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## THE RISKS OF COMMODIFYING POVERTY: RURAL COMMUNITIES, QUILOMBOLA IDENTITY, AND NATURE CONSERVATION IN BRAZIL

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Resumo: *políticas multiculturais de devolução de terras representam uma tentativa do estado e setores da sociedade civil de fortalecer 'comunidades tradicionais' (ex. quilombolas) através do reconhecimento de direitos com base em ancestralidade territorial e etnicidade. Concomitante, políticas ambientais tem limitado o uso de recursos em muitas destas áreas através da criação de áreas protegidas. Neste ensaio discutimos as contradições criadas pela intersecção destas políticas e as implicações da devolução de terras em áreas protegidas através da construção de categorias e critérios étnicos. Discutimos as implicações e limitações destas estratégias para conciliar conservação da natureza e a melhoria econômica destas populações.*

Palavras-chave: *quilombolas, conservação natural, políticas multiculturais*

**D**rawing on ongoing ethnographic research<sup>1</sup> in two *Quilombola* communities located within protected areas in Brazil, we reflect and discuss the challenges of studying the implications of policies based on cultural and ethnic categories to address issues of basic needs and well-being among these communities. *Quilombolas* are the members of rural communities formed by descendants of slave. The United Nations Development Program estimates the number of “*Quilombolas*” in Brazil to exceed 2 million people distributed around some 2,500 communities (<http://www.pnud.org.br/home/>). In Brazil for instance, since the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, many rural communities have been granted land rights based on ethnicity, settlement history, and Afro-Brazilian ancestry (FRENCH, 2006; GOMES, 2003).

For some communities, the immediate result of these changes has been a complex process of internal rethinking of identity, values, and social practices to conform to the opportunities opened by a legally-endowed *Quilombola* identity, and thus, rights to land. Additionally, in 2001 the Brazilian Congress passed the National System of Conservation Units law (SNUC) providing a framework for the establishment of protected areas that can include the presence of Traditional Populations a category which can include *quilombolas*, *caiçaras*, and *caboclos* (MEDEIROS, 2006). The underlying assumption, however, is that both ecotourism, low intensity subsistence practices, and management of non-timber forest products will create revenues and foster positive links between local communities and nature conservation.

We contend that because of increasing nationalization and globalization of nature conservation and ecotourism, new forms of commodification of intangible goods such as performances of local and regional identities are emerging. Furthermore, this process sets the stage for communities to negotiate internal and external access to resources, economic opportunities, and land rights. We argue that the foremost challenge for these communities is to find balance between negotiating their own identities, economic aspirations and the expectations created by legal, cultural, and environmental discourses. The same source of social capital built through the intersection of ethnic and environmental alliances might either threaten or empower them. On the one hand, *Quilombola* communities have gained an opportunity as a Traditional Population to be associated with the environmental movement while subsuming their historical stigmas (e.g., ‘black poor’ and rural poor) within an image of indigeneity. On the other hand, this hybrid identity may imply that they are ecologically adapted, but culturally, economically, and demographically frozen in time: a repackaged version of the ‘noble savage’. As a result, while many *quilombola* communities living within parks of high conservation value might benefit from being transformed into Traditional Populations, they eminently risk being kept under economic constraints since traditional populations are not

expected to develop strong market links and high consumption rates; in other words, to change the material conditions which attest, as cultural markers, to their identity. We call this paradox a Commodification of Poverty, given that the goal of nature protection schemes might contribute to maintaining Traditional Populations under limited capacity for adapting to and dealing with new economic demands and opportunities and inter-generational demographic changes. We argue that, in countries like Brazil, policies aiming at social and environmental problems should confront poverty as a major issue underlying most human-environment relations and the goals of nature conservation.

