

# DEVELOPMENT AS A DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

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- *The case of the Quilombola communities  
in the Iguape Basin and Valley – Bahia* •

## ABSTRACT

*The aim of the article is to describe the process of social and political organisation of the quilombola communities of the Iguape Basin and Valley in the municipality of Cachoeira, in Bahia, and to present its development dynamics. To this end, the article looks into the formation and implementation of production centres based on the experience of the Council in these communities. It examines the concept of quilombola communities, with emphasis on the territorial dimension as a place of belonging and for passing on knowledge and ancestral practices, which are important in maintaining the cultural identity of the quilombola in Bahia. The argument is that these communities are not properly acknowledged and this undermines their identity, territorial belonging and therefore their chance of having rights.*

## KEYWORDS

*Quilombola Community* | Organisation | Cultural Identity | Development

The cultural and socioeconomic formation of Brazil stems from diverse ethnic roots, the influence of which has been the determining factor in the process of land distribution in the country. However, the contributions that nowadays form a natural part of our daily lives and its uniqueness, above all the experiences of development founded on the workforce and knowledge of black and indigenous ethnicities in the formation of the national culture, are not recorded in scientific studies and research with the wealth of detail and protagonism they deserve.

There are many traditional communities within the Brazilian territory, of particular importance are those that stem from black legacies and are organisationally shaped by quilombolas. According to the Palmares Cultural Foundation (2018) – the Ministry of Culture organisation responsible for issuing the self-definition certification as requested by the communities – the “*quilombolas* are descendants of enslaved Africans who have kept their cultural traditions of subsistence and religion over the centuries.”<sup>1</sup> In Brazil there are 2,685 traditional communities registered as being acknowledged as descendants of the *quilombos*.<sup>2</sup> Of this total, Bahia is the state with the highest number of certificates from the Palmares Cultural Foundation. There are 658 in total, 35 of which are located in the Recôncavo Territory, in Bahia.

Given the importance of the state of Bahia in this context, in this article we focus on the case of the *quilombola* communities in the Iguape Basin and Valley, within the municipality of Cachoeira, located in the Bahian Recôncavo. These communities have sparked attention for their achievements via the *Quilombola* Council of the Iguape Basin and Valley, considered important by those who live there as they result from their struggle, protagonism, collective organisation and political representation. The process of social and political organisation in the *quilombola* communities is a tool for winning their social rights. Fundamental rights in exercising citizenship, such as education, health, housing, leisure, food (and other rights that have been historically denied, such as access to land), are fundamental in ensuring development and autonomy and promoting well-being, and must be secured for everybody, without prejudice of origin, race, sex, colour or any other form of discrimination.

The *quilombola* fight is focused on a vision of sustainable development and solidarity, guided by the construction of citizenship and social organisation, democratisation of local power and by the development of the potential and the capacity to retain and reinvest the wealth produced with local resources, in a way that respects human and environmental values. This fight defines a historical moment when the practices of the people who descended from the *quilombo* are changing and when they are being integrated socioeconomically and culturally into Brazilian society. This represents the search to affirm an identity of distinct elements, of an image made up of particular characteristics that establish their place within the context of the development model that has been adopted with a trend towards asserting local traditions, as a response to exclusion or as a move towards non-subordinate integration.

The basis for the construction of this article is recognition and respect for the centuries-old, traditional practices and knowledge of the *quilombola* communities of the Iguape Basin and Valley. In this sense, we understand the importance of fostering the communities' struggle to guarantee their rights, to preserve their identity, the cultural memory related to uses, customs and tradition of Brazilian cultural diversity and ancestral and cultural wisdom maintained and developed within the communities. In this way, we will take a step towards defending and strengthening the cultural identity, autonomy, social and political organisation and development of the communities.

## 1 • Fundamental issues surrounding recognition of *quilombos* in Brazil

Due to the political mobilisation of black movements, among them the *quilombolas*, the 1988 Federal Constitution represented an advance in the recognition of black populations in the country through the establishment of article 68, Transitional Constitutional Provisions, that “survivors of the *quilombo* communities who are occupying their land should have this land recognised as permanent property, and that the state must issue the documents to this effect.”

