

## Aleijadinho, the “Baroque hero,” and Brazilian Nationality

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**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses the various discourses that established Antonio Francisco Lisboa, known as “Aleijadinho,” as a cultural hero who anticipated a supposed “Brazilian cultural identity.” This myth, constructed as a biographical fiction in the nineteenth century, was later re-appropriated as historical evidence in a number of programs in the history of thought regarding the arts and letters in Brazil. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these programs proposed their own interpretations of the works attributed to Aleijadinho, mobilizing notions of race, environment, psychology, art and politics that were not documented at the time of the works’ creation. This article is concerned with the material, institutional and rhetorical conditionings of artistic production in the eighteenth century, in order to provide evidence for the argument that the term “Baroque,” and the psychologizing and expressive categories associated with it in many of these discourses, are in fact external to the actual effective practices of Luso-Brazilian artists at that time.

**KEYWORDS:** Aleijadinho; Baroque; History of Brazilian Art; Cultural Hero; Nationalism

**RESUMO:** Este texto faz referência aos discursos de vários gêneros que, desde o século XIX, produziram Antônio Francisco Lisboa, “o Aleijadinho”, como um herói cultural antecipador da suposta “identidade cultural brasileira”. O mito assim construído como ficção biográfica no século XIX foi reapropriado como evidência histórica, posteriormente, em diversos programas da história do pensamento sobre artes e letras no Brasil. Nos séculos XIX e XX, propuseram interpretações das obras atribuídas ao Aleijadinho, mobilizando noções raciais, ambientais, psicológicas, artísticas e políticas não documentadas no tempo do artífice. O texto trata de condicionamentos materiais, institucionais e retóricos da produção artística no século XVIII, para evidenciar que o termo “barroco” e as categorias psicologistas e expressivas a ele associadas em muitos desses discursos são exteriores às práticas efetivas dos artífices luso-brasileiros desse tempo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Aleijadinho; Barroco; História da Arte Brasileira; Herói Cultural; Nacionalismo

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Roger Bastide, in *Psicálise do Cafuné* (1941), was one of the first writers to reflect on the myth of Aleijadinho using the image of the "Hero."<sup>1</sup> For Bastide, the trope of the hero in the West provides the mythological foundation for the characterization of the figure of the artist. The hero comes to the world predestined to suffer. It does not matter what he does. His destiny is marked by a fate that inevitably leads to a tragic end. For Bastide, the modern world, marked by a growing individualism, appropriated this model and juxtaposed it with the Romantic concept of the genius. Aleijadinho was the ideal figure created in this imaginary of the heroic genius. As a mulatto, he could be understood as a product of the intersection of the country's formative races, an attribute that the modernists associated with the São Paulo Modern Art Week of 1922 raised to a paroxysm. Illness would impart the finishing touches to his tragicness.

To create the myth, several distortions are made. On the one hand, Aleijadinho emerges as a genius, out of nowhere. This narrative emphasizes the putative precariousness of his formation in order to highlight the difficulties that supposedly marked his life and to confer upon him a kind of magical appearance in a slave society where there was no place for "artistic autonomy" as profound as that attributed to him. In the same fashion, physical devastation caused by illness is amplified to confer greater relevance and tragicness on his heroic efforts. On the other hand, collective work becomes a blurry backdrop from which the figure of Aleijadinho surfaces with creative powers bestowed on him by the gods (Bastide 1941, 141).

The idealization and mythification of the artist began to take place fifty years after his death and gradually transformed him into a national hero, whose works of art gave shape to resistance against the colonizer. Conveniently, this anachronistic narrative ignores the extent to which national identities are a later invention. In Latin America during the first half of the twentieth century, the concept of national identity is mobilized along with a set of political expectations, almost always linked to projects directed toward the future. As with all generalizations, this sense of "national identity" implicates relationships of power, which, in Latin America, frequently employ the discourse of the "Baroque" as an instrument that is more political than aesthetic.

