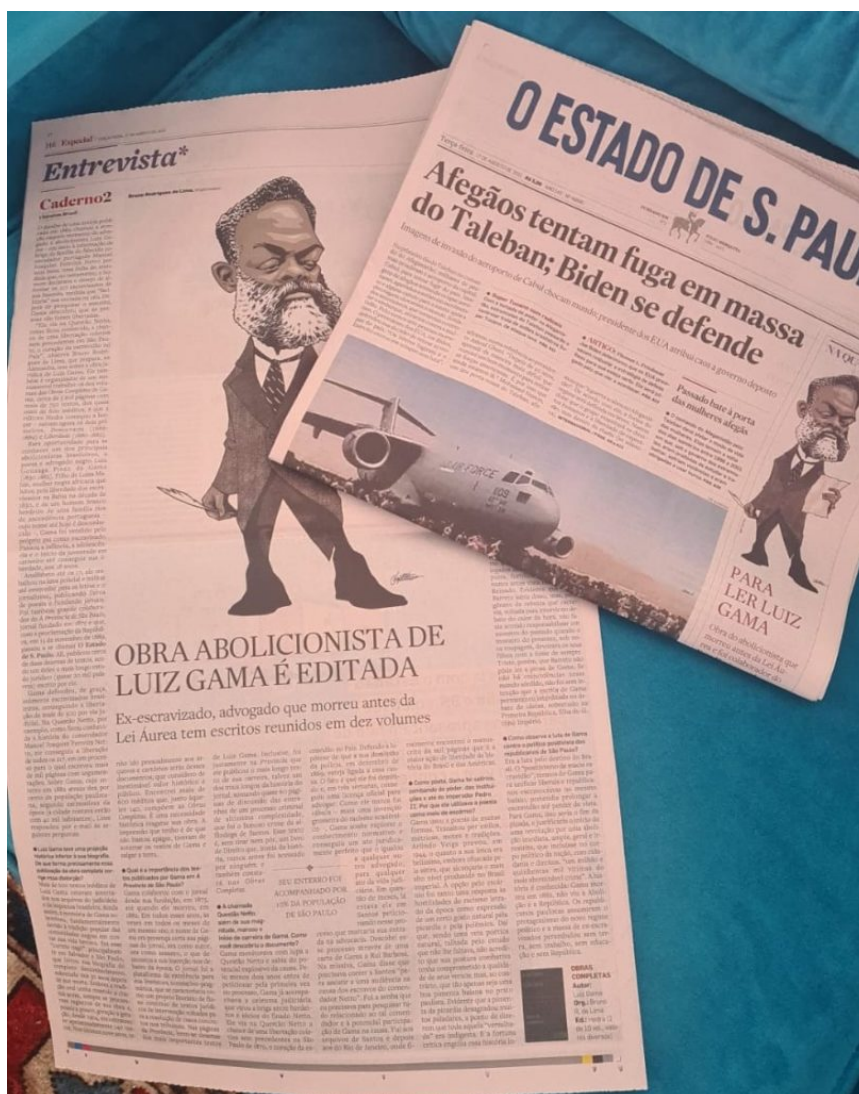


On Luiz Gama's Momentum, Past and Present

written by Bruno Lima | November 19, 2021

What is the reason for the Brazilian public's sudden and overwhelming interest in the life of [Luiz Gama](#) (1830-1882)? What explains the incredible attention the Brazilian press has given in recent months to retracing the trajectory of the patron of Brazilian Abolition?^[1] One answer would be: finally, the heroic narrative of the former slave who first regained his liberty and then became a lawyer defending the freedom of hundreds of enslaved people in the courts has been bolstered by hundreds of new legal and press sources. Another possible answer would be that Brazilian society is really drawing attention to its slavery past, and the records of that historical regime of normativity undeniably play a role in today's debates. In one way or another, this Gama revival has been driven by the power of documents and archives.

Prior historiography on Gama often relied on the commonplaces of a legendary narrative – for instance, on his supposed entering into Law School. But now, given that a vast part of the records related to his legal actions consisted of judicial papers, this same mythical narrative will be read, refuted or confirmed by the force of legal historiography.



