

WHEN EPILEPSY MAY HAVE CHANGED HISTORY

Antônio Moreira César as the commander of the third expedition in the war of Canudos

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ABSTRACT - Colonel Antônio Moreira César, the Commander of the third Expedition against Canudos (1896-1897), nicknamed "head-chopper", was considered an implacable military man, a synonym of ferocity and extreme brutality against his adversaries. Therefore, he was nominated the Commander of an expedition considered almost invincible. Since his 30's he presented epileptic seizures, which increased in frequency and severity on his way to Canudos. After several well-documented episodes and probably considering himself the winner in anticipation, he ordered a premature and almost ingenuous attack against Canudos. His misjudging is attributed to the effect of successive seizures. He was shot and killed on the very first day of that battle and his expedition had a horrible and unexpected end. Based on the descriptions of his biographer we discuss the nature of his disease probably characterized by focal seizures with elementary and complex visual hallucinations followed by language deficits and episodes of complex partial seizures and secondary generalization and its role in this episode of Brazilian history.

KEY WORDS: War of Canudos, epilepsy, epilepsy in literature.

Quando a epilepsia pode ter mudado a história: Antônio Moreira César no comando da terceira Expedição na Guerra de Canudos

RESUMO - O coronel Antônio Moreira César, comandante da terceira expedição contra Canudos (1896-1897), conhecido como "corta-cabeças", foi considerado um militar implacável e seu nome um sinônimo de ferocidade e brutalidade extrema contra seus adversários. Por estes motivos, foi nomeado comandante de uma expedição considerada quase invencível. Desde aproximadamente 30 anos apresentou crises epiléticas, as quais aumentaram em frequência e gravidade a caminho de Canudos. Tendo apresentado vários episódios bem documentados e provavelmente considerando-se vencedor antecipadamente, ordenou o ataque precipitado e quase ingênuo contra Canudos. Sua falta de julgamento é atribuída ao efeito das crises epiléticas sucessivas. Ele morreu de um ferimento por tiro no primeiro dia da batalha e sua expedição teve um final horrível e inesperado. Com base na descrição de seu biógrafo discutimos a natureza de sua doença, provavelmente caracterizada por crises focais com alucinações visuais elementares e complexas seguidas de déficit de linguagem e episódios de crises parciais complexas e crises com generalização secundária e seu papel neste episódio da história do Brasil.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Guerra de Canudos, epilepsia, epilepsia na literatura.

The War of Canudos, one of the most disputed episodes of Brazilian history, took place from 1896 to 1897. In the scenario of the war the most important characters were represented by the leader of the movement, Antônio Conselheiro; also by a war correspondent, Euclides da Cunha, whose description of this episode transformed him into one of the greatest names of Brazilian literature; and last, the

Commander of the third Expedition organized by the Army to restrain the revealers, Colonel Antônio Moreira César, whose epileptic seizures were very well documented by the witnesses of the campaign¹. Their descriptions represent one of the best documents of the interpretation of seizures by lay people in the XIX century literature. The defeat of this expedition, provoking substantial risk to the neonate

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Brazilian Republic has been attributed to his incapacity of judgment consequent of his illness.

The scenario

The Canudos insurrection exploded in the backlands of Bahia ("sertão") in 1896 and seemed to hold back ideas and feelings opposed to those of the Republican regime recently implanted in Brazil in 1889. This episode united an ardent religious leadership by the charismatic Antônio Conselheiro, the disregard for the local and nationally constituted authorities and was made up of a destitute group whose number reached about 25,000 people. In his haughty manner with a "saintly halo", Antônio Conselheiro built a mystical headquarters in a retreat as an isolated hiding place called Canudos, previously a cattle farm.

