"PEOPLES OF TRAJECTORIES IN THE PARAÍBA BACKLANDS: The Quilombola Community Os Rufino

"POVOS DE TRAJETÓRIAS" NO SERTÃO PARAIBANO: A Comunidade Quilombola Os Rufino

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Abstract: This article investigates socio-environmental governance in a quilombola territory located in the semi-arid region of Paraíba. It adopts a perspective that seeks to understand, through quilombola experiences and knowledge, how these communities organize themselves as collective and autonomous territories, incorporating their own conceptions and practices. Using an ethnographic approach, the study aims to explore the culture and the social and environmental relationships within the community. Field visits and interviews were conducted, applying memory and oral history methods. Through the narratives of the interviewees, it was possible to perceive the community's evolution, the socio-environmental changes that have occurred, and to relate them to historical time and the development of public policies, confronting official documents with the community's lived perceptions.
Keywords: Quilombola communities, Socio-environmental Governance, Semi-arid region.

Resumo: Este artigo investiga a governança socioambiental em um território quilombola do semiárido paraibano, adotando uma perspectiva que busca compreender, por meio da vivência e do conhecimento quilombola, como essas comunidades podem se organizar como territórios coletivos e autônomos, incorporando suas próprias concepções e práticas. Utilizando o método etnográfico, buscamos entender a cultura e as relações sociais e ambientais presentes na comunidade. Realizamos visitas de campo e entrevistas, aplicando o método de memória e história oral. A partir das narrativas dos entrevistados, foi possível vislumbrar a evolução da comunidade, as mudanças socioambientais ocorridas e relacioná-las ao tempo histórico e a evolução das políticas públicas, confrontando os documentos oficiais com a percepção sensível da comunidade.
Palavras-chave: Comunidades quilombolas, Governança socioambiental, Semiárido.

Introduction

In Brazil, the various ethnic groups that make up the so-called "traditional communities" have their origins deeply rooted in the struggle against oppression

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throughout centuries of colonization. These groups include indigenous peoples who survived genocide since colonial times and descendants of the Black diaspora, who resisted enslavement and continue to face state oppression. The main focus of these struggles, especially for those living in rural areas and forests, is the protection and recognition of their territories, where they maintain an ancestral connection with the land, developing knowledge and practices passed down through generations. In this way, they build a sense of belonging that goes beyond the mere notion of collectivity, transcending the simple aggregation of individuals in a given space.

In this context, governance that understands and respects the ways of life of these populations, recognizing their knowledge and practices, is considered essential. Nego Bispo, nickname of Antônio Bispo dos Santos, an influential quilombola writer and thinker, used to define these peoples, who build knowledge from their concrete life experiences, as "peoples of trajectories." These peoples do not rely on theories, but on the reality of their daily experience of working with the land. Thus, their experiences do not separate them from their territory, but rather make them part of it, resulting in what Nego Bispo conceptualized as "biointeraction". In this perception, a quilombola territory is more than just a space; it is a place where life reproduces itself in all its forms and where the community shares its customs and traditions passed down from generation to generation, in a relationship that does not involve a beginning, middle, and end, but rather a beginning, middle, and beginning (Santos, 2023).

Applying these reflections to the reality of the Paraíba backlands, where these peoples often face socioeconomic challenges exacerbated by the climate crisis, the environmental issue becomes even more urgent. In a setting characterized by a semi-arid climate and the caatinga biome, public policies often reproduce colonial dynamics, perpetuating inequalities and marginalizing the voices and rights of these populations (Santos, 2015). Thus, this research sought not only to understand but also to challenge these paradigms, highlighting and proposing the importance of critical and emancipatory approaches to the environmental and territorial governance of these communities, within a democratic and pluralistic horizon.

With this in mind, we present the history of the Os Rufino Quilombola Community, located in the Paraíba backlands. This community stands out for its valuable cultural contribution and for living together in a collective territory, built on the recovery of its ancestry. Furthermore, their quest for harmonious coexistence with the semi-arid region, guided by respect for the caatinga biome, has been fundamental to the survival and prosperity of future generations.

To conduct this research, we used ethnographic methods, as we understand the quilombola population to be the bearers of a specific culture, language, and territory, as well as a specific and original way of giving meaning to them (Wielewicki, 2001). Therefore, field visits and interviews were conducted with leaders and residents, visits in which the itinerary was constructed from the perspective of memory, using the oral history interview methodology. In the transcripts of these interviews, we seek to present not only the historical trajectory of the interviewees, but also their perceptions and the evolution of access to water, as well as the community's involvement in the Caatinga biome, with agricultural production and animal husbandry — elements that shape the community's organization and political engagement. Thus, this research aims to understand how socio-environmental governance is articulated in the Os Rufino quilombola community through its historical, social, and political trajectory.

