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# Chica da Silva

(c. 1731–1796),

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.73637>

**Published in print:** 01 June 2016

**Published online:** 31 May 2017

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*.

also known as Francisca da Silva de Oliveira, Brazilian slave, was born in the village of Tejuco, located in the Minas Gerais captaincy in Brazil. More than any other slave, her figure became an icon, representing Brazilian mulatto power and symbolizing Brazil's so-called racial democracy.

Chica da Silva was a slave who lived at the height of eighteenth-century diamond extraction in colonial Portuguese America. She became legendary in large part because of her relationship with the contractor João Fernandes de Oliveira, a white man who held the royal concession on private extraction of diamonds in the region of the village of Tejuco (today's Diamantina), in the northeast of the captaincy (the current state) of Minas Gerais. It was in this region that rich gold and diamond mines were discovered in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, becoming important economic resources for the Portuguese empire. Throughout the twentieth century, Chica's mythical figure was used to represent black women's sensuality and the capacity for race-mixing characteristic of Brazilian society, especially after *Xica da Silva* (1975), a feature-length motion picture directed by Brazilian Carlos "Cacá" Diegues.

The myth of Chica da Silva was initially constructed by Joaquim Felício dos Santos, a nineteenth-century memorialist from the city of Diamantina, who dedicated a few chapters of his book *Memórias do distrito Diamantino* (1868) to her life and relationship with João Fernandes de Oliveira. By having her story told, unlike the many other black and mulatto freed and slave women living in Minas Gerais at that time who had relationships with white men, Chica was rescued from oblivion and become a historical figure. At this point, however, the author portrayed her in a negative light. To him, Chica was a low-born *mulata* with crude features, a fleshy woman with a shaved head, lacking in grace, beauty, spirit, and education—as one might expect a white member of the nineteenth-century elite to view slaves or freedmen, especially women. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, local writers began to add some positive features to Chica's image, starting to describe her as a woman of rare beauty. With no historical evidence of her appearance, this was merely a move to justify the diamond contractor's attraction to her. Since then, the character has been immortalized in Brazilian poems, novels, television serials, cinema, soap operas, and Carnival parades, reinterpreting and adding new aspects to her mythical figure, a personage with nothing or very little in common with the people who really lived in colonial Brazil.

Chica da Silva was, in fact, the illegitimate daughter of an African slave, Maria da Costa, who was born on the Portuguese Gold Coast in northwest Africa. Her father was a Portuguese immigrant, Antonio Caetano de Sá, who held the military rank of captain. Chica was born sometime between 1731 and 1735 in a small village near Tejuco called Milho Verde. She was baptized as Francisca the next year in

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the local parish church. At the time, slaves were given only Christian names. Documents of that time show that their color or place of birth would be used to distinguish slaves with the same name. Francisca was referred to as *parda*, of lighter skin, and she and her mother were slaves of the freed black Domingos da Costa.

At a very young age, she was sold to her second owner, the Portuguese doctor Manuel Pires Sardinha, who lived in the village of Tejuco. With him, she had her first child Simão while still a slave. Although Manuel Pires Sardinha never recognized Simão as his son, he granted the boy his freedom on the occasion of his baptism and left him part of his fortune when he died. In 1753 Chica was bought by João Fernandes de Oliveira, who had just arrived in Tejuco to administer the diamond contract won by his father in Lisbon. At that time, Chica was between 18 and 22 years old, and João Fernandes was 26. Soon thereafter, Chica and João Fernandes began a long-term relationship and, in December of that same year, he granted her freedom. From then on until 1771, when he returned to Portugal, they lived together as if they had been officially married. They never legalized their relationship, which would have been dishonorable for white men and their descendants. Such mixed marriages were strongly discouraged by the Portuguese state and the Catholic Church, which investigated couples' origins and would normally refuse a marriage license to those of different colors or social status.

In 1754 Chica became pregnant with their first baby, a girl named Francisca de Paula, born in April 1755. They had thirteen children in total: four boys and nine girls (the others were João, born in 1756; Rita, 1757; Joaquim, 1761; Antônio, 1762; Ana, 1763; Helena, 1764; Luiza, 1765; Maria, 1766; Quitéria, 1767; Antônia, 1768; Mariana, 1769; and José, 1770). Nearly all the names chosen by the couple reaffirm family ties, derived from their relatives' given names, and suggest that they had established an authentic family, although not by the sacred bonds of official marriage. Having an average of one child every thirteen months challenges the sensual, lascivious, maneating image that always characterized the mythical Chica.

