Slave Diet in Late Colonial Bahia, Brazil: "I Doubt that the Moors Are So Cruel to Their Slaves"

[The following except from a personal letter written in late eighteenth-century Salvador da Bahia by a careful observer of regional life indicates that the royal decree of 1701 intended to assure adequate provisioning for plantation slaves (see previous document) was no longer seriously enforced by that period. In fact, there is no reason to doubt that the brutal neglect, punishment, and mismanagement here described were commonplace during much of the long history of Brazilian plantation slavery. Source: Luis dos Santos Vilhena, Recopilacao de noticias soteropolitanas e brasilicas contidas em XX cartas que da cidade do Salvador, Bahia de Todos os Santos, escreve hum a outro amigo em Lishoa (Salvador: Imprensa Official do Estado, 1921-1922), n, 187-189. Thanks to Professor Richard Slatta for permission to reproduce his introduction and translation from his website.]

Aside from the agricultural methods and the treatment of cattle' which I have referred to, it is only just and charitable that I say something about the barbaric, cruel, and bizarre way that the majority of masters treat their unfortunate working slaves.

There are some who provide them with no food at all, merely allowing them to work on Sundays or on a holy day on a tiny plot of ground called a "roca." From this work they are supposed to supply themselves with food during the entire week, their masters contributing only a drop of molasses of the worst kind during milling time. If it is discovered that one of these miserable people has stolen something from him, the master has him tied to a wagon, and, bound in this way, he is given at least two hundred strokes on the buttocks with a whip of two or three strands of coarse twisted leather, which amounts in reality to four hundred or six hundred individual blows. If their injuries bleed adequately, they have them washed with salt and vinegar to prevent gangrene, and some mix in Indian peppers to prevent infections, and if some swelling remains they order the wounds lanced, after which they are washed in the manner stated above. I doubt that the Moors are so cruel to their slaves.

There are others who give them Saturday to work for themselves under the same conditions. They get no other day; but receive a quart of manioc flour and three and a half pounds of dried and salted beef to sustain themselves for ten days. Others, however, who are more humane, give them this ration as well as one free day each week. There are others, finally, and these are the poorest and least ridiculous, who supply their slaves with food in a humane, charitable, and Christian fashion.

The work of these unhappy slaves consists of digging up their little plot of land and planting manioc and some other kind of vegetable that the land can support. And despite the irregular nature of this work, they might profit from it if they were not cursed with so
many enemies. In the first place, their own companions rob them, starved and indolent as they are. The many head of cattle who normally wander over the fields and fallow lands break down the slaves' flimsy fences and eat and destroy their crops. Then there are the many wild animals, notably a species of wild pig called caitelu, and a very destructive ant which in a single night can cut down and destroy everything they grow.

The lack of economic management on the part of the masters is the main cause of these misfortunes, not only for the slaves, but for the masters themselves, who quickly lose their workers, consumed as they are by work, hunger, and punishment.

What an improvement there would be if the owners of these rural properties were compelled by law to select some land from among their superabundant holdings, were made to have these lands cleared and tilled, according to their customs, and were forced to destroy the ant hills with which they are normally plagued, their tenants also being compelled to kill and drive away those ingenious insects. All these lands should then be enclosed by high, sturdy fences to keep the cattle out. The greater part of such tracts of land could be planted in manioc, with some also in rice, which in the right kind of soil and with the right kind of weather, produces a fine crop. Between the manioc plants or in a separate place aipins, a kind of sweet manioc excellent when boiled or roasted, might be grown, along with yams, potatoes, millet, sesame, gourds, and other vegetables. Finally, large and flourishing banana groves should be planted and given the greatest amount of care, since on this continent and neighboring islands the banana provides a sure form of security for the poor.