Quilombola communities in the Paraíba backlands

The existence and resilience of various quilombola communities in the backlands of Paraíba draws attention to the invisibility of the presence and history of Black people not only in Paraíba, but especially in this region. To address this gap, Diana Galiza (Fortes & Lucchesi, 2013) undertook a historical research effort, giving prominence to subjects traditionally marginalized in official historical accounts, in order to recover the participation of enslaved and free Black people in the process of populating the territory of Paraíba[1]. Many of these settlers came from neighboring states and settled in the region to work on large estates granted to colonists under the sesmarias [Portuguese colonial land-grant regime] model:

> The settlement of Paraíba took place on two fronts: one starting from the interior towards the coast, carried out by colonizers from Bahia or Pernambuco who settled in the backlands and established cattle ranches; and another that started from the coast and moved inland. Those who chose to settle were granted land in sesmarias, which could vary between 1 and 4 leagues in size, giving rise, also in the backlands, to a land system based on the predominance of large properties that has largely endured to the present day (Fortes & Lucchesi, 2013, p. 49).

In regions where the plantation system was not predominant, such as the backlands of Paraíba, where extensive farming and livestock breeding were the main activities, cattle breeding was combined with subsistence agriculture geared toward the domestic market. In this scenario, the enslaved population, despite being heavily

exploited, performed functions similar, in certain specific circumstances, to those of free workers:

> To think about slavery in the Paraíba backlands is to think differently from the plantation model that prevailed in vast areas of Brazil since the early colonial periods. In the economic dynamics of the sertão, we have another model of labor, linked to cattle raising and, therefore, with its own characteristics. Even though slaves performed the heaviest work, we can imagine black and white people performing the same tasks, sharing the same work (Abreu, 2011, p. 63-64).

Furthermore, according to Abreu (2011), the enslaved population in the backlands could be characterized as "property in motion": in addition to working on farms, these people were the subject of commercial transactions, being rented and leased to other owners, mortgaged, and sold according to the circumstances faced by their masters. In situations of extreme drought, for example, which resulted in considerable financial losses, it was common practice to sell enslaved people.

With the progressive devaluation of these people, seen as "commodities," as the abolition process approached, many masters disposed of their slaves so they would not have to support them throughout the year, especially during periods of drought and scarcity. Thus, the black population in this region spread out and formed communities in remote areas of the semi-arid region, combining practices inherited from Africa with local indigenous heritage, passed down from generation to generation as knowledge and techniques for the secular management of the biome (Abreu, 2011).

These characteristics allow us to conclude that, compared to neighboring states, the interior of Paraíba had a smaller number of enslaved people, scattered across vast regions of the sertão. However, in the context of the second quarter of the 19th century — a period in which the process toward abolition was already intensifying, with the enactment of measures such as the Euzébio de Queiroz Law and the Lei do Ventre Livre (Law of Free Birth) — the number of freed slaves increased significantly. There were many free black people who worked and lived on large estates, interacting periodically with the few scattered villages:

> The smaller proportion of slaves in relation to the population as a whole, however, did not mean that there was no black population living in Paraíba. Many children of slaves were freed, becoming workers attached to sugarcane farms (Medeiros & Sá; 1999 apud Fortes & Lucchesi, 2013).

The formation of rural black communities in Paraíba was made possible by the emergence of tenant farmers, who were given part of the property for housing and subsistence farming. With abolition, many freed Black people also became part of these communities. It is also important to consider that, in many locations, there was already integration with the territory and with existing economic production, such as cotton production, driven by the development of the English textile industry in the late 18th century, and livestock farming in the backlands (Abreu, 2011; Fortes & Lucchesi, 2013).

According to Fortes & Lucchesi (2013), the working relationship with the landowner reproduced a mixture of slavery and feudalism, in which workers had to give up a large part of their production and submit to the owner's demands in order to remain on the land. There was also a distinction that placed black and brown people in the condition of "workers in a regime of subjection" (p. 52), distinct from that of other residents.