While Mário de Andrade finds a "nativist stamp" in the sculptures of Congonhas in Minas Gerais (Andrade 1991, 45), Gilberto Freyre calls Aleijadinho "a master of national caricature," and attempts to demonstrate that the artist produced "less out of devotion to Our Lord Jesus Christ than out of his anger at being

mulatto and ill; as a revolt against the white dominators of the colony..." (Freyre, 1936, 322). In Aleijadinho, the author of *Casa Grande & Senzala* saw a revolt that conforms more to the theories that circulated in his own era than to the obedience demanded by the religious orders that originally sponsored works of art in colonial Minas Gerais.

The Freyrean image of Aleijadinho appears to derive from the invention of the Latin American "Baroque" as an appropriation and subversion of European influences, made by the colonial artist as an act of heroic anthropophagy.<sup>2</sup> In this narrative, the colonizer introduces the "Baroque" as a style and conception of the world that confirms the ideological work of the Counter-Reformation. The so-called colonial artist resists this style through a rebellion against European aesthetics, which his work incorporates and supersedes. This image recalls that of Hephaestus, the heroic blacksmith of alchemic transformations and the demiurge of a new time of cultural miscegenation. It is as if beforehand, with racism, the elements brought to this ceremony of transubstantiation would have been pure, indivisible and identical to themselves. The trope of the hero, in which Aleijadinho and the Indian Kondori are included, is an important part of this paradigm, which proposes as the origin of an Ibero-American cultural identity a model of the "Baroque" imported to the Americas, later becoming the "neo-baroque" through the process of being translated and transformed into a "neo-new" reality and language.

The generic "Baroque Man" is constituted as a mythical being. According to the interpretations that have produced this imaginary synthesis of various types, it engenders a convergence of forces (economic, political, religious, artistic, etc.) that give birth to a national identity in every Ibero-American country where the "Baroque" phenomenon supposedly took place. This character takes on many names: for José Lezama Lima, the *senhor barroco*; for Affonso Ávila, the tragic "Baroque Man." Despite variations, this archetype has a shared trait in distinguishing itself by promoting the appropriation and subversion of European culture, transforming it into a hybrid culture, typical of Ibero-America. The presupposition in this case is always the "We" seeking to affirm itself in the presence of the "Other." This pattern continues to characterize studies on Ibero-American culture, whether to confirm or question it. Many times in this search for identity, multiplicity is sacrificed for the unity of a model that continually seeks to build a more or less similar, though not always cohesive, construction of an Ibero-American culture, in general defined through the Napoleonic term "Latin-American."<sup>3</sup> This process takes on various

nuances: the Cuban writer Lezama Lima emphasizes the “Faustian striving” and the demonism of colonial baroque drama, imparting to the *senhor barroco* the dimension of catalyzer of collective tensions.<sup>4</sup> Affonso Ávila highlights in those he calls artists an internalization of the “tragic and pathetic” aspects of the “counter-reformist Baroque,” and emphasizes the “existential laceration” of the “Baroque Man,” placed between a world which is in agony and another which emerges from its ashes:

The great artist of the Baroque never forgets his condition as a persecuted man who finds himself within his own interiority through the colliding values of faith and reason, a soul tormented by his exile in the world and flesh lacerated by the repressed passion of the senses. (Ávila 1980, 36)

The metaphors intersect: The “*homem barroco*” of Ávila confers a tragic density to the “*senhor barroco*” of Lezama Lima and, vice versa, in which the latter bestows upon the former a Faustian nobility. Invariably, the formula casts the “Baroque Artist” as one who uses the very weapons of the colonizer to invent and affirm an “American Identity,” dressed in its many forms—from the prodigious talents of the Indian Kondori to the illness behind the creativity of the mulatto Antônio Francisco Lisboa, Aleijadinho, the cripple. With craftiness and ingenuity, this mythical man would transform the unbounded violence of the colonizer into art, co-opting the forces that were imposed upon him to repress and extinguish his own culture. He would take excess from the European in order to construct, from diffuse matter, hybrid and exceptional forms. In the words of Lezama Lima, “the art of the Indian Kondori represented in an occult and hieratical form the synthesis of the Spaniard and the Indian, of the Hispanic theocracy of the Golden Age with the solemn, stone-like orderliness of the Incan” (Lezama Lima 1988, 105).

