Portuguese New Christians in Brazil, Paraguay, and Chile: New Shreds of Evidence from the Literature of the 19th and 20th Centuries

Abstract: In 1497, Portuguese Jews were forced to convert to the Catholic religion. After the conversion, they were named New Christians. Some of them kept their religious practices secret (they were also called “Marranos”), others mixed their beliefs with Christianity, and others were completely integrated into the new religion. In all cases, they suffered legal and social discrimination for centuries. Although the challenges and obstacles to be overpassed, a lot has already been investigated about the History of Portuguese New Christians in Brazilian Northeastern and Southeastern states. But there is still a lack of knowledge in the Center-Western states and other Latin American countries. The current paper aims to investigate the shreds of evidence of “Marranos”, Portuguese Jews, and/or New Christians in two historical books, La Retraite de Laguna (in French) and Viña del Mar (in Spanish). The first was written in the 19th century about an episode of the War between Brazil and Paraguay. The second was written, in the 20th century, about the History of the Chilean city of Viña del Mar. Original excerpts are presented, translated to English, and the possibility of being evidence of the presence of Portuguese New Christians is discussed. In this regard, the current paper contributes by proposing a new source of research and expanding the geographical and historical perspectives of investigation. However, the main limitation is that it brings only shreds of evidence and not definitive answers. In this way, the paper contributes by suggesting new pathways for future investigations.

Keywords: Mato Grosso do Sul. Vicount of Taunay. Lopes Family Name.

Resumo: Em 1497, os judeus portugueses foram forçados a se converter à religião católica. Após a conversão, eles foram chamados de Cristãos Novos. Alguns deles mantiveram suas práticas religiosas em segredo (esses também foram chamados de “Marranos”), outros misturaram suas crenças com o cristianismo e outros foram completamente integrados à nova religião. Em todos os casos, eles sofreram discriminação legal e social durante séculos. Apesar dos desafios e obstáculos a serem superados, muito já foi investigado sobre a História dos Cristãos-Novos Portugueses nos estados do Nordeste e Sudeste do Brasil. Mas ainda falta conhecimento nos estados do Centro-Oeste e em outros países latino-americanos. O presente artigo tem como objetivo investigar os fragmentos de evidências de “Marranos”, Judeus Portugueses e
/ ou Cristãos-Novos em dois livros históricos, La Retraite de Laguna (em francês) e Viña del Mar (em espanhol). Dois livros históricos. O primeiro foi escrito no século 19 sobre um episódio da Guerra entre Brasil e Paraguai. O segundo foi escrito, no século XX, sobre a História da cidade chilena de Viña del Mar. São apresentados trechos originais, traduzidos para o inglês, e é discutida a possibilidade de serem evidências da presença de Cristãos-Novos Portugueses. Nesse sentido, o presente artigo contribui ao propor uma nova fonte de pesquisa e ampliar as perspectivas geográficas e históricas de investigação. No entanto, a principal limitação é que traz apenas fragmentos de evidências e não respostas definitivas. Dessa forma, o artigo contribui sugerindo novos caminhos para futuras investigações.


**Introduction**

Although evidence pointed out the Jewish colonies existed in Portugal since VII before the common era (BCE), in 1497, Portuguese Jews were forced to convert to the Catholic religion. Though the hate against the converted people kept existing as strong as before the conversion.¹ These converted were named New Christians. In Brazil, the continuous arrival of New Christians during the Colonial Age contributed to keeping religious Jewish practices alive, such as the Shabbat, the Yom Kippur, and other fastenings. The illiterates often mixed them with Catholic religious practices. The people who practiced these mixed religions as well as the dissimulate, camouflage, and hidden the Jewish practices were named “Marranos”.²

In recent years, precious contributions have been written about the Marranos History and influence in the Brazilian states in Northeastern and Southeastern states.³ However, there is still a lack of research and understanding about the History of Marranos and New Christians in other Brazilian regions, such as Center-Western states, and other South American countries.

Given this context, the current paper aims to investigate the shreds of evidence of “Marranos”, Portuguese Jews, and/or New Christians in two historical books, *La Retraite de Laguna* and *Viña del Mar*, respectively written about Brazil and Paraguay in the 19th century and about Chile in the 20th century. In this regard, instead of bringing definitive answers, the current paper contributes by bringing more questions about the History and influence of New Christians is not yet investigated historical periods and regions. Also, the paper contributes by suggesting new pathways for future investigations.

