

## **Some Opinions of Christian Europeans Regarding Negro Slavery in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries**

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### *Introduction*

To explore the mentality of a bygone age is perhaps the most difficult task of the social historian. The challenge, however, to peer into the minds and motives of previous generations seeking a key to their institutions and actions can scarcely be resisted by the incurably curious.

Although the past forty-four years have seen violence and bloodshed on a vast scale which grows with each conflict, and have witnessed the ghastly annihilation of human beings in millions, some of us nurtured in an older, more delicate tradition are still appalled and intrigued by historical systems which inflicted a loss of liberty and much misery on fellow human beings. Such an institution was Negro slavery developed and sustained by European powers in their Mother Countries and in their overseas Empires from the fifteenth century on into the nineteenth. We have become reluctantly accustomed in this first half of the twentieth century to the enslavement of entire populations of Europeans by Europeans, or of Asiatics such as the Chinese by tyrants of their own race, as the totalitarian state rises and advances with deadly success.

Horrible as this fate is, it, at least, follows with some logic from the atheistic materialism animating the totalitarian state. We are faced with a far greater puzzle when we realize that the European nations who seized upon the system of Negro slavery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a means to develop their overseas possessions were outspokenly Christian. Portugal, the first of these powers to utilise the system, joined with Castile and Aragon through the Middle Ages, and, especially, in the fifteenth century, as the great champion of Catholicism against the Moslem invaders of the Iberian peninsula. Spain, whose Empire was long the best customer of the Portuguese slave-trade, regarded the cause of Catholicism as synonymous with its own ambitions. The Netherlands, which by the latter half of the sixteenth century, was challenging Portugal's monopoly on the West African slave-trade, had largely changed from its traditional Catholicism to Calvin's creed, but, nonetheless, considered itself dynamically Christian. England by the seventeenth century had awakened sufficiently to the rich rewards of the West African slave-trade to begin a protracted duel with the Netherlands over possession of the Guinea trade. And like her opponent, she was a staunch defender of a Protestant version of the Christian Faith. A complicating factor in England's religious picture in the

1660's, when this struggle gained new intensity, remained the Catholic and pro-Catholic character of the Stuart Royal Family, who had much to do with the formation of England's first important slave-trading company.

France, too, sent her ships on slaving expeditions to the Guinea Coast, and what European power until the French Revolution gloried more in her role as a defender and propagator of Catholic Christianity?

The reader of this part of European history may well ask what provided the *rationale* which allowed these avowedly Christian countries to revive a system of forced labor which had largely vanished from the European scene by the twelfth century, and which chose for its victims the brown races of North and South America, but more usually, the black races of Africa.

There is no ready answer. Yet, an investigation of this historical problem is rich in excitement. Since previous centuries lacked the blessings of Dr. Gallup and his researchers, to find opinions expressed in the era from 1660 to 1750 about Negro slavery is no easy task. This fact, in itself, would seem to indicate a general acquiescence on the part of the Europeans concerned which accepted Negro slavery as a normal and necessary method of exploiting overseas plantations and of providing some domestic comfort at home.

In an effort to look even darkly into the mentality of this late seventeenth and early eighteenth century period, we may study some reactions and opinions expressed by several responsible and observant people of the time: a wandering, intelligent and immensely human French Dominican friar; an intelligent and scholarly Dutch official of the Dutch West India Company located for fourteen years on the Guinea Coast<sup>1</sup>; an apostolic and fearless Presbyterian Divine, who had defied Cromwell; a famous Anglican bishop, as well as the judgement passed on slavery in Catholic empires by a noted English scholar, and in Brazil, by a noted Brazilian writer.

