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Socio-environmental justice: traditional communities renewing musical cultures in the Bocaina, Brazil

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Introduction: musical cultures as resistance and belonging

In Brazil's coastal areas, diverse traditional communities have gained livelihoods from cultivation and fishing activities for several centuries. But in recent decades their resource access has been jeopardized by several changes: faster road access, real estate development, predatory tourism, capital-intensive agriculture and Conservation Areas meant to protect the remaining 'nature'. All these threats have arisen from the dominant modernisation model of development, as promoted by governments and large companies.

As above, the concept 'traditional communities' highlights their communal use and sustainable management of natural resources, especially as a claim to belong on the land. The term 'traditional' often denotes an historical continuity, even an economic backwardness obstructing social progress. By contrast, the term 'traditional' has been newly signified to incorporate cross-group identities, stimulated by territorial conflicts and regular mobilisations to defend land rights (Almeida, 2004: 10). Such mobilisations have revived mutual-aid traditions of reciprocity, which have historically linked agri-food and musical cultures.

As in many traditional cultures, musical performance promotes everyone's participatory experience, social interactions and belonging. This role contrasts with music as presentation or art for an audience, where performers may represent something other than themselves (Turino, 2008). Eco-ethnomusicology offers insights about how music-as-participation relates to collective action framing issues as socio-environmental. Here are three brief examples.

Haiti: Facing long-term environmental degradation in Haiti, development initiatives have been a supposed remedy, but they often threaten the country's sovereignty and undermine local solutions. Voodoo songs criticise Western models for 'using up' nature as if it were separate from society; the lyrics express alternative concepts of nature, as a vision connecting the present to a better future (Dirksen, 2018: 122). Such conflict arises from a human-nature dualism in Western developmentalist interventions, which 'carry the weighty history of neocolonializing geopolitical endeavors' (Dirksen, 2021).

South Africa: Conversely, socio-economic inequalities worsen socio-ecological injustices, especially in the modernist framework of nature/culture binaries. Near South Africa's Mozambique border, Zulu communities have been dispossessed by a conservation policy imagining Nature Reserves as a pristine wilderness, made available only to the affluent few. For nearby residents, high electrical fences separate women's fields from their ancestors' lands, while also confusing people's memories of them (Impey, 2018: 8, 183; cf. Diegues, 1993). Given the drastic landscape changes over several

decades, and men's migration to seek work elsewhere, women's walking songs lament their loss but also express resistance and assert a group belonging (Impey, 2013).

Brazil: Given the long-time racism and economic precarity in northeastern Brazil, a long drought was turned into a socio-environmental issue, stimulating new links to traditional musical culture. This renewal illustrates a general pattern: By taking up environmental problems, people reshape musical cultures through politics and social-group differences (Silvers, 2018: 6).

In Brazil the neocolonial development model has been theorised by several writers in engagement with subaltern groups (e.g. Santos, 2001; Santos, 2007). For example: 'A homogenising colonialist attitude historically erased ethnic cultural diversities, diluting them in classifications which emphasised the subordination of the "natives", "wild" and "illiterate" lacking the erudite knowledge of the colonizer' (Almeida, 2004: 23). As a traditional means of resistance and alternatives, mutual aid activities have been known as *mutirão*. From its Tupi Guaraní origin, *motyrõ* means 'work in common' (Navarro, 2005). It 'facilitates contact among people and tightens social bonds; it facilitates information exchange, love and sometimes marriages' (Diegues, 2005: 296-297).

Nowadays *mutirão* means working cooperatively, whereby everyone offers help in rotation, structured without hierarchy. This tradition serves collective aims of participants in a convivial way: 'Mutirão is a form of popular, communitarian self-organization to concretize projects or to resolve public problems which people experience every day' (França Filho, 2011: 98). As non-commercial relationship in economic activities, *mutirão* has great importance for social cohesion and group belonging (Zaoual, 2010). Such reciprocity sustains everyday life, while also facilitating resistance against exploitative neocolonial forms of development. This article will show the above concepts have informed resistance strategies in one locality.

1 Territorial conflicts in the Bocaina: demanding *justiça socioambiental*

In Brazil's Bocaina coastal sub-region, since 2006 the Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais (FCT) has built unity among the three traditional communities. They are: indigenous guaraní, quilombolas (descendants of escaped slaves) and caiçaras (descendants of Portuguese immigrants integrating their customs with other coastal groups). The FCT has promoted inter-community solidarity through various cooperative initiatives to both use and protect natural resources, especially agroecological agroforestry. These practices help resist the dominant development model and its colonizing role, as seen by the FCT and its civil society support network (Gallo e Nascimento, 2019: 42).



