Dyewood to Furs: The Brazilian Origins of French-Amerindian Trade

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The fur trade in North America, as it evolved during the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth, was developed by the French on the one hand and the aboriginal peoples of the Northeastern forests on the other. It is widely believed that it was in the northern trade that the French learned their techniques for dealing with Amerindians, a type of diplomacy in which they excelled throughout their presence in North America. There is no doubt that North America presented particular challenges demanding creative responses on the part of the French. But the fact that the French rose to those challenges successfully was due to more than the natural aptitude or brotherly sentiments often attributed to them. The French had the benefit of considerable experience in South America where they had also pioneered commercial relations with Amerindians. There they traded for such exotic items as parrots, monkeys, and feathers, but more importantly for cotton and various types of woods, particularly those that produced dye, of which *pau-brasil*l (brazilwood) was the most important. While concommitant for part of the sixteenth century with the fur trade of North America, this Franco-Brazilian trade started earlier and peaked much sooner. It declined toward the end of the century as its northern counterpart gained momentum. **[end p. 19]**

The parallels between trade for dyewood in Brazil and that for furs in "Terra Nova" (as the northern region was originally referred to) are striking. In each case, the French sought a natural product that was a luxury item, catering to the tastes of the rising European bourgeoisie. The color red was much in demand in the burgeoning tapestry industry of Flanders and France, just as furs were highly prized in the manufacture of fashionable clothing. The principal source of the red dye was a tree (*Caesalpinia sappan*) found in India and the Orient, but the discovery of *Caesalpinia echinata* and related varieties along the Brazilian coast provided a more accessible supply (Fisher, 1943, 20-23).

The simplest way of acquiring red dyes and furs was through trade with Amerindians. In Brazil, the comparatively dense and stable indigenous farming population provided sufficient manpower to cut and prepare dyewood and pile it at locations for loading on ships. This method closely parallels the French fur trade in North America; in both regions Amerindians brought their products to the coasts to trade with visiting ships. The mouth of the St. Lawrence River was a favorite rendezvous point for the northern fur trade. In Brazil, the principal trading places were in the regions of Pernambuco and Rio de Janeiro (including Cabo Frio). In neither region did Europeans at first stay throughout the year, but came on a seasonal basis (Linschot, 1638, 42; Thevet, 1878, 308-310; de Lery, 1975, 173-176).

In both cases, the French encouraged trade by adapting to Amerindian customs and practices. Facilitating such a course of action was the similarity of the peoples of north and south, despite differences in cultural particularities (Julien, 1948, 182; **[end p. 20]** Steward, 1977, 151-179) This similarity had struck Jacques Cartier; in 1535 he reported Canadians (as they soon were called) "living much like Brazilians." Andre Thevet, cosmographer to the King of France, was more categoric when he wrote that Brazilian and North American Indian customs were just about the same (Public Archives of Canada, Archives des Colonies CIID 10, Memoire d'Antoine Lamothe Cadillac, 1693; Thevet, 1878, 419; Biggar, 1924, 181). In Brazil, adaptation to Amerindian customs was given added impetus because the French operated in regions claimed by the Portuguese, and the principal way of circumventing this was by means of native alliances. In Terra Nova what had to be circumvented were the very conditions that made the region so rich in furs--the austere northern climate. Difficulties of survival under unfamiliar conditions, rather than national rivalries, caused the French to rely on techniques they had learned in Brazil, such as ritual exchanges of gifts and "hostages." French lads went to live with Amerindians to learn their ways and often intermarried

and served as interpreters and go-betweens. In the North, they came to be known as "coureurs-de-bois" (Gaffarel, 1878, 72; Chaunu, 1964, 240). One historian has gone so far as to refer to the latter as northern replicas of Portuguese-Brazilian mamelukes (Fernandes, 1949; de Holanda, 1960, 1:194; Ribeiro, 1973, 190-191).

