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⇒ Chica da Silva: Myth and Reality in an Extreme Case of Social Mobility

Abstract: The story of Chica da Silva, a well-known historical figure in Brazil's popular culture, is examined, contrasting existing public records with myths about her life in Tijuco, the small town that became the world's center of diamond exploitation in the XVIII century. Through her union with the King of Portugal's overseer of diamond extraction, this former slave gained access to a life of luxury and power far beyond that of other women of similar origins. Chica built a stable family, participated in religious organizations in her community, learned to write, and even supported artistic activities; while both written sources and many oral traditions depict her cruelty and promiscuity, these are contradicted by evidence of her social acceptance by the white elite and slaves alike. Myths can be best understood as diffuse but pervasive mechanisms of social control. Chica's trajectory remains a significant example of the power of individuals who believe in their own worth and ability to affect social change by altering expected patterns of superior/subordinate relationships.

Keywords: Chica da Silva; Social Mobility; Brazil; XVIII century.

Introduction

The life of Chica da Silva, a former slave who rose to become one of the most powerful inhabitants of the largest diamond towns in the world, is the focus of this study. There are numerous accounts of how she rose from an existence of exploitation and suffering to a position as one of the wealthiest women of her time, and diverse oral histories of her life mix historical fact with mythical narrative, making the reality elusive. As concubine to the diamond contractor João Fernandes de Oliveira, Chica emerges as a woman with enormous power and distinction.

Her romantic ties with João Fernandes were the cause of much scandal in the golden age of the town of Tijuco. Chica not only shook the foundations of her community, but also those of the entire colonial structure. She lived as an important matron of Minas Gerais and dared to have her own court and retinue of personal servants. She was very

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close to a man who was not only respected for his leadership and fairness but was also the king's representative in the region, and this proximity to power influenced perceptions of her own social worth and position in the colonial hierarchy.

Chica's existence can to some extent be reconstructed through reliable records, but these accounts often clash with distorted and contradictory popular accounts of her life. This provokes questions about how myths begin and what sustains them. Beyond an analysis of her life, we consider certain notions about representation, the social imaginary, the symbolic and the role of myth in maintaining a stable social structure.

Chica's history has been documented by several historians and local researchers. Some have said she was a faithful and honest woman, a portrayal called into question by others, who have argued that she was promiscuous and cruel. She is a character about whom relatively little is known for certain; the reasons for her social ascent, so desired by many women in conditions similar to hers, remain obscure. Up to the present, accounts of her life have been based primarily on oral tradition. It is our purpose thus to produce a new reading of Chica's trajectory in the local and national history and we seek to bridge the objective conditions of her existence and the social imaginary.

Research Methods

To carry out this work, we started from the principle that in order to probe into Chica's life it is important to understand the logic of her time, her social position, and the highly unequal world she inhabited. We rely on sociological perspectives, weighing her role in the construction of a feminine morality in Brazil through an analysis of local cultural processes, including the key causes of conflicts, exclusions, and loss of honor.

To this end, a great number of documents, both primary and secondary sources about her life, were consulted. A critical analysis was conducted, based on the indexing and categorization of these documents. Numerous inconsistencies were detected between the primary and the secondary sources about her life. We decided to include all sources because we consider that engaging with conflicting evidence enables us to demystify Chica's character. The sources used for this study are primarily wills, registers of property, baptisms, marriages, deaths, and notary records, Church archives and registers of religious brotherhoods. These documents were widely dispersed among various archives in the cities of Diamantina, Serro, Mariana, Belo Horizonte, and Rio de Janeiro, covering the states of Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro. We probed Chica's role in her society, seeking to understand both the representations of women in the colonial period and Chica's specific position as slave, woman, mother, and wife. Through a qualitative analysis, we propose to show that the attributes of passion and reason displayed by Chica and João Fernandes cannot be separated; thus, a new vision of reality can be developed.

The Arraial doTijuco and the Exploitation of Diamonds

With the discovery of diamonds – that could be collected by simply panning and sieving the river sands – in Minas Gerais in 1729, Tijuco begins its existence as the

renowned centre of mineral production in colonial Brazil.¹ Diamonds proved to be much more susceptible to being seized as contraband than the gold which was previously exploited, however, and it is estimated that about one fifth of the diamonds mined were not reported to the Royal Treasury. To counteract this, the Crown implemented firm measures by limiting entry to the area where diamonds could be found. The so-called *Distrito Diamantino* was a form of state-within-a-state, as its boundaries were defined with great precision and travel without a special license from the authorities was prohibited (Holanda 1995). The Crown could – and did – tolerate lax behavior and slippage of standards in many things and in many places, but not in the Diamond District (Boxer 1963: 184).

In 1730 the Crown decreed a royal monopoly on diamond extraction, mandating that the taxes to be charged would be the same as those for gold. It then became necessary to give careful thought to the creation of a private administration of mines to prevent trade in contraband and minimize embezzlement or theft. Thus, in 1739 the Crown granted the first diamond contract to João Fernandes de Oliveira (whose son João Fernandes is our subject here) and Francisco Ferreira da Silva. This contract was renewed for a further four years, from 1744 to 1747. The third and fourth contracts were granted to Felisberto Caldeira Brant and his three brothers. Caldeira Brant fell into disgrace before his contract ended. The fourth contract was granted again to João Fernandes Oliveira, this time for six years, from 1753 to 1758.

In time, the village of Tijuco became the most important urban center in the diamond district. Its population grew following a major earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 (estimated to have caused approximately 60,000 deaths), which resulted in the arrival in Tijuco of many Portuguese noble families seeking to recover their lost fortunes. Their presence made Tijuco a very conservative and elitist setting, and it took on the attributes of an urban centre in its social, economic and political organization. Commercial activities shaped the town's material existence, while its spiritual life consisted of Catholic forms of worship, veneration of various saints and the celebration of a number of religious events and holidays. Since the clergy had a restricted presence, many brotherhoods emerged. These were religious and charitable organizations that served to promote the performance of Catholic rituals and hired individual clergy to administer the sacraments (Martins 2000).²

Thanks to his influence on the Marquis of Pombal, the elder João Fernandes excluded his previous business partner from the lucrative diamond contract and summoned his son from Portugal to join in the lucrative venture in his stead. Trained in law at the University of Coimbra, the younger João Fernandes reflected the process of gentrification and social mobility that the senior diamond contractor sought for his family as he grew wealthier (Furtado 1998). Born in Mariana, Minas Gerais, in 1720, he became a knight

¹ The wealth accrued from the diamond trade cannot be underestimated. The Portuguese sold the jewels to other countries, primarily Holland and England, where they were cut and polished. Portugal used its fortunes to pay for the construction of elegant buildings. England used its profits from the diamonds to subsidize its army against Napoleon. Brazil was the world's largest supplier of diamonds from 1726 to 1867, when diamonds were discovered in Kimberley, South Africa.