These historical specificities resonate with Quijano's (2005) argument regarding the centrality of the category of "race" in colonialism and in the subsequent development of capitalism. In this context, an association between "race" and "work" has historically been constructed, establishing a social division that relegated the racialized population to a position of subordination and naturalized relations of domination generated by coloniality. The naturalization of socially and historically engineered processes was often a recourse of legal and governmental language to maintain the status quo in the exploitation of the Black population after abolition.

Fortes & Lucchesi (2013) report that residents of communities formed in this context still constructed a self-image associated with the condition of slavery, due to the circumstances at the time, in which land ownership was far from a reality. This lack of definition caused (and still causes) various conflicts, resulting in loss of territory and hindering access to public policies. The neglect of these communities keeps this population in a situation of extreme vulnerability, as evidenced by a recent report by the National Coordination of Rural Black Quilombola Communities (CONAQ, 2023), according to which 69% of murders of quilombolas between 2018 and 2022 occurred in non-titled territories, with 40.62% related to land conflicts and 31.25% resulting from gender-based violence.

Considering the reality of quilombola communities in Paraíba, currently none of them have collective property titles. In the semi-arid region, where the degradation of the caatinga, droughts, and desertification are intensifying (Silva et al., 2020) due to the advance of climate change, the socio-environmental vulnerability of this population tends

to worsen. The most consistent response to these problems lies within the communities themselves that live, coexist, and biointeract there (Santos, 2023).

Understanding the settlement process of quilombola communities in the semi-arid region of Paraíba is essential, as rural communities define land use based on their historical experience, in light of the various changes that have occurred in this area. According to data from the State Action Program to Combat Desertification and Mitigate the Effects of Drought in the State of Paraíba, 94% of the state's territory is at risk of desertification (Paraíba, 2017). This process, resulting from climate change combined with the extractive model of land exploitation and the absence of public policies, has affected rural communities. It is necessary to ensure their autonomy so that they can adapt to a climate reality that scientific research has classified as irreversible.

It is urgent to ensure that communities that depend on the land for their livelihood and for the survival of future generations participate in finding solutions to the damage caused by the exploitation of life and nature for capital gain. Due to their relationship with the environment, which goes beyond commercial or mere subsistence purposes, the quilombolas of the semi-arid region interact with their territory based on a sense of belonging and historical identity built on struggle and resilience, passed down from their ancestors.

Formation of the Rufino quilombola community

According to historian and president of the Os Rufino Association, Tiago Rufino, the community is a living symbol of resistance and the struggle for freedom, whose roots date back to the period of slavery in Brazil. He explains that contemporary quilombos represent the continuity of this historical legacy, in which these communities were landmarks in the struggle against an inhumane system that lasted for almost four centuries in the country.

The history of the community begins with the matriarch Rufina Maria da Conceição, a woman enslaved on the farms of Pombal during the slavery period. She had three children, one of whom was Antônio Rufino de Jesus. He married Joaquina Maria da Conceição, known as Mother Quina, with whom he had thirteen children. Between 1904 and 1910, this family settled in Sítio São João, an area that currently corresponds to the Os Rufino Quilombola Community.

According to José Nilson da Silva (known as Mestre Zé Grande, due to his work as a master craftsman), great-grandson of Antônio Rufino and Quina, his great-

grandparents worked in the construction of dams, and from this activity, they were able to acquire their land. Over the years, part of this land was sold or transferred, leaving only four of the couple's thirteen children on the property. These descendants passed on their properties as inheritance, maintaining the family presence in the quilombo to this day (Rufino, 2018).

One of the four children of Mother Quina and Antônio Rufino who remained in the quilombo is Mr. Domingos da Silva, born in 1929, one of the oldest residents of the quilombo. His parents migrated from Barra de Caiçara, a farm located in the municipality of Paulista (PB), 39 kilometers from Pombal, and settled in what is now the Os Rufino Community. During our conversation, Mr. Domingos recalls the story of how his grandfather, José da Silva (Zé do Sul), was brought from the south of the country:

> My father's father came from the South, but it was because the men bought him there, just like they buy cattle. They bought him there, brought him here, then sold him to someone else. After a year, he left here at the age of 18; a year later, at 19, he was sold again, and then he was freed. They granted him manumission, and he was freed. Then he arrived here, got married in Paulista, was married for a year, then his wife died, then only one of my aunts arrived, then he got married again to another woman (Silva, 2022).

