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# Chagas, Cosme Bento das

(c. 1800–1842),

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better known as Cosme, leader of enslaved rebels during the Balaiada Rebellion in the province of Maranhão, Brazil (1838–1841). Cosme was born into slavery in the town of Sobral, in Ceará Province, around 1800. Nothing is known about his life prior to 1830. He possibly already was a *liberto* (freedman) then, because one document refers to him as a *capitão de campo* (subordinate militia officer, a post no slave could hold) in the town of Itapecuru-Mirim in the plantation belt of Maranhão.

Cosme was arrested for homicide in 1830, and imprisoned in the provincial capital, São Luís. Having led an unsuccessful rebellion of prisoners in 1833, Cosme was transferred to a prison ship for security reasons. It is from here that he escaped in 1834, and he was only caught again in November 1838 in the subdistrict of Urubu. His whereabouts during these years are again unknown, but he possibly took refuge among the Maroon groups that were particularly strong in the rainforests of this cotton plantation area. He remained imprisoned in the capital until October 1839, when he again managed to escape from jail with seven other inmates.

By then, a major civil war, known as the Balaiada, was already ravaging most of the province of Maranhão. The Balaiada grew out of the violent conflicts between liberals and conservatives during the first decades of the Brazilian Empire, in particular after an era of conservative and centralizing government, known as the *Regresso*, began in 1837. The *Regresso* era came as a reaction by conservative elites to the liberal advances of the previous decade.

In Maranhão the conservative governor created prefectures in every district, not only to keep local liberal elites in control but also to implement a compulsory draft of recruits needed to sustain the beleaguered imperial central government based in Rio. Yet the forced recruitment fueled fresh dissent. Because neither slaves nor masters or overseers could serve in the army, the prefects concentrated on the poor free population, which consisted mainly of *vaqueiros* (cowboys) and *caboclos* (peasants) living in a subsistence economy. This peasantry had developed in the interstices of the plantation economy and consisted of freed slaves and their descendants, mission Indians and their acculturated offspring, and migrants from the drought-plagued neighboring provinces of Piauí and Ceará.

Although this free and nonwhite population had been granted formal citizenship rights under the Constitution of 1824, they faced systematic discrimination and abuse by elites. They greatly resented the massive draft of their most productive labor force into the army and feared re-enslavement. In October 1838, a free peasant nicknamed Balaio released his son and other recruits that were being transported to the capital. In a similar action, in December 1838, the *vaqueiro* Raimundo Gomes freed his drafted companions from jail in the town of Manga and issued a proclamation asking for the governor to step down and the prefectures to be abolished. Although rebels adopted the liberal

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discourse and agenda, the leaders of the Liberal Party quickly distanced themselves from the movement they could not control. Around 10,000 rebels took over most of the eastern and southern part of the province, as well as Piauí.

In November 1839, Cosme emerged as the main leader of the Maroons of the Itapecuru Valley. Taking advantage of the confusion of the civil war, he succeeded in organizing an army of enslaved rebels that was estimated at its height to be 3,000 strong. He established a headquarters on a plantation, forcing slaveholders in the region to sign letters granting freedom to their slaves. He also sent letters to authorities, proclaiming that the *Lei da República* (Law of the Republic) had replaced the *Lei da Escravidão* (Law of Slavery), and that planters who still wanted to use their enslaved laborers would have to manumit and pay them.

Army and other official sources typically described “the infamous negro Cosme” as a bloodthirsty assassin, yet a more careful reading reveals an extraordinary diligent leader who tried to bridge the gap between enslaved and free rebels in order to maximize the chances of social and political change. Cosme made repeated offers of cooperation to rebels in his area, who called themselves Bem-te-vis, the nickname for liberals in Maranhão. He signed his letters “Tutor Emperor of Freedom, Defender of the Bem-te-vis,” which reveals an interesting attempt to combine traditions of Brazilian empire with revolutionary traditions of freedom and liberalism. In the last phase of the Balaiada (February 1840–February 1841), Luís Alves de Lima e Silva (1803–1880), the new chief of the legalist army and future Duque de Caxias (Duke of Caxais), forced rebels wanting to surrender to hunt down Maroons in order to enjoy an imperial offer of amnesty.

Some Bem-te-vi officers complied with this requirement, which helped to sow confusion in the rebel ranks. Raimundo Gomes resisted until the end, and even took refuge with Cosme after his group was defeated. Cosme’s Maroons were thus the last group still resisting in January 1841. He and the remnants of his Maroon army were finally taken prisoner on 7 February 1841, signaling the end of the rebellion. On 5 April 1842 Cosme was condemned to death by a jury in Itapecuru-Mirim; he was executed by hanging in September of that year.

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