

d'Almeida, Joaquim

(?-1857),

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also known as Zoki Azata, freed African slave from the Mahi nation who became a slave trader in Brazil and then resettled on coastal West Africa in the Dahomey kingdom, part of the modern-day Republic of Benin. Details of his early life, under the name Zoki Azata, are virtually unknown, but d'Almeida's later career is well documented. Born to the Azima family from Hoko, north of Dahomey, it is believed Azata was captured by the Fon and enslaved at a young age. He was sent to Brazil and purchased by slave trader Captain Manuel Joaquim d'Almeida, who later freed him. Azata took the name of his Brazilian master after he was emancipated and baptized. D'Almeida is remembered as one of the most prominent slave traffickers of African descent during the nineteenth century and a *retornado*, or freed slave who emigrated "back" to Africa.

After receiving his freedom, d'Almeida continued to work in the slave trade with his former master. He lived and conducted business primarily in Salvador da Bahia between 1835 and 1845 and became very wealthy in the trade. Although he resided in Brazil, d'Almeida traveled often between Brazil and West Africa in the 1830s and 1840s, spending most of his time in the city of Agoué. D'Almeida possessed significant financial and political power in the city and even erected the first Catholic chapel there in 1845. Agoué, a small city of approximately 1,500 inhabitants during this period, was on the rise in the 1840s as the result of an influx of freed slaves from Brazil and Cuba. It became an important religious post within the Dahomey kingdom for French Catholic and Wesleyan Methodist missionaries. Built in honor of the Brazilian brotherhood, Senhor Bom Jesus das Necessidades e Redempção dos Homens Pretos (Our Lord of the Needs and Redemption of Black Men), the chapel was a replica of the Igreja do Corpo Santo in Salvador da Bahia and housed solely religious artifacts imported from Brazil.

Economically, Agoué and nearby Ouidah became the epicenter of competition among Brazilian, Portuguese, and Spanish slave traders. Brazilian dominance of the slave trade in Benin began in the 1790s, initially as Portuguese colonial subjects and later as part of the newly independent nation of Brazil in 1822. The de Souza family, especially Francisco Felix de Souza (also known as the "Chacha de Souza"), played a prominent role in the rise of Benin as a major slaving port for Brazilian traders. By the start of the nineteenth century, Chacha de Souza already had a virtual monopoly on slave exports from Ouidah, thanks to the privileges conferred on him by King Gezo of Dahomey.

Independent slave traders like d'Almeida eventually helped dissolve the economic control of the de Souza family in the region. In fact, Joaquim d'Almeida is credited as the slave trader outside the de Souza family who first gained approval from King Gezo, thus opening the trade up to other merchants and helping him to establish his own monopoly in Agoué. Later, he was named a customs officer in charge of tax collection for trade between Agoué and nearby Little Popo, which increased both his

political and economic power. D'Almeida became so well known that, in 1840, the British consul of Bahia named him specifically in a report on "agents on the coast of Africa who possess Establishments for the nefarious purpose of Slave Trading" and tried to get him expelled by the British Royal Navy for involvement in the illegal trade.

In 1848 d'Almeida established himself in Ouidah and, after Chacha de Souza's death in 1849, quickly became the richest and most influential resident of that city. When the British took control of nearby Danish slave posts in 1850, he was forced back to Agoué, where he spent the remainder of his life.

According to his last will and testament, written in Salvador in 1844, d'Almeida possessed a significant fortune consisting of houses in both Brazil and Benin, millions of *réis*, thirty-six slaves in Havana, forty-six slaves on plantations across Brazil, seventy-three slaves in Benin, and nine personal slaves who attended to his daily needs. He also owned a quarter of the value of slave shipments carried by the *Sarda* and several unnamed private investments in various types of merchandise.

In preparation for his permanent relocation to Africa in 1845, d'Almeida named his former owner and business partner Manuel Joaquim d'Almeida as an executor to his will and left him an inheritance. He also freed four slave women: a Creole girl named Benedita, a Yoruba woman, a Mina woman, and a Nago woman. Later in the will, he listed two illegitimate children as heirs in the absence of legitimate descendants: a boy named Soteiro, who was also the son of the Mina woman he freed, and the Creole girl Benedita. D'Almeida owed debts to his former owner; his two free, Creole godchildren in Bahia; and a woman of the Gege nation named Thomazia de Souza Paraiso, who lived on the coast of Benin. The broad spectrum of society with which d'Almeida associated, as evidenced by his will, demonstrates both the vastness of the transatlantic commercial network in place as well as its fluidity.

According to legend, a fellow Afro-Brazilian poisoned d'Almeida after a dispute over money in 1857. He was buried at his home in Agoué, instead of in the graveyard at the Saint Francis monastery in Bahia outlined in his will. Burial at home, instead of a Christian graveyard, was in accordance with African tradition and suggests that he privately held a syncretic view of religion, notwithstanding his very public support of the Catholic Church.

Despite his sordid history as a slave trader, Joaquim d'Almeida is remembered as a distinguished citizen in the history of Benin. The neighborhood he founded and once lived in, Ouidah, is still called "Zokikomé" in his honor.

[See also Souza, Francisco Félix de .]

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See also

Souza, Francisco Félix de <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-75159>>