This moment in the conversation draws attention to the metaphor used by Mr. Domingos when he recounts that his grandfather was "bought like cattle" (Silva, 2022), underscoring the dehumanization and the commodification of black life. This analogy brings us back to the reflection presented by Nego Bispo (Santos, 2023) on how coloniality, similar to the account above, dehumanizes and deterritorializes. For the quilombola thinker, coloniality acts like training oxen: it frames the being, removes its ability to live for itself and its own, with the aim of making it be and produce exactly what is expected of it.

This deterritorialization and the consequences of coloniality become even more explicit when Mr. Domingos reports that, after being freed, his grandfather went to work "on other properties, for rich men" (Silva, 2022), following the same fate as most of the newly freed black population, who, after centuries of slavery, received no reparations and were compelled to continue serving the same masters who had benefited from this system, now exploiting them as precarious labor (Quijano, 2005).

In this process, he recounts that, after the death of his first wife, his grandfather managed to acquire a piece of land where the quilombo is located today, and that his father continued to work for neighboring landowners, replicating what had been done by the previous generation until he obtained his own plot, where he grew corn, beans, and

cotton, in addition to raising cattle and goats. He also produced roof tiles, bricks, and charcoal.

At the age of seven, Mr. Domingos was already helping his father, learning the carpentry trade. During the interview, his daughter said that he was one of the best carpenters in the region. When asked if his children had learned the trade, he replied that people today are less interested in working than in the past:

> Things have changed […] The way people live has changed. Many people don't want to work today. [...] In the old days, you know? You would come home. Everything working. If you were a man or a woman, everyone did their share of the struggle at home. But nowadays (Silva, 2022).

Mr. Domingos' words reveal a discontent that can be associated with a process of erosion of the knowledge and practices previously transmitted within the family. The droughts and hardships imposed on rural Black communities in the semi-arid region led most of his nine surviving children (out of a total of eighteen) to migrate to the Southeast or settle in the urban area of Pombal, with only two remaining in the quilombo. This situation highlights the relationship between deterritorialization and rural exodus, both aggravated by the absence of agrarian reform and the difficulty of accessing public policies, which have historically been geared toward the interests of large landowners (Silva, 2020).

Despite obstacles to reproducing life in the community, residents have managed to preserve traditions and strengthen themselves collectively through culture and political participation. José Nilson da Silva, treasurer of the Os Rufino Association, grandson of Quina and son of Dona Edith, has preserved a significant tradition in the community, dedicating himself to the artisanal production of clay pots. For performing this role, he is recognized as Mestre Zé Grande, responsible for orally transmitting knowledge that spans generations.

The quilombo also preserves a strong religious tradition linked to the Igreja do Rosário [Church of the Rosary], built in 1721 and, from the 19th century onwards, administered by a brotherhood of former slaves called the “Brotherhood of the Rosary”. This brotherhood has maintained ties with the Rufino family since its inception, with members such as Joaquina “of the brooms", the first queen of the Brotherhood, and “Chico Rufino,” who was king in 1951 (Rufino, 2018).

Another important cultural expression of the community is the group Os Pontões, formed by men and boys, mostly residents of the Os Rufino quilombo, but also by

members of the Os Daniel urban community. The group actively participates in the Rosary festival with dances, songs, and fundraising for the church (Rufino, 2018).

The Rufino community highlights the importance of culture in consolidating a territory and promoting community cohesion among its members, strengthening its political articulation. This cultural integration dates back to the post-1988 Constitution era and remains a fundamental strategy for the survival not only of quilombolas, but also of other ethnic groups fighting for their territories.

Sharing in the Os Rufino quilombola territory

The sharing of land in the Os Rufino Quilombola Community is based on the distinctive characteristics of this region, which is crossed by the Piancó-Piranhas River. This river plays a significant role in the life of the community, being a recurring theme in the narratives of all interviewees.

According to Mr. Domingos, the river emerges as an important reference point in his family's history within the quilombo, representing the main, if not only, source of water to which they had access. The entire life of the community revolved around this waterway. During the floods, fishing intensified; during periods of drought, the banks were used for potato cultivation.

The vice president of the Os Rufino Association, Doralice Sales de Oliveira, affectionately known as Aunt Dora, says that when she arrived at the quilombo more than twenty years ago, water was accessed directly from the river. Over time, significant changes took place, and the community began to rely on cisterns and artesian wells. According to her, these technologies began to be implemented even before the community was officially certified as quilombola.

Aunt Dora points out that these water resources are essential not only for domestic consumption, but also for agricultural activities, such as growing vegetables. The community has access to water from the Piranhas River and also benefits from part of the São Francisco River transposition project. Only a few homes have running water.

