

Article

The Native Clergy in Portuguese America: The Presence of Descendants of Indians and Africans in the Secular Clergy (c. 1670–c. 1820)

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Abstract: This article conducts an analytical overview of the controversies and acts that resulted in the formation of a native clergy in Portuguese America. The analysis is limited to the secular clergy and the ways by which descendants of Africans and Indians were incorporated into this segment of the Church. The author addresses the way parts of these groups developed strategies to access the priesthood, seeking to escape subaltern positions and consolidating processes of social mobility.

Keywords: secular clergy; social stigmas; African and indigenous ancestry; social mobility

1. Introduction

The expansion of the Iberian Catholic monarchies in the modern world did not take place without mediators, including the secular clergy, which played a crucially important role, although sometimes undervalued by the specialized historiography. As noted by William Taylor, the parish priests, among the outstanding representatives of this secular clergy, were important cultural mediators insofar as they established connections and disseminated values in their relations with other clergy, the agents and officers of the Crown, the local elites, and the humbler population (Taylor 1999). In the composition of this segment of the clergy, Christianization, as a gradual process that drew on local consent, especially through participation in the elites' pre-existing power devices (Xavier 2008, pp. 24–27), did not waive its own adaptability to the various regional conditioning factors that constituted the Portuguese Empire.

The preference for European priests, based on the understanding that they were more attuned to the Church's process of Christianization, had to be supplanted by the contingencies of a pragmatism that was also consistent with an institution that viewed the expansion of the faith as the central issue in the missionary inclination of the modern age. The clergy's ranks needed to incorporate non-European peoples, although continuing to believe that the sons of the conquered lands were less worthy, even when some had European fathers (Lacerda 2016, pp. 212–14).

Adaptability was essential, and with it, invariably, the mestizo nature that imposed itself on this clergy's formation. Expectations developed, not only in the Church and the monarchies concerning the candidates, but also in the various populations that glimpsed multiple opportunities in the ecclesiastical careers, mainly for developing strategies of upward social mobility for their offspring and distinguishing and distancing them from what they viewed as subaltern conditions. The admixtures were related to this process of differentiation since they mixed not only biological and cultural traits, but also "qualities", forms of classification of the peoples (Oliveira and Paiva 2023, p. 11).

This article proposes to discuss some of these questions based on a synthetic (and thus non-exhaustive) view of the secular clergy that was formed in Portuguese America, highlighting the incorporation of descendants of African slaves and descendants of Indians into the ranks of this segment of the clergy. The time frames are the latter half of the 17th century, when the classificatory systems in the Portuguese Empire became more



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rigid, and the early 19th century, in the period preceding Brazil's process of political independence.

The initial time frame in the 17th century coincides with the historiography, demonstrating how the dissemination of standards of pure blood influenced the definition of classificatory systems for descendants of Africans and Indians in the Portuguese and Spanish Empires (Figueirôa-Rêgo and Olival 2011, p. 211; Marcocci 2011, p. 54; Paiva 2023; Martínez 2008, pp. 207–24). I highlight the changes in classification that were introduced in the 18th century, especially for Indians, in the context of the Pombaline Reforms. Although the stigmas did not disappear completely, the Pombaline Directorate (1757) granted freedom to the Indians and stopped them from continuing to be classified as “Negros”, in a clear process of differentiating them from the Africans and their descendants (Guedes 2015).

However, the pure-blood ideology maintained the suspicion of incomplete adherence to Catholicism by descendants of Africans and Indians. Meanwhile, the stigma attached to manual labor, and especially to slavery, reinforced the notion of lack of “quality” or “honor” that plagued the descendants of these groups (Dutra 2011, pp. 101–14; Raminelli 2012, pp. 699–23; Martínez 2008, pp. 207–24). Martínez demonstrates how the legal discourse adopted by the Spanish monarchy tended to acknowledge the adherence of Indians and Blacks to the Catholic faith, positing especially about Indians that they were “old Christians” and thus dissociated from the stain of impure blood. Still, throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, there was no shortage of theological writings defending the opposite position, claiming that the blood of idol-worshipping ancestors ran in the veins of Indians and Blacks, and therefore that especially the descendants of Africans could be viewed as the equivalent of Jews, Moors, and their descendants. According to the author, this discursive ambivalence permeated the 17th and 18th centuries, demonstrating the coexistence of conceptions that associated both origin and social status, as well as origin and faith (Martínez 2008, pp. 207–24). Ambivalent discourse can also be identified in the process of classification of African descendants during their applications for ordainment into the secular clergy in Portuguese America (Oliveira 2020a, pp. 787–93).

The issue of ambivalences in this classificatory process leads me to understand them outside of a discourse that anticipates, for the 17th and 18th centuries, categories of “racialization” that are not proper to them. Thus, I do not believe that there was a reactivation of concepts that had already existed since the 13th century (Schaub 2016, pp. 101–24), since the concepts themselves are historical categories rather than timeless formulations.

My choice of the latter time frame does not mean that I view the changes in the classificatory system as having happened overnight, but that the provisions introduced in the Constitution of the Brazilian Empire in 1824 would require a more extensive and complex discussion. The new Constitution not only revoked the so-called “blood stain”, which had influenced the classificatory system based on color, but also established a distinction related to the exercise of citizenship, differentiating the “naïve ones” (*ingênuos*), descendants of Africans who were not born slaves, from the freed slaves, who had been born in slavery and were later manumitted. The former, so long as they could prove an income, were allowed the full exercise of political rights, while such rights were limited for the latter (Mattos 2000, pp. 20–21). Considering these issues, any post-1822 analysis would require a discussion beyond the current article's scope.