European commerce in brazilwood can be traced to Columbus's epoch-making voyages. Red-painted Amerindians in the West Indies and along the Caribbean coast willingly showed Europeans the sources of their dye (d'Anghiera, 1912, 1:110; Robinson, 1969; Moser, 1981). Later, Thevet described a similar occurrence on the Brazilian coast: **[end p. 21]**

> The people of the country shewed them the Brasille tree, which they do name in their language Oraboutan and is very fayre to looke on, the barke thereof is of a gray colour withoute, and the woode is red within, and chiefly the harte, the whyche is more excellente than the reste.... (Thevet, 1568, 94).

This new source for red dye aroused immediate interest in dyewood, because it was much closer to Europe than India (forty sailing days as compared with four months). India had been the source of Europe's red dye since the thirteenth century (Gaffarel, 1878, 26; Diffie, 1947, 636-637; Simonsen, 1967, 48). On Columbus's third voyage, a better quality brazilwood was reported along the coast of Pará and Columbus shipped 1440 kilograms of the logs to Spain (d'Anghiera, 1912, 1:110). But it was Admiral Pedro Cabral's landfall in 1500 that revealed the best stands, as sample logs brought back indicated; in 1503, Amerigo Vespucci took on a load at Bahia de Todos Santos (WaldseemGller, 1507, L, 149-150). In the words of Thevet:

> ... the Portingales brought home their shyps laden therewyth. And since that we have hadde knowledge of yt, therof is made a verie great trade (Thevet, 1568, 94).

The rapid development of the dye trade in the sixteenth century indicates the demand for this commodity. In France, it was part of the commercial "take off" that had occurred during the last quarter of the fifteenth century. In Normandy, for example, the number of trading licenses granted between 1475 and 1533 by La Compagnie de Marchands had jumped from seventy-eight to 226 (Braudel and Larousse, 1977-1979, 1:246). This activity centered in Rouen, which Louis XI (1461-1483) hoped would eventually rival Bruges as a commercial center (Gaffarel, 1878, 3; Fragoso, 1965, 29-30; Braudel and Larousse, 1977-1979, I:246-247).

Portugal's claims to the rights of discovery in Brazil did not deter France from dominating the exploitation of this new source of dye (Staden, 1874, 65; de Souza, 1939, 119-132; Fragoso, 1965, 55-56). Claiming prior discovery, the French entrenched themselves in the new trade by the most practical means available: developing alliances with the indigenous peoples. They found their principal allies in the Tupinamba, Tamoio, and Potiguar. All of these peoples belonged to the Tupí-Guaraní, a large cultural group that occupied the entire Brazilian coast.

The first French Brazilian trading voyage for which there is a reasonably certain record is that of the *L'Espoir* in 1503-1505, captained by Binot Paulmier de Gonneville of Honfleur, who may have been associated with ship owner Jean Ango the younger, of Dieppe (1480-1551) (d'Avezac, 1869, 12-18). The French quickly became an important factor in the brazilwood trade largely because of the merchants of Dieppe, particularly the two Jean Angos, the elder and younger (Gaffarel, 1889; Guenin, 1901; Fragoso, 1965). They frequented the Brazilian coast in such numbers that the mouth of the São Francisco River was called Porto dos Francezes by the Portuguese (Gaffarel, 1878, 129).

The French initiative forced Portugal's hand, and King Dom Manuel moved to protect his claims to Brazil

by establishing a royal **[end p. 23]** privilege. He even agreed to forbid importation of dyewood from India in favor of that from Brazil (de Abreu, 1929; 262-267; Honorario Rodriguez, 1954, 83; de Holanda, 1960, 1:390). From 1532, he also encouraged colonization, but the settlements were too small and too scattered to keep out French traders, at least at first (Julien, 1948, 180-181).

