
Gama, Luiz Gonzaga Pinto da

(1830–1882),

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freeborn mulatto who overcame a series of challenges and adversities, including illegal enslavement, was born on 21 June 1830 in Salvador, capital of the northeastern Brazilian province of Bahia to an African mother, Luisa Mahin, and a Brazilian father of Portuguese descent. Gama became one of Brazil's most respected journalists, lawyers, poets, and abolitionists during the nineteenth century, especially in the final decades of the slave regime.

Mahin was originally from the Nagô nation located in the area of present-day Ghana. Although Mahin had been taken captive and enslaved, she earned money selling fruit on the streets of Salvador and was able to purchase her freedom by the time Gama was born. Gama described his mother as at once beautiful, strong, and vindictive. She refused to accept her status as a slave or to convert to Christianity or allow Gama to be baptized. More importantly, she is said to have been one of the first and only female leaders of the African slave revolts that occurred in Bahia during the early part of the nineteenth century. Mahin's home became the central headquarters for leaders of the infamous Malê Revolt of 1835. The uprisings were carried out by Muslim African slaves intent on obtaining their freedom and eliminating white slaveholders in Bahia. The Malês were eventually suppressed, and in 1837 Mahin was charged and deported to Rio de Janeiro, where she disappeared, leaving young Luiz behind in Bahia.

The identity of Gama's father remains a mystery, and Gama intentionally never revealed his father's name. It is known, however, that his father was a nobleman from an affluent Bahian family of Portuguese descent and well known for his addiction to drinking and gambling. After Mahin's disappearance, Gama's father arranged for him to be baptized at the age of 8. One night two years later, after having gambled away his entire fortune, Gama's father wagered the young Luiz and lost. He was sold to slave traders and his father beguilingly led him aboard a slave ship that was preparing to leave the port of Salvador for Rio. It was only when the ship began to depart that the abandoned Gama realized what had happened and shouted desperately to his father, who stood on the pier below, "Father, you have sold me!"

Upon arriving in the capital of the Brazilian empire, Gama was placed in the home of a Portuguese merchant by the name of Vieira, whose family treated him well. Soon thereafter he was among a group of over one hundred slaves sold to slave trader Antônio Pereira Cardoso and sent to his home in Campinas, in the interior of São Paulo Province. In the cities of Campinas and Jundiaí, Gama was put up for sale in several slave markets but never purchased because of his Bahian origin. Slaveholders were very leery of purchasing Bahian slaves as a result of the recent slave uprisings against whites throughout the province.

Gama was later taken to Cardoso's home in the capital of São Paulo, where he worked as a houseboy for eight years. In 1847 Antônio Rodrigues do Prado, a law student, came to live in Cardoso's home. Prado soon developed a close relationship with Gama and taught him how to read and write, and inspired in him an interest in the law. In 1848 Gama escaped from Cardoso's home after having secretly obtained documents proving that he had been illegally forced into slavery. Since Gama had been born to a free woman and had not been legally claimed by his father, his father held no legal rights over him. Moreover, although slavery would not be abolished until after Gama's death, new slave imports from Africa had been prohibited by Brazilian law since 1831.

With this documentation proving his freedom, Gama left Cardoso's household, enlisted in the army, and served on the police force for a period of six years. During his free time, he worked as a clerk in the law office of Francisco Mariade Sousa Furtado de Mendonça, a high-ranking official on the police force and later professor and dean of the São Paulo Law Faculty. Upon taking note of Gama's hard work, potential, and passion for learning, Mendonça supplied him with books and taught him literature and the basics of law.

Gama's stint in the military was short-lived. He was discharged in 1854 after being charged with acts of insubordination and imprisoned for thirty-nine days. He admitted to threatening an officer who had insulted him. For two years after his discharge, Gama worked as a copyist in several police stations in São Paulo until he was hired as a clerk in the police department's headquarters.

In the late 1850s, Gama met and fell in love with Claudina Fortunata de Sampaio, who would become his wife and constant source of support throughout his tireless fight for the emancipation of all slaves. Of this union was born a son, Benedito Graço Pinto da Gama, on 20 July 1859.