² The brotherhoods were also active in the building of churches (Higgins 1999) and even lent money to persons in need (Martins 2000).

of the king's Order of Christ of the *Desembargo*³, a high court judge and a tax collector, in addition to being a diamond contractor. The young man, aged about 33, must have impressed the inhabitants of Tijuco as he traveled the streets on a small palanquin carried by slaves or mounted on a horse covered with embroidered velvet blankets (Furtado 1998). Amador (1997) relates that, when João Fernandes junior arrived in Tijuco, his father's diamond business was in bad shape. Under the younger man's management, the business prospered, recovered all the losses incurred in the first year of the contract and continued to have extremely profitable returns thereafter.

The Chica da Silva Myth

"Mythological narrative is always presented as a true history, surrounded by mystery and secrets, transmitted through complex narratives or through sacred and magical rites. In the mythological narrative there is structure and well-narrated content that guarantee the symbolic meaning of that to which they are attached" (Filho 1995: 81). Since primitive times, the transmission of myths has formed part of the process of socialization which enables the intellectual and moral integration of individuals. To the extent that the mentality of a society may be observed at all, it can be seen in its social representations, influenced by its myths. Myths contribute to reinforcing ties among members of a given group and, through a culture's oral tradition, collective memories are preserved. A fascination with mythical accounts is inherent in human nature. Myths give rise to all kinds of practices, legends, and customs, becoming part of our common memory and history and endowing us with a sense of continuity.

Yet a mythical story can be transmitted in different versions since, as time goes by, the myth is recreated any number of times through oral or written communication. Myth and reality exist in a contradictory relationship, thanks to the mechanisms of social control which shape the way in which information is preserved, transmitted and used to justify particular points of view.

Although the overall trajectory of Chica da Silva's life was unusual, she also shared in events and practices common in her society. It is therefore necessary to examine the prejudices, preconceptions, and ideas of the XVIII century Brazil, particularly concerning the world of women. Chica's history always awakens strong interest, due not only to the stirring quality of the legends about her but also, from a feminist perspective, to the fact that her success was a striking precursor of later victories for women. She was in the vanguard, holding her own in situations from which women had previously been excluded, and her insertion into the elite society of her time attests to her character as a woman possessed of a personality strong enough to have international impact.

A number of authors have examined Chica's life. Joaquim Felício dos Santos was the first, publishing in the journal *O Jequitinhonha* a series of articles on Diamantina, the city in which Chica da Silva made her first appearance in the public eye. These articles would later appear in book form, under the title *Memórias do Distrito Diamantino* (1976).

³ *Desembargo* was a term used to refer to people who were considered "truebloods" (i.e., not "contaminated" by Jewish or Arab blood).

According to Santos, Chica “had rough features, was tall, corpulent, had her hair closely cropped and wore a wig with ringlets, as was the fashion of the time; she had no personality, no education, in short had no appeal that could justify a strong passion [on the part of João Fernandes]” (1976: 125). Machado, a contemporary of dos Santos, disagrees: “Chica might have been homely-looking but could not have been as unattractive as Dr. Joaquim Felício dos Santos described her. Had she been so, she would not have inspired in *Desembargador* João Fernandes de Oliveira, who was an extremely wealthy young man of high social class and an enviable suitor, a passion so fiery and enduring” (1980: 78).

Writer Agripa Vasconcelos (n.d.), prefers to elucidate his version of events by presenting Chica da Silva as a cruel and evil woman, who ordered that all those who crossed her path be beaten up and even killed, perhaps jeopardizing her relationship with João Fernandes as a result. In a passage from his romantic novel *Chica que manda* (*Chica Rules*), he contends that as soon as Chica suspected that another woman was interested in her companion, she committed atrocities against her. Chica was also linked with stories about the construction of Our Lady of Carmel Church, a beautiful building with an altar richly decorated with the gold of Minas Gerais and located close to the diamond contract office and the first house in which Chica and João Fernandes lived together. According to oral tradition, João Fernandes ordered the builders to follow Chica’s request that the bell tower be placed at the back of the church, so that she would not be disturbed by its noise. Various other popular explanations exist, for example that this variation on the usual design was meant to enable blacks to enter the church, for at that time blacks were allowed to go only as far as the bell tower – which usually meant only as far as the door of the church.

According to Couto (1954), the beauty of Chica da Silva was what attracted João Fernandes and kindled the strong passion he felt for her. A very well known depiction of Chica is that of the 1975 film *Chica da Silva*, whose director, Cacá Diegues, created a character capable of maddening any man with her sensuality. This movie production was based on the work of Santos, *Memórias do Distrito Diamantino*. A TV series with the same name was shown by TV Manchete in Brazil and later broadcast throughout Latin America in the late 1990s. The TV series was inspired by *Chica que manda*, the romance-historical novel written by Vasconcelos in the early 1960s. His view was that Chica da Silva was a woman who knew, in a way no one else did, how to acquire power and how to use it. In the TV series the actress Thais Araújo interprets Chica as a very attractive but perverse mulatta. From what she said at various press conferences, the actress believed that Chica da Silva was not a pretty woman but a sexually skillful one, who had mastered the art of dominating men. Araújo depicted a sensual, confident and well-spoken personality. In the TV series, Chica conveniently has only one child, thus spending almost no time being pregnant and being thereby free to pursue her mischievous adventures. In one of the episodes, João Fernandes compliments a woman slave on her beautiful teeth, whereupon Chica da Silva immediately orders that the slave’s teeth be removed, presenting them to João Fernandes on a tray. Such unverifiable incidents carry little interest from a historical point of view; however, they create images in the popular imagination that call Chica’s moral integrity into question. As a means of mass communication, TV occupies a privileged place in our information-rich world. While other means of social representation are not obsolete, TV has become the most influen-

tial medium in terms of its power of persuasion and breadth of coverage. Though characters in TV and film narratives are fictitious, they shape subjectivities in important ways and reinforce ancient myths.

The Workings of Social Markers in Colonial Brazil

In order to explore the boundary between fact and legend, we will evaluate the role that Chica da Silva was able to play in a social world very different than the one she had been born to.

Gender in Slave Society

The subordination of women to men, in its various forms, has been a feature of many societies since the earliest times. Gender relations in everyday life have been characterized by asymmetrical power relations, hierarchical relationships, inequality and exploitation in societies marked by contradiction and antagonism. Through this analytical lens we can see that the organization of gender intersects with other social structures, imposing conditions, opportunities, and limitations on all individuals within the social group.

To appreciate Chica's social position, her remarkable ascent from it and the wide impact her life had, one must understand the various dimensions of women's role in colonial Brazilian society. Poor women did usually not enter into official marriages; it was even rarer for women subjugated through conquest or slavery to marry. This certainly was the case for Indian, black, and mulatto women.

