



## 'Formidable contagion': epidemics, work and recruitment in Colonial Amazonia 1660-1750\*

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### Abstract

The text analyzes the extent to which smallpox and measles epidemics provoked transformations in the ways in which workforces were acquired and used in colonial Amazonia from the mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century, with an increase in slave raids on the indigenous population and the attempt to organize a trade route in African slaves to the region. It also explores how indigenous mortality rates at the end of the seventeenth century led to a concern with the region's defence and prompted the recruitment of soldiers from the Madeira islands.

Keywords: epidemics; work;  
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Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the population of the state of Maranhão and Pará, a territory that roughly corresponds to modern Brazilian Amazonia, was struck by various epidemic outbreaks. From the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century, there are records of serious epidemics in the 1660s, 1690s, 1720s and 1740s. Strongly dependent on indigenous labour (free and enslaved), the epidemics experienced by Colonial Amazonia disturbed the development of economic activities and influenced the forms in which compulsory labour was organized. This article looks to examine the various outbreaks of diseases and determine the extent to which they provoked important transformations in the forms of acquiring and using workforces in the region, leading to an increase in the capture and enslavement of free Indians and the organization of an African slave trade route. Our focus will be also on exploring how the indigenous mortality rate, specifically at the end of the seventeenth century, led to a concern with the defence of the region and required the recruitment of soldiers from the Madeira islands.

### 1661: the 'pox plague'

At the beginning of the 1660s, according to the *Crônica* of the Jesuit priest João Felipe Bettendorf (1990, p.201, 242), a smallpox epidemic broke out, called *bexigas* or pox. The main historical source on this outbreak, the Jesuit text describes the scale of its impact due to its occurrence a short time after an uprising of the colonists against the missionaries, who were expelled from the state of Maranhão in 1661.

Bettendorf tells us that the epidemic started in the house of a colonist in Pará, one of whose children died from the disease. Since the case involved "contagious pox, the disease spread throughout the city and captaincies, causing such damage to the Indians that most died, while also killing some children of the earth [*filhos da terra*] who had some mixed blood" (Bettendorf, 1990).

The epidemic provided an excellent opportunity for Bettendorf (1990) to emphasize the harm caused by the sacrilegious expulsion of the missionaries a short time earlier. So evident was this mistake, he writes, that the colonists themselves asked the priests, banished from the indigenous villages, to return in order to administer the sacraments and care for the Indians. There was no doubt that God had sent the 'pox plague' to punish "the entire state after the people had risen up against the missionary priests from the Company of Jesus" (p.242).

The Luxembourgian missionary was not the only one to attribute a larger meaning to the smallpox that ravaged Maranhão in the 1660s. An anonymous manuscript, certainly Jesuit in origin, on the 1661 mutiny referred to the epidemic as the "harsh sword blow of Divine Justice." Hence in a description similar to that of the Biblical plagues, the text narrated: "the air has been so corrupted that a vehement plague of pox is consuming everything" (*Notícias dos sucessos...*, 8 ago. 1662, p.181).

The priests of the Company of Jesus attributed the smallpox epidemic to their own expulsion from the region, but there are various other records that tell us about the seriousness of the outbreak in the state of Maranhão and Pará. Friar Pedro das Neves, a Franciscan missionary, for example, wrote to his superiors about the numerous difficulties

confronted by the friars in Maranhão. He warned that this was compounded above all by the "large number of deaths caused by smallpox among the gentiles, who are the very remedy of these lands." Not only had the houses of the colonists been left "without a slave," the villages of free Indians were also becoming uninhabited. Among the missionaries themselves there had also been losses: "they are very few of us left" – forty-eight died and more would die with each passing day (Neves, 10 abr. 1663).

A short while later, it was the officials from the Chamber of São Luís who were complaining to the king about the lack of slaves and labourers, "caused by the pox, which struck the entire state," and which was, they explained, a "plague among these gentiles." The officials lamented that the disease had taken the lives of almost "all the free Indians of the villages subject to Your Majesty," as well as the slaves owned by the colonists (Câmara de São Luís, 22 ago. 1665). The magistrate Maurício de Heriarte similarly relates the desolation caused by the disease. According to the author, on the island of São Luís there had initially been eighteen "large villages of Indians" from diverse nations: after the smallpox outbreak, "they wasted away and just three remained" (Heriarte, 1975, p.171).

### **1695: the 'great death'**

In November 1696, the Overseas Council advised the king about the letters received from the state of Maranhão, sent by the Chambers and the governor. The correspondence told of the 'great death' caused by the 'pox sickness,' which had claimed the lives "not only of the Indians of the hinterland, but also those of the colonists of those conquered lands, and the slaves." The devastation was so great that it had become 'completely impossible' for the colonists to harvest and process their crops (Conselho Ultramarino, 26 nov. 1696). Shortly after, the Council once again warned about smallpox, stressing the deplorable situation in which the state had been left, including in terms of its defence (Conselho Ultramarino, 14 dez. 1696).