2. Among the Impediments and Access to the Secular Clergy by Descendants of Indians and Descendants of African Slaves

The ordination of descendants of Indians and Africans into the secular clergy was always controversial in Portuguese America, at least until the early 19th century. The exemptions from the “color defect” that were issued to benefit descendants of Africans or the stain of “Indian blood” became common expressions in the investiture proceedings for the secular clergy throughout the 18th century. However, the use of such terms did not come naturally, nor was it devoid of specific meaning. The standardization of exemptions implied the definition of a vocabulary that was established, based on the experience of ecclesiastical

agents in the context of a profoundly hierarchical slaveholding society permeated by the values of a political culture from the old regime. Thus, such expressions came to represent a vision of the social classifications based on the groups' ancestry, which was determined by the role of African and indigenous slavery and the understanding that paganism was considered an inherent characteristic of these peoples. The routine use of this vocabulary in the proceedings for ordination into the priesthood, which relied on the attribution of the quality defect and the moral defect, and the possible exemptions, began to gain scope in the latter half of the 17th century and the first decade of the 18th century (Oliveira 2020a, p. 791).

Session 23 of the Council of Trent, which dealt with the priesthood issue, did not establish any impediment to the ordination of descendants of Africans or Indians. Even before the Council, Pope Leo X, in 1518, had already taken a favorable position concerning the ordination of "Ethiopians, Indians, and Africans" in a hearing conducted by the King of Portugal, Dom Manuel I, and the Bishop of Lamego (Brásio 1953, pp. 155–56). Pope Gregory XIII, in 1576, in the papal bull *Nuper ad nos*, declared that mestizos could also receive the sacred orders so long as they could speak some indigenous language (Menegus and Salvador 2006, p. 26).

The list of impediments began to appear more clearly in the synodal statutes. According to the trend expressed by Felipe II, in 1585, the Third Mexican Provincial Council determined that "no Indians or mestizos, whether descendants of Indians or Moors in the first degree, or mulattos in the same degree, will be admitted to the orders" (Third Mexican Provincial Council—Book I, Title IV. Apud: Suess 1992, p. 388). The *Synodal Constitutions of the Archdiocese of Lisbon*, was approved in 1640 and remained in force in Portuguese America until the promulgation of the *First Constitutions of the Archdiocese of Bahia* in 1707, established as an impediment to receiving the holy orders, being "part Hebrew or of other impure nation, or of negro or mulatto" (*Constituições Sinodais do Arcebispado de Lisboa* 1656, p. 98). The wording was the same that was later reproduced in the Bahian Constitutions, although the latter was even stricter since they required that such impediments be verified even during the individual's initial application for induction into the minor orders (*Constituições Primeiras do Arcebispado da Bahia* 2010, p. 224). Theoretically, the Lisbon Constitutions admitted tonsured clergymen *in minoribus* without their having to submit to proof of exemption from the impediments, a dispensation that was vetoed by the Bahian Constitutions (Oliveira 2014a, p. 212).

The synodal constitutions in Portuguese America did not raise any explicit formal impediment to the ordination of Indians or their descendants. Considering that slavery was one of the stains used as the basis for impediment to ordination, in principle, the Indians and their descendants should not have to bear such a stigma. However, ever since the first decree emancipating the Indians in 1570, signed by King Sebastião, the controversy never failed to exist. The three great emancipation laws, in 1609, 1686, and 1755, were all fraught with intense debates because even allowing that the Indians were rational and therefore free beings, the situations for them to be enslaved continued to be acknowledged, such as the condition for just war and capture. Furthermore, arguments that acknowledged the force of customs were defended considering the situation of the 17th-century *paulistas* (São Paulo pioneers), since according to these ideas, the common law right to the enslavement of Indians overrode the positive law (Ruiz 2002, p. 136; Perrone-Moisés 1992, p. 117; Zeron 2011, pp. 309–68; Zeron and Ruiz 2008, pp. 332–65).

As for the fear of ordaining Indians and their descendants, the idea of their souls' inconstancy associated with their customs, classified as pagan, appeared to weigh further, reinforced by Jesuit proselytizing since the 16th century (Castro 2002, pp. 183–90). This explains the argument by Father Luís da Grã in a letter in 1556 to the Superior General Ignatius of Loyola, when he stated, "No other people appear so readily for the Jesuit Order in all this Coast of Brazil as the mestizos, known here as *mamalucos*, yet they have no talent for such" (ARSI—Carta de Luís da Grã ao Padre Mestre Inácio prepósito general da Companhia de Jesus). However, this position was not a consensus even among the Jesuits

themselves. Father José de Anchieta was against ordaining Indians, but he admitted that the mestizos could be sent to the College of Coimbra for instruction. Father Manoel da Nóbrega believed that the natives could be ordained to accelerate the conversion process (Azzi 1992, pp. 201–7).

Indeed, even if the Constitutions of Bahia did not include any formal impediment to ordaining Indians and their descendants, there were controversies concerning the rules' relevance. This explains why some felt that the natives were unfit to rise to the clergy's ranks (Resende 2014, pp. 113–16).