Black women were commonly used as objects of pleasure by white men. Widely-held beliefs about the powerful sexuality of black women made them particularly appealing. Romero (1980) argues that since black women did not subscribe to the Catholic view of the sexual act as a sin, it is possible that their sexuality may have been characterized by particular "amatory" techniques. He also admits that since black women in colonial society, uprooted from their indigenous culture, had very few alternative means for economic and social advancement, they may have used their sexuality as a resource. Some were lucky enough to become concubines of wealthy men, who pulled them out of the poverty in which they lived and endowed them with some social recognition.

Race in Colonial Brazil

Spanish America viewed race as a continuum rather than a stark dichotomy (Twinam 1999). The same applies to Portuguese America. In both regions, it was possible to negotiate one's race and status as a noble person. For mulattos, this involved "cleaning one's blood" through some legal petition (and consequent payment) and thus passing as whites or renegotiating one's status so as to be considered a legitimate child.

Male slaves could win their freedom by working in the mines and saving some of their meager earnings. In contrast, female slaves, who were not permitted to engage in

activities such as mining, were more likely to remain their entire lives as slaves, unable to generate and save sufficient money to buy their freedom (Higgins 1999).⁴ “In order to survive, black women would sell tobacco and food on trays, such as sweets, pastries, sugar liquor, bread rolls, honey, bananas. This was the case throughout the country, and around the mines. Most of the time, with little worry about offending God, they would become prostitutes, through contact with their clients, disobeying the law of His Majesty” (Figueiredo 1999a: 153). Selling food often served as a front for prostitution among slave women. Moreover, they were often obliged by their masters to engage in improper behaviors in order to earn their livelihood. In such a context, we can see that the women slaves’ presumed “lack of moral norms” was linked to poverty and overall social misery. This was the road traversed by many slave women of the time.

Honor and Concubinage

Brazil inherited Iberian customs and a formal body of law based on Roman Law, codified in 1603 as the *Codigo Philippino*, which influenced colonial notions of honor. Hence, practices in Spanish and Portuguese America were similar (Graham 1998). There were different norms for men and women with regard to honor. Men did not lose their honor if they lost their virginity, had active sexual lives or children out of wedlock. In contrast, women lost their honor in all those circumstances. Some men lost honor due to sexual impotence or the unfaithfulness of their wives (Nazzari 1998). Men strove to establish their honor by escaping the status of illegitimate sons, paying substantial amounts to get a royal certificate giving them legitimate status (the so-called *gracias al sacar* document) (Twinam 1999). They also gained honor by displaying assertiveness, courage, authority, and domination of women.

Contrary to the moral expectations of Minas society of the XVIII century, concubinage became a common form of union, due not only to the social inequality between the partners but also to the fact that far fewer Portuguese women than men had settled in Brazil. This created the common practice of informal unions between white men and black women, a practice viewed as “scandalous” by the Church, which was nonetheless unable to prevent it. According to Freire, the “perfect white teeth [of the slaves] was a principal reason for jealousy and rivalry on the part of the ladies, who rarely had good teeth. Therefore the success of Chica da Silva in Diamantina, as the companion of the Portuguese contractor João Fernandes de Oliveira, who owned an immense fortune and ruled as a sovereign across the entire county, should not be a great surprise” (1983: 96).

In this colonial context, characterized by the mixing of various cultures, a steep racial hierarchy and the oppression of women, concubinage appears as a common system of social relations. It was built upon ideas that emerged from prevailing social conditions, in a period when the binary categories husband/wife, man/concubine, and lord/slave permeated all social contexts (Torres-Londoño 1999; Higgins 1999). Concubinage between free men and slave women did not give these women any of the legal pro-

⁴ It seems however that in some plantation areas and their surrounding cities more slave women than men were freed.

tection that marriage would have permitted (Higgins 1999). Moreover, concubinage with slaves rarely led to their freedom (Torres-Londoño 1999). On the other hand, as Twinam observes, female illegitimacy “disturbed the traditional pattern of patriarchy in that an elite man married to an illegitimate woman could not be certain that his descendants could hold political office or honorific occupations, given the ‘stain’ inherited from their mother” (1999: 279).

Higgins remarks that gender “was a critical determinant of the likelihood of a slave’s access to unregulated income, unsupervised free time, the personal patronage of their masters and mistresses, and manumission” (1999: 5). The harsh conditions meant that where emotional and sexual ties developed, they often remained hidden because of the prevailing social and moral values. A slave woman, besides providing her master all kinds of other services, was obliged to go to bed with him to satiate his sexual desires. However, she was not always a passive or unwilling participant in the relationship. Our findings, based on primary sources of Mitra Arquidiocesana of Diamantina, are in agreement with the observations made by previous researchers.⁵ In the records written by the visiting priests to Diamantina, we find:

On 10.07.1753 in the village of Rio Manso, Leandro de Mattos de Magalhães received a warning [...] during the [religious] visitation’s inquiry for lapsing into concubinage for the first time [...]. He was admonished in a paternal manner [by the priest]. Luciana, his creole slave, had incited him to sin without considering the offence to God, the scandal among others, and the good example which he is obliged to set. He paid two *oitavas* [...].⁶

On 18.07.1753 in the village of Santo Antonio do Tijuco, belonging to Vila do Principe, José Gomes Ferreira, was summoned [before the] inquiry visitation [...]. Paternally admonished [by the priest] [...]. Maria, a *multatta*, his slave thus put an end to the rumor that she is having dishonest relations with him. He paid two *oitavas* [in publishment].⁷

In this account, the enslaved woman is considered to have “power”, as “she invited him”. It can hardly be believed that a powerless person could have influenced someone much more powerful to commit such acts against their will, but the system of power relations in colonial Brazil set up an apparatus of control and legitimacy. The dominant class, led by men, was presented as a center of power and domination over others. Members of lower classes, both male and female, as well as all blacks, were at the disposal of the ruling class. This was the social structure that characterized Minas in the 1700s, and allowed a space for exploitation through a series of abominable measures linked to economic, racial, and social status. As Figueiredo remarks: “In Minas Gerais prostitution seems to have reached a higher proportion than in other places of the colony, besides presenting very peculiar features [...]. There, legal marriages involved a series of requirements by the Church and the state, which made them almost inaccessible to most inhabitants” (1999a: 115).

⁵ Giacomini (1988); Figueiredo (1999b); Higgins (1999).

⁶ MAD, *Livro de Devassas*, cx. 557, 1753: 28.

⁷ MAD, *Livro de Devassas*, 1753: 97.