Almost a century and a half after Gama's death, contemporary readers are finally presented with an edition of his *Complete Works*. With over 600 previously unknown texts, the eleven-volume collection throws both new light and a critical look on the heroicising narratives of Gama's life. Now, with access to incontrovertible documents and factual evidence, we will know the names of the hundreds of enslaved people he defended and all the causes for which he acted. We shall know how

and when the former slave entered the legal profession. We will be able to study his legal doctrine on manumission. All these opportunities to learn about the painful past of slavery in Brazil, as well as the legal struggles led by Gama, are now becoming available to readers. And this has caused a commotion in Brazilian society. The debate on Gama's work is occupying different spaces. From literary magazines to the Supreme Court, in academic forums and political movements, no one who is interested in Brazilian history has been indifferent to the recovery of Gama's *Complete Works*. Perhaps the best synthesis of this momentum is the interview I gave to the journalist Ubiratan Brasil. Besides appearing on the cover and taking up a whole page of the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, this interview was republished in over twenty other Brazilian newspapers.^[2] It gives an idea of how the public debate on the rediscovery of Gama's work is taking shape and of some of its implications for the historiography that has become hegemonic in recent decades. The interview eschews an obscure or hermetic discussion and instead explores what is best about the *Complete Works*: they are legal archives, serving as the foundation of a fine contemporary legal history. Not only specialists, but also the general public likes legal history – especially when it fulfils the basic aim of a well-written story: to be worthwhile, relevant, and up to date. And doesn't Gama have a lot to tell us about law in today's world? But that is something for another day...

Ubiratan Brasil (UB): Luiz Gama's influence on history is not adequately reflected in his official biography. In what ways, more specifically, does this publication of his complete works correct that distortion?

Bruno Lima (BL): More than 600 original texts written by Luiz Gama were entombed in the archives of the Judiciary and of Brazilian press outlets. Still, his memory survived – fundamentally, due to the popular tradition of black communities, who have been recounting his heroic life. It was this *Nagô* word-of-mouth tradition, especially in the cities of Salvador and Sao Paulo, that saved his biography from complete oblivion, particularly in the first 50 years after his death. Although oral tradition kept his legend alive, people have continued to look for his records and, little by little, generation after generation, approximately 140 texts have been found since 1904. Over the past nine years, I visited archives and notary offices looking for these documents, which I consider to be of inestimable historical and public value.

I found more than 600 original texts, which, in addition to the previous 140 records, are now available in this *Complete Works* set. My impression is that in the course of time, it was not enough to have them erased; those in power literally buried Gama's texts and salted the earth, to prevent anything from ever growing again.

(UB) How important are the texts published by Gama in *A Provincia de Sao Paulo*?

(BL) Gama collaborated with this newspaper from the time it was founded in 1875 to his death in 1882. During all these years and, sometimes, every month of the year, Gama's name appears in its pages, either as an author or in articles about his work and views. This demonstrates how he inserted himself into the debates of his time. The newspaper was a platform *par excellence* for his pragmatic-normative writing, which was characterised as a literary project with a steady flow of legal interpositions aimed at resolving concrete court cases. In the pages of *A Provincia*, one can read dozens of Gama's most relevant texts. It was precisely in *A Provincia* that he published the longest text of his career – perhaps, one of the longest in the history of the newspaper – with almost 60 pages discussing, in detail, an extremely complex criminal process known as the famous crime of the Santos port customs.

This text is a full-fledged law book, which – a true irony of history – has never been accessed by anyone before. It will also be available in the *Complete Works*.

(UB) How important was Gama's defence of José do Patrocinio?

(BL) The public defence of Patrocinio in December 1880 was a point of no return in the abolitionist fight in Sao Paulo. Gama broke with many Freemason allies and collaborators from the Republican movement. Among them was his former partner Americo de Campos, founder and editor of the newspaper *A Provincia de Sao Paulo*. By defending Patrocinio,

Gama racialised the abolitionist discourse in order to radicalise the political process. In an unprecedented move for the abolitionist cause, he defined the slavery policy as a significant element inseparable from racial violence, and racism as state terrorism.

(UB) By the way, Gama, Patrocínio and Andre Rebouças were Freemasons. How important was the link between freemasonry and the black community in the abolitionist fight?

(BL) With a few isolated exceptions, such as the literacy schools and the emancipation funds of some Freemason lodges – for instance, *Loja America*, with which Luiz Gama was affiliated – freemasonry represented more a solution in terms of individual rather than collective emancipation. In a general way, the importance of freemasonry is still overestimated, based on an uncritical and anachronistic historiography that presented accounts which were produced in the 20th century about or by Freemasons as historical facts of the 19th century. This is a huge problem. The attempt to establish a link between white freemasonry and black abolitionism does not even conceal the interest in perpetuating a distorted image of the abolitionist fight, while stating that white organisations opened their doors to black communities – which does not correspond to the historical truth.

(UB) The so-called *Netto Affair*, apart from being a major event, marked the onset of Gama’s career. How did you find this document?