Once again it was the priest Bettendorf who commented in more detail on the origin and spread of the disease. A ship has arrived in Maranhão carrying African slaves, the sale of whom would finance the maintenance of the fortresses and whose presence would intensify after the smallpox epidemics, as we shall see. This vessel, the missionary related, had arrived with someone sick from smallpox. However, due to the interest of the colonists, "with their eyes on the Tapanhunos [Africans]," the ship was unloaded and, along with the Africans, "arrived the diarrhoeas and fevers that killed many people" (Bettendorf, 1990).

It is important to remember that the decades of epidemic outbreaks in the state of Maranhão coincided with eruptions of the same disease in the state of Brazil and with droughts and famines in parts of the African continent, as indicated by Dauril Alden and Joseph Miller (1987, p.200-204, 218-220). This undoubtedly reinforces the importance of the African slave trade in the transmission of some of the diseases that spread among the indigenous peoples of Amazonia and the Americas in general (Curtin, 1968; Cook, Lovell 1992, p.218-219; Sá 2008).

According to the priest, the epidemic was compounded by a widespread lack of flour and an attack by Indians on the Mearim and Itapecuru rivers that devastated the cattle

ranches. After ravaging the captaincy of Maranhão, the smallpox spread to the captaincy of Tapuitapera where the disease caused “the same slaughter.” It also struck the captaincy of Caeté. And, according to Bettendorf, the same ship that had introduced the sickness in Maranhão “also took it to Grão-Pará.” Reaching the island of Joanes, the smallpox “raged everywhere, so much so that almost all the Indians died.” From Joanes, the priests of Santo Antônio transported the disease to their abbey in Belém, “and that was enough for them to begin to burn.” The sickness reached various indigenous villages and later spread to the captaincy of Cametá. According to the missionary, the outbreak lasted around four months, having started at the end of August or beginning of September (Bettendorf, 1990, p.585-589; Amaral, 1923, p.37).

Various other accounts mention the destruction caused by the disease in 1695. A letter from the governor Antônio de Albuquerque Coelho de Carvalho (22 jun. 1696) warned about the difficulty of stemming the tide of ‘barbarians’ who were assailing the remoter regions of the eastern border of Maranhão, “because the villages were left almost deserted by the pox disease.” A little over a year later, the governor advised the Overseas Council that, of the Indians imprisoned in the Itapecuru wars and sent to the island of Joanes to form a village, there were left “just a few young men, the rest having died from the pox contagion” (Conselho Ultramarino, 12 nov. 1697a).

The missionaries from the Company, according to Bettendorf (1990, p.586, 588), having lost around eighty Indians from the college of Maranhão and “more than 200 people” in Pará. More than eighty had died among the Capuchins of Santo Antônio, leading them to ask the king for more Indians from the *sertões* (hinterlands) due to the poverty in which they had been left (Conselho Ultramarino, 12 nov. 1697b). Not without reason, after a long seven-month visit to the more remote areas of Amazonia, the governor Coelho de Carvalho, after ‘descending’ (locating, capturing and bringing downriver) some Indians from the hinterland to populate the now desolate villages of Pará and Maranhão, noted how his plans had little effect since “few escaped the terrible diseases of that year” (Conselho Ultramarino, 14 nov. 1697). Indeed, a little time later, based on the news arriving from Maranhão, the Overseas Council warned of the amplitude of the disease, which had not only struck the towns, colonists and their slaves, “but had also reached the hinterlands, killing a huge quantity of Indians” (Satisfaz-se ao q. Sua Maj. ordena..., 9 fev. 1697).

According to correspondence compiled by César Augusto Marques (1970, p.485), the Chamber of São Luís had informed the king in 1696 that “they believed themselves to be almost entirely destroyed in view of the loss of two thousand people.” At the end of the seventeenth century, meanwhile, a petition from the procurator of the state of Maranhão at the Court referred to the ‘pox contagion’ that had killed “among captives and freed slaves the better of five thousand” (Conselho Ultramarino, 21 ago. 1699).

### **1724: the ‘pestilent illness’**

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the state of Maranhão and Pará faced two epidemics, in the 1720s and the 1740s. The epidemic that raged between 1724-1725 caused a large number of deaths among the white population and “more than a thousand slaves,”

especially the Indians, as related by the head magistrate of Pará, José Borges Valério (8 set. 1725).