#### *Slavery in Canada*

Most Canadians are ignorant of the fact that Indian and Negro slavery was a characteristic of colonial life in Canada both under the flag of Bourbon France and the flag of Hanoverian Britain. Any denial which a modern Canadian might be tempted to make would be utterly invalidated by the late Justice William Renwick Riddell's classic work on slavery in Canada, contained in eight masterly chapters of the July, 1920 issue of the *Journal of Negro History*. Although it would seem that the difficult individualistic sort of farming peculiar to early Canada, and the very limited scope of its commerce prevented any widespread use of the slavery system, yet Indian and Negro slaves did exist certainly until the early nineteenth century, and perhaps even an unknown few remained to the very day in 1833 when the Imperial Parliament abolished slavery

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<sup>1</sup> In 1621, the Dutch West India Company was formed with a charter which designated its territory of operations as the West Indies, New Amsterdam and the West Coast of Africa.

in the British Empire.

William Renwick Riddell, a late Justice of the Ontario Supreme court, in the very early part of this century became interested in the legal position of the slave in the British Empire, and in the slow legal steps which eventually led first to a slight amelioration of his condition, until finally the slave became a thing of the past. His research led him to a much neglected field of Canadian history wherein he unearthed a treasure-house of information. As a result, his lengthy and careful, scholarly articles tell a tale which places Canada of the colonial period squarely on the margin of the dynamic world of European expansion in which mercantile economics regarded the trade in Negro slaves as indispensable.

According to Justice Riddell's researches the first Negro slave on record in Quebec was brought there by the first English conqueror of Quebec, David Kirke, in 1628. This Negro slave, however, remained a complete novelty since it was not until 1688 that Governor Denonville and Intendant DeChampigny of New France wrote to the French Secretary of State complaining of the scarcity and expense of labour in the colony. They went on to suggest that if the Royal Government agreed some of Quebec's chief citizens would be willing to purchase Negro slaves from the Guinea Coast in the West Indies as a remedy for the labor shortage which was bedeviling Quebec. The Secretary of State forwarded the King's permission but warned the colonists that the cold climate of Canada might prove dangerous to the Negroes, and thus cause the experiment to fail.<sup>2</sup>

Indian slaves are to be found occasionally amongst the colonists at this period. These slaves were called "panis" – a term which has an undetermined origin. That such a class existed is recognized by the Treaty of Peace and Neutrality in America signed at London, November 16th, 1686 between King Louis XIV of France and, his friend and admirer, King, James II, of England. Article 10 of this treaty promises a halt to any further seizures of French or British Indians, their property or their slaves. The slaves of the Indians were obtained in much the same way as were the Negro slaves of the Guinea Coast: they were prisoners of war. It was these captives who formed the "panis" class and who sometimes worked for the early French colonist.<sup>3</sup>

On April 13th, 1709, the Intendant, Jacques Raudot, issued an ordinance reminding the colonists of the advantages of possessing Negro slaves and the savages called "panis," and at the same time regretting the tendency of some "panis" to escape their masters because of the unsettling influence of other colonists who tell the Indian slaves that in France there are no slaves. The Intendant reminded such early, amateur abolitionists that whatever the case in France might be, in the overseas French Empire, slavery was a reality. And to enforce the custom on this point, he enacted, "Nous sous le bon plaisir de Sa

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<sup>2</sup> Riddell, William R., "The Slave in Canada," C.I., *The Journal of Negro History*, July, 1920, Vol. V, No. 3, p. 263.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, pp. 264-265.

Majesté ordonnons, que tous les Panis et Nègres qui ont été achetés et qui le seront dans la suite, appartiendront en pleine propriété à ceux qui les ont achetés comme étant leurs esclaves.”<sup>4</sup>

Nothing could indicate more clearly the existence of a slave class, however small, in New France, and the concern of the authorities to regularize and protect this kind of property. Although there appear to be no incidents resembling the slave rebellions which occurred rarely in the British colonies to the south, there were occasions when slaves expressed themselves somewhat dramatically. A Negro woman belonging to Madame de Francheville in Montreal set fire to her mistress’s home on the night of 10th April, 1734. In the ensuing fire, part of Montreal was destroyed. For this crime, the offending slave was tried, and sentenced to death. She was hanged June, 1734.<sup>5</sup>