Credit: Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais (FCT)

Through various alternatives, the three communities have been sharing their cultural traditions, defending their territories, building solidaristic alternatives and thus more effectively resisting neocolonial encroachments. Cooperative forms extend *mutirão* traditions of mutual-aid, as a basis to renew collective identities, resource conservation and artisanal skills. Their musical cultures have been shared at numerous venues such as their own events, public festivals, education programmes

and political protests (FCT, 2014, 2016). Their musical cultures express and extend *mutirão* in activities such as harvests, festivals and house- building (cf. Diegues, 2005; França Filho, 2011).

Around the turn of the century, as urbanisation increasingly degraded nature, this threat stimulated a public policy to create Conservation Areas (*Unidades de Conservação*). Some Areas overlapped with the residential or cultivation areas of traditional communities. Government policy initially excluded such groups, based on the prevalent ‘myth of untouched Nature’ (Diegues, 1993). Under this policy, land encroachments obscured and marginalised traditional conservation practices, thus jeopardising their ways of life (Ferreira & Carneiro, 2005).

The communities jointly counterposed ‘socioenvironmental justice’ (*justiça socioambiental*), denoting their sustainable use and conservation of natural resources. In this perspective, an ethno-social diversity sustains agri-biodiversity (cf. Leff, 2001). This linkage contests the nature/culture binary, as well as the degradation/conservation binary, of the neocolonial modernisation model.

The FCT demanded a community role in territorial management, especially in conservation areas overlapping with their lands. These demands led to a shared management with many bodies (Simões & Ferreira, 2008; Sansolo, 2017). They were now jointly managing projects elaborating strategies of a social movement (Gallo e do Nascimento, 2019: 107). This arrangement facilitated greater agri-productivity in some overlapping areas, alongside a better relationship with the native forest and natural resources (Lima, 2009: 39).

As a next step, Sistemas Agroflorestais (SAFs, agroforestry systems) were developed in official conservation areas inside the Mata Atlântica (Atlantic forest). In the same area each SAF combined diverse species, both edible and non-edible, maintaining soil fertility without chemical fertilizer. SAFs articulated traditional life-modes with nature conservation for several aims: healthy food, forest recovery and water conservation (Gallo e do Nascimento, 2019: 222). SAFs were implemented by the three communities.

In 2014 the FCT launched a campaign, ‘To Conserve is to Resist: in defence of traditional territories’ (‘Preservar é Resistir: em defesa dos territórios tradicionais’). A campaign motto focused on natural resources: To know how to use is the art of traditional communities (‘Saber usar é a arte das comunidades tradicionais’). For many years each community has been demanding a culturally Differentiated Education in the state schools; this was eventually won in some towns.

Alternative development trajectories brought many benefits, initially a Community Nursery for forest plants and distinctive foods. These were showcased by a new Community-Based Tourism, an alternative resisting the dominant predatory model. Such local initiatives formed the regional Rede Nhandereko, a Guaraní concept for sharing ‘our way of being’ with visitors. The network also shared experiences among nearby traditional communities in order strengthen internal democracy, income generation and resistance against various threats (Rede Nhandereko, 2017; OTSS, 2020).

As a general pattern, traditional communities gained some victories during the 2003-16 governments led by the Partido de Trabalhadores (PT, Workers’ Party). However, subsequent Right-wing governments weakened those gains. Government attacks intensified previous conflicts – hence more difficulties, but also more opportunities for joint resistance. This has renewed *mutirão* as a link between agri-food and musical cultures. Let us look at such linkages around each community in turn: the guaraní’s *mboraí*, quilombolas’ jongo-cantico and caiçaras’ fandango.

3 Guaraní: mboráí

Brazil’s Mbyà language group of indigenous Guaraní has maintained their *mboraí*, cultural forms combining music and dance. Youths were traditionally called *xondaro’í* and *xondaria’í*, i.e. male and female warriors, formerly denoting military weapons. Nowadays their struggle needs different

weapons such as paper, pens, legal arguments, etc. (Stein, 2009: 138). Likewise music-dance cultures and short films featuring them.