A short while earlier, the governor João Maia da Gama (2 set. 1725) had given an account of how this "heinous, horrendous and pestilent sickness" had spread. It had begun during the voyage of the bishop of Pará from Maranhão to Belém, during which two Indians became sick in one of the canoes. When they stopped at the village of Caeté, the sick men were left there. However when they arrived at the village of Maracanã there were already another two sick people, who, like the first two, were left there. This strategy, initially adopted to stop the disease from spreading, achieved little since by the time they had landed in Belém another six Indians had come down with smallpox. Their arrival led the governor to isolate the sick in order to prevent further propagation of the disease.

However the measures failed to prevent the disease from spreading. According to the governor, the rest of the rowers from the Company of Jesus and the workers belonging to a sergeant who had travelled in the same canoe as the bishop had also been contaminated. Gradually the contagion propagated across the entire city. To worsen the situation, the sick Indians left behind in the village of Caeté "infected and transmitted the contagion in the said village." Those left in Maracanã also ended up spreading the contamination, "which quickly led more than eighty people, aside from those of whom nothing is known and who died in the forest into which they had fled" (Gama, 2 set. 1725).

Staying with João da Gama's account (2 set. 1725), the flights caused the contagion to spread to the ten or twelve neighbouring villages of the captaincy of Pará. Many Indians died and all the villages were left uninhabited. According to Gama, some of those who fled into the forest did manage to escape the disease, but those who ran away already "wounded by the contagion" ended up dying.

These reports reveal the trepidation that the Indians had of being contaminated with smallpox. Indigenous population frequently fled during the epidemics. The fear of contagion led them to relocate to the hinterland or to neighbouring villages. However these Indians ended up dying en route or, worse, contaminating other localities.

Like the previous epidemics – and although the reports we have of them are not from missionaries – the outbreaks were considered divine punishments for the bad treatment that the Portuguese inflicted on their slaves. The magistrate Borges Valério (8 set. 1725) averred: "the hand of God wished to punish them [the colonists] with the terrible pox contagion." For his part, the governor Maia da Gama (2 set. 1725) wrote: "God wished to show the equality of his justice by removing the miserable Indians from their unjust captivity, taking them to his [Holy] Glory and punishing as a merciful Father their unjust masters."

João Maia da Gama (2 set. 1725) also tells us that as well as the smallpox there was another terrible 'punishment' for the colonists. Coincidentally, the year of the epidemic had been plentiful in terms of crops and fruits, especially cacao, which had enjoyed a bumper year. However, the governor warned, the lack of working colonists to harvest the crops "had deprived them of the means of taking advantage of this fact, thereby punishing their ambition since they had not been content with the fertility and abundance of the victuals that God had bestowed on them."

### **1743, 1749: the 'most pernicious contagion'**

The first account of the epidemic of the 1740s is provided to us by the governor João de Abreu de Castelo Branco (30 nov. 1744), in a letter to the secretary of Maranhão and Overseas. The governor wrote that since August 1743 the captaincy of Pará and all its districts had been suffering from a "great death toll" caused by the pox contagion. The havoc caused had been such that it resulted in a flight from the villages in which a high number of Indians had died. The governor also reported that by then, around the end of 1744, the disease had almost disappeared.

On a journey along the Amazon during this period, Charles-Marie de la Condamine (2000, p.113-114) explained that the "Indians recently arrived in the missions from the woods" were more seriously affected by the disease than the Indians born among the Portuguese or those who had lived at the missions for some time. He also explained that some of the habits of the 'wild' Indians made them more vulnerable to contact with the diseases, such as the custom of painting themselves with annatto and genipap dyes and various oils, which after repeated use blocked up their pores, resulting in worse sores.

Following the emergence of the 1743 contagion, the governor Francisco Pedro de Mendonça Gurjão (26 abr. 1749) informed the king that the contamination in the captaincy of Pará had been started by the contact with the Indians removed from the distant regions of the Rio Negro. The disease had lasted three years and caused a huge death rate "both among Indians and among mestizos and some white colonists." He also reported that in the year he arrived in the state, 1747, the reports of deaths had continued, albeit at a lower level. However in November 1748, visiting the city of São Luís, the governor received advice that colonists had arrived in Pará who had been to the hinterland to harvest forest drugs, only to return with a "new contagious illness." After entering into contact with the 'domestic villages' along the Amazon, "it contaminated this city and its captaincies." This "new illness," according to Antônio Baena (1838, p.228-229), was a measles epidemic.

The governor Francisco Gurjão (26 abr. 1749) also recorded that, on returning to Pará in January 1749, he had received news of the 'reduction' not only of the city of Belém, but also the villages and farms of the colonists, "with a death toll among Indians and mestizos never before seen here." As the governor's letter made clear, the effects of this 'most pernicious contagion' were tragic, since "some populous farms ... were left almost entirely uninhabited, and the same occurred later in the houses of this city [Belém]."