The reflection on the nature attributed to the “defects” and their basis appears to be an important avenue for understanding what were viewed as impediments. In the Lisbon Constitutions, the definition of irregularities for receiving and exercising the priestly orders was already based on the idea of the defect, as expressed in Title LII—*On the irregularity born of defect* (*Constituições Sinodais do Arcebispado de Lisboa* 1656, p. 561). In Title LXXII—*On exemption from the irregularities*—the Bahian Constitutions provide that in the irregularities born of the defects, only His Holiness the Pope could issue such an exemption or grant this prerogative to the bishops. It was reported that the ultramarine bishops could receive licenses from the Pope every ten years to issue such exemptions broadly (*Constituições Primeiras do Arcebispado da Bahia* 2010, pp. 589–90). The Bahian Synodal Constitutions referred to the ten-year powers that had been special concessions by the Holy See to the bishops in Iberian America since the 16th century. Among these concessions, the prelates were granted the power to dispense with impediments related to ordination into the priesthood as well as matrimonial impediments, besides granting indulgences and other privileges. In 1749, the Jesuit Simão Marques published *Brasília pontifícia*, in which he analyzed each of these powers granted to the bishop of Rio de Janeiro in 1725 (Souza 2014, p. 187).

According to the Bahian Constitutions, the defects were among the irregularities, which were impediments to exercising the priestly orders. Although the *Constitutions* did not explicitly mention the “defect of color”, much less purported defects in the Indians, I believe one can interpret that these defects were partly deduced from what was defined as irregularity by defect of origin, namely, “that by which the slaves are irregular” (*Constituições Primeiras do Arcebispado da Bahia* 2010, p. 585).

In the interpretation of the ten-year concessions, precisely, the power to exempt candidates from irregularities to receive the priestly orders, Simão Marques defined irregular character as a certain moral incapacity to receive and exercise the sacred orders, justified according to some impropriety stemming from guilt or any other defect. He claimed that irregularities could be acquired by any of the following: (1) a defect of the soul (demented, furious, epileptic, illiterate, neophyte, or recent convert); (2) a defect of the body (blind, deaf, mute, crippled, hermaphrodite, unusually ugly, hunchback, leper, paralytic, giant, or pygmy); (3) legal infamy (resulting from one's own crime or that of the parents, or one's abject condition); or (4) a defect of freedom, birth, or leniency (Marques 1749, pp. 36–38). I believe that the proceedings of the priestly inductions drew on this association between the defect of birth and the defect of the soul as part of their basis. The exemptions from the “defect of color” and from Indian blood thus associated the defect of quality with the moral defect, that is, lack of honor and the idea of a perennially incomplete Christianization (Oliveira 2020a, pp. 792–93).

The idea of incomplete or recent Christianization, a situation evocative of neophytes, resumed a theological debate that began in the 13th century, referring to the inability of Jews and Muslims to exercise certain functions, including the priesthood. In the context of the expansion of modern Christianity and the resulting contact with African and American peoples, this discussion was resumed within its specificities, not as a direct transposition of medieval concepts (Giannini 2021).

Dispensation from the so-called defects aimed at ordaining into the priesthood was thus not new, because in Portugal, since the late 16th century, such exemptions had already been granted to the “*cristãos-novos*” (literally “new Christians”, or Jews recently converted to Catholicism). In Portuguese America, some bishops, given the constant complaints

of shortage of clergymen to administer the sacraments, relied on exempting candidates that carried the so-called “stain of blood”. The ecclesiastic dispensation thus comprised a complex facet of distributive justice, anchored in case practice, like the royal decrees that granted privileges and established hierarchies (Olival and Monteiro 2003, p. 1222; Feitler 2007, p. 53; Oliveira 2014a, p. 215).

Even assuming that the exemptions granted to descendants of Africans and Indians were not a panacea accessible to most members of these groups, they should be analyzed as an important factor in the intercession between the bishops’ pragmatism in spreading Catholicism in conquered areas and the interests and agencies of families descending from Africans and Indians, who accessed the priestly functions for their sons and thereby attempted to escape the stigmas and obtain better positions in the social hierarchies.

Few studies refer to the participation in the secular clergy by these groups. However, they had been there since at least the latter half of the 17th century. In a satirical poem that expressed discontentment with what he viewed as a breach of hierarchies, Gregório de Matos addressed his critique to “Father Lourenço Ribeiro, a mulatto who was vicar at the Parish of Passé” (Matos 2010, pp. 49–52):¹

A white man, haggard,
A mulatto braggard,
A white man depleted,
A mongrel, conceited,
Of limited learning,
of ignorance, ignorant,
presumptuous and vain,
when debating, he feigns.
That a dog cloaked as priest,
by the Holy See’s grace,
be so daring as to bark
in a white man’s face;
And such arrogance ordained
by bishop, and governor,
courtier, and admiral sustained,
having fleets in Maranhão:
Such are the miracles of Brazil.
(...)
What shall the dog preach,
such a lowly creature, he,
knowing naught of scripture
save the papers that set him free?
From four old sermons,
he draws substance and succour,
penned by friends more learned;
And if friends keep a dog,
Such are the miracles of Brazil.
(...)