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¹ NOVINSKY, 2015, p. 93.
² NOVINSKY, 2015, p. 99.
La Retraite de Laguna

La Retraite de Laguna is a book of memoirs written by the Viscount of Taunay in 1874. The author narrates his personal experience as military during the episode of the Retreat from Laguna in the Paraguayan War. Geographically, the conflict is in the Brazilian Center-Western state of Mato Grosso do Sul and Paraguay. The author provides a detailed description of their military guide, a Brazilian local named José Francisco Lopes. Based on the third edition of this book, the current paper debates the possibility of him being a New Christian and the influence of New Christian culture in the region.

The following excerpted quote may be an allusion to the levirate marriage (in Hebrew: yibum). It is enacted in Deuteronomy 25:5-6 in the Hebrew Bible and requires the brother to marry the widow of his childless deceased brother, with the firstborn son being treated as that of the deceased brother, which makes the child his heir rather than the genetic father's heir. Although Lady Senhorinha (the wife of the beloved guide José Francisco Lopes) had children with his first husband (João Gabriel Lopes), it is possible to imagine that this general custom of marrying the brother-in-law in case of widowhood may be a misrepresentation of the levirate marriage.

As can be read in Taunay:

Non loin de là avait résidé autrefois cette même D. Senhorinha, dont nous avons plus haut vanté l'hospitalité. Elle était alors mariée en premières noces à un Lopès (Jean-Gabriel), frère de notre vaillant guide José Francisco, el qui mourut en 1849. Sa veuve, restée seule avec des enfants dans un pays de frontière où il n'y a nulle protection pour les faibles, avait été déjà une fois saisie et emmenée par une troupe de Paraguéens. Réclamée quelque temps après par la légation brésilienne à l'Assomption, et rendue à la liberté en 1850, elle avait, selon la coutume assez générale du pays, contracté un second mariage avec son beau-frère, notre guide lui-même, qui l'avait établie à sa ferme du Jardin, et enfin, lors de l'invasion paraguëenne de 1865, elle avait été prise de Nouveau et encore emmenée.

In our free translation to English:

Not far from there, this same Lady Senhorinha once lived, whose hospitality we already boast. She was then married, at the first nuptials, to a Lopes (João Gabriel), brother of our brave guide José Francisco, and who died in 1849. Living alone, with her children, then children, in a border area, where there is not the least security for the weak, she had once been a widow arrested and taken by a mob of

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4 TAUNAY, 1891.
5 TAUNAY, 1891.
6 TAUNAY, 1891, p.49-50.
Paraguayans. Claimed, after some time, by the Brazilian legation in Asuncion and released in 1850, she had contracted, according to the general custom in that land, after marrying her brother-in-law [emphasis of the current paper’s authors], our guide, who had established her in his stay in Jardim. There, when the invasion began in 1865, she was again arrested and interned in Paraguay.

Also, in Taunay, it is possible to read about the guide José Francisco Lopes:

Il avait eu, dès son enfance, le goût des courses lointaines ; on disait aussi qu’un acte de violence de sa première jeunesse lui en avait fait pendant quelque temps une nécessité; l’âge ensuite avait développé toutes ses aptitudes. D’une sobriété presque absolue, il voyageait des jours entiers sans boire, portant sur la croupe de sa monture un petit sac de farine de manioc attaché à l’arrière d’une peau molle qui garnissait le dessus de sa selle; une hache pour abattre les palmites ne quittait jamais sa main.

Il était né dans le village de Piumhy dans la province de Minas Geraes, et de là, au gré de ses aventures, il s’était porté sur tous les points du sol qui s’étend du cours du Parana à celui du Paraguay. [...]  

Continuing in Taunay, here more three points of the description of José Francisco Lopes can be associated with Jewish roots: the diet, the hospitality, and the location of birth:

Il avait résidé pendant sept ans avec sa famille dans le Paraguay; mais, à l’époque de l’invasion, il était de retour sur le sol brésilien, habitant sur le bord de la rivière Miranda une propriété à lui qu’il appelait le Jardin, fertilisée par son travail et par celui des grands enfants qu’il avait déjà. Lui et sa femme, D. Senhorinha, y exercaient, à l’égard de quiconque recourait à eux, une généreuse hospitalité.  

