
Jesus, Luis Xavier de

(?-1855),

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West African-born self-manumitted slave and prosperous merchant who lived in Brazil in the first half of the nineteenth century. Accused of collaborating with the 1835 slave and Muslim-led Malê Revolt in Salvador da Bahia, de Jesus was deported to Africa and forced to abandon all properties and businesses in Brazil. Documents refer to de Jesus as belonging to the Jeje nation, a nineteenth-century slave classification today associated with people from the region of the former kingdom of Dahomey (present-day Benin). The reasons behind de Jesus's arrival in Brazil are not fully clear. Possibly, he was enslaved and sold as a result of retaliatory, military incursions of the kingdom of Oyo against its tributary kingdom of Dahomey.

After ten years working as a wage-earning slave (*escravo de ganho*), de Jesus was able to buy his freedom in 1810. An alternative explanation for his manumission argues that he received freedom as a personal favor granted by his master in his will. As a sign of gratitude, de Jesus would adopt his master's Catholic name. There is evidence to suggest that de Jesus's former master exchanged Brazilian tobacco for captives in West African ports. It was from him that de Jesus learned his initial lessons about the slave economy. As a freed African, benefiting from living near the slave port of Salvador, de Jesus would himself build a prosperous career in the slave trade and also in money-lending activities. As a result, after forty years of living in Bahia, de Jesus owned eight houses and sixteen slaves. As such, he was one of the few Africans situated among the mostly Euro-descendant economic elite of Bahia.

But de Jesus's luck changed dramatically after his alleged involvement in the Malê Revolt. Despite a lack of proof regarding his alleged participation, he was condemned to deportation to Africa. A then recently promulgated Brazilian law determined that any Africans under suspicion of collaborating with the Malê conspirators could be repatriated regardless of incriminating evidence, even if they were not formally charged or required to appear in court. The law aimed at preventing future revolts by Africans, which were believed might lead to the "Haitianization" of Brazil. The term referred to the widespread fear among the Brazilian elite that the country would experience a similar successful slave revolution on par with the upheaval that led to Haitian independence (1791–1804). Nonetheless, beyond the pretext of preventing social unrest, the law clearly benefited locals who resented the social rise and envied the wealth of freed Africans such as de Jesus.

Just months after the Malê Revolt, de Jesus was forced to leave Brazil together with an estimated two hundred other Africans. They boarded a ship hired by the Brazilian government, later arriving in the slave-trading port of Ouidah, in the Gulf of Guinea. Arrangements were made with famous West African slave trader Francisco Félix de Souza, known as "Chachá of Uidá," to receive the returning men,

including providing them with small pieces of land. Although relocated to the opposite side of the Atlantic, de Jesus would continue to reside in an equally prosperous slave-trading region, where he would resume his economic activities.

Despite restructuring his life in Africa, de Jesus never gave up the hope of recovering his Brazilian businesses and property. In an 1836 formal petition to the Bahia provincial assembly, de Jesus appealed on the ground that he was unjustly forced to abandon his fortune in Brazil. He also emphasized that, although African-born, he was a Christian and a Portuguese citizen who had fully adapted to Brazil's culture. The provincial authorities, however, claimed that de Jesus not only offered his house to Malê conspirators to meet, but was also involved in other revolts before 1835. Despite several subsequent requests, which included many legal arguments that invoked the Constitution of 1824, de Jesus died in 1855 without being granted permission to return to Brazil. Unmarried and without heirs, he shared his Brazilian fortune with the slaves he freed in his will.

Being a manumitted slave who himself became a slave owner, a former slave who acquired Portuguese citizenship, a prosperous freed African envied by members of the Brazilian elite, a patron of slave trading who was possibly involved in a major slave revolt, de Jesus illustrates the many challenges and contradictions of the African diaspora in the Americas. His documented petitions provide a valuable historical source to understanding the agency of Africans who sought formal judicial structures and legal help in order to overcome adversity and discrimination under slavery.

[See also Souza, Francisco Félix de .]

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See also

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