



Quilombos: the land is life and freedom

Quilombos: a terra é vida e liberdade

Quilombos: la tierra es vida y libertad

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Abstract

Since Brazil's imperial era, the enslaved Black African population has sought ways to resist the horrors of slavery. Some of these groups were called quilombos, a word originating from the Bantu language that means camp or fortress. This essay addresses the main dilemmas currently faced by Brazilian quilombos, such as disputes over land, the fight against violence, and the violation of rights. Additionally, the study highlights the resistance processes developed by these communities to remain in their territories. The essay articulates the thoughts of Afro-Brazilian intellectuals as the main contributors to these discussions. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the Afrodiasporic epistemic perspective. It concludes that land and territory hold crucial significance for the existence of quilombola communities, making it urgent to implement public policies that recognize, respect, and guarantee the strengthening and preservation of these communities in Brazil.

Keywords: Quilombo; Racism; Contested Territories; Resistance.

Resumo

Desde a época imperial do Brasil, a população negra africana escravizada buscou formas de resistir aos horrores da escravidão. Alguns desses agrupamentos receberam a denominação de quilombos, palavra de origem bantu que significa "acampamento" ou "fortaleza". Neste ensaio, são abordados os principais dilemas enfrentados contemporaneamente pelos quilombos brasileiros, como a disputa pela terra, a luta contra a violência e a violação de direitos. O estudo também evidencia os processos de resistência criados por esses povos para se manterem em seus territórios. Este ensaio articula o pensamento de alguns intelectuais afro-brasileiros como principais protagonistas das discussões. O referencial teórico do estudo baseia-se na perspectiva epistêmica afrodiaspórica. Conclui-se que a terra e o território possuem um significado crucial para a existência das comunidades quilombolas. Assim, é urgente a implementação de políticas públicas que reconheçam, respeitem e garantam o fortalecimento e a preservação dessas comunidades no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Quilombo; Racismo; Territórios contestados; Resistência.

Resumen

Desde la era imperial de Brasil, los africanos negros esclavizados buscaron formas de resistir los horrores de la esclavitud. Algunos de estos grupos fueron denominados

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quilombos, una palabra de origen bantú que significa "campamento" o "fortaleza". Este ensayo aborda los principales dilemas que enfrentan actualmente los quilombos brasileños, como la disputa por la tierra, la lucha contra la violencia y la violación de derechos. Asimismo, el estudio destaca los procesos de resistencia desarrollados por estos pueblos para permanecer en sus territorios. Este ensayo articula el pensamiento de algunos intelectuales afrobrasileños como principales protagonistas de las discusiones. El marco teórico del estudio se fundamenta en la perspectiva epistémica afrodiaspórica. Se concluye que la tierra y el territorio tienen un significado crucial para la existencia de las comunidades quilombolas, por lo que resulta urgente implementar políticas públicas que reconozcan, respeten y garanticen el fortalecimiento y la preservación de estas comunidades en Brasil.

Palabras clave: Quilombo; Racismo; Territorios en disputa; Resistencia.

Introduction

According to Marcella Furtado, Regina Sucupira, and Cândida Alves (2014), quilombos were founded in Brazil during the 16th century by enslaved populations, predominantly Black individuals, who fled from slave quarters to escape slavery and achieve the much-desired freedom. Today, quilombos have evolved into spaces of struggle and resistance against oppression. Nascimento (2019) emphasized that “quilombo does not mean escaped slave. Quilombo means fraternal and free meeting, solidarity, coexistence, and existential communion. We repeat that the quilombola society represents a stage in human and socio-political progress in terms of economic egalitarianism” (Nascimento, 2019, p. 289-290).

Beatriz Nascimento (2016) reflected that the word *quilombo* is a Portuguese adaptation of *kilombo*, a term originating from Bantu-speaking peoples. One of the meanings of *kilombo* is associated with a place, camp, or sacred house where initiation rituals were performed. From the 16th century to the present day, Brazilian quilombos have been persecuted by the State, society, and institutions. Records in Brazilian literature referring to quilombos were predominantly written by individuals who supported slavery; consequently, the literature often portrays quilombos as marginalized spaces, inhabited by people seen as resistant to social norms (Gomes, 2015).