Some Fragments of Reality

Little evidence exists concerning Chica's private and public lives other than the standard records of birth, marriage, baptism, marriage, death and inheritance. These documents, however, permit us to extrapolate various possibilities concerning the social transactions that led to their creation and the consequences these events had for the people involved.

Historiography affirms that Chica was the daughter of a black woman called Maria da Costa and a white man called Antônio Caetano de Sá. We do not know the time of her birth.⁸ Several authors think that Maria da Costa had been slave of José da Silva de Oliveira, the first accountant of the royal diamond extraction enterprise (and the father of the man who was to become the revolutionary Father Rolim, a major figure in Brazil's struggle for independence). Although Chica was raised in the house of the Rolim family, she was nonetheless a slave.⁹ In a religious inquiry¹⁰ in 1753, recorded in the only extant document that cites Chica as slave, she was admonished for being the concubine of Dr. Manuel Pires Sardinha, with whom she had a son named Simão Pires Sardinha. An extract of the document states:

On 19 July 1753 in this village of Santo Antonio of Tijuco at the home of the priest, Francisca, a mulatta woman, and Francisca, a crioula¹¹, slaves belonging to master Manuel Pires Sardinha, appeared in front of visitor Manoel Ribeiro Taborda. They were admonished [...]. So they were forbidden to continue the illicit contact they have with their master [...]. They confessed their sin, promising to correct it, they paid the term and sentence, and, because they were unable to sign, their master signed in their stead.¹²

This account, again, blames the women for their "illicit contact" and reflects how the colonials actors saw themselves as seduced into conducting improper acts.

It was in this oppressive social context that João Fernandes de Oliveira arrived in Tijuco in 1753 and immediately bought Chica from Dr. Manuel Pires Sardinha, according to the following text in Chica's letter of liberty: "Release of a letter of freedom letter granted by João Fernandes de Oliveira [...]. To a black named Francisca [...]. On 05.12.1753 for 800 réis".¹³ The house where the couple lived during the first years of their union still stands in Lalau Pires Street, in Diamantina. It was restored by the Institute for

⁸ Couto (1954); Santos (1976); Machado (1980); Vasconcelos (n.d.); Amador (1997); Furtado (1998).

⁹ There were two types of slaves, those raised to work within the master's house (*escrava doméstica*) and those assigned to agricultural or mining duties (*escrava de senzala*). Chica was raised as the first type.

¹⁰ The *livro de devassa* (or book of inquiry) was a religious institution peculiar to colonial Brazil. It was a book that recorded important moral offences (sins) so that when the town was visited by a higher ecclesiastical authority, he would request special acts of contrition by the sinner, usually involving the payment of some fine. The largest proportion of these sins concerned concubinage, in some towns making up as much as 85 percent of such cases (Torres-Londoño 1999).

¹¹ A *crioulo* was a person born in Brazil to two black parents.

¹² MAD, *Livro de Devassas Episcopais*, cx. 557, 1753: 102.

¹³ FEL, *Livro de Notas*, Serro 1753. In those days a strong slave could be bought for about 230 réis. The price for Chica, 800 réis, was very high and signals the strong interest by João Fernandes in buying her and the desire of Pires Sardinha to keep her.

the Historic and Artistic Patrimony; today, it functions as a public museum. The house was built during the second half of the XVIII century and is a typical building of that period, containing rooms for entertaining and daily social life, a dining room, intimate spaces such as bedrooms and an area for maids. The balcony is closed with latticework on one side, in the Arab style that so influenced the Portuguese. According to Furtado,

During the process of admission of Simão Pires Sardinha into the Order of Christ, the witnesses who gave evidence in Lisbon about his life in Tijuco, affirmed that she [Chica, Simão's mother] was an important person and lived in "the greatest ostentation and as mistress of a large house", "in keeping with standards of nobility and with great wealth"; they stated that the house was the best of the town and that it was visited by top governmental officers and representatives of the judiciary as well (1998: 5).

According to tradition, the small chapel to the side of the house, dedicated to Saint Quitéria, was built by João Fernandes because his beloved Chica could not at that time attend the church, which admitted only whites. This prohibition must have been later suspended, since all their children were baptized in the mother church of Santo Antonio do Tijuco, a fact that can be confirmed by baptismal records at Diamantina's Mitra Arquidiocesana, which also indicate that all of their children had illustrious godparents.

Among the population of Tijuco there is still a lively oral tradition telling of the decision of João Fernandes to build a large home for himself and Chica in the nearby countryside, on the road toward Serro do Frio. "It was a magnificent building in the shape of a castle, with a rich and beautiful chapel and a large room that served as a private theater. It had exquisite gardens of exotic and unusual plants [...]. Chica, who had never been outside Tijuco [...] wanted to know what a ship was like. João Fernandes ordered the construction of a dam and a miniature ship, that could contain eight or 10 persons" (Santos 1976: 125).

French traveler Saint-Hilaire (1974), who visited the Captaincy of Minas Gerais at the beginning of the XIX century (1816-1822), found in the village of Tijuco the most sophisticated culture in all Brazil. The most advanced customs and manners of the time were to be found there, especially among women, who were described kind and hospitable. According to oral traditions, corroborated by travel narratives of several European visitors, the dances and theater plays presented in the private theater of Chica da Silva were famous in the entire region of Minas Gerais (Costa 1989). That the house existed is verified by travelers' accounts as well as by a later rental contract, when attorney Dias de Moura leased the house to Sargento Mor Bernardo Brandão for 15,000 réis for a 15-year term, stating that the lease was granted "with the proviso that he undertake all necessary expenses to keep the country home in operation and well preserved, and to repair the building that is now in ruins and to erect walls around the entire country home, in view of the large expenditures that are to be incurred to repair this building. 30 March 1837".¹⁴ Even today, remains of the wooden beams used for Chica's house remain in Diamantina. Most of the materials were later used to build an extension to a religious school, but a few rotten beams are still left in a back yard. The artificial lake has long

¹⁴ BAT, *maço* 156, 1837: 59.

been drained, in part because squatters on that land were losing children to drowning accidents. Based on the accounts of the parties and artistic events that took place in Chica's country home, and judging by the cost of the lease and the likely sum paid for the repairs, it can be determined that the house was an elegant construction of great distinction in the village.

Basing his administration on fairness, João Fernandes gained the trust of rich and poor, white and mulattos in Tijuco. He was asked to be godfather for many weddings and baptisms which, given the importance of religion, was a special sign of social distinction (Mesquita 1993). In church records, we found documents indicating that João Fernandes served as a godfather in 17 such ceremonies over a period of seven years.¹⁵

Primary sources indicate that the building of Our Lady of Carmel Church took place thanks to the initiative of João Fernandes to move the statue of San Francisco de Paula to the main church.¹⁶ João Fernandes made a large donation towards the construction of the church, as shown in this extract: "Record of the gift that *Desembargador* João Fernandes makes of two houses to the patrimony of the chapel of San Francisco de Paula erected recently in this village of Tijuco: 400,000 réais".¹⁷ There are no historical records explaining why the tower was placed toward the back of the church. Nonetheless, Our Lady of Carmel Church became a symbol of the power of Chica over the diamond contractor. As we have discussed, the narrative about the tower was created and embellished by all who were interested in the couple's story and, at the same time, served to sustain the memory of Diamantina's past glories.