There, he soon gathered a group of unenlightened individuals of all mingling types, whose only reference was a large collection of criminal antecedents and an extraordinary ability in managing primitive weapons. This poverty-stricken population lived in squalor and hovels along the riverbanks of the Vaza-Barris in the dreadful arid area of stumped vegetation in the Northeast of Brazil where the shrewd Conselheiro, exploiting his trustworthy public, christened, married and separated couples, punishing by excommunication whoever dared to doubt his power, or mock his saintliness.

The aim of this religious movement, a kind of medieval Catholicism, was actually to fight against the large estates and submittance of the peasants forming equality among society thus transferring to

the earth what the church had promise them in heaven. Yet, as an inevitable consequence of the time, it was still considered a nodule of monarchical resistance. Surprisingly, four successive Army expeditions were necessary to trample down the seemingly fragile backlanders.

On finishing the War of Canudos, precisely on the morning of October 6, 1897, with the discovering and later exhuming of the body of Antônio Conselheiro (Figure 1), there were few motives for celebrating². The ritual of the hoisting of the national flag over the ruins of the war - which meant the disclosure of unburied bodies of soldiers and *sertanejos* - represented the outcome of one of the most complex and unsolved themes of Brazilian history in which the advent of the Republic was born without popular appeal or participation. In this way, the distance between the urban and coastal culture and the rural society was strengthened by the new political regime.

The "Rebellion in the backlands"

In one of his articles, published in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* in the issue of March 14, 1897, the journalist Euclides da Cunha commented on the failure of the third Expedition against Canudos in an article entitled "The Brazilian *Vendée*" in an analogy to what had happened in France in 1793. On his way he compared what had taken place in the backwoods of Bahia to the famous province, which, having rejected the French Revolution, remained faithful to Louis XVI – and was only submitted after a bloody fight immortalized by Victor Hugo in his work "Ninety-Three" the title in which the writer



Fig 1. The body of Antônio Conselheiro exhumed on October 6, 1897. He had died at 67, on September 22nd, probably of natural causes. This photograph by Flávio de Barros is the best-known and published photograph of the war² (*Museu da República*, with permission).

remembers the culminating moment of that revolution³. Due to his interest in this question and his profound knowledge, he was sent to Canudos among the 8,000 soldiers for the fourth Expedition as a war correspondent. In the book, which would be considered a prime work of art "Rebellion in the backlands", translated into almost all-western languages, he accuses the Army and the Government for the destruction of Canudos and slitting the throats of the prisoners, hereby, beheading the soldiers in a brutal fashion. He also portrayed Colonel Moreira César, the third Expedition Commander, as an epileptic leader mentally disturbed and as unstable as Antônio Conselheiro, both men reflecting the unsteady climate of the beginnings of the Brazilian Republic. He mentioned that Moreira César "... had a weird and uneven temperament as a proven epileptic, covering the instability of a serious nervous disease in a disguised placidness."⁴ The "Rebellion in the backlands" written over the period of four years arrived in bookstores in the beginning of December 1902 and had three editions published within only three years, from 1902 to 1905, and launched the engineer Euclides da Cunha into the small circle of renowned writers. In 1903 he was elected to the Brazilian Academy of Letters.

Antônio Moreira César, the Commander of the third Expedition

The third Expedition against Canudos took place in 1897 when the acting Brazilian President was

Manoel Vitorino, since Prudente de Morais, the first civilian President, was absent from the government due to a health problem. At that time, the Republican regime was at risk because some monarchic movements had emerged across the country. After two successive defeats of the Army against Canudos, within only three months, it was imperative to win. Therefore, he chose the famous Colonel Moreira César to command the new expedition. He was considered an implacable military man, who had become famous for his brutality against his adversaries when he exercised the position of Military Governor of Santa Catarina in the South of Brazil.