In addition, it is important to mention decree number 4.887/2003, which regulates the procedure for identification, recognition, delimitation and documentation of occupied land for the survivors of *quilombo* communities. According to article 2 of the decree, those who are “racial-ethnic groups according to self-attributed criteria, with their own historical background, with specific territorial relations, assumed to be of black ancestry related to resistance to historically suffered oppression” are to be considered survivors of *quilombola* communities.<sup>3</sup> In an analysis of the concept of *quilombo*, based on a broad vision of the origins and history of these groups,<sup>3</sup> it is ascertained that survivors of the *quilombo* are “associated with ‘black land’ or ‘black territory’, emphasising the condition of rural communities, defined by the fact that they share the same territory and identity.”<sup>4</sup>

In an analysis of the existence of the *quilombola* issue in the aforementioned Constitution, Almeida<sup>5</sup> shows that the *quilombolas* have a particular way of using natural resources, according to the idea of common use, combining aspects of private and collective use, the consequence of which has been a number of difficulties in interpretation for the purposes of classification within the Brazilian administrative apparatus.

In the same vein, Almeida also criticises the term ‘survivor [from a quilombo]’, which could carry the semantic weight of ‘leftover’.<sup>6</sup> In an anthropological sense ‘*quilombo* is not what was, it is autonomy constructed over time.’ In this sense, this denomination seeks to define these social groups by what they no longer are, maintaining only some memories and vestiges.

We must abandon stereotyped, preconceived and simplified conceptions about the *quilombos*, once seen as homogenous, immutable communities, unconnected with the

present and trapped in the past, associated with simplified ideas of territorial isolation and with the archaeological remains of an identity and culture that no longer exist. It should be understood then that the *quilombos* make up a social group that is ingrained in a territory, in its history and its descendants, which are the root of a feeling of belonging and interdependence.<sup>7</sup> Only from this viewpoint will it be possible to have a vision of their social reality, based on the understanding of the role of the law and a pluriethnic state.

With regards to remains and the leftovers from a past that is always resuscitated, this form of identification is used in the present day by the survivors with the intention of strengthening collective action in defence of the land they occupy and to guarantee continuity in their characteristic lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> The right of the *quilombola* survivors is linked to the idea of territory and is based on a relationship with the place of belonging, continuity, the practice of social and political organisation, within a dynamic of development. These experiences are related to cultural identity.

Consequently, recognition of the right of *quilombolas* to their land is directly linked to their very existence as social beings and right-holders. Therefore, specific cultural preservation and social organisation are necessary for their physical, social, economic and cultural continuity, not just in terms of land for housing, but also land for productive cultivation, agroforestry systems, and other traditional practices. So, the objective of documenting property is principally to implement human and fundamental rights and citizenship for these communities.

The *quilombolas*, or survivor communities of the quilombos, are brave social groups, who carry our cultural and historic heritage. It is worth highlighting that the etymological origin of the word '*quilombo*' is Banta (having been changed over time), this could be characterised as a warrior encampment in the forest.<sup>9</sup> It is noted that the *quilombolas* no longer fight against slavery. In recent years they have been strengthening ways of fighting for conquest of their territories and public policies that contribute to the transformation and improvement of their lives, as well as active participation in society.

The example given here with regards to the *quilombola* communities in the Iguape Basin and Valley shows how these groups have over time developed cultural practices and lifestyles that contribute to the consolidation of ties of belonging to their territories. It can be said then that the *quilombo* has taken on an emblematic role in the black struggle, namely in its claims to citizenship throughout history, and the current moment constitutes another of these periods of struggle for rights, based on the *quilombola* identity.

## 2 • The case of the *quilombola* communities in the Iguape Basin and Valley

The scenario of this research was the backdrop of the Iguape Basin and Valley in the Bahian Recôncavo, where there are 16 *quilombola* communities: Engenho da Praia, Engenho

da Ponte, Dendê, Kaonge, Calembá, Calolé, Imbiara, Engenho da Vitória, Tabuleiro da Vitória, São Tiago, Caibongo, Engenho Novo, Engenho da Cruz, Brejo, São Francisco do Paraguaçu and Santiago do Iguape in the Cachoeira municipality.