The influence of the diamond contractor upon the inhabitants of Tijuco is undeniable, as shown by the fact that the members of the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Mount of Carmel were summoned at one point with the sole objective of ensuring that Chica's presence in João Fernandes' household would not go against the statutes of the brotherhood. A religious record on the subject states: "On 24.11.1782, at a round table, it was resolved to maintain the membership in this brotherhood of all brothers who married non-white women and to accept those who wanted to become members even if they are married with similar mulatto women, as declared below".¹⁸ A book on expenditures of this brotherhood indicated that about 259 masses were celebrated between the years 1792 and 1793 (20 years after his death) to honor the soul of João Fernandes as founder of this church.¹⁹ All this was possible thanks, in large part, to the very considerable wealth he acquired by occupying the highest position in the mineral extraction business.

Not all slaves were utilized only as objects of sexual pleasure; many of them received diverse rewards from their masters and a few were treated as the wife and mistress of the home (Higgins 1999). This was the case with Chica da Silva. From the start, her relationship with João Fernandes brought her advantages of a lady, not a simple slave. As noted earlier, social mobility was made possible through the practice of concubinage, the only means for a female slave to enter a white society. But it is evident that Chica was not

¹⁵ MAD, *Livros de Casamentos*, 1761-68.

¹⁶ AIC, *Livro da Ereção da Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Carmo*, 1778: 1v.

¹⁷ AIC, *Livro da Ereção da Igreja*, 1778: 4v.

¹⁸ AIC, *Livro de Termos da Ordem 3ª do Monte do Carmo*, 1770.

¹⁹ AIC, *Livro de Despesa*, 16v., 34v., 47v., 50v.

treated as a concubine but rather as a wife. Typical concubine relations were characterized by the man having a second, unofficial family, entering a temporary relationship, or taking a partner until a better potential spouse was found. João Fernandes never sought to marry a woman of his own social standing. Many of the accusations of promiscuity against Chica may have been a way of attacking João Fernandes for not following traditional practices in his relations with a woman slave. Certainly the lives of the couple must have provoked rumours because cohabitation, while common, was nonetheless a practice which caused public scandal and was regularly noted in the book of inquiries as a sinful act. But such rumors did not prevent them from having a stable union.

The family of Chica da Silva and João Fernandes included many children, slaves, and farm hands, embodying the public model of a patriarchal family. Some authors state that Chica had twelve children from her union with João Fernandes.²⁰ The public records indicate that there were 13 children, nine girls and four boys. The marriage certificates of two of their daughters and the last will documents for several of the daughters identify them as either “natural” or “legitimate” children of João Fernandes. Curiously, Chica’s first owner and the father of her eldest son appears to have been the godfather to Francisca de Paula, Chica’s first daughter, at her baptism.

No matter how solid the relationship between Chica and João Fernandes, however, their children were registered only under the name of the mother, identified as “unmarried”. Only years later, in their final wills, is the name of their father mentioned, as in the case of Maria de São Jose, Chica’s fifth daughter: “I am a resident of the village of Tijuco, legitimate daughter of *Desembargador* João Fernandes de Oliveira and Francisca da Silva de Oliveira [...]. I was never married, I always lived as a single woman and had a daughter named Maria who was raised in the house of my sister Antônia Quitéria Fernandes de Oliveira”.²¹

Their daughters were educated in the Convent of Santa Lúcia in Macaúbas. This religious institution was designed to educate only the elite of Minas Gerais; it housed not only the women who opted for a religious life and those not living with their husbands, but many young women with no religious vocation who were sent to the convent for a short time. “Whether the woman was emancipated or not, it was the parents’ responsibility to protect the reputation of their single daughter, a responsibility that would be later extended to the husband” (Goldschmidt 1998: 100). This was exactly the path chosen by Chica and João Fernandes, who sought a good moral and social education for their daughters. Since a woman’s virtue was a salient feature of the social codes of this society, these convents engaged not only in devotional practices but also in preparing women for marriage and ensuring that their honor was protected. This education not only trained young women in proper behavior but guaranteed their social standing. According to Veiga, “The *Desembargador* granted immediate benefits to the Convent of Macaúbas, where he educated nine daughters for years and where two of them died. He must be considered as one of the largest benefactors of this establishment” (1897: 189). Indeed, “for the admission of Francisca de Paula, Rita Quitéria, and Ana Maria, their father paid

²⁰ Santos (1976); Vasconcelos (n.d.); Almeida (1954); Veiga (1897); Machado (1980); Couto (1954); Amador (1997).

²¹ BAT, *Livro de Testamentos*, maço 23, 1806: 4.

900,000 réis for each of them, in gold ingots. In addition, three black slaves and a couple stayed near the convent as their servants” (Furtado 1998: 5).

Although conventional gender practices dictated that the responsibility for the care of all the children remained with the woman, João Fernandes assumed responsibility for the education of his sons. This was a family agreement quite unique for its time. Contrary to custom, João Fernandes sought in this way to ensure that Chica would remain a strong woman, capable of providing a careful education for their daughters. It seems that from the moment of birth, their children were brought up within a family with a strong economic and social structure.

When he left for Portugal in 1770, João Fernandes took with him not only his own sons but also Chica’s first son, Simão Pires Sardinha. This is remarkable, because it indicates that João Fernandes recognized the child of another man and gave him both education and property. He endowed all his sons with the means to live a very prosperous life. Simão was promoted to the position of lieutenant colonel of cavalry in 1793. A man full of knowledge and wisdom, he became knight of the Military Order of Christ, and graduated from the Royal Academy of Sciences in Lisbon. In addition, he was employed to carry out observational research in the Legion of Natural History.²² In 1784, Simão returned to Minas Gerais in the entourage of Luís da Cunha Meneses, who entrusted him with the study of the first fossils found in the captaincy (Furtado 1998: 5). By the middle of the 1790s, he was in Portugal and in 1796, he requested of the king that he be allowed to remain in Portugal for one more year for “personal matters and scientific endeavors”.²³

José Agostinho Fernandes de Oliveira and Antônio Caetano Fernandes de Oliveira were promoted in 1801 to important positions, in recognition of the good services rendered by their half-brother Simão. Captain José Agostinho Fernandes de Oliveira became a public notary of the Court of Vila do Príncipe and Captain Antônio Caetano Fernandes de Oliveira became notary of the contentious village of Tijuco itself. Chica and João Fernandes’ eldest son, João Fernandes de Oliveira Grijó, was given responsibility for the administration of the Morgado do Grijó, an inventory of the estate left by João Fernandes to his family.²⁴

João Fernandes, besides providing many services in the administration of the mines, also lent the Crown large amounts of money, especially at the time of the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon, when he sent a large shipment of diamonds to the kingdom.²⁵ He increasingly earned the confidence and trust of the Crown, and even after he died in 1779, his sons continued to exercise considerable influence. The inhabitants of Tijuco, astonished by the extent of the privilege granted to him and by extension to Chica and their children, could not contest Chica’s much-envied social status. Through her ties with João Fernandes, she was respected by the religious authority, the nobility, and the people themselves.

