
Mahin, Luiza

(fl. nineteenth century),

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a wage-earning slave likely involved in major rebellions in nineteenth-century Brazil, is today a symbol of resistance and defiance for Afro-Brazilian social movements. Nothing is known of Mahin's early life, and much of what is known about her derives from brief biographic notes and a poem written by her son Luiz Gama (1830–1882). A prominent self-taught, manumitted intellectual and an energetic antislavery advocate, Gama described his mother as a thin, laborious, and attractive Yorubá-descendant from the Costa da Mina (Gold Coast) of West Africa. Gama argued that his mother, characterized by her proud and combative personality, always refused the Christian faith and was imprisoned several times for participating in slave-led revolts and conspiracies that took place in the northeastern Brazilian province of Bahia in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Gama suggests that the Brazilian government deported Mahin to Africa in the crackdown following the Sabinada Revolt (1837–1838).

Because of the paucity of historical documents, Gama's descriptions of Mahin cannot be corroborated. Details about her life continue to be clouded by doubts, including the subversive activities and supposed African noble background. Nonetheless, going beyond Gama's original description, past and contemporary authors have emphasized Mahin's central role in the 1835 Muslim-led slave rebellion known as the Malê Revolt. By working as a *quitadeira* (street vendor of snacks) in Salvador, Mahin came to be a key articulator of the uprising. Her *tabuleiro* (food stand) and house were strategic meeting points for the conspirators. According to a common narrative of the revolt, Mahin would be declared Queen of Brazil after the uprising.

Contemporary historians such as João José Reis are skeptical about the historical plausibility of a supposedly "pagan" woman having a central role in a movement composed mostly of Muslim men. Instead, Reis suggests that Mahin's protagonism in the Malê Revolt was initially popularized through the works of twentieth-century intellectuals Pedro Calmon (1902–1985) and Arthur Ramos (1903–1949). While based on contrasting conclusions about Mahin's personality—Calmon painting her as violent, promiscuous, and untrustworthy, while Ramos celebrated her nobility and value—both make mention of her leadership among the Malês. The designation of Mahin as an Afro-Brazilian leader was further advanced during the reorganization of the Afro-Brazilian movement during the late 1970s. This occurred amid the difficult years of the Brazilian dictatorship (1964–1985). To promote feelings of national unity, the Brazilian military regime had conveniently embraced the discourse of a Brazilian "racial democracy" that emphasized the country's harmonious and mixed-race population, virtually free from racism. Ironically, while embracing the idea of a harmonious mestizo society, the military regime installed in 1964 violently repressed those who voiced ideological disagreements with authoritarian rule.

It was only inside the more favorable context of gradual decompression (*distensão*) initiated by General Ernesto Geisel (1974–1979) that the Afro-Brazilian movements began to reorganize. In this respect, the creation of the Movimento Negro Unificado (Unified Black Movement, MNU), founded in 1978, is a symbolic milestone. As part of the broad efforts to challenge racism and sociopolitical exclusion, Afro-Brazilians focused on the critique of the Eurocentric approach informing Brazilian historiography, challenging the representation of Afro-Brazilians as passive and submissive historical figures. One of the results of this Afro-Brazilian activism was the promotion of names such as Mahin as well as Zumbi dos Palmares, Dandara, Anastácia, João Cândido, and Luiz Gama, among other prominent Afro-Brazilians, as historical agents and examples of popular resistance.

Particularly, feminists inside the MNU were major advocates of the inclusion of women inside the pantheon of Afro-Brazilian heroes. A historical, active leader such as Luiza Mahin was especially welcomed as a way to counter the submissive—yet idealized—place of Mães Pretas (black mothers) inside Brazilian society. These were slaves who served as domestic servants and wet nurses for Euro-descendant Brazilian families. For their roles in informally educating the children of the elite through songs and tales, many Brazilians—including members of the pioneering Afro-Brazilian movement of the 1930s—attributed to them a central role of nurturing the formation of Brazilian families in particular and, as a result, the nation as a whole.

In a different direction, activists after the 1970s centered efforts on finding ancestors that challenged the stereotypes of historical apathy and obedience of Afro-descendant populations in Brazil. Being simultaneously a slave who revolted against the slavery system, a woman who showed leadership among men, a pagan who defied Christianization, a humble yet politically ambitious street vendor, as well as the mother of one of Brazil's most famous abolitionists, Mahin was an ideal role model. Beyond unanswered questions about the historical accuracy of Mahin's life, including the conditions of her death, she remains a symbol of defiance and inspiration for Brazilians in general and for Afro-Brazilian feminists in particular.

[*See also* Anastácia; Cabral, Juan Bautista “Sargento”; Dandara of Palmares; Felisberto, João Cândido; Gama, Luiz Gonzaga Pinto da; *and* Zumbi dos Palmares .]

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See also

Anastácia <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-50684>>

Cabral, Juan Bautista “Sargento” <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-73511>>

Dandara of Palmares <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-73747>>

Felisberto, João Cândido <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-73922>>

Gama, Luiz Gonzaga Pinto da <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-73991>>

Zumbi dos Palmares <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-75397>>