The Baroque acquires, for Lezama Lima, the foundational characteristics of what the author deems Latin American culture, presented in the form of a *criollo* who emerges from his own dream of belonging to the world. For Lezama Lima, two individuals incarnate the desire for differentiation: the Indian Kondori and Aleijadinho. The first represents the Incan Rebellion and expresses the elements of his race and culture by appropriating European codes. The second, at the confluence of European and African cultures, constructs the city from the margins and sculpts at night, so as not to be seen. For Lezama Lima, these figures enrich the forms that are termed “Baroque” and in so doing prepare the rebellion of the following century (*Ibid.*)

In the mellifluous voice of the Jesuit or in the naked sword of the explorer, the European "Other" strives to amputate the sparse roots that still tie this colonized Romantic to his mythical past, his presumed origin generally Indian or Black. The more exotic this artist seems, the better, as his image is nothing more than an overvaluation of the effect of positive discrimination in the anthropophagic consumption (as modernism understands the term) of the image that the European crystallizes for the native artist.

The mission of the "Baroque Hero" is Adamic: to save his culture from forgetting, giving a superior sense and distinct destiny to this unfathomable world of Baroque forests and mysteries that seems to draw sustenance from the impenetrability of stones. Will the language that names the rivers and the forests be extinguished? Will the gods that protect from disasters and mark the passage between life and death vanish? Will the characteristic aroma of food and the ritual form of preparing it be forgotten? Will the memory of the world of their ancestors be lost to the children? No, the "Baroque Man" would never allow this. He would take up the gouge and chisel to inscribe the name of his race in stone and wood. He would make tangible the experience of life in a world in dissolution. From beauty, transfigured into the Indian caryatid,<sup>5</sup> he would create a colonial Athena, a sublime avenger of the sweat and blood exacted by the foreign Faust.

The fantasy of redemption comforts theorists preoccupied with finding identity values for American cultures that will enable them to confront thousand-year-old European cultures on an equal footing. As Maria Stella Bresciani shows,<sup>6</sup> "national identity" is a truism linked to political expectations that projects toward the future, "as if everyone were unanimously striving to achieve the impossible task of fulfilling them" (Bresciani 2001, 21). This search is driven by the "notion of origin, or of roots, a telluric concept of Romantic origin" (Ibid., 20). From this commonplace, dialogues, similarities and contrasts between a plurality of voices (formulated in different places) intersect. This often simultaneous pulverization occurs because national identity is comprised of arguments and images that various authors retrieve from the same common source of theories, information and preconceptions.<sup>7</sup>

According to Bresciani, all of these studies demonstrate a certain implicit resentment toward the colonizer, perhaps more accentuated in the Brazilian case. Using Christianity as a metaphor, "we" would forever live with the consequences of a type of "original sin."<sup>8</sup> This pessimistic picture would be situated, in turn, in three common sites, in conjunction or isolation, raised by different

researchers as the cause of “our” problems: the adverse tropical climate,<sup>9</sup> frequently mentioned in contrast to the “balanced and favorable” climate encountered by the English in North America;<sup>10</sup> the characteristics (seen through the eyes of prejudice) of the “sad” formative races that make up Brazilians;<sup>11</sup> and the alienation and lack of the “Brazilian people,” associated with the theory of “the importation of ideas, institutions, customs from other peoples, resulting as much from our mimicry or mental laziness, as from our incapacity to see and to evaluate the ‘true’ situation of the country” (Bresciani 2001, 18).<sup>12</sup> These shortcomings would be the “supposed cursed heritage of our Portuguese fathers” (Bresciani 2001, 21).