Beatriz Nascimento (2016) also noted that the first official Portuguese document mentioning quilombos was dated 1559. However, it was only in 1740 that the Overseas Council and the King of Portugal officially defined the term *quilombo* as: “all housing of escaped Blacks who exceed five, in part destitute, even if they do not have established ranches, nor are pestles found in them” (Nascimento, 2016, p. 120). This definition evolved significantly with the 2003 presidential decree 4.887, which, in its Article 2, updated the definition of quilombola communities:

For the purposes of this decree, the remnants of quilombo communities are considered to be ethnic-racial groups, according to self-attribution criteria, with their own historical trajectory, endowed with specific territorial relationships, with a presumption of Black ancestry related to resistance to the historical oppression suffered. (Brazil, 2003).

During the colonial period, these communities were referred to as *Mucambos* and *Retiros*, but the term that has endured to this day is *Quilombo* (Santos, 2015). The Brazilian state decreed the replacement of the term *quilombola* with "remaining quilombo communities," shifting the focus from individual rights to recognizing ethnic groups as collectives of rights (Matos & Eugênio, 2018). For some authors who adopt anthropological perspectives, the term *quilombo remnant* is considered more inclusive, as it encompasses not only communities formed by formerly enslaved individuals but also those established by free Black people who purchased or inherited their land. These communities share a common history of resistance and a collective struggle to secure their rights (Arruti, 2017).

It is important to note, however, that the term *remnants* is controversial. Although Brazilian law uses this designation, some scholars critique it from a socio-anthropological perspective, arguing that it risks presenting a static view of quilombola groups. Instead, they emphasize the need to account for the evolution and ongoing dynamics of these communities. This debate raises critical questions: Who are the remnants? What does it mean to be a quilombo today? (Munanga, 2001, Silva; Nascimento, 2012).

However, there are many stereotypes constructed or desired in the search to find in present-day communities or current social subjects the untouched traces of Africanness from the past. In other words, in general, society wants to find reliable traces of African tradition in present-day communities to legitimize their origin, as if customs, traditions, and ways of life were frozen in time without the need for (re)constructions throughout history (Silva; Nascimento, 2012, p. 26).

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2022), there are approximately 1,327,802 quilombolas across the country. However, only 3,563 communities possess a certificate of self-definition as a remaining quilombo community, and the quilombola population residing in titled territories represents merely 4.3% of the total quilombola population in Brazil (IBGE, 2022). As Givânia Silva and Bárbara Souza (2021, p. 87) note, "just over three hundred [communities] have their territories titled."

In this context, Vercilene Dias (2020) and Givânia Silva (2020) point out that the process of land titling is slow, with most quilombola communities unable to prove land ownership due to bureaucratic obstacles. On November 7, 2007, the federal government established the National Policy for the Sustainable Development of Traditional Peoples and Communities (PNPCT), emphasizing the recognition, strengthening, and guarantee of territorial, social,

environmental, economic, and cultural rights. This policy aims to prioritize the quality of life for both present and future generations (Brasil, 2007).

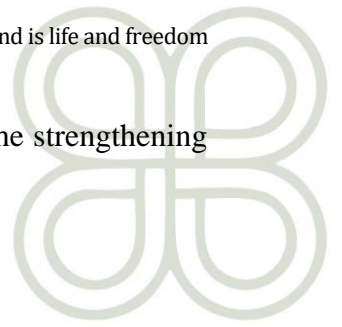
Additionally, the National Coordination for the Articulation of Black Rural Quilombola Communities (CONAQ) was created to play a crucial role in mobilizing communities, defending human rights, protecting territories, and representing these rural communities on national and international levels. More recently, in 2024, the National Policy on Equity, Education for Ethnic-Racial Relations, and Quilombola School Education was established through Ordinance No. 470/2024. This policy focuses on implementing educational actions and programs to address ethnic-racial inequalities, combat racism within academic settings, and advance educational opportunities for the quilombola population (Brasil, 2024).

Silva and Souza (2021) underscore the crucial importance of land and territory for quilombola communities, stating that these spaces are integral to “planting, production, experiences and expressions of cultural manifestations, celebrations, construction of sacred spaces, and connections with ancestral memories” (Silva & Souza, 2021, p. 86). Throughout Brazil, quilombos self-affirm their ethnic-racial identity by occupying and using territories and natural resources as a foundation for their cultural, social, religious, ancestral, and economic reproduction. This involves utilizing knowledge, innovations, and practices passed down through generations (Brasil, 2007).