Since with some of the colonists, the serious nature of the legal bond which kept the slave in servitude meant very little, so little that they freed their slaves verbally and sent them on their way, on 1st September, 1736, the Intendant Gilles Hocquart promulgated an ordinance commanding that the manumission of slaves must be by notarial act, and that any other form of manumission was invalid.<sup>6</sup>

With the conquest of Quebec by the British, the status of Negro and Indian slaves owned by French colonists was guaranteed by the Articles of Capitulation. The 47th Article stated, that “the Negroes and Panis of both Sexes shall remain in possession of the French and Canadians to whom they belong; they shall be at liberty to keep them in their service in the Colony or sell them; and they may also continue to bring them up in the Roman religion.”<sup>7</sup>

Although slavery was ended in England by the judicial decision of the King’s Bench, handed down by Lord Mansfield, on 22 June, 1772, (Lord Wyndham estimates that around 14,000 Negro slaves were freed), the decision had no effect in the rest of the British Empire. Emancipation throughout the Empire had to await the action of the Imperial Parliament in 1833. When, therefore, the War of American Independence drove thousands of loyal American subjects of the Crown northwards, they brought with them in some cases their Negro slaves.

#### *Father Jean-Baptiste Labat*

However difficult it is to find opinions regarding Negro slavery in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there are a few sources. One of these is the memoirs of Father Jean-Baptiste Labat. This French Priest was a Dominican of the Jacobin variety, who travelled from France to Martinique in

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<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, pp. 265-266.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, p. 267.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, p. 267

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, p. 268.

1684. This eminently human Dominican recorded his experiences in the French West Indies with intelligent observation. As he and his fellow missionaries landed in Martinique, they saw for the first time Negro slaves. On his arrival on the 29th January, 1684, he saw many Negro slaves coming on board his ship, and had this to say about the experience, "some of them wore a cap or an old hat and many bore the marks of stripes on their backs. This excited the pity of those among us who were not accustomed to seeing this sort of thing."<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note this reaction on the part of a refined, sensitive priest as he meets for the first time Negro slaves. He was shortly to become used to this colonial institution, since the Church to which he was attached on the island of Martinique owned several Negro slaves. With a sympathetic feeling he mentions slaves and slavery from time to time in his memoirs. He noted that around 1695 the King of France, worried about the increase of the mulatto population, imposed a fine of 2,000 pounds of sugar on the father of any mulatto. The coloured mother and child were confiscated by the Crown and given to the missionaries who looked after the hospital. Father Labat claims that this attempt to prevent interracial unions resulted only in more abortions. And what happened as well was that masters who became involved in liaisons with their slave women frequently gave them and their children freedom rather than have them enslaved to the hospital.

Labat has a most revealing passage which brings out something of his doubts concerning the propriety of Negro slavery. "There is a very ancient law to the effect that if a man can reach countries subject to the King of France, he is free. Owing to this law, King Louis XIII of glorious memory, had the greatest difficulty in the world bringing himself to permit the ownership of slaves. Finally, he only yielded to the settlers' urgent request after it was proved to him that this was the one infallible means to inspire the religion of God among the Africans, and retain them in the Christian faith which they would then be compelled to embrace."<sup>9</sup>

This feeling that slavery was not wholly consonant with the best traditions of the Mother country shows, at least in a few people, some slight examination of conscience. Somewhat mitigating the system in practice were various acts of charity such as the custom for the priests to give all spiritual services to the slaves without collecting any stipend. Interesting to note, too, are Labat's remarks concerning racial feeling within the coloured races themselves. The Carib Indian considered himself above the African slave. Reciprocating this feeling the African slave felt himself easily the superior of the Carib Indian.

Mixed in with the picture of slavery in the West Indies were the Engagées or white slaves who were serving in the British West Indies. Labat has a poignant passage regarding these wretched creatures:

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<sup>8</sup> *The Memoirs of Père Labat, 1693-1705*, translated and abridged by John Eaden, London, Constable and Co., Ltd., 1931, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, p. 58.