In our free translation to English:

Since childhood, he had a penchant for entering the wild hinterlands. It was also said that a violent act, from his early youth, had imposed this way of life on him for some time. Then came age to develop all his aptitudes. Prodigiously sober, he traveled whole days without drinking, carrying a small sack of manioc flour on the back of his horse, tied to the soft fur that covered his saddle. He never left the ax designed to cut hearts of palm.

Born in the village of Piumhy, in Minas Gerais law [emphasis of the current paper’s authors], from there, through the adventures, he had reached
all points of the area that extends from the banks of Paraná to those of Paraguay. [...] 

For seven years, with his family, he had resided in Paraguay; but at the time of the invasion, he was already back on Brazilian soil, inhabiting, on the banks of the Miranda River, his property, which he had named Jardim, fertilized by his work and that of his grown children. He and his wife, Lady Senhorinha, generously hosted those who came there.

Regarding the diet, it is worth noting that, in a land full of hunting animals, only vegetables (manioc flour and hearts of palm) are mentioned as the regular diet of José Francisco Lopes. It is also mentioned that he fertilized the land, but there is no mention of livestock. Besides, in the same state of this story (Mato Grosso do Sul), there is the Maracaju sausage, a centenary sausage recipe without pig meat (which is a food prohibited by the Jewish laws). Now the Maracaju sausage is considered an intangible heritage of Brazilian culture and protected by law.9 Also, hospitality is traditionally associated with Judaism due to the hospitality of the patriarch Abraham (Genesis 18:1-5).

Regarding the region of birth of José Francisco Lopes, the village of Piumhy (now written as “Piumhi”), in Minas Gerais state. This state is pointed out as one of the three states that most received Portuguese New Christians in Brazil.10 Although scarcely documented, shreds of evidence from the migration of New Christians from Minas Gerais to Goiás (a Center-Western Brazilian state) are registered.11 Among the documented names, there is the family name “Lopes”, through the person priest João Lopes França.12 To the best of the current paper authors’ knowledge, there is still a lack of registered evidence of the migrations of New Christians from Minas Gerais to other Center-Western states (especially to Mato Grosso do Sul).

Besides, Fernandes (2004) counted 903 New Christians living in Minas Gerais between 1705 and 1786 (the period ends exactly one century before the publication of the book La Retraite de Laguna). Among the cited New Christians, we counted 37 with the family name “Lopes” (4.1% of the sample). It is worth noting to remember that 903 is the documented population (most of them men). Though it does not represent the whole population, once most of the population was illiterate, most of them may not have had documents, or their documents did not resist until nowadays.

New Christians registered by Fernandes with “Lopes” family name were:

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9 SEBRAE, 2015.
• Manoel Lopes from Belo Horizonte (p. 110). Fernão Lopes da Costa (p. 117) from Rio das Mortes. João Lopes (p. 117) from Sabará. Three cities less than 300 km far from Piumhi by car (GOOGLE MAPS, 2021).
• João Lopes de Mesquita, Manoel Lopes, Manoel Lopes Pereira (p. 118) from Serro Frio. A city less than 600 km far from Piumhi by car (GOOGLE MAPS, 2021).
• Fernão Lopes da Costa, Francisco Gonçalves Lopes, Francisco Lopes (p. 112), João Lopes, João Lopes Alvarez, João Lopes de Miranda, João Lopes Nunes, João Lopes Xavier, José Lopes, Joseph Lopes, Manoel Lopes, Manoel Lopes Pereira (p. 113), Maria Lopes (p. 113) from undefined regions in Minas Gerais.

Therefore, the question of whether one or many of these Portuguese New Christians was/were connected to José Francisco Lopes remains opened for further investigations. The assumption of veracity, consequently, implies that the Mato Grosso do Sul (as well as other North-Western states) may have received influence from New Christians and Jewish culture. This constitutes pathways for further investigations.

Viña del Mar

*Viña del Mar* was written by Carlos J. Larraín in 1946 for describing the History of the Chilean city of Viña del Mar (previously named “Peuco” and “Siete Hermanas”).

The Chilean author mentions Pedro Omepezoa, Ventura Pérez de Arce, Cristóbal Rodríguez, Francisco Alvares, and José Francisco Vergara, owners of the farm of Viña del Mar, as descendants of “Portuguese Jews”. Besides, he adds that, before the Independence of Chile, the Portuguese immigrants (most of them were New Christians) were the hugest foreign people living in Chile.