Between the XVI century and the XX century the region of the *Quilombola* Territory in the Iguape Basin and Valley, in the Bahian Recôncavo, stood out in the Brazilian colonisation process as a centre for formation and exportation of capital, based on the agroslave economy and regime. Activities included production and processing of sugar cane, tobacco exploration, trading of black slaves brought from Africa, as well as being a large agro-industrial complex equipped with mills.

The *quilombola* communities in the Iguape Basin and Valley are located in the region of the Baía Extractivist Reserve – Iguape Marine. These communities are organised in associations, recognised by the *Quilombola* Council of the Iguape Basin and Valley. Like most rural communities their main sources of income are fishing, gathering shellfish and agriculture.

However, although the land of half the *quilombola* communities in the region is delimited by the National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) and is recognised by the Palmares Cultural Foundation – both linked to federal government – the communities still require final documentation, which depends on negotiations between farmers, communities and INCRA. We note the urgent need to take action towards instituting this process.

It is noted that the collective organisation of the *quilombola* communities was a central issue for the constitutional guarantee of recognising their rights. However, the difficulties in fulfilling this are blatantly obvious. Sluggishness and bureaucracy in the state apparatus, along with the reaction of political and legal sectors and racial and social prejudice, are the main obstacles to achieving their fundamental rights. It should be stressed that although oppressed by landownership and economic issues, these communities are resistant to the various forms of domination and maintain a strong connection with their history and journey, having preserved the customs and culture of their ancestors for centuries.

## 2.1. Political organisation

The *Quilombola* Council, founded on 8 July 2005, is a civil society organisation. It is legally registered and is non-profit making. The organisation makes no distinction between colour, race, sex, ideology or political party. Its headquarters are located within the community. It is regulated by statute and by the pertinent legal norms.

Its structure is collegiate with the participation of 16 *quilombola* communities located in the Iguape Basin and Valley region in Recôncavo, Bahia, around the Marine Extractivist Reserve of the Baía do Iguape. It is represented by four people elected by the community, two title holders and two substitutes.

The choice of council members takes into account criteria of gender and generation and the group is, therefore, made up of young people, elderly people and men and women. There are 56 council members who directly and indirectly represent over 3,500 families. The meetings are rotational and are held on a monthly basis in different communities. There is a rotation system of male and female council members to coordinate general and extraordinary assemblies.

The *Quilombola* Council of the Iguape Basin and Valley aims to defend the rights of communities, to ensure the continuity and integrity of its territories and a dignified, healthy lifestyle in harmony with the environment. In carrying out its aims the *Quilombola* Council articulates, mobilises, organises, supports and executes actions and projects based on the principles of justice and ethno-racial equality, autonomy, collectivity, participation and respect for diversity.

Through the creation of the *Quilombola* Council of the Iguape Basin and Valley and community association, the communities have fulfilled important achievements, considered to be structural gains.

Initially the communities were not in agreement on the possibility of dialogue with public power. They were afraid of losing their way of life and feared prejudice concerning their relationship with the natural environment. However, the communities came to the conclusion that collective organisation broadened their capacity to bring about complex dialogue with public power, the primary reason for the constitution of the decision-making community council. In 2007, the Council approved the application of a Quick Participative Diagnosis (DRP), with a group of young people and *quilombola* leaders. There were visits to 350 homes, 16 community meetings, interviews with 498 people involved in *quilombola* family agriculture, extractivism and bee-keeping. From this group the first local and deep outline of the *quilombola* profile emerged, indicating the reality and the gaps faced by all the communities.

It was seen that most of the heads of *quilombola* households fell within a monthly income bracket of less than the minimum salary. The activities of gathering shellfish and the harvest from an abandoned dendê plantation, used for cooking oil, added some value to the low family incomes.

