

# Lampião and Maria Bonita

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## Cangaço



*Cangaço* is the name given to a form of "social banditry" in the Brazilian Nordeste in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This region of Brazil is known for its aridness and hardships. It is a land of little water, much cactus and scrub vegetation, not unlike that of the American Southwest. Although one of the oldest areas of Brazil, it has traditionally been one of the most backward. Roads were cattle trails and telegraph lines almost non-existent. Few people received anything beyond a rudimentary education. Local society was ruled by large landholders and political bosses, often one and the same. In reaction against the domination of the land owners, the government and systemic poverty, many men and women decided to become nomad bandits, roaming the *sertão* (backlands) looking for money, food, and revenge. They became known as *cangaceiros* and were supported by the poor people of the society, who fed them and protected them against the policemen sent by the government to stop them.

One of the most common reasons why young people joined the *cangaço* was to avenge the honor of the family. This was the case of Jesuíno Brilhante, a famous *cangaceiro* from Rio Grande do Norte, as well as Sinhô Pereira, who joined the *cangaço* to avenge the murder of his brother in the countryside of Pernambuco.

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## Lampião



The most famous *cangaceiro* of them all, the one who is often associated with the whole history of the *cangaço*, was a man named Virgulino Ferreira da Silva - better known as *Lampião* ("Oil Lamp"). He was born in 1897 in the Northeastern state of Pernambuco. As he grew up, he and his family got entangled in the ever-present local feuds.

The family somehow ended up of the bad side of the local police, and in a raid on his home in 1919, Virgulino's father was killed, and he fled with others into the backlands. Virgulino sought vengeance and proved to be extremely violent in doing so. At age 25, Virgulino had become *Lampião*, the scourge of the backlands and killer of police and soldiers, whom he always called *macacos* (monkeys).

For the next 15 years he and his band of *cangaceiros* would never be far from the headlines of newspapers throughout Brazil. His band rarely totaled more than 40 men, but he would fight battles against up to 200 militia or special police. He knew the country side, he had spies, he had friends, and the local population often aided the band, although quite often reluctantly. Most people simply wanted to be left alone. The *cangaceiros* also had women in their band; they dressed like *cangaceiros* and participated in many of their actions. The most famous was Maria Bonita (Pretty Mary), *Lampião*'s companion until death.

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### Hero or Criminal?



Lampião was not a revolutionary, he was a bandit. His raids over a decade and a half took him into seven different states. Those who opposed him could lose everything, including their lives. In the event of betrayal or talking to the police, the *cangaceiros* were merciless. On the other hand, if Lampião and company came to town, and he had no reason to be mad at you, and you had nothing he wanted, quite often he would arrange a party with music and plenty of *cachaça* ( a form of alcohol).

Lampião would wipe out whole households of enemies at times. He would assault small towns and cities alike, killing police, asking local merchants for "contributions", seizing any goods he could carry off and often distributing those which he could not to the local population.

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### The End

In July of 1938, Lampião and his band were betrayed by one of his supporters and were ambushed in one of his hideouts. 50 soldiers armed with machine guns crept up and surprised an equal number of *cangaceiros*. About forty bandits managed to escape, but the leaders were clearly visible and were targeted in the first shots. Lampião and Maria Bonita were among the dozen bodies left dead after 20 minutes of battle. To insure that the news of Lampião's demise would be believed, the soldiers took the heads of the captives to Salvador, where they remained on display for over 30 years. Lampião's death signaled the end of an era.

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### In Popular culture



Over the years, Lampião and Maria Bonita have become the subjects of numerous folk stories, books, popular pamphlets, songs, movies, and a number of TV soap operas. They have all the elements of drama, passion, and violence typical of "Wild West" stories. Yet, the fact remains that Lampião was the most notorious of the social bandits that roamed the countryside.

Their exploits have taken on the tone of myth. To many people, he was a folk hero, a kind of Robin Hood who defied the dominant planter aristocracy of the region, the so-called *colonels*. Lampião has become one of the most representative icons of Brazil. His image is still seen everywhere, particularly in the *Nordeste*.

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### Sources

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  - Lampião ([www.brazilbrazil.com/lampiao.html](http://www.brazilbrazil.com/lampiao.html))
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