#### NEO-LIBERALISM, CLASS, AND THE SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSE

Hale (2002) has argued that 'neoliberal multiculturalism' in Latin America has come about in part as a response to demands for rights by the culturally oppressed and excluded, in part a move away from class-based politics. Despite having opened new political spaces, offering a mix of opportunities and peril, it has reinforced the fragmentation of society into multiple identity groups with few perceived common interest and characteristics. In this context, social movements have increasingly become organized around ethnic based identity as the main vehicle for socioeconomic transformation with limited attention to the historical intersection between ethnicity and class. Paradoxically, however, for local communities and social movements this may create a situation where recognizing the historical and socioeconomic roots of inequality and poverty may threaten the pillars of their own cultural identity discourse. The question is whether transformation through ethnic-based movements alone can address the historical structural problems necessary to overcome their economic and political marginalization. Most importantly, how the restraints created by policy (e.g., regulation of land market and land use) and expectation created by society will limit their ability to adjust and take advantage of new economic

opportunities. Communities are faced with negotiating the trade-offs between a heightening ethnic awareness and empowerment and/or class-based organization.

One may wonder as to what extent are the global discourses on environmental sustainability and economic globalization intersect as part of a larger project. Some have argued that the global economic elite continues to forge the terms and conditions of the global sustainable development agenda and conservation areas priorities (BROAD, CAVANAGH, 2006; WEST *et al* 2006). International NGOs and environmental agencies generally operate through three main articulated apparatus: supporting local and national environmental protection agencies by funding nature protection projects in developing countries; training and transferring scientific knowledge through ‘capacity building’ programs targeted mostly to decision-makers, young scholars, and local leaders; and systematically maintaining a “green discourse” with a broader audience through media and political discourses. In spite of the overwhelming complexity that prevents articulation of the larger picture of the ongoing socioeconomic and environmental outcomes of globalization, it is undeniable that the sustainability discourse has been appropriated by both local and global actors as a means of guaranteeing access to markets, environmental services and products. At the local level, rural communities such as the case of many *quilombola* communities have been redefining and negotiating new cultural forms of resources control. As it seems, liberal economic policies and its sustainable discourse has not only fostered new social agendas but also has dramatically changed local and global relations, which in turn has led to the creation of new contested territories (ESCOBAR, 1998; COMAROFF; COMAROFF, 2007).

#### RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF NATURE CONSERVATION IN BRAZIL

Since the 1990s national policies to protect biodiversity, not only in Brazil, but in many Asian, African, and Latin

American countries, have focused on the creation of institutions and legal categories as a way of addressing the presence of people inside and around protected areas (ZIMMERER, 2006; DIEGUES, 1996). In Brazil, such a process has culminated in the creation of the National System of Conservation Units Sistema Nacional de Unidades de Conservação da Natureza (SNUC). The SNUC has provided a framework for the establishment of a “natural protected area network”, which may include the presence of “traditional population” such as *Quilombolas*, *caicaras*, *caboclos* as the conciliation between the development and preservation of the environment (BARRETO FILHO, 2005; MEDEIROS 12).

In Brazil, the number of protected conservation areas has drastically increased over the past few years, but most areas are still facing the dilemma of reconciling the presence of human populations, conservation of biodiversity, and maintenance of ecosystems services (DIEGUES, 2000; SILVA *et al.*, 2005; NAUGHTON-TREVES, 2005). Many *quilombola* communities are a good example of a group historically tied to rural areas, and consequently subjected to “conservationist pressures”, such having limited ability to decide on land use and technology.

*Quilombola* communities differ from other “traditional populations” in Brazil, such as Seringueiros, Jangadeiros, and Quebradoras-de-Côco, mainly because of 1988 Brazilian Constitution which guaranteed them the rights over their “traditional territory”. Although many of these groups have also achieved land rights within a framework of *quilombola* identity. Article 68: “aos remanescentes de *Quilombos* que estejam ocupando suas terras é reconhecida a propriedade definitiva, devendo o Estado emitir-lhes os títulos respectivos” (to slave descendant communities, *Quilombos*, it will be given right over their territory, by means of government titling of such lands). In 2003, a presidential decree asserted that self-declaration is a valid criteria to become *quilombola*. Consequently, the number of people claiming *quilombola* identity has dramatically increased. Recognition of land rights based

on ethnic-oriented criteria emphasizes elements that tie identity and territoriality together, and tend to reinforce the *quilombola* condition as that of a “peasant collectivity” (GUSMÃO, 1998; GOMES, 2003). As a consequence, marginalized rural groups “without name” have been brought into the forefront of policy negotiation arenas, including environmental policies. The immediate result has been the “re-appropriation” of values, practices, and the construction of a *quilombola* ethnic identity which has, in most cases, not previously existed. Yet, it has contributed to promote the valorization of their environmental stewardship as “traditional populations”.