(BL) Gama meticulously monitored the *Netto Affair*, and he knew about the explosive potential of this case. At least two days before petitioning in this process for the first time, he was following up on the legal imbroglio produced by the conflict among the heirs and associates of the deceased nobleman Ferreiro Netto. Gama saw the *Netto Affair* as the opportunity for an unprecedented collective liberation action in the state of Sao Paulo of the 1870s – the heart of slavery in the country. I defend the hypothesis that his dismissal from the police in December 1869 was connected to this case. The fact is that he was fired, and, within three weeks, he obtained an official license to act as a lawyer. Since Gama never was a *rábula* [i.e., a practical lawyer without a degree] – another coarse invention of academic racism –, he skilfully explored the normative knowledge and attained a perfect legal feat, which set him as an equal to any other lawyer of his time and enabled him to carry out any procedure of legal practice. Within a few months, there he was in Santos, petitioning in this process that would mark his debut as a lawyer. I found this case by reading a letter written by Gama to Rui Barbosa. In it, Gama states that he needed to rush to Santos “to attend a hearing of the case of the slaves of Commendatore Netto”. This was the passcode that I needed to survey all I could about this so-called Commendatore and Gama’s likely participation in the case. I went to the archives in Santos and then Rio de Janeiro, where I finally found the thousand-page manuscript, which is the longest pro-liberation piece in the history of Brazil and the Americas.

(UB) As a poet, Gama was a satirist and scoffed at the established powers, the current institutions and even Emperor Pedro the Second. Why did he use poetry as a means of scorn?

(BL) Gama used poetry in many ways. He moved between various distinct styles, metrics, mottos, and traditions. In 1944, Arlindo Veiga showed how much beauty there was in his lyricism, which, though obfuscated by satire, reached the highest level seen in Imperial Brazil. Gama’s propensity to scorn was both a reply to the hostilities of the racism manifesting in literature in his time and the expression of a natural taste for mischief and polemic. I consider it a natural poetic vein, shaped by arduous dedication to his studies, and do not believe that his combative attitude compromised the quality of his verses. On the contrary, I see it only as a good old pepper spice from Bahia on a Sao Paulo dish. It is evident that the pepper of mischief displeased many palates, to the point that some stated how indigestible all that “verse-mayhem” was. And the academic establishment swallowed this tasteless story that Gama was a mediocre poet – an image that is regrettably perpetuated to these days. To mention only his romantic peers, what are Gama’s verses at the Sao Benedito Cemetery other than *Condoreirismo* at the height of its poetic form – written, one must mention, eleven years before Castro Alves’ famous *Navio Negreiro* poem?

(UB) The fact that Gama never saw his mother again, who was deported to Africa, left deep marks on him, didn't it?

(BL) Rui Barbosa once said that Gama was made “of glass, for groaning, and of bronze, for resisting” – a truly accurate metaphor for his path, which contained countless examples of how he resisted the trials of life. Gama’s decades of searching for his mother Luiza Mahin, from his escape from bondage in 1848 until the time when he was a renowned journalist in the 1860s, is one of the facets of the very personal sufferings he experienced. Gama tells of dreaming and weeping, and dedicates poems to his mother. He also gave his mother’s name to his daughter, who died prematurely – another ordeal in the life of this black man made of glass and bronze. The “moody, insufferable and vengeful” African woman Luiza Mahin, his mother, was always the North Star in his fight for justice and freedom.

(UB) While Lima Barreto (1881-1922) fought the Republic, Luiz Gama criticised the Empire and became a great abolitionist. But both, even without getting to know each other, denounced the occurrence of prejudice, social injustice, and favouritism of all sorts. What sets them apart and what draws them closer to each other?

(BL) Gama and Lima Barreto are two interpreters of what it meant to be Brazilian, writing from rather similar standpoints. Paradoxically, Barreto’s Republic was still the same old Empire, in such way that his criticism touched more the lines of continuity between the Empire and the Republic than those lines of rupture. Favouritism, administrative corruption, and racism in literature, for instance, were legacies of a tradition that was strengthened in an unprecedented scale vis-à-vis the days of Emperor Pedro II. Lima Barreto evidently knew this, but in his chronicles aimed at interfering in the debates at the time, it did not make sense to fight a monster of the past when the monster of the present, under new garb, was devouring his children with the same appetite. It is said that Barreto did not have access to Gama’s prose. There are no coincidences in this world, but it was not without intention that Gama’s writings were practically banned from the public debates of ideas, above all during the First Republic – which was, in turn, a child of the previous Empire.