The well-known study by Richard Morse, *O espelho de Próspero*, is a dissonant voice in this tendency to compare negatively the weakness of Iberian America with the success of Anglo-Saxon America, above all the United States. The author criticizes the “evolutionary” concepts of history that fail to examine European pre-history, from which colonialization originates, and that consequently produce prospective rather than retrospective analyses, invariably portraying the Iberian world and its institutions and ideas as “archaic, inept and marginalized” (Morse 1995, 22). Morse establishes a rich comparison between these two cultural universes, starting from the ideological and institutional legacies that the New World received from the nations that gave birth to them, and showing the persistence in the Americas of forms of thinking that are inherited from colonialization. In this comparison, Morse proposes other perspectives, based more on cultural histories than on economic parameters (postulated as an infrastructure reflected in the arts) and he proceeds to analyze the positive aspects of Ibero-American colonization. Morse undertakes a complex study of the philosophical foundations of colonization, and his conclusions are original, although they occasionally result in generalizations, such as the thesis that “the Ibero-American” would be “better equipped and situated than the Anglo-American to maintain alternative constructions of social reality” (Morse 1995, 162).

The tendency, following Morse’s analysis, is to open new lines of interpretation of Ibero-American cultures, as in the interesting work of Maria Stella Bresciani. It is not our objective here, however, to introduce a reading of these interpretative tendencies in studies of “Ibero-American identities.” Instead, our interest is the relation of these discourses to the concept of the “Baroque” and, more specifically, how they constitute the backdrop to the construction of the myth of the Ibero-American “Baroque Hero.”

Bresciani writes that interpreters of Brazil “are unanimous in denouncing the difficulty of colonizing a country located in the tropics and in listing the negative characteristics of our colonizers.” The image of the country that emerges as a truism out of these opinions shows the same thing in different ways, that Brazil is a nation of an inconclusive and incongruent configuration. It is a country that is apparently a paradise, yet hostile even in its positive image, a climate “that saps both physical and mental forces” (Bresciani 2001, 13).

This recalls the legends of Eden mentioned by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda in *Visão do Paraíso*. The author sees a failure of imagination on the part of the Portuguese, with their utilitarian intelligence, to see the fantastic spectacle of tropical nature and link it to representations of Eden, which would differentiate it from the myths of the Spanish conquest. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda presents us with the world of myth that accompanied the coming of the Spanish to the New World. He laments that this “fantastic geography” seems rarified in the Portuguese Americas “in sharp disproportion to the manifold activities of its navigators” (Holanda 1977, 7). In fact, the first Spaniards, like Columbus, were convinced that they had found the “Earthly Paradise,” and had actually identified some rivers as those recorded in Genesis. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda shows how the first descriptions of the New World are imbued with a fantastic geography from all eras, including anthropomorphic fauna and magic flora.<sup>13</sup> In the literary convention of Edenic motifs, the biblical narrative had already been contaminated by classical references, as in the famous El Dorado, a personification in America of the Golden Age that Ovid imitated from Hesiod (Holanda 1977, 16).

In this garden, it cannot be presumed that one will always find delights. Ideas of instability and corruption in a world that was dominated by *memento mori* and that was being brought inexorably to its end as a consequence of Original Sin and the Fall were obsessions during the Baroque era, and these ideas prompted the search for a place of innocence where salvation would be possible (Holanda 1977, 181-188). In this “Earthly Paradise,” the image of the innocence of the savage posed by Pero Vaz de Caminha is immediately substituted by the imagery of “animals” or “barbarians” and “people without a history,” broadening the pretexts for a “just war against the barbarian” and offering moral justifications for the “naturalness” of their capture and servitude (Hansen 1998). Where to place, therefore, the hope of redemption? The figure of the colonial artist provides a response, centuries later, in a projection shaped by the Romantic image of the genius creator. This would be the “Adamic Hero,”<sup>14</sup> capable of facilitating the cross between the

Old and New Worlds. As a personality sundered by these contradictions, he would nevertheless be the humble demiurge who, in the image and manner of God, would recreate a hybrid world in art formed from the mixture of contradictory elements from Europe and the Americas. He would be the civilizing hero charged with the task of dominating this mysterious and savage nature.