The current paper shares the information provided by the author as follows. As can be read in Larraín:

> Pedro Omepezoa, designado a veces en los viejos infolios con el nombre de Pero Ome, Pedro Ome y Pedro Me, había nacido en Portugal por 1510 y era en Lima caballero de Pizarro. […]

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13 LARRAÍN, 1946.
15 LARRAÍN, 1946, p. 224
Como de muchos de sus contemporáneos que se decían portugueses, puede fundadamente sospecharse que Omepezoa procediera de una estirpe hebrea. Su nombre que equivale a decir “hombre y persona” es a propósito para despistar, ya que no señala un origen característico, y el hecho que su hijo Pedro, casara con Luisa de Salas, hija de Francisco Gudiel, tildado como judío en una declaración de Hernando de Ibarra y que su hija se llamara Prudencia de Sáa, apellido éste que es contracción de Salamón, es muy sugestivo.16

In our free translation to English:

Pedro Omepezoa, sometimes referred to in the old folios as Pero Ome, Pedro Ome, and Pedro Me, had been born in Portugal in 1510 and was a knight of Pizarro in Lima. […]

Like many of his contemporaries who called themselves Portuguese, Omepezoa can reasonably be suspected of coming from a Hebrew stock [emphasis of the current paper’s authors]. His name, which is equivalent to saying “man and person” is intended to mislead since it does not indicate a characteristic origin, and the fact that his son Pedro married Luisa de Salas, daughter of Francisco Gudiel, branded as a Jew [emphasis of the current paper’s authors] in a statement of Hernando de Ibarra and that his daughter was called Prudencia de Sáa, a surname which is a contraction of Salamón, is very suggestive.

In the previous quotes, it is possible to observe the book author’s assumptions about Omepezoa being a Portuguese New Christian and the shreds of evidence he brings to support his assumptions.

Also, the Portuguese descendants Ventura Pérez de Arce, Cristóbal Rodríguez, and Francisco Alvares are mentioned and described as the owner of the Viña del Mar.17 As can be read in Larraín:

El Capitán don Ventura Pérez de Arce que sucedió al Presidente de Quito en el dominio de la hacienda de la Viña de la Mar, conservó esta propiedad en su poder durante 20 años. Aunque que estaba radicado desde antiguo en Valparaíso, Pérez de Arce era oriundo de Quillota ciudad onde afincaba gran parte de su linaje que procedía del enlace del Capitán Francisco Pérez, natural de Lisboa, con doña Mariana Vásquez de Arce, hija de Hernando Vásquez, conquistador de Nueva Granada y de Elena Cancino.18

In our free translation to English:

16 LARRAÍN, 1946, p. 23.
18 LARRAÍN, 1946, p. 119.
Captain Ventura Pérez de Arce, who succeeded the President of Quito in the domain of the Viña de la Mar estate, kept this property in his power for 20 years. Although he had long been based in Valparaíso, Pérez de Arce was a native of Quillota, the city where he settled a large part of his lineage that came from the link between Captain Francisco Pérez, a native of Lisbon, with Mrs. Mariana Vásquez de Arce, daughter of Hernando Vásquez, the conqueror from Nueva Granada and Elena Cancino.

The fact that the author does not give any other information besides de name of the Portuguese father may mean there was no information available about Ventura Pérez de Arce’s ancestry. This lack of information may be intentional to hidden Jewish origins. Referring to the year 1738, a similar situation can be read in Larraín:

El sucesor de Pérez de Arce en las tierras de la Viña, Capitán Cristóbal Rodríguez, era también de origen portugués, pero de una procedencia aún más modesta que su antecesor. Había nacido en el puerto del Callao en el Perú, y era hijo natural de Cristóbal Rodríguez y de Josefa León, según declaró en su testamento. Fuera de esta indicación nada se conoce sobre su ascendencia [...].

In our free translation to English:

Pérez de Arce’s successor in the lands of La Viña, Capitán Cristóbal Rodríguez, was also of Portuguese origin, but of an even more modest origin than his predecessor. He was born in the port of Callao in Peru and was the natural son of Cristóbal Rodriguez and Josefa León, as he declared in his will. Outside of this indication, nothing is known about their ancestry [...].