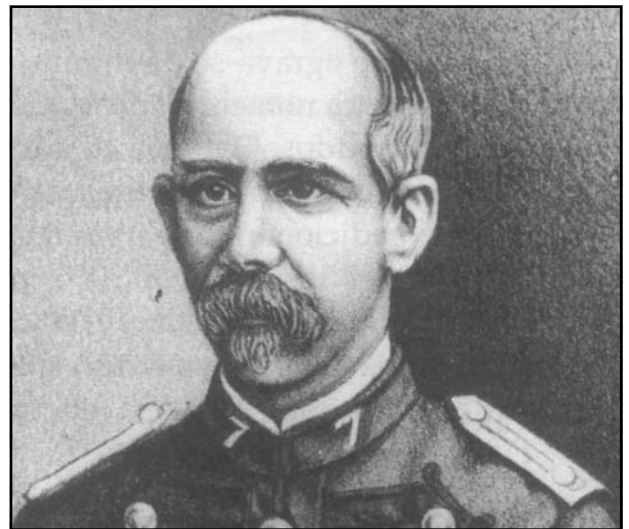


Fig 2. Colonel Antônio Moreira César.



Fig 3. Surrender of the sertanejos on October 2nd, 1897. Photographed by Flávio de Barros² (Museu da República, with permission).

Born on July 7, 1850, Moreira César was a short and rather thin man, sad eyes, bow-legged and the pale look of an invalid who was always in uniform (Figure 2). Of humble origin, he enlisted in the Army as a volunteer and took oath to the flag in Rio de Janeiro, where he made his military career. As a military man, he was considered very competent, a compulsive instructor of the Infantry and Artillery Forces having written "Instructions to the Brazilian Infantry, based on the Portuguese Instructions." Probably his dedication to his work suffered some short interruptions due to physical problems, since very early. There is reference of an absence for health treatment for three months when he was only 30 years old. The exact cause is not mentioned¹. In 1883, in Rio de Janeiro, he participated in the assassination of Apulcro de Castro, a journalist who had insulted the Brazilian Army⁵. Consequently, after his participation in the Revolta da Armada, on the Ilha do Governador, he became the confidant of Marshall Floriano Peixoto, who was then the second Brazilian President. The Republicans had to face many monarchic movements, one of which was the Federalist Movement, in the South of Brazil. In 1893, Marshall Floriano Peixoto nominated Moreira César as a temporary Governor of Santa Catarina with a special duty: to control the revolution in Nossa Senhora do Desterro, now Florianópolis. There he commanded unscrupulous executions without procrastination on the Anhatomirim Island of an unknown number of members of the Federalist Party. Considered an idealist, not interested in money, honors or even power, he was a devote nationalist, worshipping technical progress and believing that only the Army could instill order and save the country from the existing chaos and corruption at the Imperial time⁶. In the name of his devout belief he was capable of practicing any act which would threaten his faith. After such a short and glorious military career, his name became a synonym of ferocity and extreme brutality against his adversaries.

In Santa Catarina his health problem started becoming more obvious¹. It was there that his biographer Coelho Fontes described his epileptic seizure which occurred in January 1896. On a ship, he met an acquaintance to whom he referred episodes of continuous dizziness and showed a bruise mark on his left eyebrow, which, he mentioned, had saved him from more serious consequences of an epileptic seizure. During this seizure he fell down hitting his face against a traveling trunk resulting in a strong hemorrhage. On this occasion, this man presented him with a copy of a book about

hydrotherapy written by Father Kneipp. Thanking him, Moreira César, after taking a look through the first paragraphs, said that he would accept the suggestions as soon as he left the ship¹.

After the executions in Santa Catarina he returned to Rio de Janeiro. It was said that during the trip he had ordered the arrest of the captain of the ship whom he had suspected of being responsible for the slowness of the trip. He stayed in Rio de Janeiro for a short period of time, since on February 6, 1897, he would disembark in Salvador, Bahia, commanding the 7th Infantry Battalion for the third Expedition against Canudos.