In the search to connect the concept of national identity to the Latin American invention of a Baroque aesthetic, there emerges the crucial issue of the anxiety of naming: "a Baroquism was created by the necessity of naming things, even if we remove ourselves from the techniques in vogue" (Carpentier 1966, 53). We encounter the attempt in all the poets defending this "aesthetic"—from Lezama Lima to Haroldo de Campos—to create a new language, to create a discourse that represents "American identity." Despite its apparent rebellion against the colonizing culture, in some ways this proposition is based on an image of Paradise in the New World that was disseminated in the colonists' metropolises.

The "Baroque Man," whether criollo or not, recalling Adam, created from a magical synthesis of antagonistic cultures and races in the American paradise by an ironic God who sailed the ocean in a Spanish or Portuguese galleon. This Adam, like Macunaíma, is a hero without character, a hybrid being, of undefined color, formed from a mixture of races generically defined with unsuspecting rigor—White, Black and Indian. In a repetition of Genesis, this being would be in the position to give names to the things of the New World. In creating his own form of expression, this new Adam would re-edit creation, curiously enthroning the Edenic vision of the colonizers. He hopes to reflect in his speech the transubstantiations that form part of his own make-up as a protagonist of the American "Baroque" drama; the symbiosis between the image of Western European culture, seen as Cartesian and cold, and his Indian and Black origins, understood as visceral and fecund.

## notes

1. "Aleijadinho," the diminutive of crippled, is how Antônio Francisco Lisboa became known. The artist lived and created in Vila Rica (today Ouro Preto) during the eighteenth century. Due to a considerable legacy of works and monuments in Minas Gerais, he would be considered by most Brazilian critics as the greatest name in the history of colonial art in Brazil. To several foreign critics his work transcends national boundaries and deserves a prominent position in the history of art in the Americas.

2. This is expressed by Lezama Lima's idea of the "Counter-Conquest."

3. In this text, we follow the terminology of Richard Morse and prefer to use the terms Ibero-American and Anglo-American, instead of Latin America and the United States. Morse shows that the term "Latin America" originated in Napoleonic France, almost four centuries after the discovery of the West Indies "as part of a 'geoideological' discourse to define the linguistic, cultural and 'racial' unity of the Latin peoples, in contradistinction to the Germanic, Anglo-Saxon and Slavic peoples." The author believes that, although the term "Latin America" has lost its Eurocentric neo-Napoleonic connotations, it has acquired new instrumental accents as the designation of a world strategic zone that also includes the non-Iberian peoples of the Caribbean. Richard Morse shows in *O espelho de Próspero* that the expression "Latin America" was modified by French colonial activities in the Mexico of Maximilian. With the term "Ibero-American," Morse hopes to suspend not only the "outdated categories of Bonapartism but also the geopolitical prescriptions that the governments of the First and Second World imposed on their respective academic cadres and on the region itself." In addition, the new term allows differentiation between the French, Italian, and Iberian traditions within the "mythified Latin tradition" (Morse 1988, 14).

4. The *senhor barroco* is the protagonist of the resistance movement by means of an appropriation of the colonizer's culture which the author calls a "counter conquest" (Lezama Lima 1988, 89).

5. We refer to the "indiatyds" sculpted on the gateway of San Lorenzo de Potosi, Bolivia, between 1728 and 1744, attributed to the legendary Indian (or mestizo) Kondori. See Lezama Lima (1988, 83).

6. The reference is to the paper presented by the author at the "Colóquio memória e (res)sentimento: Indagações sobre uma questão sensível" held at UNICAMP and afterwards republished by the UNICAMP (Campinas) University Press.