In this same letter still (26 abr. 1749), Francisco Gurjão also ordered the military officers during Holy Week (when the colonists returned to the city) to count the number of dead in the 450 houses with people resident, which comprised half of the city's population, which in total had nine hundred homes. It was calculated that 4,900 people had died in Pará's principal city. Believing there to be fewer residents in the city than the number listed dead, the governor decided to carry out a census of the whole of the captaincy of Pará and nearby regions, such as the villages from the Solimões and Negro rivers as far as the Caeté river. This was a complicated task since as well as the distance involved, people continued to die from smallpox in these localities. Nonetheless, responding to the governor's letter, the Overseas Council (16 maio 1750) presented lists of the number of dead in Pará. One of

these gave the number of 3,348, including the farms run by the Jesuit priests, while the other counted 3,061 dead, referring specifically to the parish of Campina in Belém.

However even more alarming figures were presented in a letter from the officials of the Chamber of Belém to the king in May 1750. Along with various certificates signed by missionaries from the villages of Indians listing the number of dead, there was a "Summary of the people who died in the religious service and among the villages they administer and the residents of this city." The total number killed by the contagion was 18,377, comprising 7,600 residents of Belém and the remainder from the service and indigenous villages of religious orders (Câmara de Belém, 15 set. 1750).

As in various other regions of the Americas, the impact of the various epidemics that struck the state of Maranhão and Pará was highly significant and their effects felt for many years to come. The reasons for the epidemics and their implications for the American continent have been studied by numerous scholars, reflecting the scale of their consequences and the transformations they provoked. Among these studies, various authors have looked to explain the importance of the diseases, notably smallpox, in terms of comprehending the 'success' of the European conquest of American regions, especially Mexico and Peru (Crosby, 1967; McNeill, 1979, p.185-199; Wachtel, 1998, p.200-203), as well as understanding the processes involved in the depopulation of the continent (Cook, Lovell, 1992; Cook, 1999; Livi-Bacci 2006). The reliability of the sources recording epidemics in the colonial past has also been discussed (Joralemon, 1982, p.112-124). The impact of the epidemics has also provoked a debate on the vulnerability of native American populations to European diseases and its implications (Crosby, 1976).

From the sixteenth century onwards, smallpox and other diseases provoked equally dramatic falls in the indigenous population in the Amazonian region, as in the state of Brazil, in both the mission villages and the Portuguese settlements, as well as the hinterlands (Sweet, 1974, p.78-90; Alden, 1985, p.435-437; Moreira Neto, 1988, p.23-24; Hern, 1991, p.452-455; Hemming, 1995, p.139-146; Porro, 1996, p.27-40; Raminelli, 2000; Calainho, 2005, p.68-71; Gurgel, 2009, p.123-130). In all events, at least in the Amazonian region, there are no studies, and perhaps insufficient data, to allow the role of diseases in the depopulation process to be examined apart from the effects of the other factors identified by historiography, including warfare and forced labour. Moreover our interest here is to understand how, in Colonial Amazonia, the diseases were perceived as a threat to the type of society that had been constructed there, prompting concrete actions on the part of the Crown, the authorities, colonists and, of course, the Indians themselves.

On one hand, as David Sweet (1974, p.79) pointed out, the smallpox outbreak represented a "major crisis for the production system, depleting the labor force." As in other Portuguese conquests in the Americas, therefore, the epidemics led to a reorganization of the forms of acquiring and using the workforce in the region, although they did not mean, as some authors argue in relation to the state of Brazil, the decline or atrophying of the forms of forced labour imposed on the Indians (Schwartz, 1978; Alencastro, 2000, p.127-138). On the other hand, from the Portuguese point of view, at least the epidemics of the 1690s comprised a threat to their very sovereignty over the territory of the state of Maranhão and Pará, given the visible diminution in the troops stationed in the region's

fortresses and prisons. Hence, in relation to the literature on the Amazonian region, this article looks to deepen our analysis of the reorganizations that the epidemics caused especially in terms of labour supply.

### **'The remedy of these lands'**

The devastation caused by smallpox in the 1690s and 1720s provoked, on the part of various groups from the colonial society, a new rush for Indians – “the remedy of these lands” as Friar Pedro das Neves defined them – who were increasingly scarce. Hence in 1697, as we have seen, the Overseas Council examined a petition from the Franciscans from the province of Santo Antônio, probably written at the beginning of the year, in which the missionaries recalled that the kings had granted them villages for their subsistence (thirty Indian couples for each of the abbeys of São Luís and Belém). However, according to the Council’s report, they complained that “as well as many others who have died in recent years, in this year 82 people, adult and child, died from smallpox.” The deaths had left the friars “exposed to great misery.” They therefore asked the king to authorize the capture of Indians from the hinterlands (Conselho Ultramarino, 12 nov. 1697b).