With the salary he earned working in the police department, Gama was able to devote his free time to exploring social issues that were deeply important to him, and he began to write poetry and newspaper articles for publication. In 1859 he published his only book, *Primeiras Trovas Burlescas* (First Comic Ballads), a collection of poetry and social and political satire. In this collection, Gama covers a range of topics including ridicule of the Brazilian aristocracy, societal greed, women's fashion, and the emperor's practice of granting titles of nobility. Most notable, however, is Gama's mordant critique of social whiteness. He attacks the black and mulatto elite who attempted to pass as white, and who were more concerned with maintaining their own social status with no investment in the abolition of slavery. In Gama's most noted poem, "Quem Sou Eu?" (Who Am I?), he expresses his racial pride by declaring that he did not mind being called *negro* or *bode* (goat), a pejorative term often lodged against blacks in nineteenth-century Brazil. In this poem, Gama also calls attention to the prevalence of racial mixture in Brazil and to the fact that people of African descent existed in all stations of Brazilian society.

In 1864 Gama founded the *Diabo Coxo* (Lame Devil), a humorous periodical in which he published political and social satire, as well as antislavery propaganda. Gama wrote and printed most of the articles himself. The paper was short-lived, lasting for no more than a year. Though Gama's biting social satire ultimately angered many who saw themselves reflected in his verses, he was embraced in several social and literary circles and became known as one of São Paulo's most prominent abolitionists. This was the initial step in his personal and lifelong battle against slavery and defense of the humanity and rights of slaves.

Gama's firm stance on slavery and injustice proved menacing to conservative abolitionists and slaveholders alike. He earned a reputation as a troublemaker, and on more than one occasion his life was threatened. His antislavery fight also resulted in his being fired from his job as a clerk in the police department. He would later disclose that among those who conspired to have him fired were his own friends, who had grown weary of his subversive behavior. His conspirators attempted to silence him, hoping that the loss of his job would cause him financial difficulties and ultimately put an end to his seditious activities. To their dismay, however, Gama soon landed on his feet and was hired as a proofreader and apprentice editor for *Ipiranga*, one of the most prominent newspapers in Brazil at the time. He also published several antislavery articles under the pseudonym "Afro." The following year he joined the editorial staff of the newspaper *Radical Paulistano*, which included such leading abolitionists as Rui Barbosa (1849-1923), Joaquim Nabuco (1849-1910), and Castro Alves (1823-1864), all of whom were students at the São Paulo law school.

Though Gama had made significant advances through his journalism, he soon focused his efforts on gaining the freedom of slaves through the courts. He used his extensive legal knowledge to defend people who had been illegally enslaved, and also purchased the freedom of several slaves with the donations he received from his antislavery speeches. Gama even used his own home in São Paulo as a place of refuge for fugitive slaves.

Though he never obtained a law degree, he had audited several law courses. However, because of the constant racism and ridicule to which his fellow students subjected him, he did not continue his formal studies and instead began to study law on his own. Through his hard work, passion, and dedication, Gama became a self-made lawyer and was revered for his acumen and legal knowledge. He became famous for his fiery and eloquent defense of slaves' rights. In the courtroom he openly championed the right of slaves to revolt against their masters. In numerous hearings he became known for declaring, "Every slave who kills his master, whatever the circumstances, does so in self-defense." Through his efforts he became known as the "lawyer of the slaves," winning the freedom of more than five hundred people living in bondage.

Despite all his tireless work, Gama did not live to see the final abolition of Brazilian slavery. He died at his home in São Paulo on 24 August 1882, from complications of diabetes at the age of 52. His death came as a huge blow to the Brazilian abolitionist movement, but through his efforts, his dream of freedom for all slaves was realized six years later in 1888. Gama is forever remembered in Brazilian history for his unwavering fight against slavery and racial discrimination, his defense of human rights, and his tireless pursuit of freedom and equality for all Afro-Brazilians.

[See also Álvarez Nazareno, Carlos and Mahin, Luiza.]

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See also

Mahin, Luiza <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-74429>>

Álvarez Nazareno, Carlos <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-50672>>