Despite their resilience, quilombos in Brazil face numerous challenges. Pereira and Magalhães (2022) emphasize that each quilombo is unique, with distinct ways of life and specific approaches to managing quilombola identity. Nonetheless, as Nascimento (2016) highlights, Brazilian quilombos share common struggles: the fight for access to land, basic sanitation, education, and against invisibility, historical erasure, violence, and the violation of rights. Notably, for the first time in 150 years, the IBGE conducted a census of the quilombola population as an ethnic group in 2022 (IBGE, 2022).

This article aims to address the primary dilemmas currently faced by Brazilian quilombos, including disputes over land, the fight against violence, and the violation of rights. Additionally, the study highlights the resistance processes these communities have developed to maintain their territories. The essay draws upon the perspectives of Afro-Brazilian intellectuals as central contributors to these discussions, employing a theoretical framework rooted in the Afrodiasporic epistemic perspective.

In the first part of the essay, I discuss the struggles faced by Brazilian quilombos, such as disputes over land and violations of rights. Next, I explore the resistance strategies these communities have employed to remain connected to their territories. Finally, I emphasize the



urgency of implementing public policies that recognize, respect, and ensure the strengthening and preservation of quilombola communities in Brazil.

Years of struggles against invisibility and violation of rights

Amanda Pereira (2022) conducted participatory research with quilombola women from the rural *quilombo* known as Quilombo da Pinguela, located in the interior of Bahia. The participants reported that when accessing health and social assistance services, as well as interacting with the police, agricultural, and education departments, their quilombola identity was not recognized. Moreover, there is a historical and persistent silence surrounding the existence of the *quilombo* in the city. This lack of acknowledgment is compounded by the absence of support from municipal authorities, the state, and society at large—many city residents are unaware of the *quilombo's* existence.

The women of Pinguela attribute this invisibility to the community's lack of official land title, as the territory has not been demarcated by the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA). Additionally, the *quilombo* faces a land ownership dispute with Usina Unial Agrícola. The struggles faced by Quilombo da Pinguela are reflective of challenges experienced by many *quilombos* across Brazil, which must navigate the dual pressures of affirming their identity through their unique ways of life and conforming to state-defined identity policies. Generally, the state dictates how quilombola lifestyles should be, determines who qualifies as *quilombo remnants* (a term used by the state), and validates citizenship through the legal recognition of land titles (Fernandes et al., 2020).

As Fernandes et al. (2020) note, Brazilian *quilombos* have two options for obtaining recognition: they can negotiate and accept the identity definitions imposed by the state, or they can reject them, understanding that these definitions often stem from a white, exclusionary worldview. “The affirmation of their identity involves processes of both negotiation and confrontation with these sectors of power, sometimes seeking alliances, and at other times challenging them to legitimize their identity and guarantee their rights” (Fernandes et al., 2020, p. 4). Historically, and continuing today, *quilombos* in Brazil have been victims of racism, territorial expropriation, and violence (Pereira & Magalhães, 2023). Santos (2015), popularly known as Mestre Nêgo Bispo, provides examples of *quilombos* targeted by attacks since the Portuguese Overseas Empire, through the Republic, *Estado Novo*, and into the Democratic State of Law. He highlights parallels between the histories of Quilombo dos Caldeirões (CE), Canudos (BA), Pau de Colher (BA/PI), and Quilombo dos Palmares (AL). These *quilombos* were accused of being “communities of messianic fanatics, lacking social discipline, morality, and

proper customs, and therefore a threat to the moral, social, economic, and cultural integrity of the Republic” (Santos, 2015, p. 58).

Under orders from the state, these *quilombos* were invaded by police, republicans, and colonels, who destroyed their properties by fire to expropriate their territories and erase all symbols and meanings of their way of life (Santos, 2015, p. 59). It is important to note that attacks on quilombola communities persist to this day. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the state to ensure the full enjoyment of the rights guaranteed by the current Constitution. Despite the inclusion of *quilombos* in public policies and expanded access to rights, statistics indicate that the majority of Brazilian *quilombos* continue to face violations of their rights (Pereira et al., 2022; Pereira & Magalhães, 2022; Silva & Souza, 2021).