Significantly, in the years after the 1690s, and especially the 1720s, there was an upsurge in petitions similar to those of the missionaries, made by colonists asking the Crown for permission to capture Indians from the hinterlands. In fact, we believe that this involved the adaptation of a legal possibility that the Crown had discerned in 1684, in a provision that permitted the Portuguese to capture Indians at the Crown’s cost and administer them privately in village settlements, although this ruling had never actually been implemented (Sobre se conceder administrações..., 2 set. 1684; Mello, 2009, p.258-274).

Hence it is no coincidence that from the end of the 1690s onward various colonists asked the Crown to authorize the capture of Indians, a procedure that had been seldom used, despite being in force since the mid-1680s. At the start of the eighteenth century, the king granted various licenses, such as those given to José Portal de Carvalho (Sobre se conceder a José Portal de Carvalho..., 1948), José da Cunha de Eça (Sobre se conceder a José da Cunha d’Eça..., 1948), Hilário de Moraes Bittancourt (Sobre se conceder licença a Hilário de Moraes..., 1948), and Thomas Beckman (Sobre a licença concedida a Thomas Roque Man..., 1948). This legal device was increasingly used to compensate for the labour shortage during a period of intense scarcity of indigenous workers due to the epidemics.

The possibility of recruiting workforces through private capture expeditions becomes clearer during the smallpox outbreak of 1720, when the number of colonists who ended up requesting authorization for slave raids increased noticeably. In the aforementioned letter of September 1725, the magistrate Borges Valério (8 set. 1725) describes the epidemic responsible for devastating the state in 1724 and warns about the “consternation in which these colonists find themselves” following the death of so many slaves, principally the Indians “who are extremely necessary to all trade and the sustentation of the peoples.”

While the epidemic continued to spread through the state, in January 1725, the colonist Jerônimo Vaz Vieira (c.1724-1725) asked for permission to capture 150 Indian couples since he owned two mills, one producing sugar and the other sugar cane rum, and had



lost around fifty slaves due to "a large contagion that struck this state." Likewise, alleging that their Indian slaves had died in the 'general contagion,' requests for permission to carry out private capture expeditions were made in 1726 and 1727 by José Oliveira (1726), José dos Prazeres (c.1725-1726; *Sobre se conceder a Jerônimo Vaz Vieira...*, 6 jun. 1726) and Antônio Machado Novais (c.1725-1726), as well as missionaries from the Carmo and Mercês Churches (*Se dá licença aos Padres do Carmo e Mercenários...*, 1948; Gama, 13 set. 1726), among many others.

Although during this period the practice represented a solution to the labour shortage, it was difficult to implement if the legal stipulations were followed. In September 1727, the governor João Maia da Gama rued the difficulty faced by the colonists who had to make use of captured Indians at their own cost, since not all the Portuguese lived close to the villages where they were captured. To illustrate this problem, the governor declared that in the year he assumed office (1722), they had been granted thirty charters allowing the capture of Indians. However only one had been undertaken by the time he wrote the letter, a case where the colonist concerned lived close to the village settlement (Gama, 22 set. 1727).

On the 13th of April the following year a royal letter sought to alleviate the problems engendered by the private slave raids. To solve the labour shortage, bearing in mind the representation made by the attorney of the Indians concerning the disregard for the law on conducting slave capture expeditions and the sharing out of the Indians, the letter ordered that the expeditions should only be carried out by public authorities and "on no account by private persons." It also ruled that the Indians should be registered in books and that they should be distributed beyond the villages to the "mills and colonists of this state" according to the needs of each colonist (*Sobre a forma do descimento...*, 1948).

—According to Márcia Mello (2009, p.271-274), the law that banned the realization of private capture expeditions failed to have the impact desired by the Crown. Alexandre de Souza Freire, who took over the government of Maranhão precisely in 1728, interpreted the letter and presented it to the Council of Missions as though it "opened up the wilderness to the colonists," allowing the Council to issue charters allowing captures. This question had been discussed in a meeting of the Council in which it was decided that the colonists who needed the Indians should send a request to the Council, which would assess the merit of the request based on the colonist's needs. Consequently in 1728 a considerable number of charters for captures were granted (we found 17 concessions) with the aim of solving the labour shortage problem, based on the idea that the Indians privately captured could now, according to the understanding of the royal letter by the Portuguese, be distributed directly to the colonists.

It should be emphasized that all these charters contained the justification that the colonists had no Indians because many of their slaves had died in the 'general contagion' and that to assist the work of the colonists and the Royal Treasury itself – due to the increase in income that would be achieved through the tithes paid on production – the petition should be granted to remedy this situation.