The definition of “traditional” within the scope of environmental policies in Brazil, at least in legal terms, brought the possibility of an ideological association between populations inhabiting protected areas and the environmentalist movement. However, the term “traditional” in such a context carries contradictions and possibilities resembling the “ecologically noble savage” ideal (REDFORD, 1991). The multiple meanings embedded in the term “traditional” may be threatened when confronted with empirical evidence (CASTRO *et al.*, 2006). Under this category, *quilombolas* living within protected areas are taken for granted as “noble savages”, who are ecologically adapted to their local environment, and assumed to be cultural, economically, and demographically static over time. This has been the favorite idealization employed by certain sectors of the environmental movement as well as tourist enterprises, local and national governments, and international development agencies. However, it is necessary to identify why such ideologies have predominated over the still narrow political space of debate and concerns for rural populations (BRONDIZIO 2004/2006; 2008). In simple terms, one may raise the question of what would be the alternative discourses and practice for the environmental movement (ESCOBAR, 1998; MELUCCI, 1985; COHEN, 1985). The answers are not easy or simple, given that such a discourse seems to play on language politics in which all actors are eager to benefit. Accordingly, we should ask to what extent

the sustainability discourse emanated from economic agents such as ecotourism agencies or development conservation NGOs whether or not meet sustainable development criteria, or empower “traditional communities” economically. Would it be possible to reconcile environmental conservation goals, while guaranteeing *quilombolas*’ land rights, and economic needs and expectations? Or, is it that such possibility of conciliation continues to represent a conservation myth? In other words, is the process of cultural recognition of *quilombolas* trap of the “noble ecologically oriented savage” or a way to forge a new notion of a “noble economic actor”?

We argue that in certain circumstances, for instance, the idea of ecotourism as a sustainable economic activity is part of a new-conservationist myth embedded in the broader liberal economic discourse, or its “greenish” language branch. In this context, the successes of ecotourism in protected natural areas would rely on the presence of local performances of identity by “ecologically oriented people” as long as all of them are maintained in a “steady state” in terms of economic, cultural and demographic change. In other words, maintaining them under the label of traditional populations would mean keeping them under limited economic conditions and particular expectations of cultural performance. As we already mentioned, we see the relationship between people and parks in such circumstances a “commodification of poverty”: where cultural markers associated with these relationships may reinforce their condition of poverty. Therefore, while in the short run, through recognition of land rights, *quilombolas* might benefit from being transformed into traditional population, and most importantly form a positive sense of identity, in the long term, they risk limiting their economic freedom.

Ecotourism enterprises, for instance, are usually devoted to protecting areas which attract regional and global travelers searching for a sense of cultural diversity and global belonging while being tourists (BAUMAN, 1999). In this context, forests have become sources of pleasure for outsiders, working as sanctuaries to relieve modernity’ wounds. The nature

protection scheme has sought to either displace or “incorporate” people into wide range community-based projects (ADAMS *et al.*, 2004). In fact, very few have focused on alleviating poverty (BROCKINGTON *et al.*, 2006; FISHER, TREG, 2006; WILKIE *et al.*, 2006). After restrictions imposed by the creation of protected areas some local people become permanently faced with the challenge of not being allowed to manage forest resources, particularly in relation to agricultural activities (CASTRO *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, they are confronted with communal land rights, when in fact many communities have “traditionally” function as household and private land managers. This has been the case of some *Quilombola* communities. As a result, many people have been gradually abandoning agriculture and other environmentally “harmful” practices to engage in “sustainable” alternatives to local development. One may suspect that the immediate environmental outcome is forest fallow growing back in these areas. Here is where ecotourism and ethnotourism play a major role. Embedded in the idea that “forests are thankfully getting back” is a process of encouragement for people to strengthen market links through tourism. The basic idea is to foster local production and consumption as depending on the links communities are able to establish to external source of goods and services. In this way, environmental services revenues have been dislocated from the local to the regional and global levels, where the real beneficiaries are global tourists and local affluent entrepreneurs.

#### RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURAL POLICIES IN BRAZIL

Since 2003 the Brazilian Ministry of Culture has been running a large program — “Pontos de Cultura” (Hotspots of Culture) — intended to identify and financially support local cultural initiatives relevant to maintaining cultural diversity in the country (<http://www.cultura.gov.br/index.php>). It is in fact a joint venture between the ministry and Petrobras, the

stated owned Brazilian oil company which sponsor this program. Based on information collected during initial dissertation fieldwork along Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo coastline (May-July, 2006) one of the authors (R. P.) observed that, as of 2004, some communities had been granted approximately R\$6,000 to initiate an ethno-tourism project. For local leaders it represented having successfully entered into the market place.

This “agreement” allocated money for teaching young people about their past and traditions as African slave-descendents through a complex set of activities such as handcrafting and dance performances, similar to other communities in Northeast Brazil (FRENCH, 2002; 2006). While mostly directed toward education of young people, performances of Afro-Brazilian dances and games such as “*capoeira*” and “*jongo*” represents a source of both income and learning to mold an authentic *quilombola* identity. All of these performances are targeted to outsiders who come to visit such communities as part their tourist packages. It is worth mentioning what one would call a “shadow effect” produced by the proximity of these communities to Paraty an important historical and tourist site in Brazil. That is also Unesco world heritage site due to its cultural and environmental features. During the early 19s century, Paraty used to be the main seaport between the Atlantic Ocean and the countryside where gold was extracted and shipped to Europe. Nowadays, Paraty is a small city dependent primarily on seasonal tourism. For the many “traditional populations” living nearby, Paraty provides a potentially important economic service by attracting people from all over the world to the area. However, the tourist market has taken advantage of the presence of such communities as tourist sites where outsiders are given the opportunity to experience “authentic” traditional food, housing, handcraft, dances, etc. Similar interactions have been reported elsewhere in the literature (ASHLEY *et al.*, 2001), and some have ultimately produced undesired outcomes for the locals. Most ecotourism and cultural tourism programs are focused on promoting local development, but in reality few of them have

the “observed”, or “consumed” communities as direct beneficiaries.

#### THE MAKING OF THE BLACK RURAL POOR AS A TRADITIONAL POPULATION

Class and color have been historically key variables explaining social inequality in Brazil (GOLDSTEIN, 2003; GOMES, 2003; HENRIQUES, 2001; HOOKER, 2005). Color, in particular, is generally seen as good predictors of economic position. Yet, social policies under the auspices of liberal economic plans have emphasized cultural and ethnic categories as tools for social programs and public discourse. In Brazil, ethnic categories can be roughly divided into three groups: indigenous “traditional populations,” non-indigenous “traditional populations,” and immigrant groups (CASTRO *et al.*, 2006; LIMA, POZZOBON, 2001). One may argue, however, that the absence of a class dimension within the concept of “traditional populations” artificially separates “them” from [non-traditional] rural population and the urban poor alike. An important question is why have many *Quilombola* communities preferred to adopt an environmental-ethnic identity over an economic, or class, based designation and alliances? What are the long-term consequences of political isolation of small rural communities from a large and politically important contingent of rural and urban poor? In the short-run, however, it is important to recognize their success in mobilizing political action to guarantee land rights and cultural recognition never possible on the basis of their social position and marginal status alone.

The social implications of being black and poor in Brazil go beyond the scope of analysis of this essay (SILVA, HASENBALG, 1992; SHERIFF, 2001; DAMATTA, 1995). However, it is important to call attention to the underlying connection among blackness, poverty, and prejudice and the effort among rural communities to gain social status and respect in society by constructing a *Quilombola* identity. Most