Their *mboraí* feature the Xondará dance, where youths imagine seeking and reaching *Yvy Marãẽy*: a Land without Evils. They learn to be warriors: the steps simulate movements of three different birds, whereby dancers acquire strength, lightness and agility. More generally, their dances incorporate immaterial qualities of some birds (Stein, 2015: 212, 227). As participatory performance, the *mboraí* express memory, advice, teaching, concentration and reciprocity – *mborayú*, a related word (ibid: 215). Here various objects – adornments, pictures, musical instruments, song lyrics -- define a belonging to their ethnic group and territory (ibid: 227).

In the Bocaina region, Mbyà-Guaraní musical traditions have been promoted by the [Coral Guarani Tenonderã](#) in the town Angra dos Reis. With the motto, ‘the Guaraní path to follow’, they sing: ‘Come all you warriors (*os guerreiros e as guerreiras*) to dance, sing and celebrate our house of prayer. Our ancestors gave us the Guaraní way of life. Live to be Guaraní’ (Scapino, 2020). Their *mboraí* have been deployed for political protest, as explained next.



Credit: Coral Guarani Tenonderã

Since 2016 Right-wing Federal governments have undermined earlier progressive gains and the state agencies responsible for them. Under Federal law, indigenous people’s lands were protected and were meant to be formally demarcated. Yet relevant agencies delayed decisions about legal title, thus weakening Federal protection from profit-driven incursions. Guaraní *mboraí* have been deployed in numerous protests such as these three:

Territorial demarcation: Since 1967 FUNAI (Fundação Nacional do Índio) had the main responsibility to protect the interests of indigenous people. In January 2019 President Bolsonaro decided to transfer the agency from the Justice Ministry to the Agriculture Ministry, which favours agribusiness. This shift threatened indigenous people’s environment as well as their prospects to gain land titles. Guaraní protests featured the Xondará, where dancers run in a circle and continuously jump over a stick. In Ubatuba this dance-as-protest blocked the main street and square (Ubatuba Sim, 2019).

Health service: Early on, the PT-led government had established a special health system for indigenous peoples, called Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS). This mandated a local, holistic provision – encompassing nutrition, housing, land demarcation, environment, etc. – guaranteeing the right of indigenous participation in decision-making (FNS, 2007: 87). The main responsibility lay with the Secretária Especial da Saúde Indígena (SESAI). In 2019 the Bolsonaro government sought to abolish SESAI, transferring all responsibility to each municipality. Guaraní Choral members explained their opposition:

Many people say that we don’t belong to the municipality; often we face discrimination from simply wanting a service from the municipality. We want our differentiated service, as our elders taught us, with our religion, beliefs and medicines which our villages know how to make (CGT,

2019).

To defend the Federal service, Guaraní nationwide held many protests. In the Bocaina they blocked the highway BR101 near Ubatuba. Demonstrators held placards with the slogan: 'Priority to indigenous health', and 'SESAI is ours'. Guaraní youth continuously danced the Xondará to maintain the blockade, despite the Federal Highway Police (Mirim, 2019a).



Guaraní women block BR101 holding placards: 'Priority to indigenous health. SESAI is ours.'

In another attack, the Bolsonaro government attempted to weaken social services and pension payments. This provoked protests throughout the country. In Paraty the Guaraní held a protest with FCT t-shirts and speeches from other community representatives. The Coral Guaraní Tenonderã sang: 'We have power when we are all together. We sing this music to be happy' (translation from their language). Placards said: 'The indigenous people are here in Paraty from five villages. Demarcation now for indigenous land! Guaraní people want indigenous health.... Take your dirty hands off my retirement' (Mirim, 2019b). In all those ways, they have renewed musical cultures to assert a communal belonging which could defend their distinctive services and territory.

4 Quilombolas: jongo-cantico

During the Portuguese Empire many slaves escaped captivity, fleeing far from the colonizers in remote forest areas. They established their own communities in refuges called quilombos. Hence their descendants have been called quilombolas. Their communities nationwide continuously face threats of dispossession; they maintain a proud collective memory, helping to confront their present-day oppression.

Their jongo dance originated from slavery as 'songs of protest, repression and resistance'. The cântico was often in a code obscure to the slaveowners (Stein, 1990: 246). It is simultaneously a song, divinatory practice, confraternity, etc. (Alcantara, 2008: vii; Justino, 2013: 2). Some lyrics highlight struggles to defend quilombo territories and to withstand the wounds which the community has suffered (Pinheiro, 2015: 73).

Jongo-cântico expresses *mutirão* in several contexts including harvests and house building. Quilombolas can take shelter 'in singing, dialoguing and discussing the reconquest of territory and freedom. Such themes are illustrated by this *ponto*: 'At the edge of the sea I saw a warrior who swore on the flag. He sounded the bugle, like his entire army. He struggled for me'(Alcantara, 2008: 44).