²² APM, doc. 49, *rolo* 127.

²³ APM, doc. 17, *rolo* 59.

²⁴ The *morgado* consisted of writing up a careful inventory of all property and assets and placing them under the administration of a specific person, usually the first-born son. According to law, daughters could inherit only one-third of their father’s property. While the sons received most of the inheritance, it did not mean that it was divided evenly among them.

²⁵ APM, doc. 13, *rolo* 61, 1756.

Chica da Silva also learned to read and write and, although it is believed that she acquired only the rudiments of literacy, this was enough of a distinction in a society where women were very seldom literate at all. In a document confirming her admission as a member of the Brotherhood of Our Lady of Mercy, her signature can be seen clearly.²⁶

Although it was not possible in colonial Brazil for a white person to marry a black person, Chica da Silva is an important example of someone who challenged social norms. Contrary to the prevailing practices, she created a family, displayed great opulence and knew how to take advantage of the opportunities life presented to her. She inverted her slave role, which would have been that of prostitute, servant, possibly chambermaid and day and night companion for her mistress, becoming instead mistress of her own slaves. She maintained social relations in the village becoming godmother to several children, participating as *juiza*²⁷ of important religious brotherhoods, and educating her daughters in the boarding school accessible only to the elite of Tijuco. Her generosity can be observed from the fact that in 1773 she gave as alms to the Brotherhood of Our Lady of Rosary – a brotherhood of blacks – in the form of gold earrings to help it with its expenses²⁸; this gesture of kindness does not seem to square with the negative traits attributed to her in other accounts. Documents of the time also show that she was respected; for example, a church record states: “On 30 July 1757, in this chapel of Santo Antonio of Tijuco, I baptized [...] Margarida, legitimate daughter of Paschoal e Izabel, slaves of Dr. Alberto [... one of the] godparents was Bento, slave of Dona Francisca”.²⁹ At that time, *dona* was a title applicable exclusively to white and noble women.

The people of Tijuco may initially have attributed the fascination Chica evoked in her companion to her role as an object of sexual pleasure for João Fernandes, but ultimately they accepted her as a matron of their society, a situation which challenged the social hierarchies across the entire Captaincy of Minas Gerais. As Algranti (1999) remarks, slave women were persons with whom a white man could have ties without betraying the social norms that ruled between the sexes. Race superseded all other legal considerations, and black women, whether slaves or free, had no legal protection, as they were considered to be without any virtue or honor that might need to be protected.

While she was prevented from marrying, however, Chica da Silva lived in the manner of a white woman. The rigorous requirements for admission to the brotherhoods were stated in the many clauses of their statutes. Each statute was approved directly by the king and, only after approval was granted could they be put into effect. Evidence of Chica’s participation in the brotherhoods of Tijuco therefore calls into question the depictions of her as a despicable, perverse and immoral character.

The prevailing accounts about Chica – at least those in printed form – emphasized her sensuality over her intelligence, her mean character over her likely solidarity with other slaves. The most striking element in this myth is her sensuality, coding a message about her as sexual threat and a dangerous seductress. In the dominant accounts, both in

²⁶ MAD 1776, f 88v.

²⁷ This position was a very important in the brotherhood, representing the key administrator of the society, usually filled by a very honest and prestigious person.

²⁸ MAD, *Livro de Inventário da Irmandade N. Sra. Do Rosário*, cx. 514, 1733.

²⁹ MAD, cx. 296, *Livro de Batismos*, 1757: 28.

novels, film, and TV, there are many more references to her physical appearance and her mean character than to her intelligence. By implication, she appears at times to dominate João, and is reduced to the status of a temptress.

According to Iglésias (1998: 5), Chica attained a higher status through her relation to João Fernandes, but society wanted revenge. Society wanted to feel comfortable and thus it wanted to accept only persons with clear credentials. For Furtado, “Chica da Silva was neither queen nor witch, and her performance vis-à-vis the white elite of the village of Tijuco was always conservative, trying to use the advantages that her new position in that society offered her. Throughout her life, she sought to diminish the stigma that her color and slavery imposed upon her, promoting the social mobility of her children. To that effect she used the influence and wealth of her companion” (1998: 5-6).

Some versions of the oral traditions try to demystify her, showing a profile of a woman who acted with propriety and was fair toward her companion and her children. The account that circulates among the Afro-Brazilians is that she was an honest and faithful woman, and that whites tried to portray her in negative light to demoralize the black people (Costa 1989; Cruz 2000).

The first document we found in our research related to Chica’s concubinage with Dr. Manuel Pires Sardinha. This is an important finding that directly contradicts the majority of accounts about her life. According to most accounts, when Chica went to live with João Fernandes, she brought with her two children from her first union, Cipriano Pires Sardinha and Simão Pires Sardinha.³⁰ According to the original document, at that time Chica was indeed a slave of Dr. Pires Sardinha and lived in his house, but there were two other slave women who were also his concubines. In his will, written in 1755, Manuel Pires Sardinha clearly states that he had two slaves called Francisca.³¹ As we have commented above, this is the only document that refers to Chica as a slave, and it suggests that the only product of Chica’s union with Pires Sardinha was their son Simão. Here our findings match the account by Furtado (1998). Besides the inheritance he left for Simão, Pires Sardinha left a certain amount of money for Chica da Silva herself.

The evidence concerning Chica’s freedom is also contradictory. Historiographic sources are almost unanimous in asserting she was freed by Sargento Mor José da Silva de Oliveira, who granted her liberty at the request of João Fernandes.³² Our findings, like those of Furtado (1998), contradict that claim, and suggest that Chica was given her freedom directly by João Fernandes, who bought her from Dr. Pires Sardinha for 800 réis.³³

To emerge from a condition of slavery and find a place within the elite of Tijuco was incomprehensible to many at that time and, not surprisingly, was a move viewed with contempt by the higher members of society. Chica da Silva, through her second union, became the most powerful woman of her time, economically and socially. She raised a large family, accumulated much wealth and had a large number of slaves and a beautiful

³⁰ Santos (1976); Vasconcelos (n.d.); Almeida (1954); Veiga (1897); Machado (1980); Couto (1954); Amador (1997).

