

“The ancient Portugal reborn in the Brazil”: The myth of Portuguese-Brazilian Empire in the epic poem *Caramuru* by Santa Rita Durão

The poem *Caramuru* was published in 1781 by Santa Rita Durão whose intention meant to create an epic poem about Brazil’s formation. It is a narrative from a modernized origin as far as the legendary and mythical backgrounds are interlaced with certain characters and historical events, among them it is pointed out the protagonist’s journey, the Portuguese castaway Diogo Álvares Correia, who acquired relevant ascension over the Brazilian Indians from Recôncavo Baiano in the middle of 16th century, being named by them as *Caramuru*. It is noticeable that the poem holds certain historical fantasy in its introduction prepared by the writer, which is entitled “Previous Reflections”, where he refers to his documental resources by demonstrating his pride of being intellectual. Although it is concerning the documented facts, it does not mean that *Caramuru* must be a historical text. It intervenes in the historical-chronicle material in a way to transform it in an epic material, by taking advantage of a literary tradition that in the 18th century was pointed out as inferior (the chronicle) to compose a literary form, at that time considered as superior, the epic poem which tells the Brazilian formation history according to a prestigious model by the erudite European culture.

Caramuru represents Brazil as a social-political unity, even though during the whole colonial period (and later on) there was not a political unit, indeed. In Durão’s work, the Brazilian country is imagined as being a united and indivisible entity, which territorial borders extremes are, in the north, Grão-Pará (where Amazonas river is located) – “Dá princípio na América opulenta/ Às províncias do império lusitano/ O Grão-Pará, que um mar nos representa”¹ (VI, 71) – and, in the south, São Vicente and São Paulo, provinces which borders were up to Prata river: “S. Vicente e S. Paulo os nomes deram/ Às extremas províncias que ocupamos;/ Bem que ao Rio da Prata se estenderam/ As que com próprio marco assinalamos”² (VI, 79). It means that *Caramuru* incorporates the ancient desire of Portuguese colonizers: the constitution of “Magnus Brasil”, a project secretly nourished in the Court in Lisbon. It had been deceitfully spread by cartographers and chronicle writers related to Portuguese Court since the 16th century.

¹ “It initiates in magnificent America / To Portuguese empire provinces/ Grão-Pará, that a sea represents us”

² “São Vicente and São Paulo the given names/ To extreme provinces we occupied;/ To the Prata river they have extended/ the ones that we own have marked”

The idea of “Magnus Brasil” indicates that since the beginning of colonization the Portuguese government had intentions of not respecting the territorial boundaries which were set by Treaty of Tordesillas. Furthermore the Portuguese colonizers created the thesis that a territorial division between the American domain of the two Iberian dynasties should not be established by lines considered abstract and artificial by them, but by natural boundaries, which were pointed out by the Portuguese as more rational instruments of demarcation. Those natural boundaries would be preferably the abundant fluvial courses which went all the way through South America. Since those early years, the Portuguese saw Prata river as the ideal boundary while the fluvial border in the north had not been immediately set, but it was oriented by a legend told by the chronicle writers and later on confirmed by cartographers from the 16th and 17th centuries. The legend was based on Indian reports which mentioned a huge lake full of wealthy mineral resources surrounded by an advanced civilization in the interior of the continent. One of the first scholars to study the cartography that pointed to the existence of the mythical lake was the historian Jaime Cortesão (1957). He assures that as a matter of fact the Island- Brazil myth, not the diplomatic treaty, was the model followed by the Portuguese to occupy America.

The idea of Island-Brazil justify itself because two rivers started from the lake, one flows towards to the north and the other river, to the south. Therefore both rivers circumscribed a set apart territory from the rest of the continent. According the notion of natural boundary it would be more reasonable that the island formed a united geopolitical domain. Thus, Brazil as a geographical entity would be precedent of social-political country, in other words, the Portuguese expansionism would be just fulfilling a destiny auspiciously manifested by nature. That is the vision adopted by Santa Rita Durão in his poem: Brazil as a wide territory “naturally” comprehended between Prata and Amazonas rivers and it was destined, by God’s will, for the Portuguese Crown. Moreover, Durão incorporates and gives an epic dimension to the myth of a country defined by its own nature, destined by God for expanding the territory, politics and cultural of the Portuguese nation.

The disseminated image is of a Brazil that has not been built, but a country that has made itself by a natural and auspicious process, which had been accepted by the Portuguese as fate. It is noticeable that it is not just about the geographical and natural greatness, there is a presupposition that magnitude would sign to a majestic political future.

The roots of that imperial ambition may be founded in its own myth about the origin of foundation of Portugal reign, that acquired new meanings when, from the late years 16th century to the beginning of 17th, the Portuguese king D. Sebastião disappeared and

Portugal was under Spanish domain. The situation motivated a strong patriotic feeling, expressed by the people's desire of having D. Sebastião back to free their reign; it became a myth which messianic background matched priest Antonio Vieira's work as an erudite defender of it. Priest Vieira studied the prophecies from the Bible and ended up concluding that Portugal would be the Fifth Empire as foreseen by the ancient prophets. Far from being only an isolated utopia, the vision of Portugal as the Fifth Empire became common and was intensified when the Portuguese reign recovered the independence.

Several evocations of that utopia may be identified in Durão's poem; above all, the Brazilian colonization is seen as a Christianization process for a non-Christian population. Durão even states that Portugal would become greater than Greek and Roman empires by the evangelization of the Indians, as a reference to the ideal Portuguese Fifth Empire. Although it is involved by some mysticism, the ideal does not mean that Durão has been a retrograde intellectual, it must be pointed out that he was a pioneer for putting his effort to give an aesthetics shape to a long-term project created by Portuguese and Portuguese-Brazilian based on French Enlightenment: the formation of a great Portuguese-Brazilian Empire.

The rationalism may be considered without the utopia of Fifth Empire from its mystical dimension, but the concept remained and it was often discussed by intellectuals and statesmen from Portugal and from the colony. As they were aware of the potentials of a wide territorial domain, both elites from each side of Atlantic Ocean pursued ambitiously the goal of building a Portuguese-Brazilian Empire, a dream which gathered allied people even among the group of participants in *Inconfidência Mineira*.

Durão was a Portuguese-Brazilian intellectual who has lived in Europe since his childhood, then his work is according to the metropolitan perspective of conceiving Brazil as a unit integrated to Portugal, defined by God for been an extension of Portugal, father-reign. The Brazilian country of *Caramuru* is a land which is identified and confuse itself with the generous nature, destined to be a Portuguese and catholic empire in South America. After the Independence, the Brazilian elites adopted the imperialist vision and, instead of a Republic, it was formed an imperial regime, the only one in America. In that context, it was interesting to emphasize Durão's metropolitan position and highlight what in *Caramuru* sounded as an epic chant from the past and, mainly, as a prophetic chant of Brazilian Imperialism. Nowadays *Caramuru* is forgotten by the academy and set apart from the great public, in the other hand the expansionist mythology, that it has helped to create and consolidate in Brazilian culture, has survive as far as the imperialist future of Brazil is still a utopia strongly incorporated to Brazilian popular imaginary.