The arrival in Salvador

The arrival in Salvador consisted of many honors and reports of the eccentricity of its Commander. On the evening of February 6th to his despair those surrounding him witnessed a seizure while he was still on the ship. After referring frequent headaches to Friar João Evangelista de Monte Marciano, a capuchin Father who had been sent on a conquered religious Mission in Canudos, Moreira César got up appearing worried. After swallowing some pills, he sat down with a sudden change in his expression and seemed to find things surrounding him rather odd. This led the Friar to conclude that he had presented a prodromic sign followed by a short absence, which usually antecedes epileptic seizures. After slow recuperation of consciousness with slurring speech, he excused himself attributing to what had happened as fatigue and tension, mentioning that sometimes he presented visual hallucinations in the form of spots, colors, figures or complex scenes in its smallest details and, at other times, sudden despair or even inexplicable terror. He also questioned whether that evil, which was not minimized by hydrotherapy, would not be a punishment that could be eased by faith⁷.

A long journey

As an extremely self-confident Commander, Moreira César had united 1200 soldiers, 15 million bullets and 73 canons en route to Bahia. Rapidly they figured out a plan of action to overtake Canudos. But this plan was executed without proper care since they did not know what it was like to strike an unknown region of the arid Sertões.

On the other hand, the victory of the two previous military battles had increased the prestige of Canudos among the *sertanejos*. Thus, the place was receiving thousands of new followers, reinforcing its defense with the construction of trenches. Hand

armaments, gunpowder and bullets were being manufactured continuously by the *sertanejos* who also fixed guns and learned how to manage the stolen weapons of the soldiers.

Underestimating the *sertanejos*, however, Colonel Moreira César had not foreseen difficulties neither had he correctly evaluated the enemies with whom they were going to be faced. He was certainly confident about his former military successes and also the modern tactics to succeed in leading his expedition to a good term⁸.

Above all, he could still not foresee the greatest enemy he would be obliged to face- the epileptic seizures, which became more frequent as he approached the enemy. On his journey of about 25 days he presented several seizures some of them lasting many hours or even days. As stated by lieutenant colonel Dantas Barreto⁹ in his book *Accidentes da Guerra* "... His health conditions when he was crossing the arid lands were of great concern. A pronounced physical debilitation was a clear evidence of his profound ruins; sinister thoughts and confidential matters were being discussed among the officials and the medical staff of the campaign; above all this, in the horizon of the backlands lay the indications of a tremendous storm.

*In Serra Branca he complained about a strange feeling which filled his ears with a persistent metallic sound. The trip was once more interrupted in Cansanção, at 23:00 hours, where his ill-feeling persisted; he spoke with difficulty, his speech was slurred, incomplete, and the tongue, may be dormant, handicapped the clear expression of his thoughts. One hour later, on the way to Quirinquinquá, overtaken by his illness, he got off the horseback and was taken over by a horrible attack. His force developed to such a point that his companions, even though there were four, could not restrain him... He gesticulated, forcing himself to utter something which he could not do at all fighting against himself in a kind of titanic struggle as a gladiator in action against a famous adversary. Suddenly the seizure ended and Moreira César, tired and beaten, even though fully conscious, rested and fell asleep until the next day⁹. "According to Coelho Fontes"¹¹... The colonel fell flat sprawling on the ground, victim of what the soldiers believe to be a congestion." And Euclides da Cunha⁴: "...The sick innervation of the commander exploded in an epileptiform convulsion, in the middle of the road, before the ranch of Quirinquinquá". And finally, Manoel Benício¹⁰, war correspondent of the newspaper *Jornal do Comercio* "...The colonel Moreira César presented an*

unexpected attack. The doctors diagnosed epileptiform convulsion."

These descriptions suggest the diagnosis of a simple partial seizure possibly with a secondary generalization. Yet, the signs described above pointed out that most of his seizures were suggestive of involvement of the dominant hemisphere.