*Quilombola* communities have lived in the lower end of the social scale even when compared to other marginalized sectors of society. Access to education, economic incentives, land resources, and job market opportunities, which exclude a large contingent of urban Brazilian on the basis of color, are even more severe among rural black communities (HOOKER, 2005). Regardless of how poverty is defined and measured (KAKWANI, 2006), economic elites have historically developed their own classification systems for identifying and segregating the poor from their social spaces. The “poor” include all whose burden is to face a social stigma marked by skin color, social and economic subjugation, spatial segregation, material culture, clothing, use of language, music, religion, habits, food choices, and mostly by the social spaces (social networks) they are permitted to travel and occupy. Brazil’s socioeconomic elite has generally developed a discourse of social prejudice against the poor whatever their ethnicity and skin color which is particularly visible in rural areas (BRONDIZIO, 2004/2006). To be poor is, to a large extent, to be backwards, lazy, unchanging, and sometimes repugnant. Poverty is a kind of social and cultural aberration and an inherited mind set of those who lived it, rather than an aspect of the ways in which the modern state and a market society function (GIOVENARDI, 2003; SINGER, 2001).

One exception of social movement for land rights based more directly on conditions of class and/or poverty is the MST (Brazilian Landless Movement) in which members want to gain secure land tenure by asserting among other things, that they are rural poor who have been historically subjected to socioeconomic exploitation from dominant elite of large landowners (*latifundiários*). Unlike indigenous peoples, *Quilombolas* and other kinds of “traditional populations”, in general MST grassroot groups tend not to use ethnic identity as a political and social tool in their struggle for land. Conversely, as we have argued in the case of *Quilombola*, for example, focus on ethnic identity in contemporary environmental discourses has facilitated the rise of local social movements and access to

resource rights but has glossed over the extent to which these cultural categories relate to class and poverty. We are not saying that there is an implicit “false consciousness” in all other non-class forms of identity and awareness, or vice-versa (ALLAHAR, 2005). The explicit use of ethnicity over class by many *quilombola* movement has opened strategic political spaces within both neoliberal multiculturalism and environmental sustainable discourses otherwise not possible. As a consequence, some marginalized and oppressed rural (black) communities have been given an unprecedented political and economic advantage, while for other rural populations it may have created additional barriers and exacerbated internal social inequalities.

The sheer number of rural *Quilombola* communities living in or around protected areas in Brazil and affected by these processes raises interesting questions about the short and long terms impact and benefits of these changes. The juxtaposition created between two different sets of institutions creates many economic and demographic challenges for these communities. On the one side, there are environmental protection laws and government apparatuses intended “to keep order” by ruling hundreds of protected areas aiming primarily at nature conservation. In Brazil, protected areas have become an alternative to address environmental problems such as deforestation while not confronting the pressures of expanding global commodity markets and national economic goals. On the other hand, there are rural (black) communities struggling not only to gain land titles, but to improve their economic conditions and access to resources. Can environmental protection and cultural-identity based policies create conditions for improving well-being among historically marginalized communities?

#### THE CHALLENGES OF DOING RESEARCH WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE POVERTY DEBATE

There is a wide and long literature on what it means to be poor, who defines it and what parameters should be taken into account (ATKINSON, 1987; SEN, 1976; HULME,

SPHERE, 2003). For the purpose of this essay, however, poverty is defined as general lack of choices and opportunities that reflect in low life expectancie, low education, lack of basic material goods, social exclusion, lack of freedom, and dignity (PNUD, 2005; DURAIAPPAH *et al.*, 2005). Yet, the concept of poverty continues to be a matter of contention and a highly politicized concept.

Mainstream poverty research, even after accepting recognition of the need for a multi-dimensional approach to poverty – i.e., going beyond income/consumption measures to take account of holdings of assets and hence a greater security, and consideration to self-respect – has generally failed to address the dynamic, structural and relational factors that give rise to poverty (Harris in press). Most frequently, poverty has been generally understood in terms of flows of consumption.

In thinking about research to understand social and economic changes prompted by the recognition of *Quilombola* communities, we draw on Sen's "capability approaches", which try to establish a clear distinction between means and ends in terms of assessing and improving human development (SEN, 1999). We contend that the means can only be understood by context-based ethnographic studies that address both individuals and groups. In this regard, one of the most fundamental and neglected human dimensions related to low-income populations is individual self-esteem. Even recognizing the advances and strengths of the fairly comprehensive asset-based approaches to poverty – which are based on assessing possession of assets and, whether they are land, markets, livestock, human or social capital—they also still lack fundamental assumptions about human development dimensions. The challenge is to incorporate such dimension of well-being when analyzing ethnicity, race, and class relations.