7. For the author, mesological and racial concepts constitute a persistent, common foundation from which these determinist theories extract their explicative force (Bresciani 2001).

8. The author asks: Is this politically-motivated search for a national identity not an "attempt to settle accounts with our founding countries for not having accomplished an impossible mission based on a utopian purpose without reference to any ideal model,

heritage of the Lusitanian countries? Or, we could ask, is it an unrealizable settling of accounts, given that we repudiate our actual countries and fantasize a noble father (an idealization of the foreigner) by always making him a model to be imitated?" (Bresciani 2001, 21).

9. This is the case with Gilberto Freyre, who writes about the difficulties that the Portuguese encountered in establishing and organizing a systematic agricultural system in an environment where certain "pernicious forms of vegetation and animals" dominated. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda also noted the inadequacy of European agricultural practices on Brazilian soil, observing a type of intrinsic weakness in this transplantation to a world that was very different from that of its origin. The colonizers would have brought over different genetic and cultural heritages and, in comparison with English America, the Iberian was worse off. The failure of the Portuguese colonizers would have had its origins in the predominance of the irrational and the emotional over organization and rationality. The same difficulties are highlighted by Prado Júnior who considers them one of the positive factors in the old dichotomy in relations of the colonization of the United States (Freyre 1933, 54; Holanda 1969, 3; Prado Júnior 1945, 21). The three works which were also consulted in the original are cited by Bresciani (2001, 9-11).

10. See Holanda (1969, 11-16, 121) and Freyre (1933, cited above); also Vianna (1973, 19), Bresciani (18-19).

11. Gilberto Freyre is the great architect of the image of "racial democracy" which counterpoises the analyses on the three founding races of Brazilian culture that are characteristic of the majority of studies from the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth centuries, and especially discourses produced within the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (IHGB).

12. Guilherme Simões Gomes Jr. discusses a reading of *Raízes do Brasil* made by Otto Maria Carpeaux. For Carpeaux, what Sérgio Buarque calls the "Iberian mentality" is a "perfect picture of Baroque society": "the opposite of hierarchies, of work, full of the spirit of adventure and the cult of the individual." This Iberian mentality is the origin of the "American tradition" as an "island" of "society and the baroque spirit" within the capitalist "continent of Western civilization." Guilherme Simões Jr. comments: "taking as a basis Baroque culture, the exaltation of personality to the detriment of the hierarchical order would signify constituting the notion of Baroque by means of an element that is alien to it. This is strange when the Baroque is seen simply as a style or even when it is considered a cultural complex." The author discusses the anachronisms of style and the exaltation of personality within the period considered to be "Baroque which is strongly hierarchical and dominated by the rhetoric of disillusionment and the topic of *memento mori*" (Carpeaux 1943, 382; Simões Jr. 1998, 117).

13. The world is the *codex vivus*, similar to the *codex scriptus* of the Bible. In this book of Nature and God, the *Arguto favellatore* (as Tesauro calls him) manifests His Divine Wisdom

by symbols and subtle enigmas (Tesauro 1958, 39). The invisible, incorporeal and the spiritual are more important than the visible, and the desire to see by means of and notwithstanding Nature is common. In the fantastic animals of Eden, God would have left indications of the rarest and most supreme truths. "And what better proof of the great age of the world than the disappearance of these divine messages, which is worth as much as the silence of God?" (Holanda 1977, 191, 209).

14. This Hero has nothing to do with the Classical Hero of whom Sérgio Buarque de Holanda speaks, who is "always equal to himself, made of a single piece, tending to be silent in a world that only likes to speak in allusions, ambiguity, metaphors, nuances and equivocation." See *Considerações sobre o barroco no Brasil: Estudos históricos* (254). He is likewise not connected to the patriarchal Adam of the theological-political thinking of the Iberian Peninsula, which transmitted the divine right of paternity to the kings and nobility of Spain (Gomes Jr. 1998, 180).

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