These Engagées are indeed numerous but should not be trusted, as they are poor Irishmen for the most part, who groan in a very harsh servitude lasting for seven or at least five years. These unfortunates are as often as not compelled to commence a fresh period of slavery as soon as they have finished their first term of servitude, and no matter what pretexts or reasons their masters allege in order to prolong their bondage, the Judges never question them. Indeed, if this Island were attacked the masters would have their hands full for these men would certainly turn their weapons against them and join the invaders if only to recover their freedom.<sup>10</sup>

As a frequent visitor to the British West Indies Labat had ample opportunity to compare slavery in the British and French possessions. On the whole he felt that the French treated their slaves better. For one thing he remarked that the Protestant clergymen in the British possessions neither instruct their slaves nor baptize them. In fact Father Labat thought that the Negroes on an island like Barbados, for example, were regarded more as beasts and allowed any sort of conduct so long as they did their work properly. He thought, as well, that there were more slave revolts in the British Islands of the West Indies than in the French. Yet in all fairness he admitted that similar revolts occurred occasionally in the French Islands. With a remarkable insight into human nature Father Labat wrote this significant sentence, "It is indeed true that the desire for freedom and revenge is common in all humanity and to obtain it a man will commit any crime."<sup>11</sup>

The Dominican Friar believed that the better treatment the French slave owners accorded their Negro slaves sprang from their Catholic religion, and the restrictions imposed upon Catholic slave owners by the slave code of Canon Law.

#### *William Bosman*

In contrast to the French Dominican Friar is William Bosman, Chief Agent for the Dutch at Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast, West Africa. He was in charge of the Dutch interests in West Africa for a period roughly from 1691 to 1705. The book which he had published called, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea divided into the Gold, the Slave and Ivory Coast*, is in reality a series of lengthy letters written home to an uncle in the Netherlands who was also a director of the Dutch West India Company. Bosman, who like Labat, was a discerning observer, had something to say regarding the motivation for Europeans to work and live on the West Coast of Africa. The motive quite frankly was unabashed greed. He recognized the terrible fatalities amongst the white officials, but made the philosophical remark that it is over the dead that men are promoted. He admitted candidly that it was great riches which urged his people on. "However, the money we get here is indeed hardly enough

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<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, p. 128.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*, p. 128.

acquired, if you consider we stake our best pledge, that is, our lives, in order to obtain it.”<sup>12</sup>

Amongst his analysis of Negro life and customs he remarked concerning their religion that if it were possible for them to be converted to Christianity, the Roman Catholic religion would likely succeed better than the Protestant, because of the ceremonies and of the natural, liturgical rhythm of the Catholic Church.

In his description, which is a very lengthy one indeed, of the actual operations of the slave trade, he made several things quite clear. First, the slaves were supplied by the African tribes themselves. Secondly, when the slaves offered for sale were presented before the fort of the European company, in this case the Dutch fort of St. George Del Mina, the slaves were then carefully examined in their completely naked condition by the company officials and company doctor. Those which were set aside for purchase after having been bought were then branded on the breast with a branding iron which imprinted on their flesh the arms or name of the company. This was done in order to differentiate the slaves from the slaves of the French, English, Danes and those of the Africans themselves. Bosman notes with ironical delicacy that the female slaves were not branded quite so hard as the male slaves. At the end of his long account of the slave trade, William Bosman clearly pondered in his mind the effect that this description might have on his civilized uncle in the Netherlands. “I doubt not but that this trade seems very barbarous to you but since it is followed by mere necessity it must go on...”<sup>13</sup>

Although Bosman himself seems hardened to the problems of life on the West Coast of Africa, yet even he seemed to realize dimly that the slave trade was not one of the better features of European civilization.