Constantly at odds with the poet, who was the son of a family of blueblood sugar plantation owners in Bahia, and based on what can be gleaned from the poem that defiles him, Father Lourenço was surrounded and protected by a solid network of social relations that downplayed his defects of origin. Corroborating this, Gregório de Matos himself decries the “miracles of Brazil” that allowed a mulatto dressed as a priest to stand up to a white man and who even had friends that would support him in such arrogance. Lourenço Ribeiro was introduced as the parish priest of Our Lady of the Incarnation of Passé in the diocese of Bahia in 1693 and was considered a distinguished holy orator, having published several of his sermons in Lisbon (Rubert n.d.). As Gregório de Matos admitted, while the

Holy See saw no problem with his priesthood, part of the local elite refused to tolerate what they viewed as arrogance, in the poet's own words.

Some bishops took a pragmatic stance on the issue, however. When Dom Francisco de São Jerônimo took office over the Rio de Janeiro diocese in 1702, he faced an expanding frontier with the beginnings of gold and diamond mining in Brazil's hinterlands. Pressured by the need to provide spiritual guidance to the inhabitants of Minas Gerais, the bishop spared no effort to supply the frontier region with parishes and vicars, which meant ordaining more priests. During his pastoral tenure, which concluded in 1721, 10.7% of the candidacies for ordination into the secular clergy were submitted by descendants of Africans and 1.3% by descendants of Indians. Dom Francisco ordained practically all of them (Oliveira 2021, pp. 126–30; Ferreira 2016, p. 70).

His successors to the diocese in the first half of the 18th century did not take the same position. Bishop Antônio de Guadalupe, whose episcopal government lasted from 1725 to 1740, received 1.2% of the candidacies for ordination from descendants of Africans and none from descendants of Indians, and he ordained none of them, as far as is known (Oliveira 2021, pp. 127–32). The bishop's stance appears to have discouraged such candidacies, as he expressed in a message to the Magistral Canon of the See in Lisbon, in 1726, referring to a mulatto priest whom he had summoned to discuss the sacraments: "A village priest, 82 years of age, of great capacity and highly lettered, contrary in all respects to his color, since he is a mulatto" (AHU-CU-Ofício do Bispo do Rio de Janeiro, D. Frei Antônio de Guadalupe, to the magistral canon of the Holy Patriarchal Church of Lisbon, Dom João da Mota e Silva 1726). In this same missive, Bishop Guadalupe went on to express his disagreement with the policy of his predecessor, who he believed had adopted an overly liberal stance, since ease in granting exceptions to everything had become the custom in the diocese (Oliveira 2021, p. 132).

Bishop Antônio's successor took a similar position. Under Bishop João da Cruz, from 1741 to 1745, no descendants of Indians applied for ordination, while the candidacies of descendants of Africans reached 3.7% of all the requests for ordination in the Rio de Janeiro diocese. However, this percentage represented a single case, a candidate who had left the diocese to be ordained in the diocese of Angola, believing that the bishop's stance on the other side of the Atlantic would be more favorable to his cause. The case was processed in Rio de Janeiro at the request of the See in Luanda, where the candidate ended up being ordained (Oliveira 2021, pp. 127–33).

The bishop that presided over the diocese in Rio de Janeiro in 1747, Dom Antônio do Desterro, was the same who had been in Angola and had sent the above-mentioned requisition to the diocese in Rio de Janeiro. When Dom Antônio was named to head the diocese in Angola, in a letter to the Ultramarine Council, dated to 1738, he expressed a position in favor of building a seminary in which "negros and mulattos" could be turned into missionaries that would work more efficiently at converting the pagans (Oliveira 2021, p. 134).

Named to the Rio de Janeiro diocese, where he exercised his pastoral duties from 1747 to 1773, Bishop Antônio do Desterro wrote in 1757, upon the promulgation of the Directory of Indians, his position in favor of the ordination of natives, stating that boys from the indigenous villages could be enrolled in the two seminaries in the diocese and that after learning Latin, the most skillful could be ordained:

... and hence they cannot fail to become civilized, since this [ordination] is such a powerful means for civilizing the barbarians of Guiné and Angola, who are far more unfit, that it cannot fail to be so as well to civilize a few more rational ones, more fit and skilled in everything.

(RIHGB—Carta do Bispo D. Frei Antonio do Desterro sobre criação de novas freguezias no bispado do Rio de Janeiro 1757, p. 46)

The bishop's idea was that after they were ordained, the Indian priests could attract more natives to the flock. In 1765, in a memorandum to the Naval and Overseas Secretary, Bishop Antônio addressed the issue again, this time involving descendants of Africans.

The bishop complained that with the See vacant, the cathedral chapter of Mariana had sent 80 candidates to Rio de Janeiro to receive the orders, and whom the bishop considered “unworthy and unfit”:

among whom are various mulattos, some barbers and tailors by trade, and white boys pulled off the farms and out of the shops, all of whom so entirely unfit for the holy ministry of the Altar that I deem them utterly unworthy, if what I have heard of them is true, as I believe.

In light of this absurdity, I hereby order to summon them for examination in my presence after the Fleet’s departure, to choose among them only those who prove to be trained, with all the others excluded . . .

(AHU-CU-Rio de Janeiro Avulsos—Ofício do Bispo do Rio de Janeiro, D. Frei Antônio do Desterro ao secretário de estado da Marinha e Ultramar 1765)

The bishop’s complaint had more to do with the mulattos’ and whites’ previous occupations, making them unfit for administering the sacraments. But so long as he examined them in person, the bishop was not refusing to ordain those whom he deemed more fit, and he was not opposed to ordaining mulattos in this case.