The estuary environment of the Iguape Basin has been compromised with the interference of the building of the Pedra do Cavalo dam, despite the extensive mangrove swamp and the irregular behaviour of the Pedra do Cavalo hydroelectric plant (administered by Votorantim Energia), significant amounts of freshwater were released which led to a reduction in the quantity of fish and shellfish. This situation became more serious with the construction of the Enseada do Paraguaçu shipyard, which affected fishing activity, lowering the potential of the catch, which negatively impacted on family incomes in the communities.

The Council has been dedicating itself to improving the debate around the distribution of products and honing viability studies into production potential and the implementation

of the distribution plan, integrated with trends and strategies designed within a solidarity economy, conquering local, national and international markets. It is worth mentioning that the women *quilombolas* have become empowered by taking on the role of negotiators and winning over new markets, a dynamic that has led to integration across the communities.

The *Quilombo* Charter,<sup>10</sup> arose from the community experiences. This document was put together following a community seminar at the *Quilombola* Meeting in 2015. The Charter currently represents a benchmark for sustainable development in the Iguape Basin, with the participation of all the communities. The Development Group of the *Quilombola* Communities of the Recôncavo Territory (NUD-QTR), stemmed from it. This goes beyond the reach of the *Quilombola* Council of the Iguape Basin and Valley (it integrates the *quilombola* communities of Cachoeira, São Félix, Santo Amaro Maragogipe, Muritiba and Cruz das Almas).

The *Quilombo* Charter is a collective expression of the *Quilombola* Council, paving the way to dialogue between all the members and the powers of the Brazilian state. It is not merely an exercise in staking claims, but rather a demonstration that the communities know their needs and what they require to face them and how public action can act. If were not for community action, ensured under the umbrella of the *Quilomba* Council of the Iguape Basin and Valley, facing serious issues for maintaining the way of life of the community could have petered out by now.

The *Quilombola* Charter, therefore, constitutes a fundamental and necessary tool to assist in the development of public policies and in fulfilling precepts, taking actions of reparation to these communities that reflect their reality, as well as actions that guarantee citizens' rights and property rights over the land that they have historically occupied.

It is imperative to stress that the *Quilombola* Council votes and develops an integrated plan of action, containing projects designed by their own efforts and it handles actions that depend on the support of public entities and private partners. One example is the *Quilombola* Citizen project, the profile of which emerged from needs identified by the community itself. This project is a reference for its participants and for the construction of new projects, precisely because it has preserved and continues to preserve a democratic, participative character at every stage, maintaining an efficient system of social control, to the point that, at new phases, there is a process of evaluation and reformulation to maintain alignment with the interests of the communities. This means that, with each new experience, the external social player may be different, public or private, but the accumulated experience will preserve the will of the community and its objectives for collective, sustainable development.

## 2.2. Socioeconomic organisation

Given the reduction in environmental conditions that favour the sustainability of the communities, the *Quilombola* Council considered recommendations for projects, actions and alternatives to minimize the impact of the presence of private and public

interests exploiting the wealth of natural resources. After some deliberation, the community itself carried out a number of actions to face the problems. Based on experience gained and given that private initiative and public power were present, they set out requests for support for their projects, under the understanding that the choices and experiences of the community were to be respected.

Projects supported by public resources emerged, arising from government programmes. One example was community-based ethnic tourism. An economic viability study was carried out beforehand, as well as a handicrafts project, and others. Research and classification of the potential of extractivism (oysters and sururu) and research into the commercialisation of fish and shellfish (oysters, sururu and fish), as well a project to implement oyster and dendê (for oil) farming, are all community initiatives that received the support of public funds and research.

### 3 • Production centres as a democratic practice

The *Quilombola* Council continues to be driven by the quality of its work, widening the debate on ways to qualify the participation of the whole community, whose leaders serve short, rotating mandates, as well as promoting training courses for new leaders, such as mobilisation actions to make research viable into local production potential for the development of the communities.