According to Tiago Rufino, the water supply service implemented by the previous administration was discontinued, forcing residents to purchase motors and pipes on their own to ensure supply. This situation made it impossible for many families to enjoy the benefit:

> At that point [regarding access to water], a water supply service was set up under the previous administration, but there was little left to complete it; it was just a matter of the motor and a few meters of pipe.

> I believe it's a simple thing, but most families can't afford to buy this equipment (Rufino, 2022).

The community has a large-capacity water tank; however, the lack of machinery and pipes prevents efficient distribution to meet total demand. Most of the water consumed comes from cisterns, as mentioned by the interviewees. In cases where these are insufficient, families collect water from the river and treat it at home with chlorine.

Thiago Rufino expresses his perspective on resolving the problem and proposes the search for a comprehensive project that encompasses the completion of this infrastructure, including the implementation of an adequate treatment system. He highlights the importance of this treatment, considering that the river water is not drinkable due to pollution caused by urban sewage discharge. Among the demands raised by local leaders, the drilling of an artesian well stands out, especially in view of the challenges related to controlling water use during the dry season.

Access to water for irrigation of different crops faces limitations due to budget constraints. In addition, the community reports difficulties in using river water, often due to strict regulations imposed by the National Water Agency (ANA) which, although necessary for enforcement, end up making it unfeasible to collect water for agricultural activities, raising irrigation costs for both grass and other crops.

Mestre Zé Grande says that he sought alternatives to cope with periods of drought and maintain a small agricultural production. However, restrictions imposed by the federal government, along with a ban on using river water, compromised their plans. His words reflect his frustration at the lack of government incentives aimed at coexisting with the semi-arid region:

> Before I started this work here [clay handicrafts], I went to the federal government. At that time, there was water withdrawal. They collected all the river water. It was a real prohibition—you could only water the animals with this tiny amount. Then I said, I had twenty-five head of cattle. I said, I'm going to sell them, because I won't watch my cattle die of hunger there, looking to the government, which gives nothing to anyone. Then ANA, which is the federal agency, prohibited everyone from watering their animals, you know, along the riverbank. I even had a big project, already approved by Banco do Nordeste. I went there to suspend it because I couldn't afford to pay. What was I going to pay with? If my job was cattle. It was intended for planting and irrigation, but there was no water. It was impossible to work. So I suspended it. From then on, I got involved in this work here, but I always worked in agriculture as well. In winter, I always plant my beans so I can eat them. [...] In this case, regarding economic activity, the only incentive, the only thing that provided some incentive, was the production of pots and pans. However, there are no other projects focused on agriculture or animal husbandry (Silva. J., 2022).

Thiago Rufino suggests some alternatives to the problem, such as building a reservoir or dam in a suitable area of the community, in order to overcome these limitations. He highlights the presence of a small dam, which, unfortunately, is silted up. In early 2022, the community acquired a machine (possibly PVC) to clean up this pond, with a view to revitalizing it. He also mentions the intention to develop a project to optimize this initiative and talks about the need for technical assistance to put these ideas into practice.

In addition to these issues, the problem of river silting deserves special mention. In August 2016, a complaint was filed with the Public Prosecutor's Office regarding this situation. The document cites “possible environmental crimes committed on the Piranhas River, near a quilombola community.” This involves the illegal extraction and sale of sand taken from the bed of the Piranhas River, in the section that crosses Sítio São João (MPF, 2016).

Figure 1 – Silting of the Piranhas River due to mining activity

Source: Own archive (2023).

In the document, which requests an inspection of the site and points to a possible responsible party, it is possible to see the bureaucracy and leniency of the institutions with regard to the problem. It is reported that a notification was sent to the National Department of Mineral Production (DNPM), which did not even respond to the letter sent by the Public Prosecutor's Office, even a year after the complaint was filed. Only after sending a second letter did the DNPM respond that there were proceedings requesting the use of the Piranhas River bed for mining activities; however, up to that point, there had

been no authorization for such activities at that location, and therefore any extraction from the river bed was considered illegal (MPF, 2016).

Subsequently, an inspection was carried out which confirmed that sand extraction was taking place at the site, but the damage was not quantified and no one was held responsible for the crime. Even though there was strong evidence pointing to the perpetrator of the crime, the case was closed on the grounds that no one was caught removing sand on the day of the DNPM inspection and that, after questioning the possible perpetrator, who was linked to a local politician, he denied the accusations. In 2023, seven years after the complaint was filed, the problem persists. Residents remain skeptical about the ability of institutions to resolve this problem.