³¹ MAD, *Livro de Testamentos*, cx. 350, 1755.

³² Santos (1976); Vasconcelos (n.d.); Almeida (1954); Veiga (1897); Machado (1980); Couto (1954); Amador (1997).

³³ FEL, *Livro de Notas*, Serro 1753.

home – practically a palace – in the countryside. She had many friends and certainly quite a few enemies.

Paulo Messias de Oliveira Filho, a local dentist, compiled a genealogical chart of his family and discovered he was one of Chica's descendants. Through research in the city archives and museums, Paulo Messias traced his family to his great-grandfather, Franklim Amador dos Santos, one of the great-grandchildren of Chica and son of Frutuosa Baptista Fernandes de Oliveira. Although he is white, he accepts the validity of his findings. According to him, "Chica da Silva was a mulatta who had children with a white man, and from then on there was substantial miscegenation through subsequent generations".³⁴

It is important to observe that many authors tended to repeat the accounts presented by Joaquim Felício dos Santos³⁵, failing to search out important documents that suggest – to the extent that dry official documents can do so – that Chica was a woman with a strong personality, who established the beginning of an era and challenged many of the racial and moral prejudices of her time. That Chica was able to occupy key positions in exclusive brotherhoods, that she served as godmother in many baptisms (although mostly for her slaves), that her daughters gained access to the best school in town, that she lived in a sumptuous palace, and that she became literate are all signs of her high social standing and determination. A controversial character with contradictory attributes, Chica's progress into myth encompasses various conflicting accounts, in which she moves from being a slave to become "Queen of Tijuco". These are unusual events, so unveiling her trajectory is not an easy task – not least because she existed within a highly prejudiced and macho society.

The departure of João Fernandes for Portugal in 1770, after 17 years of living with Chica, is intriguing. Toward the end of the sixth diamond contract, the king sent the Count of Valladares, governor of the Captaincy of Minas Gerais, to visit João Fernandes in Tijuco. According to most sources, the Marquis of Pombal suspected that João Fernandes had amassed his great fortune mainly by infringing upon the contract terms and, therefore, should pay the Crown the huge amount of 11 million cruzados in fines.³⁶ In contrast, Furtado argues that the reason for João Fernandes's return to Portugal was the death of his father, Sargento Mor João Fernandes de Oliveira, and that he went to the Court to protect his inheritance:

Sargento Mor João Fernandes de Oliveira second marriage was to a rich widow [...]. The betrothed drafted a nuptial agreement. The bride, Isabel Pires Monteiro, combined her rich patrimony with that of her husband. If upon his death, the couple did not have children, she would withdraw from the inheritance only the amount corresponding to the value that her property had accumulated [...]. Before his death, the stepmother managed to have Sargento Mor alter his will, giving her the right to half of their property. When the Desembargador

³⁴ Personal interview (2001).

³⁵ Joaquim Felício dos Santos was nephew of Feliciano Amador do Santos, who married Frutuosa Baptista de Oliveira, a granddaughter of Chica. According to Paulo Messias, since Frutuosa divorced Feliciano, the loss of this fortune may have created resentment within the Santos family and led to the negative portrayal of Chica.

³⁶ Santos (1976); Vasconcelos (n.d.); Machado (1980); Amador (1997); Couto (1954).

[João Fernandes] learned the news, he returned [...] to Portugal to fight for the annulment of this will (1998: 6).

Along the same lines, Oswaldo declares that: “João Fernandes solved the problem with his father’s will and saw his step-mother enter a convent, with a modest pension. He remained in this way the owner of the home his father built in the region of Buenos Aires, which has always been one of the most charming areas of Lisbon” (1998: 2).

Official sources indicate that in 1771, the year following João’s departure for Portugal, the king ended the system of personal contracting of diamonds and appointed the Royal Treasury to exploit and market them instead. At that time, the king also issued an edict on “Regulations for the Diamond District”, a set of 56 legal instructions known also as the *Livro da Capa Verde*. Here, explaining the reasons for the de-privatization of the diamond contract, the king states: “Urgent reasons for my decision are some information about the harmful and intolerable abuses that have been perpetuated in the mining exploitation of diamonds”. This being the case, it is probable that João Fernandes returned to Portugal to answer the accusations against his integrity before the king. That does not negate the possibility that he inquired at the same time into his father’s inheritance. If the king did order him to return to Portugal to face such charges, it is likely that João Fernandes may have been prohibited from returning back to Brazil, particularly given his popularity among the people in Tijuco and growing moves for independence for Minas Gerais. The careful attention to his inheritance in 1775 may be taken as a further sign of his having fallen into disgrace, an attempt to protect his property for the benefit of his children.

João Fernandes was concerned to leave Chica in good financial standing since he could not cite her in his will, as their union had not been legal. During his lifetime, he therefore sought to transfer many pieces of property to her, such as their home in the city of Tijuco, their beautiful home in the countryside, jewelry, slaves, and some plots of land by selling them to her, as attested by the following transcription: “I declare that I sold a plot of uncultivated land named Pombeiro, at a price of 80 oitavas and a mining dig to Mrs. Francisca da Silva de Oliveira, for the price of 300 oitavas, for which all this now belongs to her. Tijuco 30.01.1761”.³⁷ Probably this type of commercial transaction was made with the purpose of benefiting Chica da Silva and their children since, without a legal union, the authorities and the people in general would become curious about the free transfer of large amounts of land. According to Goldschmidt (1998: 139), placing a property in the name of his beloved could have been a useful subterfuge utilized by João Fernandes to escape the incrimination of concubinage, as well as a means of providing her with assets that could otherwise have belonged to her. However, it can be safely assumed that this transaction did not in reality call for the transfer of funds. More likely, these documents were recorded in the land title office to ensure that she would be the future owner of such property. These lands later became incorporated into the patrimony of Chica, and were subsequently inherited by one of her daughters. Chica’s descendants were also legally endowed with the inheritance of their father. In their own will, her daughters declared ownership of gold and silver jewels, houses, animals, farms, land

³⁷ BAT, *Cartório do 1º Ofício*, março 20, 1761:13v.

with sugar and manioc processing equipment, dry goods stores in Tijuco and many slaves, besides having access to one-third of the revenues of their father's inheritance. These historical records indicate, contrary to movies that were later made about Chica, that she did not lose her fortune when João Fernandes left Brazil.

For his children, João Fernandes established the *Morgado do Grijó*, consisting of a full inventory of land and other assets he owned including houses, farms, cattle, and horses. According to Santos: "In former times, noble men, who used to claim ignorance as a quality essential to nobility, understood that the only way to perpetuate their names was to have a family that would create the trunk [of the family tree]. Among other institutions more or less officially intended to achieve this end, is the *morgado*, a unique economic institution that Portugal imported from Spain" (1976: 127-28).