In the two decades of the 1690s and 1720s in which non-human forces exacerbated the shortage of indigenous workers for the colonists and missionaries, we can observe the use

of the indigenous capture policy produced through the articulation of mechanisms that granted powers to the colonists, like the Council of Missions. Consequently we can note how socioeconomic questions shaped by the interests of the Crown and especially the colonists led to the redrafting of policies in response to an extreme labour crisis at a time when smallpox was devastating the colonists and the indigenous populations, as well as heavily reducing the royal income. Dauril Alden (1985, p.437-438) rightly observes that the terrible epidemics of the 1740s created the critical conditions inherited by the Pombal ministry at the start of the 1750s. We need to investigate, therefore, the extent to which smallpox and measles influenced another important alteration in relation to indigenous labour, namely the Pombaline reforms allowing the unrestricted freedom of the Indians and ending the secular administration of the villages of free Indians by regular clergy, both in 1755.

### **'Ships of blacks'**

One of the responses to the huge indigenous death toll – beyond the general complaints about the misery in which the state had been left – was the recourse to slaves coming from Africa. The idea that the state of Brazil had progressed thanks to the African workforce was common in petitions and documents sent from Maranhão (MacLachlan, 1974, p.113-114; Chambouleyron, 2004, p.102-104). It was natural, then, that during periods of crisis, the colonists turned to the traffic in African slaves as a solution to the lack of indigenous workers.

In 1665, for example, the councillors of the Chamber of São Luís wrote to the Overseas Council to point out that the suffering of the colonists of Maranhão had been presented various times to the king. As far as the councillors were concerned, the reason for the state's failure to prosper was the "large shortage of slaves" (Câmara de São Luís, 22 ago. 1665). The councillors indeed complained that over the previous four years few slaves had come from the hinterland, "which has reduced the production of sugar and other farm crops." This was combined with the smallpox epidemics, which had decimated the Indians of the villages and killed the slaves of the colonists. This was why, they claimed, "finding themselves disillusioned and in desperate need, they hired merchants from the kingdom to send them Tapanhunos from Angola and Guiné, in order to do everything to keep the farms going." The councillors had been advised that merchants wished to send Africans to the state of Maranhão in order for the traders to ask for wavers on the royalties paid on the cargo brought by the ships. The councillors of São Luís asked the King to grant these wavers, paying just half the royalties on the shiploads. In addition, they asked for the traders to be allowed free passage to sail to the state (Câmara de São Luís, 22 ago. 1665). Having received the petition from the Chamber of São Luís, the Overseas Council forwarded their request to the attorney of the Treasury, who declared that the experience indeed proved "that the farms of Maranhão could not [produce well] with the Christian Indians living in the villages of the state, nor with the gentiles who are brought from the hinterlands." At its meeting, the Overseas Council (19 dez. 1665) agreed with the attorney's assessment and insisted that the Chamber's petition be accepted, "so they [the colonists]

have the people who cultivate their lands with which the state will grow and the royal revenues will increase, which cannot be done without the said slaves."

A similar situation took place in the 1690s. In the meeting in which it warned about the magnitude of the devastation wrought, the Overseas Council itself (26 nov. 1696) suggested that the colonists of Maranhão should be sent a shipment of Africans immediately, "because otherwise not only will they not be able to assist the work of the mills and the cultivation of their fruits, they will also face huge losses in the trade on which they subsist." A year later, the councillors again asked for another provision of slaves as "had been practiced in recent years," now though due to an 'extremely urgent' cause, namely the devastation caused by the diseases (Satisfaz-se ao q. Sua Maj ordena..., 9 fev. 1697). A few days later, the king replied to the governor that, owing to the deaths caused by the smallpox epidemic, he had decided to assist "thereby with a provision of Negros as well as some infantry support" (Para o mesmo..., 14 fev. 1697). In 1698 the Overseas Council reported that due to the 'great death toll' among the Indians and the slaves themselves who had been sent in the previous years, it would be convenient to continue with the provision of Africans, "because by this means not only would they gain the benefit of having the people necessary to serve them and work on their fruit crops, but as a consequence for Your Majesty's Treasury, since the abundance of the harvest will make a big difference to the revenue from the contracts" (Dá-se conta a V. Maj. do acento..., 4 maio 1698). The first slave trade route to the state of Maranhão and Pará, consolidated between the mid-1690s and the mid-1700s, would also seem to have been stimulated among other factors by the recurring needs of the colonists as a result of the dreaded smallpox (Chambouleyron, 2006, p.82-85).