Comparative evaluations indicate that *a posteriori* considerations of the impact of protected areas on people can do little to alleviate poverty, marginalization and improve well-being. On the contrary, an understanding of local conditions, historical constraints and economic aspirations needs to be

completed before the establishment of park or reserve (WEST, 2006). Although one may think of such action as common sense, most parks are established without any assessment of households or communities conditions and aspirations prior to their creation. There are many opportunities for anthropologists to integrate multi-sited and multi-temporal research designs (MARCUS, 1998) in assessing past and present feedbacks between local communities, social and political movements, and protected areas.

The recognition of different kinds of poverty is fundamental step to the notion that only through context-based approaches one can assess poverty. Poverty is experienced differently by different groups of people and may not be labeled as such by many. In the Amazon, for instance, Lima (2005; 2006) recognizes that many riverine families who would fall within the so-called “poverty line” prefer to define themselves as “forgotten” or “abandoned” rather than “poor.” This argument is not to say that poverty measurements, whatever they might be, are biased, inaccurate or even artificially and politically established. On the contrary, poverty in its material dimension can and must be assessed. Instead, we contend that this has to be closely connected to how peoples represent and give meaning to it. People may refer to their condition of poor and its opposite “rich or powerful”, as a relational and in many cases situational category to indicate or claim political disregard. As such, the term poor can be used to indicate limited levels of consumption or restricted access health and education, but not necessarily hunger or indigence. What matters most is how an individual experiencing a substantial lack of goods and opportunities will be able to develop the capability to change his/her own life.

Even when people do not refer to themselves as being poor, it does not mean that they do not consider themselves as being oppressed, excluded, marginalized, or by any other definitions that subtly in discourse capture different forms of expressing poverty in its broadest sense. As previously suggested, many other non-verbal and subtle manifestations can be at play, requiring research approaches such as direct interaction

and observation of human behavior. In this regard, our own experiences working with caboclos in the Amazon, *Quilombolas*, caicas in the Atlantica Forest, and slum dwellers in big city centers such as Rio de Janeiro have suggested that while sharing similar needs their social-cultural differences can not be easily captured by standard poverty measurement.

Socioeconomic and ecological ethnographic oriented research may contribute to unveiling the complex issues underlying rural populations and their relationships with the local environment and market forces. These approaches are likely to foster relevant theoretical and methodological insights while possibly promoting collaboration with local communities.

As we have argued in this essay, communities who have adopted these economic strategies while “fitting in” the sustainability discourse may profit out of it, as long as they are able to maintain a hybrid identity (i.e. *Quilombolas* and traditional populations) and, include the ability to make political alliances based on class. The real threat seems to lie on them failing to develop “capabilities” for gaining power to negotiate and avoid the risks of falling into the trap of “commodification of poverty”. By this trap we mean not having the power to either control or decisively influence their economic and cultural strategies within these protected areas, and alliances with local, national, and global enterprises marketing their identity and “traditions.” By symbolically associating their livelihoods to nature, many rural populations have been engaging in a global network in which cultural identity is a commodity (BROWN, 2004; COMMAROF, 2007). It is worth questioning to what extent the commodification of local identities will be controlled by law and market forces rather than by people’s demands and agency. How long are they willing to seek political and economic incentives by performing “dances for tourists”? While performances of identity operate as a weapon against social exclusion and discrimination, for these populations, they are still faced with conforming to new political spaces endowed by environmental laws and changing economic pressures.

## Nota

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Abstract: *Multicultural policies focusing on land devolution represent an effort on the part of the state and sectors of the civil society aiming at empowering “traditional communities” (e.g., quilombolas) by recognizing rights based on territorial ancestry and ethnicity. Concurrently, environmental policies have limited the use of many of these areas through the creation of protected reserves. In this essay we discuss the contradictions created by the intersection of these policies and the implications of land devolution within protected areas based on constructed criteria of ethnicity. We discuss the limitations and implications of these strategies to achieve, concomitantly, environmental conservation and improvements in the well-being of marginalized rural populations.*

Key-words: *quilombolas, nature conservation, multicultural policies, poverty.*

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