While describing Francisco Alvares, the wealthiest man in Chile at his time, Larraín states:

Francisco Alvares, el sucesor de don Benito Fernández Maquieira y don José Manuel Cea en las haciendas del antiguo valle de Peuco que volvió a reunir en un solo haz como lo había estado en tiempos de los Cortés, los Carvajal y de Alonso Ribeiros, era un opulento comerciante lusitano, nacido en la ciudad de Viana en Portugal, establecido en la plaza de Valparaíso poco después de nuestra independencia.

Nada se conoce sobre sus orígenes ni sobre la actuación de sus progenitores. Sólo se sabe que en su juventud fué marino, aunque tampoco se han averiguado sus andanzas.

Con fecha 25 de marzo de 1814, los libros parroquiales de Valparaíso registran el matrimonio de “Francisco Xavier Alvares, natural del Reino

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19 LARRAÍN, 1946, p. 127.
Francisco Alvares, the successor of Don Benito Fernández Maquieira and Don José Manuel Cea in the haciendas of the old Peuco Valley that he reunited in a single bundle as it had been in the times of the Cortés, the Carvajal and Alonso Ribeiros, was an opulent Lusitanian merchant, born in the city of Viana in Portugal, established in the Valparaíso square shortly after our independence.

Nothing is known about their origins or about the actions of their parents. It is only known that in his youth he was a sailor, although his wanderings have not been ascertained either.

On March 25, 1814, the parish books of Valparaíso record the marriage of “Francisco Xavier Alvares, a native of the Kingdom of Portugal, and son of Juan Alvares and Luisa María, single, with Dolores Pérez, from here, daughter of José Pérez and Magdalena Florez”.

On the next page, while describing the life and family of Francisco Alvares, Larraín adds:

Los súbditos portugueses, tildados generalmente de procedencia hebrea, eran dueños en los primeros decenios del siglo pasado, de las más importantes casas comerciales de Valparaíso. Según un censo levantado en 1809, constituían el núcleo más numeroso de extranjeros radicados en Chile, pero pasados los sucesos de la Independencia y abiertos nuestros puertos a la libre navegación, fueron poco a poco supeditados por otros elementos europeos, especialmente ingleses.

In our free translation:

In the first decades of the last century, the Portuguese subjects, generally labeled of Hebrew origin [emphasis of the current paper’s authors], owned the most important commercial houses in Valparaíso. According to a census carried out in 1809, they constituted the largest nucleus of foreigners living in Chile, but after the events of Independence and our ports opened to free navigation, they were little by little subordinated by other European elements, especially English.

Finally, while describing José Francisco Vergara, the son-in-law of Francisco Alvares, Larraín states:

José Francisco Vergara, marido de dona Mercedes Alvares. El aporte de la estirpe lusitana de Albano Pereiro, de fuerte dosis semita, influyó en su imaginación, le hizo crear grandes empresas, ser un escritor de

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20 LARRAÍN, 1946, p.223.
21 LARRAÍN, 1946, p.223.
In our free translation:

José Francisco Vergara, husband of Lady Mercedes Alvares. The contribution of the Lusitanian lineage of Albano Pereiro, with a strong Semitic dose, influenced his imagination, made him create large companies, be a writer with a strong materialistic spirit, and prompted him to make an unequal marriage, with an immensely wealthy lady, with which he never got along.

First, it was observed by Fernandes that the New Christians, as a survival strategy in Minas Gerais, preferred to have a business partnership with those of the same family and Jewish origins. Maybe the same circumstances may have happened in Chile. The fact that José Francisco Vergara is pointed out as a descendent of Portuguese New Christians may indicate that his father-in-law was also a descendent of Portuguese New Christians. Second, the author’s association of a historical character’s Jewish ancestry with the stereotype of Jewish people having a strong imagination, great constructive power, literature affinity, materialistic believes, and financial ambition may be evidence that anti-Semitism was still current in Chile.

Final Remarks

In this way, we expect to have widened the perspective of studying and researching the History of New Christians in Latin America, proposing a novel interpretation of shreds of evidence from the Literature. Also, we recommend that the investigation of the migrations and influence of New Christians should be widened to a larger territorial area in Brazil (encompassing Center-Western areas). Similarly, we reinforce that, once territorial borders were not the same as the today, investigative perspectives should also consider a wider international perspective, e.g., considering Brazilian and Paraguayan territories or connections between Portuguese New Christians in different Latin American countries.

References


22 LARRAÍN, 1946, p. 246.


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