In the eighteenth century, the smallpox outbreaks once again led the colonists and authorities to suggest and demand the dispatch of Africans to Maranhão to save them. The case cited by Jerônimo Vaz Vieira, master of the Pará mill, is a prime example. In a request written in 1725 or 1726, Vaz Vieira, complaining of the deaths of his 'worker slaves' and observing that "some ships carrying slaves customarily arrive at the port from the Guinea coast," requested that they sell him "twenty of the said slaves for a fair price" so that his mills could be kept running (Vieira, c.1725-1726).

At the end of the 1740s, councillors from the Chamber of Belém complained of the 'rigorous epidemic' that had reduced the captaincy of Pará "to the misery and penury of its beginnings," the worst of the damage being the "ruin caused to the slave contingent, of which the colonists are so deprived that they see their crops and plantations left to rot." Requesting as usual that the king authorize the retrieval of Indians, the councillors added that "as this remedy is still insufficient to replace the many thousands of slaves [who] perished in this plague, we beseech Your Majesty to send some vessels of black slaves for them to be shared among the colonists" (Câmara de Belém, 30 maio 1749).

In 1749 it was the governor of Maranhão, Francisco Pedro de Mendonça Gurjão, according to the report of the Overseas Council which lamented the "deplorable state to which the city of Pará has been reduced." It seemed to the governor that given the "great number of Indians and mestizos devoured by the contagion" the king should send succour to the colonists of the state in the form of "some shipments of slaves from the Gold

Coast, Guinea and the Cacheu Islands.” With a favourable opinion from the attorney of the Royal Treasury – who also suggested that they send African from the kingdom to Maranhão – the Overseas Council (16 maio 1750) was equally in favour of the “introduction of the blacks from Africa as already practiced on another occasion.”

A short while after the meeting of the Overseas Council, a new letter from the governor, Mendonça Gurjão, emphasized the terrible situation of the colonists because of the diseases, referring to the ‘formidable contagion’ that afflicted the Portuguese in the state of Maranhão. For the governor (13 ago. 1750), the “great decadence and consternation of this people” can only be solved with the help of “immediate shipments of slaves from the Cacheu Islands, the Gold Coast and Guinea.” If not, the governor warned, “the final ruin of this captaincy will surely ensue.” In September 1750 it was the turn of the officials from the Chamber of Belém to beseech the king to “send some ships of blacks,” given the extermination of the workers (Câmara de Belém, 15 set. 1750). However, in contrast to what happened at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, the epidemics in the 1720s and 1740s do not seem to have led to the development of a slave trade route to the state of Maranhão and Pará. At least there is no record of ships during these years (Silva, 2008; Barbosa, 2009).

### **“People needed to staff its garrison”**

The 1690s saw a major effort from the authorities to enlist troops to be sent to Maranhão, the Crown concerned by the incessant French incursions in the cabo do Norte region. The first reference to the dispatch of soldiers from the Madeira Islands to Maranhão is found in an opinion given by the former governor Gomes Freire de Andrade at a meeting of the Overseas Council. Between 1695 and 1696, the former governor, commenting on letters sent by the governor and head captain of Pará, highlighted the lack of men at the state’s forts. The Overseas Council (18 jan. 1696) accepted the arguments of Gomes Freire de Andrade and suggested that men be dispatched from the Madeira Islands at the costs of the Royal Treasury. Organized by the council itself (Termo de obrigação..., 2 mar. 1696), the voyage failed due to a mutiny on the ship carrying the soldiers (Conselho Ultramarino, 26 fev. 1698, 12 nov. 1698).

At the end of 1696 the smallpox epidemic once more led the Overseas Council to recommend that the king dispatch soldiers recruited in the Madeira Islands. The councillors warned the Portuguese monarch Pedro II that even “without this fatality” the state of Maranhão was already “very small in forces for its defence and its main forts are without garrisons with suitable people.” Hence the eruption of the disease would only worsen the vulnerable military situation in the region. This made it necessary to recruit another one hundred soldiers to be sent to Maranhão at the costs of the Royal Treasury (Conselho Ultramarino, 14 dez. 1696).

In February 1697, in correspondence with the governor, Pedro II reinforced the dispatch of ‘another’ hundred soldiers from the Madeira Islands because the “death toll there [in the state of Maranhão] caused by the pox” had not only taken the life of indigenous workers, but had also left “the prisons without the people needed to staff its garrison”