*The Rev. Richard Baxter and Bishop George Berkeley*

It is a point well taken in history that the past may not be judged by the standards of the present. Yet, we have surely the right to wonder if institutions sanctioned by custom did not have their opponents even in their own day. Professor Donnan, for example, in a Portuguese account translated into English, allows us to see that when the first Negro slaves were brought to Portugal in 1441, the miserable lot of the captives, shocked after their capture and longing for their home land, presented a sad spectacle which touched most of the Portuguese who witnessed it. Another document, written in 1444, acknowledges the reality that people were becoming accustomed to the sight of slavery, and that the merchants had found it profitable. Two justifications arose to allay the consciences of the Portuguese. One was that these slaves were pagan or infidel,

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<sup>12</sup> Bosman, William, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea Divided into the Gold, the Slave and the Ivory Coasts*, translated, London, Printed for James Knapton at the Crown, and Daniel Midwinter at the Rose and Crown, in St. Paul’s Churchyard, 1705, Letter VIII, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, Letter XIX, p. 364.

and, therefore, outside the protection of Christendom. Related to this was the consolation that these wretched Negroes would now be converted to the true faith, and thereby more souls would be gained for Christ. The second justification came from the Bible. Erudite ecclesiastics pointed out that the Negro race sprang from the loins of Ham, who was the son of Noah responsible for his father's two-fold disgrace of drunkenness and nakedness, and, therefore, accursed. An accursed father bred an accursed race destined to serve races which came from the more respectable sons of Noah.<sup>14</sup>

Although these points of view prevailed for centuries with different people at different times, they have always had some opponents. Bishop Las Casas in Spanish America is an early example. Rev. Richard Baxter in seventeenth century England is a further example. Baxter, a Presbyterian Divine, published in 1673 a manual of moral theology in which he dealt specifically with the question of Negro slavery. This was just one year after the Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa were reorganized as the Royal African Company of England, and embarked on England's first effort at slaving on a regular and large scale. Baxter subscribed to the ancient notion that a man may be lawfully enslaved for two reasons: in the event of payment for crime and for payment of debt. He stated strongly, however, that neither of these conditions apply to Negro slaves. Consequently their slavery cannot morally be justified, as he explains, "but to go as pirates and to catch up poor Negroes or people of another land, that never forfeited life or liberty, and to make them slaves, and sell them, is one of the worst kinds of thievery in the world, and such persons are to be taken for the common enemies of mankind; and they that buy them and use them as beasts, for their mere commodity, and betray and destroy or neglect their souls, are fitter to be called incarnate devils than Christians though they be no Christians whom they so abuse."<sup>15</sup>

While maintaining that emancipation is the duty of a Christian slave owner, Baxter was realistic enough to recognize that few plantation owners would follow such advice. He, then, advised as the next best thing the Christianizing of the Negro slaves, not so much by preaching as by the noble, charitable example of the master. He emphasized constantly the need for charitable and just treatment of the slaves.

His interest in the Negro slaves was shared sixty years later by Bishop Berkeley, the great philosopher Bishop of Cloyne. In an Anniversary Day sermon given at St. Mary-le-Bow Church to the members of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in 1731, the Bishop criticized severely the reluctance of the planters in the West Indies, and on the main land

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<sup>14</sup> Donnan, Elizabeth, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave-Trade to America*, Vol. I, 1441-1700, Washington, D.C., Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1930, pp. 22-25.

<sup>15</sup> Baxter, Richard, *Chapters from a Christian Dictionary or a Sum of Practical Theology and Cases of Conscience*, selected by Jeanette Tawney, London, G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1925. p. 32.



of America, to convert their slaves to Christianity. He compares the early Puritans to the old Testament Jews in their notion of being the “elect” or “chosen people of God,” because of the early antipathy of the Puritans to the Indians. Bishop Berkeley claims that this antipathy was extended to the Negroes, “with an irrational contempt of the blacks, as creatures of another species, who had no right to be instructed or admitted to the sacraments.”<sup>16</sup>

While criticizing such an attitude, he felt that many planters fear that if they baptized their slaves, they would be compelled to free them. The Bishop hastened to reassure them, but warned them that slaves must be treated with justice and charity. Bishop Berkeley makes an interesting comparison between the British Protestant policy towards slaves and coloured people and that of the Latin Catholics. “It must be owned that our reform planters with respect to the natives and slaves might learn from those of the Church of Rome, how it is in their interests and duty to behave. Both French and Spaniards have inter-married with Indians, to the great strength, security and increase of their colonies. They take care to instruct both them and their Negroes in the Popish religion, to the reproach of those who profess a better. They also have Bishops and Seminaries for clergy; and it is not found that their colonies are worse subjects or depend less on their Mother Country.”<sup>17</sup>