In the Bocaina, a community organizer has emphasised that urbanization threatens the quilombos' culture and territory. Their joint protection needs youth discipline and supportive public policies:

How can we protect our lands? Through jongo the youth maintain their quilombo identity, distant from the wounds that society has inflicted on them. Jongo and capoeira help to discipline the

youths... Now their school teaches a differentiated education so that the youth can better absorb this culture, so that people take up the struggle for identity and territory.

As some youths say, jongo helps to strengthen a quilombo conscience, to rescue memories of past struggles and combat racial preconceptions (Mapa de Cultura RJ, 2014;also Lide Uff, 2014).

In the Bocaina region, the quilombo community in Campinho da Independência had been struggling for decades to gain a land title. In 1999 it finally succeeded, becoming the first in the state of Rio de Janeiro. This struggle was led by the Associação de Moradores do Quilombo do Campinho (AMOQC). After its victory, AMOQC more readily gained resources for a community-led development, starting from a shared management of Conservation Areas.

This cooperative model was extended to Community-Based Tourism, aiming to counter the mass tourism which had stimulated environmental damage and real-estate sales. Ethno-Ecological Itineraries (Roteiros Etno-Ecológicos) provide visits to local leaderships, family-based organization, reforestation especially of the Juçara tree, artisanal production, a communitarian restaurant and jongo. Visitors get to know agri-food heritages, stories, environmental conservation, territorial guides, etc. (QdC, 2014).



Credit: Quilombo do Campinho's logo and storytelling session

TBC has featured the restaurant [Quilombo do Campinho](#) since 2014. The restaurant is 'a self-managed community enterprise guided by solidarity economy principles as a work philosophy'. Quilombo families organised jongo workshops, as well as samba and capoeira (CdQ, 2014). The restaurant became a new host for the annual Encontro da Cultura Negra (Black Culture Meeting), which had begun in 1999. The programme combines jongo-cântico (songs), stories and agri-food heritages, highlighting their inter-linkages (FLIP Preta, 2019).

These living cultures strengthen a common sense of quilombolas belonging on the land to create their own future. Renewing mutirão traditions, a solidarity economy based on agroecological agroforestry develops interdependencies among several activities and helps others to replicate them.

5 Caiçaras: fandango

For several centuries, many early Portuguese immigrants lived on the coast, far from metropolitan centres. These caiçaras integrated their customs, values and capacities with other coastal groups, especially for fishing. Since the 1970s, the Bocaina's caiçaras have been marginalized by development-as-modernisation, especially luxury tourist resorts, condominiums and real-estate speculation (Caá-içara, 2020). They suffered land grabs, expulsions and thus struggles to stay on their former lands. Moreover, potential income from tourism provoked competition among caiçaras, thus undermining their communal relations (de Abreu, 2020: 332-35).

Mutirão had been central to caiçara practices for centuries, especially through their fandango music and dance. This has been featured at events such as harvests, religious festivals, baptisms, weddings,

etc. (Diegues, 2005). Through mutirão, people regularly met each other for chats, joint meals, music-making, instrument-making, etc. (Sabourin, 2009). But modernization marginalised traditional agricultural activities and likewise mutirão. As agri-food production lost its traditional forms and rural spaces to a commercial logic, caiçaras increasingly felt an estrangement (Costa, 2012: 149, 152).

Hence a fandango song sarcastically depicts a famous town as predatory tourism: 'A shark lives on Sad Wolf Street in blessed Cananéia. It is a paradise, as the tourists discover...' (Costa, 2012: 152; Magdalena, 2008: 4). Its lyrics express a lament for the community's loss and hope for its future recovery.

Given the new economic pressures, some caiçaras illegally extracted resources from forests. They were cutting down the juçara tree, crucial for forest biodiversity, in order to sell the palm hearts (palmito). Their bad conscience was made worse by their own exploitation, as expressed in a fandango song: 'Whoever takes the palm heart gains nothing. Whoever buys it has money... This trade is worse than being a prisoner. It would be better to stop it' (Costa, 2012: 149).

Towards a collective solution, in 2012 the FCT helped to initiate Projeto Juçara, named after this endangered palm tree. The fruit is rich in healthful anti-toxins and anti-carcinogens, offering a large potential for products and thus an incentive for conserving the tree. Projeto Juçara has sought to become financially self-sustaining in several ways: selling the fruit pulp in shops and export markets; generating income for owners of protected forests; and likewise for businesses that process the pulp into diverse food products.

