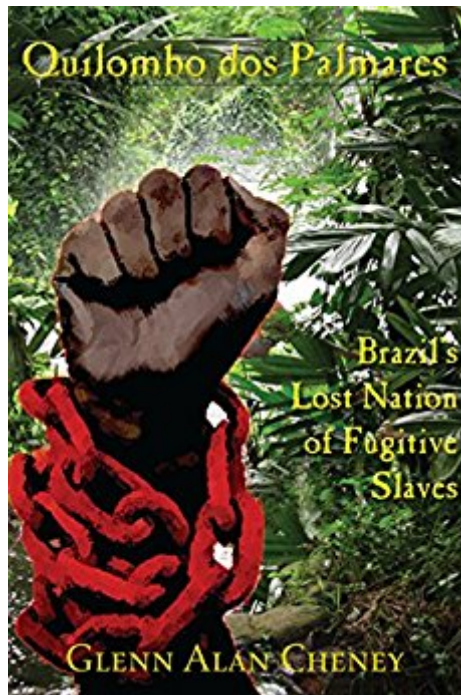




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Quilombo Dos Palmares: Brazil's Lost Nation Of Fugitive Slaves



Synopsis

For almost a hundred years, a nation of fugitive Africans, Indians, whites, and mixed races fought off the world's most powerful empires in a struggle to survive in freedom. Over the span of the 17th century, the Quilombo dos Palmares melded several cultures to form its own language, religion, government, values, and way of life. Its population may have exceeded 20,000. Its last king is believed to have been an educated descendant of slaves. He took the name Zumbi "Lord of War" and built a citadel fortress on a mountain in northeast Brazil. There Palmares made its last stand. Glenn Alan Cheney's comprehensive history of Palmares and the colonial captivity of Pernambuco, Brazil, explores the origins and cruelties of slavery, the warfare between Palmares, Portugal, and Holland, life in the rebel nation, and the siege that wiped Palmares off the map. Quilombos "isolated societies of fugitive slaves" still exist in Brazil, and the struggle for their land continues. Palmares and Zumbi have grown to become myths and symbols of resistance to racism, tyranny, capitalism, and national pride. Cheney does not let Palmares die in 1694. He brings it to life in modern Brazil.

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Customer Reviews

Well written, in depth history of the Quilombos. As a bonus, the book describes where to find one of the last remaining Quilombo communities Conceição das Crioulas in the State of Pernambuco. I just might visit there and interview some of the older residents on my next trip to Brazil.

This excellent book brings to light a lesser known chapter in the drama of European colonisation. It provides examples of the persistent and continuing resistance to coerced labor and cultural oppression.

What an interesting book--it reminded me of the movie "The Mission" where Robert deNiro is a slave hunter (in this case Native Americans) turned priest. Very well written, and relevant today with its links to the present situation in Brazil.

"Quilombo..." is the history of a large republic of fugitive slaves (and other outcasts) in Brazil's Northeast during the colonial era. The author points out that everything has to be reconstructed, since the slaves had no written records and the records of the Brazilians (and Dutch) were less than complete. Nevertheless, it's fascinating reading. The author knows how to write and how to make history come alive. Very good at synthesis and painting the "big picture;" dry wit abounds. Those Americans who try to claim that African slaves had it good might want to read this to get their minds right. And those Brazilians (Gilberto Freire etc.) who tried to claim that Brazilian slavery was benign should have thought of the story of Quilombo dos Palmares and its inhabitants before expounding their theories. There were a couple of typos in the first edition but apparently these have been corrected. Brazil seems to have been the Western Hemisphere center of unusual subcultures tucked away in the jungle or elsewhere in the backlands. Canudos (see Os Sertões), colonies of Russian immigrants, a "Little America" created by US Southerners after the Civil War, etc. Quilombo dos Palmares is among the most fascinating and tragic. Highly recommended.

I became an admirer of Cheney's nonfiction after reading Promised Land, about the work of the activist nun Leonora Brunetto on behalf of landless farmers in Matto Grosso, Brazil, so I was

very eager to read *Quilombo dos Palmares: Brazil's Lost Nation of Fugitive Slaves*. Palmares flourished for almost 100 years in the 1600s, harrying colonial Brazil's coastal sugar plantations from its hidden location in the vast hinterland forest, eluding expedition after expedition sent out by the colonial authorities to crush it, and living on in the imagination of Brazilians down to the present. Very little scholarship has been done on Palmares. Cheney is familiar with what scholarship there is, and additionally has pored over colonial documents of the time—the records of the expeditions and correspondence related to the problem (from the authorities' point of view) of Palmares. Unfortunately, no Palmarian records remain, and, to date, no archeological evidence. This is a big problem: Palmares appeals for all kinds of reasons. It's a powerful, rich symbol. And yet it's almost impossible to get at its reality. As Cheney points out, the seventeenth-century records he relies on are written with an agenda: to simultaneously vilify the Palmarians, appeal to superiors for funds and support, and paint themselves in as good a light as possible. At times this could mean downplaying Palmarian successes; at other times it could mean exaggerating the threat. It has to have been something of a significant threat, or at least annoyance, because the Portuguese monarch himself sent letters addressing the leader of the Palmarians. But how numerous were the Palmarians, in actuality? Were they a unified state, or not? The expeditionary forces mainly described villages that they came upon after the inhabitants had fled; one vivid description of a flourishing town was written up by someone who'd never been there, with no mention of where the information came from. For me, the most interesting portions of the book were the portions where Cheney talks about these problems and about the history of Palmares-of-the-imagination, Palmares as inherited through stories passed down for generations, Palmares as alive today in the struggles of the dispossessed. History is written by the conquerors, but a different story may still be told by survivors and their descendants and sympathizers, and in the chapters "Digging for Truth" and "Quilombo Forever," Cheney reflects on this, and on the rights and merits of different types of histories. The central portion of the book, chronicling the various unsuccessful campaigns against Palmares, was more frustrating for me than not, despite Cheney's engaging writing style. So much of it can only be speculation, and the value of the sources themselves, as truthful accounts, is suspect: I think I would have preferred a shorter book that settled for an overview and summary. Cheney's decision to cover each one is deliberate. In the preface he says, "In my hope of writing the most comprehensive history of Palmares, I decided to retain this information. It will seem excessive to many, perhaps useful to a few." Maybe so—but can it count as a comprehensive history when much of it is speculation? And yet, while falling in the camp that found

the information excessive, I appreciated, after the fact, that I had ended up with much more sense of colonial dynamics and the various characters and personalities involved than I would have if Cheney had followed the advice of the editors he consulted. In spite of my dissatisfaction with the central portion, I would recommend Quilombo dos Palmares to anyone who's interested in Brazilian history, colonialism, and the problems of historiography.

Disclaimer: I received this book as part of the GoodReads.com First Reads program. The early settlement of Peru by the Portuguese brought the enslavement of the native population as well as importation of African slaves. The Portuguese appear to have been barbaric slave masters, and many of their slaves ran away, preferring to take their chances in the jungle. There they build a series of villages and started their own state within a state. Their numbers may have been over 20,000, and they were soon raiding the Portuguese settlements for munitions and food. For almost 100 years they thrived until a particularly brutal commander and his mercenary army finally found their leader's fort and succeeded in routing them, capturing and killing many. This was the end of the end for the Palmares state, though remnants survive to this day. This book was a fascinating exploration of the history of the early days of New World settlement, and I learned a lot that I had never known before. I highly recommend it.

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