When speaking of mentalities in history which tolerate or actually cherish institutions now condemned by much of society, we must examine whether the institution was not merely one amongst many. Slavery is the depth of servitude. Servitude of various kinds was part of daily life in European society in the centuries under consideration. England knew indentured servants, apprentices, different kinds of servants, and knew, too, that from time to time the barbary pirates carried off European Christians into Moslem slavery. The pages of the *London Gazette* in almost every issue from 1669 to 1672 carry advertisements put in by irate masters whose servants have run off with livery, gold and “several other things.” The *London Gazette* of the week 16th January, 1670, informed the public that those with relatives or friends who have recently been captured by the barbary Turks could obtain their release by applying to a Committee set up by the Lords-in-Council and by paying ransom of Fifty Pounds. For those who had no such well-to-do relatives or friends, a public subscription was opened. These depredations of the North African Pirates were not new. Accounts of kidnapped sailors, and of other Christian slaves are to be found in the pages of Purchas. Even in Christian countries such as Spain, Portugal and France, and Italian Republics such as Venice, these were in some cases household slaves, and in all there were galley slaves.

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<sup>16</sup> Berkeley, George, *A Sermon Preached Before the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts; at the Parish Church of St. Mary-le-Bow, Friday, 18 February, 1731, Day of Anniversary Meeting, 1732*, London, J. Downing, pp. 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, p. 20.

### *Some General Remarks*

Lord Wyndham in his book, *The Atlantic and Slavery*, makes the point that generally speaking the Negro slaves were better off under the Spaniards than under any other slave-owning people except the Portuguese. Lord Wyndham attributes this to the Catholic religion of the Spaniards, and to the restrictions imposed on the Catholic slave-owner by the Slave Code of Canon Law. For one thing slaves had the customary right in the Spanish world to buy their freedom on payment of a certain sum. It must be remembered that this particular thing was not peculiar to the Spanish world. A slave woman was allowed under the Spaniards to purchase the freedom of her child who had been born to her in slavery. Further when a Mulatto child was sold, the Spanish father was given preference before other buyers. The emancipation of slaves in the Spanish Empire was an act of piety encouraged by confessors. "And the knowledge that they could so easily become free, and the frequency of the occurrence, mitigated their owners' sense of superiority."<sup>18</sup> With this statement Lord Wyndham underscores an important ingredient in the psychological relations existing between Spanish slave owners and their slaves.

A distinguished Brazilian writer, Gilberto Freyre, in his study, *The Masters and Slaves, a study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, agrees with Wyndham in his opinion that the lot of the Negro slaves was usually better in the Catholic Empires, "Yet it was in the fervor of the Catholic Catechism that the harsher and more gross traits of the native culture were softened in the case of those Africans who came from the Fetishistic areas – although to be sure this was a Catholicism that, in order to attract the Indians, had opulently decked itself out in fresh colours, with the padres even imitating the mummery of the native medicine man. The Catechism provided the first glow of warmth to which the mass of Negroes was subjected before being integrated in the officially Christian civilization that in this country (Brazil) was made up of so many diverse elements, elements whose force or harshness the Church sought to temper without wholly destroying their potentialities."<sup>19</sup>

Negro slavery which became a part of European economic life from the fifteenth century onwards fitted into a pattern of thought and habit which allowed it to be accepted and which eventually considered it to be indispensable. At the same time, however, it did cause qualms of conscience to some Christians, and the system had its occasional opponents.

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<sup>18</sup> Wyndham, H. A., *The Atlantic and Slavery*, Oxford University Press, London, Humphrey Milford, 1935, Part III, C. II, p. 248.

<sup>19</sup> Freyre, Gilberto, *The Master and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, translated by Samuel Putman, New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1946, C.V.P. 375.