

Álvares, Domingos

(c. 1710-?), intellectual and healer,

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was born around 1710 in the Mahi region of the modern-day West African country of Benin. Álvares spent his youth in a Vodou community dedicated to the earth spirit Sakpata. Álvares's parents, Afnaje and Oconon, held positions of leadership in this community, a status Domingos inherited from them. Álvares rose to prominence in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world after being enslaved in Africa, transported to colonial Brazil, and eventually prosecuted by the Portuguese Inquisition in Lisbon.

During the late 1720s, Álvares experienced first-hand the rise of the Dahomean Empire under the leadership of Agaja (c. 1673-1740), the ruling monarch from 1718 to 1740. As King Agaja's military expanded into new territories, Álvares witnessed the death and displacement of countless refugees. In the midst of this crisis, Álvares's parents died, and he took over leadership of their healing community. Like maroon communities in the Americas, Álvares's village offered refuge from enslavement and possible death; it also offered the promise of physical and spiritual healing. Álvares possessed knowledge of medicines that could cure a range of physical ailments. He also drew upon the direct powers of ancestors via spirit possession. As Álvares's following grew, he posed a direct political challenge to Agaja. In response, Agaja ordered Álvares captured and sold to Atlantic slave traders, most likely at the port of Jakin.

Álvares arrived in northeastern Brazil around 1730 and was immediately put to work on a sugar plantation in a remote region in Itamaracá. The plantation went bankrupt, and Álvares was sold to another sugar property near the city of Recife. There, Álvares refused to work as a cane cutter, instead asserting his vocation as a healer. When his master refused to allow him to go into the woods to collect his medicines, Álvares allegedly poisoned the master and his family. Álvares was jailed and eventually sold a thousand miles south in Rio de Janeiro.

When Álvares arrived in Rio in 1738, he had already gained notoriety as an extraordinarily powerful figure. On the basis of this reputation, a small planter purchased Álvares in order to cure his wife of a chronic illness that had plagued her for months. The plan quickly fell apart when the man and his wife refused to grant Álvares permission to collect his medicines. As the woman's health deteriorated, the frightened planter turned Álvares over to the custody of Rio's governor for safekeeping.

The governor eventually found a merchant willing to purchase Álvares not as a personal servant but as a lucrative, cash-generating investment. The merchant arranged a rental property in the western part of the city where Álvares set up a permanent healing practice. There, Álvares built a loyal community of followers who gathered for weekly sessions of dancing, spirit possession, divination, and healing. During this time, Álvares split the profits from the healing center with his master, earning the master 100 percent profit in just 1 year. Álvares's reputation for healing snake bites, stomach ailments,

syphilis, and diabetes had grown to such an extent that people came from as far away as 30 miles (50 km) to avail themselves of his powers. However, Álvares's growing popularity also gained the unwanted attention of the Portuguese Inquisition, prompting his master to grant him his manumission.

Shortly after earning his "freedom," priests raided the healing center, chasing away Álvares's followers with whips and warning them that they should never return. Álvares, who was absent at the time of the assault, remained on the run for several months. Nevertheless, he expanded his healing empire to include two other healing centers. He also established a small community of Vodou initiates, the majority of them Africans from the Bight of Benin. The community's ritual space was strategically located at the foot of the Nossa Senhora da Glória do Outeiro church. There, Álvares built a shrine consisting of a large earthen vessel full of medicines with a large knife stabbed through the center. This vessel was surrounded by calabashes and other spiritually powerful objects, all arranged under a large orange tree. Álvares conducted elaborate ceremonies every Saturday that included his wife, Maria da Rocha, their newborn daughter, and the rest of their spiritual family.

In 1742 Catholic officials finally caught up to Álvares, arresting him and dispatching him to Lisbon where he was tried by the Portuguese Inquisition for witchcraft. Over the course of two years, Álvares was subject to interrogations by inquisitors, who attempted to extract from him a confession that he had entered into a pact with the devil. Refusing to admit to such a pact, Álvares explained in painstaking detail the origins and methods of his cures. He insisted that he learned the majority of his cures from his ancestors in his African homeland. Álvares told the inquisitors that his cures came from the natural properties of his medicines and not from some diabolical source. Álvares also insisted that he never parted from Roman Catholicism after his baptism in Itamaracá years earlier, a claim supported by eyewitnesses who testified that Álvares often made the sign of the cross and possessed images of Catholic saints in his healing centers. Despite Álvares's convincing testimony, the inquisitors refused to accept his explanations, subjecting him to torture on the rack. In 1744 he was ordered to march in penitential garb in Lisbon's main public square and make a public confession. His punishments included whipping and lifetime banishment to the frontier village of Castro Marim in the far south of Portugal.

Immediately upon arriving in Castro Marim, Álvares was the target of derision and abuse. Claiming that he could not earn a living in the small village, he abandoned the terms of his banishment, commencing a 300-mile (483 km) trek across the Portuguese Algarve. Over the course of three long years, Álvares did what he could to survive. He sold sardines, worked in a hostel, and claimed the ability to detect buried treasures. He also continued to heal in many of the same ways he had in Benin and Brazil; however, Álvares could not build the kinds of social and political networks that had served him so well earlier in his life. Isolated and on the run in rustic Portugal, Álvares was finally captured by agents of the Inquisition in the small town of Sylves in 1747. He was again held captive in inquisitorial jails for several more years before being tried in the town of Évora. In 1749 inquisitors exiled him again, this time to the small town of Bragança in Portugal's far northeast. Álvares disappears from the historical record at this juncture, facing the eighth forced migration of his lifetime.

Though enslaved or in jail for nearly half of his life, Domingos Álvares's contributions to the intellectual history of the Atlantic world were manifold. He successfully challenged the expansionist, mercantilist ambitions of the Dahomean and Portuguese empires through organic, grass-roots movements that emphasized social reciprocity and public healing. He endorsed a form of religious pluralism that accommodated African ancestors and spirits, as well as European Christian ones. He demonstrated the pharmaceutical efficacy of plants in treating certain diseases years before Western medicine

understood the biological properties of those medicines. Finally, Álvares engaged in philosophical exchanges with some of the most powerful men of his time—kings, governors, businessmen, and priests—articulating his ideas across a vast swath of the Atlantic world. Overall, Álvares projected a distinct form of African modernism onto an increasingly homogenized capitalist, individualist, and European “modern” world.

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