Dom José Joaquim Justiniano Mascarenhas Castelo Branco, prelate of Rio de Janeiro from 1773 to 1805, was also not opposed to such ordinations. The article’s next section will discuss cases in which the bishop ordained both descendants of Africans and of Indians. In the latter case specifically, Dom José Joaquim took over the diocese at a critical period in the expansion of Portuguese America’s frontiers to the south and to the west, where the native population was still numerically significant. The bishop wrote the following in a letter to the Naval and Overseas Secretary in 1777:

Meanwhile, the [provincial] general of Goiás has asked me for two secular priests or two regular priests with knowledge of the language of the Indians who in that same captaincy may come to embrace the Holy Catholic faith, to swear obeisance to His High and Loyal Majesty, to teach the dogmas of our holy faith.

And having no secular clergy who know the language, I turned to the provincial of Santo Antônio [the Franciscan monastery in Rio de Janeiro] in all friendship, yet without obtaining the desired results, since neither were there any in his congregation, save one who had some knowledge of the language of other Indians, and I thereby authorized that same provincial to send him to Goiás, where he is now serving.

(AHU-CU-Rio de Janeiro Avulsos, Ofício do Bispo do Rio de Janeiro, D. José Joaquim Justiniano Mascarenhas Castelo Branco ao Secretário de Estado da Marinha e Ultramar 1777)

Such difficulties help explain one of the testimonies recorded in the ordination proceedings for Antônio José de Araújo Silva, a native of the Rio Pardo parish in Rio Grande, the legitimate son of João Cuiu and Maria Ubapêi, Guarani Indians from São Miguel das Missões. A student at the São José Seminary in Rio de Janeiro, Antônio José was ordained in 1785 by Bishop Castelo Branco. A colleague interviewed during the examination of his candidacy *vita et moribus* justified his ordination as follows:

To serve the Church (. . .) and given the dearth of priests in this diocese, especially in [Rio Grande] and more so, those who know the language of that nation, the need is justified for the Church, as made obvious for these reasons, that the cause for ordination will be highly useful for the Church.

(ACMRJ—HS—Antônio José de Araújo Silva. Apud: [Resende 2014](#), p. 119)

Further research is necessary to determine the percentage of such ordinations among all those performed, not only by the bishops of Rio de Janeiro but also by those in other dioceses, although some efforts have been made to expand this field of studies. Bishop Manoel da Cruz headed the diocese of Maranhão from 1739 to 1747 and dispensed with the impediments on grounds of mulatto identity or indigenous ancestry in some 9% of the candidates fit for ordination ([Muniz 2016](#), pp. 83–84). Bishop Manoel took great care to

encourage the priesthood among mestizos under his protection, as in the case of Father Domingos Barbosa, a story I will discuss later. The ordination rate in the Maranhão diocese resembled that of the Mariana diocese from 1748 to 1801, when 9% of the candidates were dispensed from the “mulatto defect” and were found fit to receive the sacramental orders (Villalta 2007, p. 42). At any rate, although the numbers are not massive, one can state that these percentages suggest that such exemptions were normal (Grendi 2009, pp. 26–27), revealing a tendency among the bishops in the evangelization of their flocks, relying on a partially mestizo clergy. And as we will see, this exceptionality likewise expressed the issue of upward social mobility among these segments of the population.

3. Examples of Careers among Mestizo Clergymen in Brazil: Preservation of Family Status and Upward Mobility

In this section, I draw on examples of some individual careers, reconstructed mainly from proceedings for ordainment into the priesthood. These proceedings, consisting largely of testimonies,² allow us to glimpse the social relations established by individuals and their family groups. Viewing these relations allows us to understand the strategies developed in the process of obtaining the priestly orders, that is, the ways that possibilities and uncertainties were administered in the social setting (Levi 2000, pp. 96–99).

I begin by presenting a case which in my view stands out in the second half of the 17th century, the career of Father João de Barcelos Machado. Ordained in 1669, João was the illegitimate son of Father Inácio de Barcelos Machado and the mulatta Felícia Tourinha, born in the city of Rio de Janeiro and baptized in 1644 in the Candelária parish. His paternal grandparents were Luiz de Barcelos Machado and Catarina Machada, and his maternal grandparents were Ventura de Paiva, a tailor, and Isabel da Rocha, a black woman. According to testimony recorded in the proceedings for his induction into the priesthood, at the time João was born, his mother was a slave who belonged to Dona Maria da Rocha. Further, according to the proceedings, his paternal grandparents were “old Christians”, nobility, and members of the city government (ACMRJ-HS-João de Barcelos Machado, notação 3152, Apud: Oliveira 2014b, pp. 31–32; Oliveira and Rodrigues 2022, pp. 38–39).

Two of João de Barcelos’ paternal uncles, Manoel de Barcelos Machado and José de Barcelos Machado, owned sugar plantations and slaves, besides boasting the title of “captain”. Captain José de Barcelos was one of the family’s principal representatives in the so-called local nobility with executive positions in 17th-century Rio de Janeiro. He served two terms as purveyor to the Royal Treasury in 1672 and 1675, besides participating in the military government of the captaincy, as commander of the Fortress of São Sebastião in 1695. From 1675 to 1676, he served as purveyor to the Santa Casa da Misericórdia (Mercy Hospital) in Rio de Janeiro (Oliveira 2014b, p. 32; Oliveira and Rodrigues 2022, p. 39).

