
Chico Rei “Galanga”

(fl. eighteenth century),

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a legendary figure of Afro-Brazilian history and popular lore whose actual existence is uncertain. According to the various stories that were propagated during the twentieth century, Chico was a king (*rei*), born in the early eighteenth century in the West-Central African kingdom of Kongo. In the different variations of the story, Chico, his family, and other fellows of his village were captured and sold into slavery. In Portuguese America, they were enslaved in the mountainous town of Vila Rica (today known as Ouro Preto), in the gold mining region of Minas Gerais.

After working for some years in a mine, Chico started hiding gold in his hair, and with his accumulated wealth he eventually purchased his freedom. According to the story, Chico became a very prosperous man and bought a gold mine in Vila Rica, which allowed him to buy the freedom of his family and other members of his village. Another version of the same story states that Chico’s unnamed former master gave him the gold mine as a gift to thank him for his good services. Once a freedman, Chico Rei and his fellows built the Igreja de Santa Efigênia (Church of Saint Iphigenia), which houses the Catholic Irmandade da Nossa Senhora do Rosário (Brotherhood of Our Lady of Rosary).

Despite the compelling nature of many of the details of the Chico Rei story, there are no primary sources confirming his existence, even though his name is present in the collective memory of the members of the Brotherhood of Rosary. Moreover, it is hard to determine if the legend emerged during the period of slavery, or if it is a more recent phenomenon. The first reference to Chico Rei probably appeared in the book *História antiga de Minas* (1904), by the Brazilian historian, journalist, politician, and lawyer Diogo Luiz de Almeida Pereira de Vasconcelos (1843–1927). Subsequently, the story was widely disseminated in the various editions of the textbook *Histórias da terra mineira* (1914), by Carlos Góis (1881–1934). It was also reproduced in the essay *O colono preto como fator da civilização brasileira*, published in 1918 by the Afro-Brazilian historian Manuel Querino (1851–1923).

Over the years, Chico Rei has remained alive in Brazilian popular memory. In 1964, Rio de Janeiro’s Salgueiro samba school staged the story of Chico Rei. The school’s lead samba, “Chico Rei,” composed by Geraldo Babão, Djalma Sabiá, and Binha, describes how Chico was captured in Africa and faced the horrors of the Middle Passage, was eventually sold into slavery in Minas, and later purchased his freedom. Despite these hardships, the lyrics underscore how Chico overcame the slave status and became a prosperous man. In the following years, Chico’s story was also featured in the theatrical play *Chico Rei: A Salamanca do Jarau* (1965), by Walmir Ayala, in the novels *Lembrando Ouro Preto e Aleijadinho: Reisado, congado, Chico-Rei* (1965) by Angélica de Rezende and *Chico Rei: Romance do ciclo da escravidão nas Gerais* (1966) by Agripa Vasconcelos, and in the film *Chico Rei* (1985) by Walter

Lima Jr. In all these productions, Chico's familiar story of triumph over hardship was reproduced with slight variations. Moreover, in Minas Gerais, local Afro-Brazilian associations created groups named after Chico Rei to promote the history of Afro-Brazilian heroes.

Chico's legend has been updated in other initiatives intended to promote tourism in Ouro Preto. In 1946 the son of a local resident, while playing in the courtyard of his mother's house, discovered the entrance of a mine that was blocked with stones. Convinced that her son had found the Encardideira gold mine, described in *Histórias da terra mineira*, Maria Bárbara de Lima decided to install artificial illumination along the one-mile deep mine shaft, and to name it "Mina do Chico Rei" (Chico Rei's Mine). The mine, which now contains a small restaurant, remains open to public visitation.

Over the last fifty years, several other popular and scholarly works published in Portuguese, English, and Spanish contributed to disseminate Chico's story. Although not based on documentary evidence, Chico's tale amalgamates elements of the experiences lived by several different enslaved individuals who came from Africa to work in the gold mines of the interior of southeastern Brazilian, and who were able to purchase their own freedom. His story also helps to construct a biography of an enslaved hero in a country that, despite having imported the largest number of Africans to the Americas, only recently started to value its Afro-Brazilian historical actors.

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