The doctors advised not to proceed with the trip as his state of health was serious and there was a possibility of the repetition of the incident. If this had happened at the moment of the combat it would have been fatal¹. "... After getting together, the medical staff applied medicines and withdrew to the porch of the house¹⁰." Vargas Llosa⁶ in his work of fiction then describes the treatment in details: "...Colonel Tamarindo, one of the Commanders of the Expedition, confronting the seizure, ordered that his mouth be opened and the tongue pulled forward. As soon as the doctor arrived, he bled the patient for the congestion and applied cupping glasses for half an hour. This was followed by a bath applying frictions with alcohol, a mustard poultice and then made him inhale the smoke of burning embers. Moreira César referred the feeling of being submitted to the practice of witchcraft, to which the doctor commented that the frontiers between science and magic could not be distinguished." When he heard the diagnosis of an epileptic seizure he angrily replied that this was not possible since he didn't have the nerves and had never felt any such pain or pleasure "...I'm not afraid of dying. I shall not die before going to Canudos¹⁰."

Moreira César attributed the seizure to the reaction of the acid of umbus, not completely ripe, that he had eaten at the time of this event with iodureto, a drug he had used in the past⁹. Since derivatives of iodine were used for epilepsy treatment in the past we suppose that it was prescribed for control of the seizures¹¹.

Between Monte Santo and Cumbe, in Lajinha "... the Colonel suffered two more attacks, one after the other, but not as severe as the first."⁹ There were misperceptions, distrust and sentiments of persecution besides outbursts against those under his command. These characteristics point to a personality disorder with paranoid and impulsive features. Psychopathic signs are also described although we cannot assume a diagnosis of an antisocial personality in view of all the adversities of that moment, fanaticism and pressure to win. On the other hand, there are no available data about his personality at an earlier age. The fore mentioned suggest an organic personality disorder although it does not allow

for the conclusion of postictal psychosis since there was no definite relationship between the behavior disturbance and the seizures. An interesting point is that psychotic disorders might be related to a dominant hemisphere disturbance¹².

Some of his seizures were interpreted, by the simple soldiers around him, as syncope as the last seizure described on his way to Canudos, in Jibóia Farm where he refused to rest¹.

When he got closer to Canudos, at the end of February 1897, Colonel Moreira César sent a telegram to the Minister of War in the following terms:

- *"My only fear is that the fanatic Antônio Conselheiro won't be there, waiting for us!"*¹³

And to the Governor of Bahia he sent the message:

- *"I only regret the flight of the fanatics!"*¹³

The march to the proximity of Canudos was painful due to the suffocating heat, the difficult trails and the emotional tension of the soldiers. On March 1st, at the sounding of an alarm, a horseman left the encampment at a gallop and rushed alone on the road looking for the enemy. It was Moreira César. His sick attitude that had caused him to flee was a load of provisions sent by a farmer of the region, a great adversary of Antônio Conselheiro⁴.

Despite his mental condition, he kept marching. As soon as he felt a little better, contradicting the opinion of the doctors and without perceiving that he was falling into a trap set up by the sertanejos, Moreira César had a false impression that it would be very easy to face and get to Canudos, ordering an attack of the labyrinth-fort built by the *sertanejos* preceded by two shots fired into the air as a warning. In his first speech, accompanied by the loud and enthusiastic vivas, trying to encourage the exhausted soldiers, he demanded an anticipation of the plans of attack:

- *"My comrades! As you know I'm visibly infirm. I have not eaten anything for days; but Canudos is near... let's over take it! We will have lunch in Canudos!"*⁴

Enthusiastic about the effects of the attack, Moreira César considered himself the winner in anticipation and ordered the soldiers:

- *"We're going to take the town without firing another shot – at the point of the bayonet!"*⁴

The Colonel thought the sertanejos were terrorized in view of the horsemen, but the soldiers were received by intense fire. Having noticed the fear of the soldiers, Moreira César decided to be a personal example of courage:

- *"I will give those people courage!"*

When he crossed the Vaza-Barris River, Moreira

César was shot down and killed. Then, Colonel Tamarindo took over the command, and together with the soldiers decided to withdraw, concluding that they had underestimated the difficulties and the resistance of the encounter. Having been communicated about this decision, Colonel Moreira César, in agony, vehemently protested:

- *"Do not retreat, as it would be a shame, a misery. Instead, attack again tomorrow. And Canudos shall be conquered!"*

He demanded that his protest be registered and, if he survived this disaster, he would resign from the Army¹⁰.