The paternal family’s prestige, besides João de Barcelos’ own intellectual background (since he had probably studied in Coimbra, Portugal, where he obtained the title of licentiate), served as factors that helped promote his ecclesiastic career. Beginning in 1670, Father João de Barcelos Machado appeared as the registrar in official proceedings of the Ecclesiastic Chamber of the Rio de Janeiro diocese; beginning in 1688, he held the office of coadjutor for the congregation of the See in the same diocese. In 1701, he took over the pastoral duties in the parish of Our Lady of the Presentation of Irajá, in the coastal lowlands of Rio de Janeiro, where he remained until his death in 1731 (Oliveira 2014b, pp. 34–35; Oliveira and Rodrigues 2022, p. 44).

Father Francisco da Costa Maciel was another case in which family origins and personal intellectual background must have paved the way for his career. In 1708, he began his ordination proceedings by submitting an apostolic brief to the Ecclesiastic Chamber of the Rio de Janeiro diocese to exempt him from the “defects of illegitimacy and color”. Born in Rio de Janeiro, as was João de Barcelos Machado, Francisco Maciel also held the title of licentiate and was also the son of a priest (in turn a licentiate), Bento Curvelo Maciel, collated vicar of the mother church in Vila de São Paulo. According to witnesses in Francisco’s ordination proceedings, he was born when his father still held secular status

and had engaged in relations with a free black woman named Madalena da Conceição. Francisco's paternal grandparents were Captain Antônio Curvelo Escudeiro and Dona Joana do Souto, and his maternal grandparents were identified as blacks from Angola. As with João de Barcelos, Francisco's paternal grandparents were recorded in the proceedings as "outstanding persons" in the city (ACMRJ-HS-Francisco da Costa Maciel, notação 974, Apud: [Oliveira 2020a](#), p. 686).

Ordained in 1709, in 1736, Francisco Maciel submitted another apostolic brief to the vicar general of the Rio de Janeiro diocese, by which he requested his nomination to the position of apostolic notary, which was granted to him the following year with his investiture in this post. The apostolic notaries could be named directly by the Pope and be sworn in later by the vice-chancellor in Rome. This form of nomination was used for those who were not affiliated with a specific diocese. Another modality was through indirect nomination by the Pope and was applied to those who were established in a specific diocese for their duties. The collation was bestowed by the bishop, who performed a background examination of the candidate based on the criteria of family ties and a worthy life, in addition to confirming the candidate's vows. A third modality was based on a request by the diocesan bishop, who received from the Pope the right to create a certain number of notaries ([Valverde 2010](#)).

The case in question appears to have adopted the second approach, since according to the *First Constitutions of the Archdiocese of Bahia*, the notaries were required to show the titles of their collation to the diocesan provisor or vicar general to be admitted and examined (*Constituições primeiras do Arcebispado da Bahia* 2010, p. 863). Local relations were thus important, because submitted as they were to the Ecclesiastic Assembly, it fell to the bishop to admit the candidates, as with the recommendation for and nomination to the position of registrar under the Ecclesiastic Chamber, where the bishops chose highly trusted persons as their representatives, not only for recording diocesan documents, but likewise for assisting in overseeing the congregation's conduct ([Oliveira 2020a](#), p. 687).

A somewhat different profile was identified in the career of Father Domingos Barbosa in the diocese of Maranhão. Domingos was the firstborn son of João Barbosa da Costa and Maria Ribeira, having been baptized in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Victory in 1717. Neither the parents nor much less the grandparents boasted any distinctive title, nor even less the priest's godparents. However, the family proved to have good relations with the local laity and ecclesiastic hierarchy, since the vicar general himself baptized Domingos. His sister Joana's godfather was Sargeant-Major João Nogueira de Sousa, and his brother Jerônimo's godfather was the Carmelite friar Jerônimo de Santa Ana (APEM-AAM-Genere, Doc. 1566—Domingos Barbosa, Apud: [Oliveira and Soares 2023](#), pp. 46–47).

When he began his candidacy for the priesthood in 1741, wishing to emphasize his proper ancestry and his family's good relations, Domingos stated that his parents and grandparents had belonged to the Santa Casa da Misericórdia (Mercy Hospital). However, throughout the proceedings, witnesses reported that the candidate descended from a "pagan native caste" on the side of his maternal great-grandparents, identified as "mamalucos" (of mixed Indian and European ancestry). In 1742, the vicar general, even acknowledging the existence of the "defect", issued a favorable opinion for Domingos' ordination. This opened the doors for him, not only to the priesthood, but also to an upward ecclesiastic career, since he went on to hold the position of chaplain to the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Victory, starting in 1744, performing baptisms in that same church from 1748 to 1761, probably as coadjutor, and was later promoted to vicar from 1772 to 1782 in São José do Ribamar and Vila de Paço do Lumiar, both located in the diocese of Maranhão. Notably, both places had been designated as Indian villages, formerly *aldeamentos* (Indian settlements administered by the Jesuits) ([Oliveira and Soares 2023](#), pp. 49–67). This process of upward mobility can be related to the role that some bishops assigned to the native clergy in the conversion of Indians, such that certain impediments were overlooked or dismissed in the name of evangelization of the native peoples.

