Class, Creed and Colour in Administration

The Compromissos of the Misericórdia of Lisbon were followed by the overseas branches of the brotherhood. The living conditions in the settlements of Portuguese in Asia, Africa and Brazil differed markedly from those in the mother country. The social structure of these communities and the relations of the Portuguese with other ethnic groups and followers of other creeds, varied from country to country. The branches of the Misericórdia in Gôa and Macao made their own Compromissos to cater for local conditions. It has been seen that the Misericórdia of Bahia did not formulate its own Compromisso, but boards of guardians often found it necessary to interpret, rather than follow blindly, the clauses of the statutes of Lisbon. In this respect the archives of the Misericórdia afford a fascinating insight into the more elusive and least tangible aspects of Brazilian history — the infrastructure of society and the ethnic and religious stresses and strains present in colonial Bahia.

The Provedor of the Misericórdia was, by definition, ‘a gentleman, of authority, prudence and virtue, of good repute and of such an age that the other brothers can recognise him as their head and can obey him the more easily’.

1 Compromisso of 1618, chapter 8, §1.

2 The Provedors of the Misericórdia of Gôa are listed in J. F. Ferreira Martins, Historia da Misericordia de Goa, vol. 1, pp. 385–400. In Bahia the records of Provedors are incomplete for the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but the following governors-general served as Provedors: Mem de Sá (1560s?); Luís de
Provedor was only contemplated as an expedient to enforce payment of debts, but a motion proposing this in 1751 was defeated.¹ Even the Count of Sabugosa, who had served the Goa Misericórdia admirably as Provedor in 1713 during his viceroyalty in India, was not asked to occupy the corresponding post in Bahia during his fifteen years as viceroy of Brazil.

There were three reasons for this difference of attitude between the Misericórdias of Goa and Bahia. First, the membership of the Misericórdia of Bahia was drawn from a more highly-developed corporate social body than that existing in Goa. Secondly, there had been established in Bahia a land-owning aristocracy of plantation owners and cattle ranchers, the like of which never existed in the narrow confines of Goa. Thirdly, the nationalistic spirit, which was to achieve Brazilian independence in the nineteenth century, was strongly in evidence a century earlier. The Count of Sabugosa was prominent in fostering this independence movement. He supported the Bahian business community in its efforts to maintain the monopoly of the slave trade to the west coast of Africa and the Gulf of Benin, against overtures from Dom João V and the merchants of Lisbon to ‘cash in’ on this trade. The landed aristocracy of Bahia had been born and bred in independence. Its members represented the human aspect of the dichotomy existing between the theory of royal decrees and the practice of enforcing them. This landed aristocracy financed the Misericórdia in the seventeenth century and monopolised the post of Provedor.

In 1726 Dom João V ordered the Count of Sabugosa to verify that the large tracts of land owned by certain families in the hinterland of Bahia were

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¹ Minute of 13 October 1751 subsequently ruled null and void (ASCMB, vol. 15, f. 54). The Misericórdia of Rio de Janeiro sent a petition to Dom João V asking him to allow Gomes Freire de Andrade (Governor, 1733–63) to serve as Provedor ‘porq’ com o seu activo zello, e rectidão inflexivel fará com q’ se paguem as numerosas dividas q’ à mesma Santa Caza se devem’. The king passed the request on to the governor with a covering letter of 6 May 1746 encouraging his acceptance (ANRJ, Códice 952, vol. 33, f. 142).