João Fernandes de Oliveira Grijó, the oldest child of João Fernandes and Chica, was appointed to administer the property. He in turn arranged that following his own death his own eldest son, João Germano de Oliveira Grijó, would become the administrator of the *morgado*. In the event, João Germano, being under age, appointed lawyers to administer it for him.

A document describing the assets of the *morgado* indicates that *procurador* Bento Dias de Moura sold property and spent the assets without orders from his client João Germano.³⁸ The executor was formally charged with engaging in improper use of the assets left under his administration and even of having sold a considerable portion of them, thus causing material damage to the heirs. He responded by claiming he was acting according to the law since his clients were in Portugal and he had not heard from them in over 11 years, so he considered them to be dead. Even after this flawed administration of the *morgado*, the heirs of João Fernandes remained in good financial standing, since their inheritance was vast. From the inventory of the *Morgado* of Grijó left by João Fernandes and in the other wills left by his daughters, it is clear that Chica and all their children had a very luxurious life.

Although Chica's will has disappeared from the city of Serro in Minas Gerais, we found in the archives of the Antonio Torres library in Diamantina details of the inheritance that Chica left for her daughters. In addition to leaving lands for her daughters Marianna de Jesus and Maria de São José (as discussed above), we find records of property left for Francisca de Paula, who declared a large fortune in her will, with 800,000 réis left to her godchildren, the poor and her main heir, as well as 50 oitavas of gold to her niece Anna. Francisca also instructed her heirs to build a rich frontispiece for the high altar of the Mother Church of Rio Preto. Since she did not have direct descendants, she chose her niece Frutuosa Baptista de Oliveira, daughter of her sister Rita Quitéria, as her main heir. The inheritance consisted of "money, gold, silver, cattle, horses, slaves, and real estate [...]. Pé-do-Morro, 1839"³⁹. Rita Quitéria, another of Chica's daughters, owned several pieces of jewelry, some of them probably inherited from her mother (Furtado 1998).

Chica's daughters returned from Macaúbas and married important people in Tijuco, a reflection of the social prestige inherited from their father and extended to their mother.

³⁸ BAT, *maço* 27, p. 2, 1841.

³⁹ BAT, *maço* 10, 1839.

Even after the departure of João Fernandes, Chica continued to be considered an important person in the town, being, for instance, *juiza* of the Brotherhood of Our Lady of Mercy between 1788 and 1789.⁴⁰ Their daughters and sons entered as confirmed members in the Brotherhood of São Miguel of Souls, each paying four oitavas of gold for their admission.⁴¹ Chica used her power, in turn, to the benefit of some of her slaves, eleven of whom were buried in the cemetery in the Chapel of Santo Antônio.⁴² During 1790-91 her daughter Francisca de Paula Fernandes de Oliveira was *juiza* of the Brotherhoods of Our Lady of Mercy, Our Lady of Health, and Saint Efigênia.⁴³ In August 1796, the brotherhood of Our Lady of Mercy ordered the celebration of ten masses for its sister Francisca da Silva de Oliveira. Such events are evidence of the social capital João Fernandes left Chica and his children. The assets in the hands of the family give evidence of the appreciation João Fernandes had for his companion. Because of their concubinage, João Fernandes did not acknowledge the existence of Chica da Silva in his *morgado*, but he assured instead that his sons would enjoy the dignity his fortune afforded them in a monarchical society, guaranteeing them a successful future. Chica took care of their daughters' future and, drawing on the connections of João Fernandes, was able to marry them well.

João Fernandes de Oliveira did not marry while he was in Portugal. Chica da Silva died waiting for his return and enjoying the social and material benefits left by him. "On 16 February 1796, Francisca da Silva de Oliveira, a single woman, died with all the sacraments. She had a service and a funeral mass, with the attendance of all the priests of this town and the brotherhoods of which she was a member".⁴⁴ She was also buried in the church of Saint Francis of Assisi in niche number 16. Being buried in the church was a privilege reserved only for people of distinction, and Saint Francis of Assisi was a church designed for wealthy white people at that.

Conclusions

This study has attempted to present documentary evidence of the reality and myth of Chica da Silva, showing the importance of myth when a person on the margin of society travels an unexpected trajectory. Chica da Silva's life reshaped relations between white master and black female slave, thus challenging the only model that existed at the time. It is not surprising that her insertion in white society gave rise to many fantastic retellings and fictitious stories about her life, particularly among the people in Diamantina.

The discursive strain in the dominant narratives is that Chica was successful due to her strong sensuality and a mean character, which protected her against possible rivals. In this way, myth accomplishes a double end. On the one hand, the radical nature of her social ascent is minimized and distorted by invoking characteristics that are not socially appreciated. She is made extraordinary to convey the message that these events will not be repeated again. Here, myth embodies measures taken by society at large to impose

⁴⁰ MAD, cx. 514, 1789.

⁴¹ MAD, cx. 519, 1791.

⁴² MAD, *Livro de Óbitos*, cx. 350, 1777-85.

⁴³ MAD, cx. 510, 1790-91.

⁴⁴ MAD, cx. 350, *Livro de Óbitos*, 1796: 55.

order and ignore the powerful opportunity for change the union of Chica and João afforded to all Brazilians. On the other hand, by describing the union of Chica and João Fernandes as something extraordinary, myth also distorts the reality since, although not typical, unions of this kind were not as unusual as this version of events suggests. Many upper-class men established solid and respectful unions with Indian and black women, and this indeed was the beginning of the creation by the *mestizaje* of new families and hybrid cultures. As Edelman (1971) concludes in his analysis of politics – producing a sharp observation applicable also to our social life – myths simplify our complex world.

While some oral history is backed up by archival evidence, most popular stories about Chica are sheer fantasy and function as mechanisms of social control, by reducing the significance of her contribution to social norms. As with many other slaves of the Minas region, she entered unions of concubinage with her masters, and through one of them attained freedom and great social status. She was different from others because, through her union with the diamond contractor, she became a very influential person in her society. While she had to live in a situation of concubinage, she was amply recognized as a wife. She transformed the stereotype of a concubine from a woman dependent on the husband and thus submissive to him, to a person who could exercise initiative in the running of her house and life, promoting artistic and religious endeavors in her community. João Fernandes was crucial her fate and her fame; his fortune helped her a great deal, as did his determination to follow a path he thought was just. But Chica's charisma, determination and strong personality (which can be inferred from the initiatives she took in the artistic, social, and religious life of her town) probably played no small part in making her an unusual woman in this European-dominated slave society, breaking and fighting against social and racial barriers, thus demonstrating the inherent worthiness of all human beings.

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