Surviving records provide some details of this trade. For instance, the cargo of the French ship *La Pelerine* captured by the Portuguese in 1532, consisted of 3000 "leopard" (probably jaguar) skins, 300 monkeys of different varieties, 600 parrots listed as knowing French, cotton, and, finally, 5000 quintales of brazilwood. The total value was listed at 62,000 ducats (Marchant, 1942, 38-39; Mollat, 1964, 69; Simonsen, 1967, 57-58). The very fact that such losses continued to be reported throughout this period indicates persistent French presence, particularly during the 1540s and early 1550s (Calendar for State Papers, 1863, 148-149 and 470-471). By the mid-1500s, Henry II moved to curb the activities of Ango the younger, who by this time was in effect waging his own private war with Portugal, complicating relations with France. The shipowner found himself facing restrictions on his commercial activities as well as charges of crimes at sea. These problems, along with his personal extravagances, led to his ruin.

Such commerce would not have been possible without close cooperation between the Amerindians and the Europeans. Human labor was essential, and was mostly provided by the Amerindians. In the words of Thevet:

> When the Christians are there **[ernd p. 24]** for to laade Brasill, the wylde men of the countrey cut it them selves, and sometimes they bring or carie it three of foure leagues to the shi ppes. I 1 eave to youre judgement their paine and travel, and al for to get some poore or course weede and shirt (Thevet, 1568, 95; Thevet, 1575, 950).

The early depictions of the French and Portuguese in the Brazil trade show Amerindians doing the work. Maps are the richest single source for this information. One outstanding example is the often-reproduced illustration from the Reinal map, 1519 (Cortesão and Texeira de Mota, 1960, I :pl.2; Klemp, 1976, pl. 66). A French map, believed to have been executed about 1542, shows brazilwood being prepared around a cannibal feast. The greyish bark and red heart of the tree are carefully illustrated (Jomard, 1842-1862, 29-30). A Dieppe map, dated 1579, not only gives details about where brazilwood may be found but also the labor available from nearby villages (Van de Claye, 1579). Heavy logs (each weighing about twenty-four kilograms) carried on bare shoulders bruised and tore flesh, yet the Amerindians were reported willing to do this work for those whom they considered friends and allies, and who also brought them trade goods (Thevet, 1575, 950: Thevet, 1953, 221-222; de Lery, 1975, 174-175).

The interpreters who served as liaisons between the French and the Amerindians were commonly referred to as "Normans," indicating the origin of many of them (de Lery, 1975, 223). It was in Rouen, a Norman city, that Jean Cordier in 1547 published a list of French-Tuplnamba words and phrases for use by traders in Brazil as an appendix to his **[end p. 25]** navigation manual (Mollat, 1952, 71-73). It was also in Rouen that a residence was maintained at 17 rue Malpalu for visiting Brazilians; similar residences also may have been found in other Atlantic port cities.

In 1550, Rouen staged a spectacular civic celebration for the royalty, expressing its gratitude for the favored position it had obtained in the Brazilian trade. The previous year Henry II had granted Rouen a monopoly of 208 listed articles (Gaffarel, 1878, 110). Among Rouen's series of astonishingly elaborate tableaux was a recreation of two villages set in a Brazilian forest that had been concocted on the banks of the Seine. Fifty Brazilians and 150 French sailors enacted village life and the routines of brazilwood gathering, including the loading of the wood on a ship waiting in the river. The climax of the tableau was a fight between the two villages in which the temple of the vanquished was burned. The spectacle so pleased Henry's queen, Catherine de Medici, that she came back to see it a second time (Julien, 1948,

183).

A significant aspect of this event was the scale of its presentation. Apparently, even plants and shrubs were imported from Brazil and installed on the river bank, and the French naively painted the brazilwood trees red. Monkeys, birds, and other Brazilian fauna were let loose in the area. Most striking of all was the fact that 150 French sailors were found who were familiar enough with Brazilian ways and languages to participate (Honour, 1975; Dickason, 1977, 266-267).