The interviews also pointed out that, currently, there is no effective control over who carries out mining activities on the riverbed. Some people in the community obtain permits from landowners, while others, especially non-Quilombolas, carry out extraction without any permission. The lack of control and oversight raises concerns about the potential environmental damage resulting from this disorderly practice, which even involves people from other municipalities.

This process demonstrates negligence not only toward the community, but also toward the importance of preserving a river in a semi-arid region. Mestre Zé Grande speaks nostalgically about when the region was conducive to fishing:

> In this river? There are very few fish in the river now. We only see very small fish. You don't see many fish in the river anymore. There used to be a lot of fish. Then time ran out […] the river doesn't have many fish now. The fish we mostly see in the river are little curimatã and piranha. When I arrived here, the river had plenty of fish. The river water was deeper (Silva, J., 2022).

Life in rural communities in the semi-arid region is greatly affected by water availability, and especially in areas that do not have complex irrigation systems, as is the case on large properties, there is even greater dependence during the dry season. This reality highlights the inequality mentioned in the statements made by leaders, who denounce the lack of public policies aimed at encouraging small farmers and expanding their production.

An example of this inequality is the distribution of resources under the Safra Plan, which, in 2023/2024, allocated 8.5 billion of the 13.6 billion reais in agricultural credit subsidies to the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (Pronaf). According to a study conducted by the NGO Climate Policy Initiative in partnership with PUC-RJ, which analyzed credit programs, types of producers, and the purpose of credit,

"although 1% of loans are for companies, they obtain 29% of the credit volume and correspond to 85% of the area that receives rural credit" (Assunção & Souza, 2020, p. 2).

Thus, it can be observed that the criteria established by the program do not guarantee parity in access to resources , and it is essential to review them also from the perspective of environmental policy, since the study proves that small producers contribute to the reduction of deforestation and to the diversification of production, unlike large producers, whose demand for land increases as they access these resources (Assunção & Souza, 2020).

In the Rufino quilombo, there is a small amount of agricultural production, mainly beans and corn, especially during the rainy season, and grass, which is planted throughout the year to feed the small herd, raised mainly for milk production. Agricultural production is primarily for personal consumption, while milk is intended for both domestic consumption and commercialization.

However, when the need arises, some residents (both quilombolas and non-quilombolas) seek informal employment, whether on large farms, in the city, or in the homes of local families. Often short-term and paid daily, these jobs involve a variety of activities, from domestic work to working on neighboring farms, building fences, or working as cowhands.

According to Thiago Rufino, this occurs because, although many own their own land, some basic conditions are not met, which leads them to seek opportunities outside the community:

> Everyone has land there, but they lack the conditions to expand it. Not just that subsistence income from working in agriculture and livestock farming, but something that can be profitable. During the winter, if you can grow your corn and beans, then stock up for subsistence, and when it is the dry season, they go to work as hired laborers, sometimes on large farms. Others work in the city, and there are people who live in the community but commute every day because they work, say, in a family home or in local commerce (Rufino, 2022).

Inequality in access to services in the region is also noteworthy, as exemplified by the dairy collection service, whose collection points were set up on the properties of the most influential farmers, ignoring small producers, who end up having more difficulty marketing their production. Although agriculture and livestock farming are the main activities in the Os Rufino quilombo, the production of clay pots plays a prominent role in the circular economy of the territory. This production is a symbol of tradition and craftsmanship within the quilombo. Mestre Zé Grande, one of the people responsible for

this production, learned the craft from his mother and, over the years, has refined his techniques:

> My mother always worked, when she raised us, making crockery. She made pots and doors. She learned a lot about making pots. From her mother. It had been passed down from her grandmother, who was Mother Quina. But she didn't just learn from her mother, she learned from other people there, in Várzea Comprida dos Leites [district of Pombal, where Mestre Zé Grande was born], who already carried it in their blood and were already doing it. She watched her mother working, and then she began to do it herself (Silva, J., 2022).

Initially, the process involved manually extracting the clay, but now the master uses equipment to improve the quality of the material:

> She [her mother] always had us help with the work. But when she had me do it, I didn't actually make pieces. In the past, we removed the entire clay-processing stage by hand, picking out all those little stones. Today it's different. Today I have a mill to grind the clay and remove that stone residue. So only the clay remains, just the binding material itself. That way, there are no stones left in the clay (Silva, 2022).