The perspective of more effective action in catechizing the pagans was present in the career of Father Pedro da Motta. The priest was an Indian from the Coroado nation who had come “out of the forest” when he was eight or nine years old to the parish of Guarapiranga, in the vicinity of Vila de Mariana, in Minas Gerais. Pedro da Motta remained under the tutelage of Chief Customs Officer Manoel da Mota de Andrade and was baptized in the year 1778, already in adulthood. In 1779, Pedro applied for admission to the priesthood to the Ecclesiastic Court of the diocese of Mariana, where he was examined, obtained “dispensation from *neofitismo* [recently converted from paganism] and illegitimacy”, and ordained the same year. In 1780, he was dispatched to convert the Indians at the *aldeamento* of the Coroado and Puri peoples in São Manoel do Rio Pomba, in the same diocese, and in 1782, he was named principal teacher to work in another Indian *aldeamento* called São Miguel, with the purpose of teaching the boys the Christian religion, besides reading, writing, and arithmetic (Resende 2003, pp. 321–22).

Herding the flocks of pagans appears not to have been a task reserved exclusively for priests who descended from Indians, especially in the latter half of the 18th century and after the Jesuits were expelled from Brazil, since many of the *aldeamentos* were secularized and turned over to parish priests. This new missionary wave absorbed and allowed the development of careers for other mestizo priests, as in the following case.

In 1781, Joaquim Gomes de Jesus began his examination for ordination. Joaquim was born in the parish of Our Lady of the Victory in the captaincy of Espírito Santo, the son of second lieutenant Severo Gomes and Úrsula das Virgens, both identified as free *pardos*.³ His paternal grandparents were Francisco Gomes da Silveira and Rosa Maria, a free *crioula*.⁴ His maternal grandparents were Father Francisco Xavier de Jesus and Vitória Maria, a free *parda* woman. That same year, following the depositions, the diocesan vicar general ruled to suspend Joaquim’s candidacy, alleging that his parents were “*pardos*” and his paternal grandmother was a “*crioula*”, meaning that his application could not be entertained. Six years later, in February 1787, Joaquim Gomes de Jesus submitted a new petition to the Ecclesiastic Chamber of Rio de Janeiro and now attached a papal brief by which he was “dispensed from the defect of color”. The brief had already received the Pope’s approval in July 1785, and we do not know what transpired in the two years until he presented it to the bishop. In May 1787, the same vicar general that had ruled to suspend the proceedings acknowledged that Joaquim could enjoy the graces specified in the brief and could be ordained without any impediment (ACMRJ-HS-Joaquim Gomes de Jesus, notação 3583). This shows that the Holy See’s policy tended to be more flexible than that of some members of the local ecclesiastic hierarchies.

The initial difficulties do not appear to have prevented Joaquim’s ecclesiastic career from flourishing. In September 1797, the Court of Conscience and Orders approved an introductory letter by which it ordered the collation of Father Joaquim Gomes de Jesus in the Church of the Holy Wise Men in the captaincy of Espírito Santo, which, according to the letter, was a “village peopled by Indians, and with many European families”. It extolled the merits of the clergyman who had served as professor of Latin grammar at the Our Lady of the Grotto Seminary in the Rio de Janeiro diocese, and who was already serving as commissioned vicar in the same parish where he had now been named to collated vicar (ANTT-OC-Padroado do Brasil, maço 16).

One of the most emblematic careers may have been that of Father José Maurício Nunes Garcia in the old Rio de Janeiro diocese. José Maurício was born in the parish of the See in the city of Rio de Janeiro and was baptized in the cathedral on 20 October 1767. He was the legitimate son of Apolinário Nunes Garcia, a free *pardo* and tailor by trade, and Vitória Maria da Cruz, a free *parda*. His paternal grandmother was Ana Correa do Desterro, recorded as a *crioula* from Guiné, while his maternal grandfather was unknown. His maternal grandmother was Joana Gonçalves, recorded as a *crioula*, and his maternal grandfather was unknown. On 10 June 1791, he entered a petition with the Ecclesiastic Chamber of the Rio de Janeiro diocese in which he requested “to be dispensed from the color” to be able to proceed with his ordination. He claimed in the petition that he had

received a good upbringing from his parents, that since childhood he had shown a calling for the priesthood, and that to achieve this purpose he had devoted himself to his studies in Grammar, Rhetoric, Moral and Rational Philosophy, and Musical Art. On June 16 that year, the Reverend Doctor Francisco Gomes Villasboas, diocesan provisor, issued a favorable response to the request, reporting that he saw no other irregularity in the candidate except the “defect of color”, and that he had proven his morals, religious calling, and dedication to studies (ACMRJ-HS-José Mauricio Nunes Garcia, notação 3834, Apud: [Oliveira 2011](#), pp. 51–66).

José Maurício attracted a set of witnesses that demonstrated the good relations he and his family had developed. These included the customs official Marcos Antunes Marcelo. Other witnesses speaking for the candidates included three priests, three professional musicians, a goldsmith, a tailor, and a solicitor and notary to the Royal Treasury. The fact that a third of the witnesses were priests may suggest two plausible paths. The first was the legacy of personal relations maintained by Apolinário, the candidate’s father, whose former slave master was also a priest. The second path, equally plausible, may have resulted from the relations built by José Maurício himself. As a musician, even before he joined the priesthood, the candidate had provided services to the Church, since the institution was one of the major sponsors and consumers of musical art in the modern Catholic world ([Oliveira 2011](#), pp. 51–66).