Some hours later he died. It was March 4th, 1897.

During the withdrawal Colonel Tamarindo was also shot dead. His death promoted terror and panic among the soldiers, at that moment completely powerless after almost one month of hunger and thirst in that hostile environment. Immediately, they dispersed abandoning the battlefield⁴.

At the end of the fourth expedition, on October 6, 1897, the balance of Canudos showed that approximately 5,000 soldiers and 10-25 thousand sertanejos had died throughout the campaign. Most of the rebels, even after having surrendered (Figure 3), were obliged to say "viva the Republic." This request was seldom satisfied. Many yelled "viva our Counselor." They were aware that they would die whether they shouted one way or the other. The soldiers then *"...Grabbed the victim by the hair putting two fingers into the nostrils, held back the head and clearly exposed the throat, slitting it"*⁴. And the "red tie" was applied indistinctively not only to the warriors but also to the elderly, the women and children who survived the destruction of Canudos¹³. Once more, in the history of mankind, the weakest were dominated by the insanity of the powerful at the moment of the victory.

The end

It is a complex question to try to understand Moreira César's personality when he served as a Commander of the 7th Infantry Battalion. Different people interpreted his defeat from different angles. The description of Moreira César's personality, by most Brazilian writers who portrayed the war, demonstrated that the concepts about epilepsy and degeneration pointed out by Morel and Falret in 1860^{11,14,15} were known and accepted in Brazil by the end of the XIX century^{4,16}. Friar João Evangelista de Monte Marciano, to whom Moreira César had probably made a long confession on his arrival in Salvador, concluded that his voice would not carry the

same weight as those of the world scientists and those who know the human soul. "... *However, I can say that in Moreira César I could not identify the signs of the widespread insanity mentioned by everybody. He was an epileptic, for sure, but it would be temerity attributed to his illness the slips in his behavior. If he committed crimes, he was responsible for them.*"⁷ It seems improbable that the seizures, even though there had been several, or even the personality outbursts, ferocity, head-chopping, etc., had a direct relation with the disaster of the third Expedition. From a superficial viewpoint, everything seemed to have been well programmed, even though forced to do so in a very short period of time. The command of 1200 soldiers with a significant quantity of weapons had been offered to someone very well prepared, judged almost invincible. A person whom Floriano Peixoto, the President of the country, trusted very much. Some historians also believed he could return to Rio de Janeiro as a hero. As a winner, he would represent the strongest name in the Brazilian Army, which would enable him to eventually take the Presidency upon himself at that critical time or help Manoel Vitorino to assume the Presidency⁷. Although Colonel César had a cautious plan for the attack, his strategy was based on erroneous information. Even the Governor of Bahia, Luiz Vianna, had told Moreira César that the 7th Infantry Battalion would have to face only beggars, women and children totally disarmed. Instead of this, they had to face Antônio Conselheiro, a new Prophet and his followers, simple and starved sertanejos who, despite this, had an extraordinary adaptation to the conditions of environment and whom Euclides da Cunha defined in this final statement: "*The sertanejo is above all else a strong-hold*."⁴

We can well imagine the repercussion of the unexpected failure of the third Expedition throughout

the country in the scenario of the neonatal period of the Republic! Someone or something had to be blamed. In this scenario, the stigma of epilepsy prevailed once more. As Afranio Peixoto, who in his book *Epilepsy and Crime* from 1898, claimed: "... *Today the burden of blame should be lighter... and justice would consider him irresponsible, since he obeyed the determinations of a morbid condition being only a passive instrument of his epilepsy*"¹⁶.

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