This tableau impressed Henry II with the importance of the Brazil trade. Within a few years the king encouraged the first major French attempt to establish a colony in Brazil: that of Nicholas Durand de **[end p. 26]** Villegaignon in 1555-1560. A second attempt, supported by Louis XIII, was at Maragnan (Maranhão) in 1612-1614. In both cases the sites were chosen because of their strategic location for trade. Both attempts failed. The Portuguese were more successful in curtailing French settlement than they were in keeping out French traders. However, French national pride had been soothed in the meantime with the successful establishment of Quebec on the St. Lawrence in Canada in 1608.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese had restricted the French sphere of operations, and the French were confined to the region of Rio Grande do Norte (Julien, 1948, 219-220). More than any other factor, the establishment of sugar plantations sounded the death knell of the French trade. The establishment of plantations resulted in the depletion of the coastal *mata* (forest) where the brazilwood had been most accessible.

As her Brazilian activities declined, France became more involved in the fur trade in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and along the northern Atlantic coast. Some of the French who were active in exploring and trading in North America had also been similarly occupied in Brazil. This was particularly true in the case of the younger Jean Ango, whose commercial network included both American continents. Jean Parmentier and his brother Raoul were among these seamen active in both North and South America, as was Thomas Aubert. Jacques Cartier, who led three trips to Canada, 1534-1542, had been recommended for the appointment by virtue of previous voyages to North and South America (Habert, 1964, 206). He not only spoke Portuguese well enough to act as an interpreter but also brought a Brazilian girl to France in 1527, for whom his wife stood as **[end p. 27]** godmother the following year (Biggar, 1930, 476). Cartier gave evidence of familiarity with Brazil in his reports of his Canadian voyages (Biggar, 1930, 153, 183). Jean Fonteneau dit Alfonce, Roberval's celebrated pilot on the latter's 1542 colonization voyage to Canada, had spent most of his sea life in the service of Portugal, and was particularly known for his expertise on the Brazilian route. Author of the first published navigation manual to include Newfoundland waters (*Les voyages Avantureux du capitaine Ian Alfonce, 1559*), he was also co-author of a cosmography that demonstrated this familiarity (Gaffarel, 1878, 113-122; Schefer and Cordier, 1882-1923). An expedition along coastal America, from Labrador to Brazil, sailed in 1583-1587 under Guillaume Le Hericy, with Jacques de Vaulx of Le Havre as chief pilot. Isaac de Razilly, lieutenant-general of New France, 1632-1635, was the brother of Francois, one of the leaders of the French attempt to establish the Maranhão colony in northern Brazil twenty years earlier. Sometimes the pocess worked in reverse, and Canadian experience preceded service in Brazilian waters. For example, Pierre Chauvin de la Pierre, temporary head of Quebec in 1609-1610 during one of Champlain's many absences, was serving in Brazil in 1612 (Hakluyt, 1582, I: 2; *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 1966, 1:208; Wroth, 1970, 67).

The custom, developed in Brazil, of bringing Amerindians to France for indoctrination in French ways and to learn the French language, was continued in Canada. But where Rouen had been the center of this activity for Brazilians, in the case of Canadians it was St. Malo and Dieppe. In 1603, Francois Grave du Pont, a naval captain turned merchant, accompanied by geographer **[end p. 28]** Samuel Champlain, led an official voyage to assess trading and colonization prospects along the Gulf of St. Lawrence. One of their first acts upon reaching Tadoussac was to prepare the way for .their project by solemnizing an

alliance with the local Amerindians, the Montagnais, at a "tabagie" (Champlain, 1922, 1:100-101). A similar type of feast had been an indispensible feature of the Brazilian trade.

The items of trade were different in North America, but the techniques were not. In the south, the stimulus to develop these techniques had been largely political, but they were continued in the north largely because of geography and climate. In both cases, primitive hunters and horticulturalists interacted peacefully and for mutual benefit with European merchantilists. For more than two centuries the two civilizations met and interacted in a trade that was important for a comparatively short time in Brazil and for considerably longer in North America. In both cases, the French developed the human relations of that interaction. Their Canadian experience was to become the more consequential, but it was in Brazil that they first formulated their version of "Ie bon sauvage" that became such an important concept during the eighteenth century (de Mello Franco, 1937). Their Brazilian experience does much to explain why the French were able to seize the initiative and maintain their dominance in the fur trade for as long as they were a colonial presence in North America.

Note

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