(UB) How do you see Gama’s fight against the positivist policy of Sao Paulo’s Republicans?

(BL) It embodied the struggle for the destiny of Brazil. The “soft slavery positivism” – an expression used by Gama as he jointly referred to pro-slavery Liberals and Republicans – sought to prolong slavery for an indefinite time. For him, that was the last straw, which justified the beginning of a revolution aimed at the immediate, far-reaching, general, and unrestricted abolition of slavery, to include “one million and five hundred victims of the most abominable crime ever” committed against the nation’s political body. But we already know the story: Gama died in 1882 and did not live to see the Abolition and the Early Republic. The Republicans from Sao Paulo became the protagonists of the new political regime, whereas the mass of former slaves roamed aimlessly with no land, no work, no education, and no Republic.

The Luiz Gama Momentum - Headlines and Links

TV

[Luiz Gama tem obra completa lançada mais de 100 anos depois de morte](#), TV Brasil, Brasília

[Entrevista – Bruno Rodrigues de Lima](#), AITV, São Paulo

Newspapers and magazines

[Luiz Gama terá coletânea de 5000 páginas com farta documentação inédita](#), Folha de S. Paulo, São Paulo

[Luiz Gama ganha cinebiografia e edição de suas obras completas recheadas de inéditos](#), O Globo, Rio de Janeiro

[Obra abolicionista de Luiz Gama é editada](#), O Estado de S. Paulo, São Paulo

[Luiz Gama: textos inéditos mostram como abolicionista denunciava violência policial no século 19](#), BBC News Brasil.

[O resgate da obra de Luiz Gama, de ex-escravo a advogado abolicionista](#), Revista Veja, São Paulo

[Obra completa do abolicionista de Luiz Gama é editada](#), Revista Isto é, São Paulo

[Pesquisador prepara, na Alemanha, tese sobre obra jurídica do abolicionista Luiz Gama](#), Correio Popular, Campinas

[Conheça Luiz Gama, advogado escravizado que libertou 500 negros no Brasil](#), Estado de Minas, Belo Horizonte

[Obra completa do abolicionista de Luiz Gama é editada](#), O Tempo, Belo Horizonte

[Obra completa de Luiz Gama é editada](#), O Povo, Fortaleza

[Coleção reúne obra completa de Luiz Gama](#), Jornal Rascunho, Curitiba

[Meritocrata x antirracista: direita e esquerda disputam legado de Luiz Gama](#), Universo Online, São Paulo

Youtube, Spotify, etc.

[Afinal, quem foi Luiz Gama?](#), YouTube Channel: Provocação Histórica, Campinas

[Luiz Gama e os abolicionistas de São Paulo](#), YouTube Channel: História do Brasil como você nunca viu, Brasília, YouTube show

[Luiz Gama: conheça o patrono da abolição da escravidão no Brasil](#), Podcast: O Livro da Semana, São Paulo

[Quem foi Luiz Gama?](#), Podcast: Coisa jogada, Rio de Janeiro

[Doutor Gama](#), Radio broadcast: Multicultura, Educadora FM, Salvador

[Lançamento das obras completas de Luiz Gama](#), Travessa Bookstore

Law Schools

[Lançamento das obras completas de Luiz Gama](#), Webinar: Getúlio Vargas Foundation Law School, São Paulo

[Lançamento das obras completas de Luiz Gama](#), University of Sao Paulo Law School, São Paulo

[1] Recently, the three major newspapers (plus the BBC News Brazil) and the leading weekly magazine in Brazil highlighted both in printed and digital versions (some of them on the front page) the launching of Gama's Complete Works. See, Folha de S. Paulo: [Luiz Gama terá coletânea de 5.000 páginas com farta documentação inédita](#), O Globo: [Luiz Gama ganha cinebiografia e edição de suas obras completas recheadas de inéditos](#), O Estado de S. Paulo: [Obra completa do abolicionista Luiz Gama é editada](#), [Luiz Gama: textos inéditos mostram como abolicionista denunciava violência policial no século 19](#), and Revista Veja: [O resgate da obra de Luiz Gama, de ex-escravo a advogado abolicionista](#).

[2] See, e.g., Correio Popular: [Pesquisador prepara, na Alemanha, tese sobre obra jurídica do abolicionista Luiz Gama](#), Estado de Minas: [Conheça Luiz Gama, advogado escravizado que libertou 500 negros no Brasil](#), O Tempo: [Obra completa do abolicionista Luiz Gama é editada](#), O Povo: [Obra completa de Luiz Gama é editada](#).

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