Casa do Barro Dona Edith currently consists of 14 people, including masters and apprentices who keep this important tradition alive, from molding to finishing the pieces. Knowledge is passed on organically, with the most experienced teaching the younger ones, ensuring the continuity of this tradition.

The impetus to involve young people in production came from an initiative that aimed to revive and preserve the culture of clay pots. Many of these incentives came from politicians and NGOs, whose support was crucial in uniting the community and rekindling interest in artisanal production. Mestre Zé Grande talks about how this work developed in the community, which was previously done on an individual basis:

> Initially, everyone did it. They learned, but each one had their own little workshop at home. They had their little workshop at home to make things. So, in this project, in this case, it was the lamp [project] that brought everyone together... And that's when we started working here in this house. When we started working, it wasn't in this house. It was in another house that belonged to a cousin of mine. Everyone gathered there to start. After that first moment, we brought the project here to perfect this material. Empower Project. Which was the City Hall, the European Union, and the State Government (Silva, 2022).

Mestre Zé Grande shares with us the entire production process, which begins with collecting clay from a clay pit. This clay is mixed with soapstone, using a traditional technique that dates back generations. After the pieces are molded, they undergo sanding,

polishing, and finally firing, which lasts six hours. The use of firewood is judicious: only dead wood is used, in order to avoid excessive temperatures that could alter the pieces.

> With the grinding tool, we take the clay, grind it, and keep everything separated. The stones are separated as well. Today it's called soapstone. Here, though, I've known it since I was born as soft stone. [...] The first step we do is to collect the clay from the clay pit. Then there's also the stone part, which is another stage. We take the stone and grind it as well, to mix it in. After I grind it all up, I sift it through a sieve. A very fine mesh. Then I take twelve kilos of clay and put it into a cart so it can be worked there. Then a large basin. That's where we make the mixture, mixing it very well. It's twelve kilos of clay with six kilos of stone. There is more than half of the clay. After completing this whole process, I wet it all to knead it. After kneading, I take it and put it into a bag. Once it's in there, I let it rest for about forty minutes so I can begin the work, doing the molding… We take water from the river… Then there's the sanding stage. We sand it completely, and then we reach the final stage, which is polishing before it goes into the kiln. After polishing it all, where do we take it? To load the kiln and do the firing. The firing lasts six hours. Then we fire it for six hours and only take it out the next day. So it cools down with time. The firewood we use comes only from woodland that is already dead. We don't use jurema firewood. Because that wood burns too hot. And the firewood needs to be the kind whose heat doesn't last too long. Jurema retains heat for more than forty-eight hours. That ends up altering the pieces. Now, in this weather — windy like it is now, with this wind we're feeling here — if we leave all the doors open in the drying area, the pieces will crack. A lid or a pot is harder to crack. A large piece — a jar, a wide piece — will open up like a crater. It's always waste, but we don't lose the clay. It all goes back again. We grind it up. Nothing is lost… Before firing, everything is reused (Silva, J., 2022).

Mestre Zé Grande's account of artisanal clay production presents us with a circular process in which nature and culture are integrated and complement each other. Care is taken from the moment the clay is collected in a region surrounded by jurema trees, where the location of the material extraction, the adaptation time, and the recovery of the soil are all considered. When we arrive at the site, Mestre Zé Grande explains that there is a rotation system in the extraction areas, so that the soil can regenerate. He points out the spots where the clay is removed, as shown in the following images, where you can see the grooves resulting from this process:

Figure 2 – Clay extraction site

Source: Own archive (2023).

In addition, other highlights in Mestre Zé Grande's speech are, once again, the importance of the river for wetting the clay for kneading and for careful use in molding the pieces; the cycle of reusing pots that have cracked and whose clay can be reused; the decision to use only wood from dead trees, as opposed to jurema wood, avoiding indiscriminate tree cutting; and consideration of the weather during the process, to protect the pieces from cracks caused by the wind.

It is clear that, throughout each stage of the artisanal production process, the community reveals a close relationship with and deep knowledge of its territory, preserving both the integrity of its people and customs and that of nature. In this sense, we can see that as the quilombola identity strengthens, the connection with the territory and with the beings that coexist in it also intensifies. This artisanal production is a good example of how collective organization and self-management capabilities are present in the community.