In fact, she tried to live and act like any lady of the local elite, similar to the other freedwomen who, like her, had managed to accumulate some wealth. She lived in a large and comfortable house, one of the best in the village, with a private chapel, where two of her daughters would later marry. The house was located close to those of the local elite and was a solidly built, airy two-story house with a garden in the backyard and its own private fountain, providing clean water for the house's needs. On the second floor was a large living room with a balcony and a veranda facing the street. There, living in the greatest ostentation, Chica was served by many slaves of her own; they were used as household servants, breastfeeding newborn babies, and also rented out to work in the diamond mines, providing income for the family. Soon she assumed João Fernandes's surname, becoming Francisca da Silva de Oliveira; around the village, she was referred to as *dona*, a sign of honor and respect, usually attributed only to distinguished white women—further proof of her importance and degree of social success. She also learned how to read and write, and was able to sign her name in some documents that have survived.

The five boys (including Simão, her first son) received their formal education with the local priests. This included instruction in Latin, which was required for entry into the prestigious university in Coimbra, Portugal, or for those hoping to pursue an ecclesiastical career. The elder four (Simão, João, Joaquim, and Antônio) went to Portugal in 1771 to complete their studies, and José later became a priest, probably having studied in the Mariana Seminary, the only one in Minas Gerais to turn out priests. Simão studied at the Coimbra Colégio das Artes (School for the Arts), and João studied at the

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Colégio dos Nobres (School for Young Nobles), created in Lisbon by the marquis of Pombal to prepare nobles for posts in imperial administration. Her nine daughters were educated at the best educational establishment in Minas. A mix between a convent and a school, the Macaúbas Nunnery was intended for the daughters of well-off families, either for formal education or religious confinement. But only Maria became a nun, while the others left the institution one by one, returning to Tejuco, where they were married to white Portuguese men, usually low-ranking officers.

Chica always sought to place her children and herself among the local elite. This was achieved by a number of measures, not merely via João Fernandes's importance and fortune, since he was forced to return to Portugal in 1771 to resolve family disputes over his father's inheritance and never returned. From that point on, Chica was left on her own, and she, like other freedwomen in Tejuco, found mechanisms to maintain her status. One of these was membership in several brotherhoods (*irmandades*), which were generally composed of individuals of the same origin and social status, as a way of obtaining distinction and social recognition. These rules were not always respected, however, and some people of color, like her and other freed people in Tejuco, succeeded in becoming members of societies that were usually exclusively white. She and her children belonged to the brotherhoods of the Holy Land, Holy Ghost, Saint Francis, Saint Michael of the Souls, and Mount Carmel—all of them whites-only, in theory.

Chica raised her and João Fernandes's children in the Catholic Church; from a young age, they were encouraged to serve as godparents to a number of children in the village, be they slaves, freed, or free born, which allowed them to show charity to the poor while building links of solidarity and protection, as being a godparent was an important mechanism of socialization in that society. In fact, when Chica da Silva died, she was able to convince several important men in the village to take care of her last wishes regarding the distribution of her property among her heirs.

As for her large slave stock, Chica da Silva was a very conservative owner, seeking to maintain her investment, as was usual among slave owners, including freed people. There are no indications that she freed any of them, not even in her will, which was a common practice to show one's charity and a Catholic mechanism to raise the soul of the deceased to paradise. Several of her slaves married each other—in marriages promoted by her—a way to ensure their loyalty and their acceptance of captivity.

Chica died on 15 February 1796 in Tejuco and was buried at the Igreja de São Francisco (Church of Saint Francis of Assisi), whose brotherhood was normally reserved for the local white elite, a demonstration of the importance and prestige she had accrued. All the priests of the hamlet gathered in a ceremony round her body, which was accompanied to the grave by all the brotherhoods to which she belonged, a public expression of the distinction she had achieved in life.

Despite the myth that eventually emerged around Chica da Silva, she was neither the queen of the slaves nor the redeemer of her race; nor was she a shrew, a witch, or a seductress. She knew, as was common for freedwomen of the period, how to take advantage of the few possibilities that the system offered her. Her actions among the white elite of Tejuco were always aimed at diminishing the stigma that color and slavery had imposed on her and at promoting the social ascension of her descendants in the Luso-Brazilian empire of that time.

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In this sense, her life was an illustration of the fact that “racial democracy” in Brazil was nothing of the kind, but a method of denying the African origins and even the dark skin of mixed-race individuals who were forced to identify as white in order to achieve social acceptance. It also shows that these mechanisms, still a force in contemporary Brazilian society, have roots in the colonial past.

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