Land and territory: resistance movements

For traditional communities, the land carries a vital and sacred energy. It is regarded as a mother and is synonymous with freedom.

Land, understood here in a broad sense, encompasses not only the physical space necessary for the material reproduction of life but also the land where the symbolic resides—a place where memory finds its sanctuary, home to myths and legends, a source of beauty, inspiration, and sacred collective meaning, as essential to life as the land of labor (Silva & Nascimento, 2012, p. 34).

In rural *quilombos* throughout Brazil, the land and natural resources are integral to preserving nature as well as the cultural, social, religious, ancestral, and economic practices that are passed down through generations. It is important to note that, in general, the capitalist system does not maintain a relationship of respect and harmony with the land. Instead, it exploits advanced technologies, chemical pesticides, and herbicides to accelerate production, aiming solely to maximize profits (Miranda et al., 2021).

The capitalist logic of appropriating territory has fostered industrialization and urbanization, leading to significant land degradation and environmental pollution. Since the *Estado Novo* period, public policies have actively promoted rural exodus, disregarding the knowledge and sustainable practices of traditional peoples, which are seen as insufficient to support the demands of the capitalist system (Santos, 2015). According to Santos (2015), traditional communities maintain a biointeractive relationship with nature. Biointeraction stands in opposition to the capitalist exploitation model, as it is based on the principles of "extract, use, and re-edit" (Santos, 2015, p. 100). Traditional peoples rely on organic energy sources that can be reused or discarded naturally. These organic materials decompose rapidly or serve as sustenance for other species, thereby fostering a sustainable and regenerative cycle (Santos, 2015).

We emphasize the importance of biointeracting with all the elements of the universe in an integrated way, to the point of overcoming the expropriatory processes of colonizing developmentalism and the fallacious nature of the synthesis and recycling processes of (un)sustainable developmentalism, through the process of reissuing natural resources by logic of biointeraction (Santos, 2015, p. 100).

Roberta Araújo (2017), along with Amanda Pereira and Lilian Magalhães (2022), emphasize that caring for the land and preserving natural resources are key resistance strategies employed by *quilombola* communities to maintain their connection to African traditions and culture. It is important to recognize that the strategies developed by these communities to sustain their existence and resist external pressures are diverse and heterogeneous. As Nascimento (2016) highlights, each *quilombo* embodies unique ways of being, acting, feeling, and existing, which vary across the national territory. Through practices such as cuisine, cultural expressions, agriculture, dances, rituals, legends, storytelling, popular festivals, and the stewardship of their territories, the *quilombola* population has found enduring ways to preserve and celebrate their African heritage and cultural identity.

Resistance is achieved, therefore, with the maintenance, re-elaboration, and construction of culture, religion, and sociability that contained values that allowed Black men and women not to lose elements of identity with the continent of origin, assimilating other possible cultural aspects within the context of slavery. This resistance occurred in different spaces, including slave quarters, but quilombos were, without a doubt, an important territory for its elaborations. Without opposition and resistance to slavery, there would not be what we call Afro-Brazilian culture (Soares, 2020, p. 57-58).

Conclusion

This essay examined the primary dilemmas faced by *quilombola* peoples, including the dispute over land, the fight against violence, and the violation of rights. It also highlighted the resistance processes developed by these communities to remain connected to their territories. Although the rights of *quilombola* communities are guaranteed under the 1988 Constitution and reinforced by public policies and decrees addressing their specific needs, these rights are frequently violated due to systemic racism. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the State to ensure the full enjoyment of the rights enshrined in the Constitution.

Despite the challenges posed by racism, it is crucial to recognize the remarkable resilience and achievements of *quilombola* communities. Over generations, they have developed strategies to preserve and protect their Afro-Brazilian culture, transmitting ancestral knowledge and practices across time. For these communities, the land holds not only material value but also profound immaterial and symbolic significance. While studies on *quilombola* populations remain scarce in Brazil, there is an urgent need for further research on this subject. Additionally,

it is imperative to implement and strengthen public policies that acknowledge, respect, and ensure the preservation and empowerment of *quilombola* communities throughout the country.

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