum of 600,000 réis.

Following his emancipation Rufino came to appear again in the documentation, some months later going to Rio Grande, “when the loyal anti-Farroupilha government was based, perhaps in the company of his former owner, the judge José Maria Peçanha,” and “stayed there... involving himself with the local Muslim community until at the end of 1838, he was involved in a police action in Porto Alegre against that Muslim school” (p.69). After this, as suggested by the sparse documents about him, he probably went to Rio de Janeiro between the end of 1838 and the beginning of 1839, “and not three years earlier, as he let appear in Recife in 1853, when he had good reasons to omit the real history of his departure from Rio Grande do Sul: arrested on suspicion of conspiracy he could not reveal that he had been suspected of something similar fifteen years earlier” (p.70).

In Rio de Janeiro “Rufino had noticed that he could get protection and a good life – as well as money – by enlisting as a worker in the slave trade” (p.81). Here the authors show how Rufino participated in the transatlantic slave trade, as well as detailing the profile of the crews of slave ships and their goods (as well as the average quantities of slaves transported in the return voyage), also detailing the principal organizers of this risky market, due to the English prohibition of it since the beginning of the 1830s, but one that was nonetheless incomparably profitable.

In this journey the authors present us with the histories of the various persons in the slave trade at that time, from crew members to the leaders of the trade. Alongside the *Ermelinda*, the vessel on which Rufino worked, they indicate the destinies of the schooner *Paula*, the *patacho São José* and the *União* (the vessel on which Rufino sailed before the *Ermelinda*), when these were confiscated and put on trial by the English in Sierra Leon, along with other vessels. It is also shown that there was much evidence that despite English inspections “slave traders and English fraternized in the slave trading posts,” since “the true ‘brothers’ of the English on land were other whites, even if they were slave traders, and not the black slaves, who were said to be the ‘brothers’ of the abolitionists in distant England” (p.157).

Although they were not condemned, despite the attempts to gather evidence which showed the vessel to be a slave ship – which it actually was –, the losses were evident for the *Ermelinda*, its crew and its owners. Although the authors’ discussion is extraordinarily rich, there is no way in so few lines to detail all the ramifications and details of this venture and its consequences after the vessels were captured and brought to Sierra Leon where they were tried.

From Sierra Leon to Recife, Rufino, with all the crew and the traders in people, had to count the losses of the venture, not carried out due to the English capture on the African coast. In Recife Rufino went to live on a street called *Senzala Velha*, a representative name for a former captive and slave trader like him. The authors make an exquisite analysis of the profile and characteristic of religious practices in Recife in the nineteenth century, where Rufino would not be alone, due to the ethnic, cultural and religious plurality there. As an *Alufá* (Muslim), Rufino knew the meanderings of his religion, and its practice helped him get through that difficult period. When he was detained in the middle of 1853 for the practice of religious rituals, Rufino maintained a serene attitude, despite the “concerns of the Pernambucan authorities” having been “awoken not only because it was known that in Bahia the rebels had papers written in Arabic like those found with Rufino, but also because, according to the reports which circulated around the country, many of the Malê rebels were freed African and *Nagôs* like him” (p.331). Having said this, it is also worth highlighting that “Rufino certainly developed a cosmopolitan vision of a world only reached with great difficulty by the majority of Africans, and even less by his contemporary Brazilians” (p.355), which makes his trajectory more representative.

Thus, the authors offer us the interpretation of a rich and complex person, inserted in the core of a dynamic movement of the trade of captives in the nineteenth century. Tracing in this way through micro-analysis (the trajectory of Rufino) and macro-analysis (the detailed study of the slave trade), the text also suggested advances and brings innovations about the use of methodological instruments for the analysis of sources and the presentation of data.

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