Ordained in 1792, José Maurício initially continued to conduct his activities as chapel maestro in the church of the Brotherhood of São Pedro dos Clérigos (Saint Peter of the Clergy). The priest had joined this brotherhood in 1791, as recorded in the brothers’ record book. The profession of musician in the clergymen’s brotherhood may be seen as one of the prerequisites that accredited José Maurício for the same functions in the See Cathedral, since in a provision of August 1798, then-bishop of Rio de Janeiro, Dom José Joaquim Justiniano Mascarenhas Castelo Branco, named him chapel maestro of the diocesan cathedral ([Oliveira 2011](#), pp. 51–66).

The arrival of Portuguese King Dom João VI and his court entourage in Rio de Janeiro in 1808 would increase the prestige of the priest-maestro. According to some, Dom João VI was impressed by José Maurício’s musical talent and confirmed him in the position of chapel maestro in the old See, now the Royal Chapel, where he served as principal organist and exclusive composer until at least 1811. In 1809, Dom João also bestowed the priest with the title of Knight of the Order of Christ. The priest’s biographers state that his career waned after 1811, with the arrival in Rio de Janeiro of the Portuguese musician Marcos Portugal. The king named Marcos Portugal to the same functions, although José Maurício did not lose either his position or the pension attached to it. Still, the court’s preferences fell to the European musician, who thereafter held the most important musical roles in the Royal Chapel, with the mestizo priest left to conduct the less important events. There were exceptions, however: José Maurício conducted the royal orchestra for the mass commissioned by the city council to celebrate Brazil’s elevation to the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil, and Algarves in 1816, and for the mass in thanksgiving for the birth of Princess Dona Maria da Glória that same year ([Mattos 1970](#), pp. 35–40).

José Maurício passed away on 18 April 1830. According to some authors, he was in dire financial straits and forgotten by what was, by now, the Empire of Brazil. Just days before, on April 4, he had appeared before the notary public to legitimize one of his six children ([Mattos 1970](#), pp. 35–40). Although his biographers insist that the musician-priest died in oblivion, through his prestige, he had managed to promote his children’s own careers. For example, his namesake Dr. José Maurício Nunes Garcia had been acknowledged by him as a legitimate son, and through the father’s intercession, was admitted to the Medical Surgical Academy of Rio de Janeiro, where he graduated in 1828 and became a professor of Surgical Sciences in 1833 (BN-SM-Documentos Biográficos-Apontamentos para a notícia biográfica . . . do Dr. José Maurício Nunes Garcia).

The recorded cases show that at least until the end of the colonial period, the descendants of Africans and Indians who were ordained into the secular clergy did not reach

top positions in the Church structure, such as bishops or vicars general, or even members of the cathedral chapters. However, one cannot ignore the degree of upward mobility that some achieved through their priestly investiture. Notably, such mobility was always associated with a family project, since in societies with traits of the political culture from the old regime, even when individuals enjoyed some degree of autonomy, they were submitted to broader societal projects that expressed the hegemonic group's vested interests.

The cases of priests João de Barcelos Machado and Francisco da Costa Maciel demonstrated that families belonging to the local elite on the father's side clearly supported their access to the priesthood as a decisive element for upholding the family's honor. They adapted to the colonial world, and to the conditions of the peripheral elites, a kind of agency that had long been practiced by the European aristocratic houses, namely to send their second-born or illegitimate sons to the ecclesiastic or military careers in order to ensure less subaltern conditions for them while maintaining the family's prestige (Bosl 1988, pp. 21–22; Monteiro 2012, p. 75; Oliveira 2020b, p. 700). The cases of Domingos Barbosa, Joaquim Gomes de Jesus, and José Maurício Nunes Garcia showed that the priesthood's prestige was also pursued by families of former slaves and descendants of Indians who occupied the so-called middle stratum. The distinction resulting from ordination into the priesthood marked the agency of these families in building an upward mobility that distinguished them in a society where inequality was taken for granted. In this sense, the Church acted as an evangelizing institution that disseminated a process of social classification by which the reproduction of hierarchies contributed to the reproduction of the system of domination itself.

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Notes

- ¹ Considered one of the greatest exponents of satirical baroque Brazilian poetry, Gregório de Matos was born in Bahia in 1636, the descendant of an aristocratic family from Ponte de Lima, Portugal. His father had settled in Brazil as a sugar plantation owner and slaveholder. Gregório studied with the Jesuits in Bahia and continued his education in Coimbra, where he graduated in Canons in 1661, later presiding over the Civil, Penal, and Orphans Court in Lisbon. Upon returning to Bahia in 1682, he was named judge of appeals for the Ecclesiastic Tribunal, a position that required tonsure and induction into the minor orders. He was dismissed from this position following a series of clashes with the bishop due to his failure to wear the habit and his refusal to receive the major orders. He went on to practice law and to live on the earnings from his family's wealth. After a period of exile in Angola due to problems with the governor of Bahia, he returned to this captaincy, where he passed away in 1695 (Wisnik 2010, pp. 17–19; Vainfas 2000, pp. 267–68).
- ² Although various legislations attempted to regulate them, the testimonies in the Old Regime were largely based on networks of prior knowledge and expressed personal support to a given cause (Olival et al. 2013, pp. 324–25).
- ³ A color quality that referred to miscegenation between descendants of Africans and Europeans, but which indicated, beyond the biological admixture, a degree of upward mobility for those so identified. The term is different from mulatto, which generally carried a more pejorative meaning in Brazilian colonial society.
- ⁴ An African-descendant woman born in the colony, as opposed to born in Africa.

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