As a versatile ingredient, juçara fruit eventually contributed to a new popular drink, a diverse gastronomy, Community-Based Tourism and regular festivals celebrating these cooperative developments. The festivals have been jointly organised by caiçara and quilombo communities, featuring both their musical traditions (Ubatuba Prefeitura, 2019). Thus the juçara's recovery has helped to build an inter-community territorial identity.

Agroforestry development in turn has inspired a revival of mutirão in several forms. An agenda for differentiated education included agroecology and several art forms including music (de Carvalho, 2010). The project [Sementes Caiçaras](#) organises workshops teaching youth how to construct the typical instrument, the rabeca. In Ubatuba the Grupo Fandango Caiçara has been organising similar workshops in schools (Burihan, 2019). They valorise the caicara culture for the future generation to gain knowledge of its roots.



Credit: [Sementes Caiçaras](#) fandango workshop and publicity

As a local folklorist-musician explains:

The fandango event is a form of *mutirão*, which is a form of resistance. Everyone helps the others: one person makes food, another helps to serve it, another brings a dishwasher, another puts up banners, etc. The event ends up happening in this way... In the historical context of this people, doing the fandango reminds you of the solidaristic labour of a collectivity where everyone participated, played and benefited. Most important is bringing people closer through *mutirão* (Gato, 2020).

By renewing *mutirão*, *caiçaras* can better resist market competition, create a communal sense of belonging and strengthen claims to the land against neocolonial development.

6 Conclusion: decolonial resistance-conservation

The Bocaina sub-region exemplifies many coastal areas where traditional communities face threats from development-as-modernisation. This has colonised their everyday lives, e.g. by treating them as threats to nature, degrading their natural-resource base, expanding real-estate interests and shifting land use towards the profit-driven economy. Those colonial roles have been theorised by several Brazilian writers in engagement with subaltern groups. Informed by such concepts, the Bocaina's resistance activities have broadened what had been separate traditional identities.

Under the motto of socioenvironmental justice, the Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais (FCT) has brought together the Bocaina's three traditional communities, namely: indigenous Guaraní, quilombolas and *caiçaras*. They opposed the dominant myth of 'untouched nature'; they eventually gained a formal role in sharing the management of Conservation Areas, as a basis for both using and conserving natural resources there. They developed agroecological agroforestry systems and extended them to commercialise food products, both traditional and new. Based on workers' cooperatives, they further developed Community-Based Tourism and a *juçara*-based popular culture, both conserving and harvesting the tree. In those ways, FCT initiatives have linked agrobiodiversity with socio-cultural diversity, contrary to the neocolonial nature/society binary.

They have at once renewed their agri-food and musical cultures, which express *mutirão*, a communal tradition of mutual aid. Strongly grounded in dance, the songs have metaphorical, ironic or allusive lyrics, expressing pleasurable, playful and solidaristic relationships. Recent territorial conflicts have given new meanings to old songs and have stimulated new ones, e.g. about racism, predatory tourism and resource plunder. Music training helps youths to build individual discipline for acting responsibly towards the wider community. Agri-food and musical cultures have been integrated within a culturally Differentiated Education of each community.

Through all those activities, inter-community bonds help to create an alternative solidaristic development. Their cultures together strengthen a decolonial resistance-conservation, a communal sense of territorial belonging and thus long-time claims on the land.

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Abstract for SOAS seminar

The Bocaina sub-region exemplifies many coastal areas where traditional communities face threats from development-as-modernisation. This has colonised their everyday lives, e.g. by treating them as threats to nature, degrading their natural-resource base, expanding real-estate interests and shifting land use towards the profit-driven economy. Under the motto of socioenvironmental justice, the Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais (FCT) has brought together the Bocaina's three traditional communities, namely: indigenous Guaraní, quilombolas and caiçaras. Under the motto of socioenvironmental justice, the Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais (FCT) has brought together the Bocaina's three traditional communities, namely: indigenous Guaraní, quilombolas and caiçaras. Strongly grounded in dance, the songs have metaphorical, ironic or allusive lyrics, expressing pleasurable, playful and solidaristic relationships. Recent territorial conflicts have given new meanings to old songs and have stimulated new ones, e.g. about racism, predatory tourism and resource plunder. Through all those activities, inter-community bonds help to create an alternative solidaristic development. Their cultures together strengthen a decolonial resistance-conservation, a communal sense of territorial belonging and thus long-time claims on the land.