In addition to artisanal production, the community remains involved in building a biointeractive relationship. Environmental awareness is being integrated into local identity, seeking harmony between humans and nature, bringing about a reconnection with the territory. When asked how he sees this interaction between the community and the territory, Thiago Rufino points out that, although there is deforestation in areas with intense agricultural production, such as riverbanks and lowlands, most of the areas behind the residences are preserved, with few reports of deforestation and burning.

He points out the harmony between residents and the remarkable diversity of birds in the region, even suggesting the possibility of a future project to create a bird sanctuary. Thiago Rufino highlights the community's growing awareness over time, mentioning

practices previously adopted, such as bird trapping and trading, which have been replaced in pursuit of a more balanced coexistence with the local ecosystem:

> We were talking to someone who did that, we talked and she changed her mind. She used to catch a type of bird that I don't remember, I think they were blue-fronted parrots, to sell them. But what happened was, we kept talking, we kept talking about what was causing the damage and such, that it would end with extinction. And that's what I said, and that was it. He doesn't do that anymore (Rufino, 2022).

It is important to note that this practice, previously adopted by the resident, was linked to his livelihood. Therefore, it is important to develop projects capable of providing sources of income that guarantee people's livelihoods. In this regard, Thiago reinforces the need for technical monitoring and mobilization among public agencies, so that they support initiatives aimed at families in vulnerable situations.

Cultural traditions, tackling environmental challenges, and seeking economic opportunities are issues that are intertwined in the daily life of the Rufino community. By addressing these issues, the community keeps its cultural heritage alive while organizing itself in the search for solutions to ensure its way of life.

From everything that has been built by the community residents, it is clear that this is a collective project aimed at achieving a full and dignified existence in their territory. However, there needs to be collaboration from public institutions, which are called upon by the quilombola population not to act as interveners, but as mediators. This reflection is crucial because, in many aspects of community life, the difficulties are more profound, revealing that, instead of full self-management of the territory, a form of management persists that keeps the community in a situation of dependency, weakening the collective organization that is essential for its survival.

When we asked about other communities in the region, reports emerged of cases in which quilombolas are left in situations of extreme social vulnerability by the public authorities. These narratives range from the loss of traditions to the population's exposure to violence, drug addiction, and countless other problems. Stories of people who were once valued for their important work with recyclable materials, but who are now forced to rummage through trash on their own, without any safety or institutional support.

During our conversation, Mr. Domingos commented that today production is not the same as it used to be, because “the land also ages, becomes tired, and dies.” To prevent this from happening, he showed us, with a gesture of plowing the earth with his hands, how it would be possible to “save the earth” and, consequently, all life that depends on it.

This gesture suggests that it is only through the hands of the quilombolas, and through their autonomous and collective construction, that the quilombo will survive.

Conclusion

In Paraíba, the significant concentration of quilombola communities in the semi-arid region reveals a close connection between the presence of the black population and the historical culture of large estates and agriculture in the region. This connection dates back to the times of slavery and post-abolition, when many enslaved and freed Black people were engaged in the agricultural activities characteristic of the area. Working as cowhands and laborers on cotton plantations, these individuals contributed significantly to the formation of the cultural identity of the region. Quilombola culture in Paraíba, therefore, is intrinsically linked to agricultural and livestock practices historically associated with large estates, reflecting the complexity of relations between the black population and the land in the semi-arid region. Understanding these historical roots is essential to fully comprehend the cultural and social heritage of the quilombola communities in this state.

Closely observing sharing in the Os Rufino Quilombo allows us to reflect on how rural Black communities have the ability to experience the semi-arid region as ancestral territory, building their identity based on biointeraction with the caatinga. Unlike what occurs among colonized peoples, whose relationships are based on convenience, in these communities interactions, both between people and with the environment, are established based on convergence (Santos, 2023).

Understanding the political dynamics in quilombos reveals the potential of these communities to autonomously establish collective management of their territories. However, this capacity for autonomous and collective construction only materializes when they are not vulnerable to the socio-environmental difficulties faced in the semi-arid region, aggravated by the advance of climate change.

Finding these rich interactions in the quilombo transforms our perception of how to approach what we call environmental and territorial management, leading us to understand that, in the quilombo, it is not a question of managing, as something to be administered and regulated, but of nurturing, in the sense of conceiving and providing what is most essential: life.

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[1] According to the census conducted in 1872, a few years before the abolition of slavery, of the 1,510,806 enslaved people in Brazil, including men, women, and children, 21,526 were living in the territory of Paraíba, of whom 10,681 were men and 10,845 were women (IBGE, 2018).