(Para o mesmo..., 14 fev. 1697). In September 1697, the Overseas Council informed the king that the ship had arrived in March in the Madeira Islands and that the governor had undertaken everything with "such singular diligence" (Sobre Sua Maj. mandar agradecer..., 27 set. 1697). In a letter dated 21<sup>st</sup> July 1697, the governor finally advised the king that one hundred soldiers had arrived from the 'Islands,' half of whom remained in São Luís while the other half went to Pará (Conselho Ultramarino, 18 nov. 1697). In 1698 another two hundred soldiers were brought to the state of Maranhão (Sobre os duzentos soldados..., 10 dez. 1698) – a provision that was repeated over the following years, even into the eighteenth century. Unfortunately the only information known about these soldiers is the number sent and not how many actually arrived, nor their fate. They probably swelled the ranks of some of the companies billeted in the cities and various fortresses scattered throughout the territory, establishing relations with the multifaceted population that formed the contingents of troops in the state of Maranhão and creating various strategies in response to the forms of social control, as a new military history of the region has looked to explore in detail (Gomes, Nogueira, 1999; Nogueira, 2000; Nogueira, 2002, 2008; Viana, 2009).

The smallpox epidemic, therefore, exposed the fragility of the state of Maranhão and Pará's defences. Composed of convicts, Indians, mestizos and Africans living in poor conditions, the state's troops were clearly highly susceptible to the transmission of diseases, particularly given their living conditions, whose impact became evident when it was believed that the borders were under the most serious threat, the case of the 1690s.

### **Final considerations**

The outbreaks of smallpox and measles examined here led to a multifaceted response on the part of the Crown, the authorities, colonists and the Indians themselves – many of whom simply fled from the contagion, as we have seen.

The impact of the epidemics can be seen from two perspectives. On one hand, the need to consider the dissemination of the diseases in order to understand the transformation of the labour sphere in colonial Amazonia. These 'fundamental forces,' not derived from humans, which authors like Donald Worster (1989, p.289, 1990, p.1090) suggest that we should examine to understand human experience, resulted in the reorganization of practices and conceptions that enabled access to the workforces. Without these workers, whether indigenous or African, it was believed that the state of Maranhão and Pará could neither 'grow' nor 'remain the same.' Hence the importance that the private slave capture expeditions began to have after the smallpox epidemics of the 1690s and the significance of African labour for colonists and authorities. It can be observed that one solution did not exclude the other. This means reconsidering the idea of the arrival of Africans as a 'substitution' of native labourers, though this does not mean that Indians and Africans were not seen in very different ways by the Portuguese.

On the other hand, we need to call attention to the demographic impacts of the diseases and, in the case of the 1690s, to their ambiguity. Although, as observed, it is difficult to measure the human losses with any accuracy – except for the epidemics at the

end of the 1740s – the outbreaks of diseases represented an irremediable demographic collapse, especially in the native populations, and continued to assail the region throughout the entire colonial period (Chermont, 1885; Vianna, 1975, p.35-51; Meireles, 1994, p.214-218). Something that becomes evident in the examined accounts is the idea of devastation, undoubtedly aggravated by the type of society constructed in the region, based on the slave and compulsory labour of indigenous people (many of them settled in village communities, also structured for the purpose of organizing labour) and to a lesser extent of Africans.

Curiously the smallpox epidemic of the 1690s had an ambiguous impact on the region's demographics. As in other years, the Indians were the main victims of the contagion and the eruption of the disease led to a new response from the Crown to replace the contingents of workers and soldiers in the state's forts. Hence although thousands of Indians died between the 1690s and the middle of the following decade, the population was replenished with the arrival of hundreds of Africans and recruits from the Madeira Islands whose presence in Amazonia was also determined by the impact of smallpox. At the same time, both at the end of the seventeenth century and in the 1720s, the diseases seems to have caused a large movement among indigenous populations, provoked by the practice of private capture expeditions, resulting in a reconfiguration of the indigenous population close to the Portuguese communities, who comprised the bulk of the workforce.

The formidable contagions that devastated colonial Amazonia over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, therefore, also shaped the society slowly constructed there, influencing the composition of its population and the ways in which labour was organized in the territory.

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Sobre se conceder administrações de Aldeias livres de gentios aos moradores do Estado do Maranhão q. ele baixarem com as condições q. esta provisão declara. Códice 93, f.377-378 (Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino). 2 set. 1684.

SOBRE SE CONCEDER A JOSÉ DA CUNHA D'EÇA...  
Sobre se conceder a José da Cunha d'Eça faculdade para descer sessenta casais de gentio forro das brenhas e centro dos matos junto ao seu engenho real de açúcar. Lisboa. 17 abr. 1702. *Anais da Biblioteca Nacional*, Rio de Janeiro, v.66, p.217. 1948.

SOBRE SE CONCEDER A JERÔNIMO VAZ VIEIRA...  
Sobre se conceder a Jerônimo Vaz Vieira possa descer à sua custa 80 casais de índios. Lisboa. Códice 270, f.7-7v (Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino). 6 jun. 1726.

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SOBRE SUA MAJ. MANDAR AGRADECER...

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