The *Quilombola* Council proposed the implementation of Production Centres, with a view to sustainable, mutually supportive development, as a way to strengthen the organisation of production in the *quilombola* communities of the Iguape Basin and Valley, in a way that makes use of its endogenous factors. It is understood that, in this way, development stems from the rational use of resources and the production factors that the *quilombolas* have at their disposal, providing them with understanding of new technology which is compatible with their reality. These practices boost production, productivity and autonomy, as well as increasing income due to the process of verticalisation of production and the collective trade of the communities' products, based on sustainable standards.

By collective decision, in a deliberative council, the communities spoke with public research institutes, which led to the implementation of production centres for Dendê, Oysters and Native Plants, Beekeeping, Fishing and Shellfish, Agriculture, Handicrafts and Ethnic Tourism, based in the communities, as well as the Iguape Quilombola Solidarity Bank (BSQI). The initiative was integrated into a project known by the communities as the Route of Freedom, which aims to expand the potential for generating work and income, within the sustainability of the *quilombola* communities.

These centres are autonomous and are run by members of the groups of producers that make up the centres and are governed by systems developed by the *quilombola*

producers themselves. They define organisational rules and norms and the development of their activities, with integrated action plans, put together by members with the support of the Iguape Valley Centre for Education and Culture (CECVI). Decisions concerning each centre are taken in monthly meetings by means of a commission made up of one representative from each group. The Council works as a phase for consultation and reflection when there are conflicts that are not resolved internally by a centre. The centres are organised around a solidarity economy and socioenvironmental sustainability. Results are distributed collectively, based on the principle of a solidarity economy. Nowadays, this contributes to maintaining the Quilombola Solidarity Bank, which uses the social currency of the “sururu”.

The methodology used in developing its work and activities is based on promoting self-regulation, following the principles of valuing and salvaging the experience of life and work, by means of respect and recognition of culture, knowledge and aspirations, in a continuous process of education and work focused on the preservation and conservation of the environment of the *quilombola* communities.

In an analysis of production processes, Capina<sup>11</sup> affirmed that they all imply the existence of certain technical relations, which are not neutral, in a way that mathematics, on the other hand, is. Nonetheless, the criteria for using mathematical concepts is different, because behind solidarity ventures are the people who operate them and at the forefront, the people who will benefit from the results.

This is because, unlike private business, that seeks to indiscriminately maximise profit for its owners and shareholders, solidarity ventures, as in the production centres described here, are based on a logic of mutual survival and seek all-encompassing human development for its workers. The economic viability of solidarity ventures interconnects technical conditions with the variety of social relations that are involved in the initiative.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to stress that in managing and consolidating the centres formed by the *quilombola* communities, the Council assumes the challenge of articulating the training and professional qualifications needed for the processes of the production centres. To this end an integrated project was implemented for training and qualification on the theme of solidarity economy. This training course is both a strategy and the basis for consolidating groups as a way of strengthening the organisational practices of traditional communities, that, in turn, have walked the path of struggling for resistance against the historical process of exclusion, and are based on solidarity and in social transformation.

The experiences of the training course are aimed at social transformation and demand the involvement of the *quilombola* communities, in an effort to overcome individualism, social inequality, unemployment and environmental exploitation and degradation. They seek to counteract the inequality and marginalisation produced by competition and by relations of subordination that are a characteristic of the current capitalist production method.

## 4 • Conclusion: development as a democratic practice

The process of training communities by means of a system based on participation and transparency in decisions stimulates cooperation and creates an institutional environment that is more favourable to improving the capacity for social innovation. This method, however, demands the production of new understanding, different from those of the capitalist economy, and the formulation of actions that are based on an exchange of knowledge, respect for diversity and the construction of tools that contribute to strengthening collective organisation of the *quilombolas*, their cultural identity and ancestry, knowledge being considered as one of the possibilities for the construction of new understanding and practices. This is what Bava defines as “transformative techniques and methodologies, developed in interaction with the population, that represent solutions for social inclusion”.<sup>13</sup> Cavalcanti states that development, unlike growth, is indeed concerned with the generation of wealth, but aims to distribute it, to improve the quality of life of the whole population, taking into consideration environmental protection.<sup>14</sup>

For this it is important to stress the role of training and of democratic practices such as the *Quilombola* council itself and the production centres, in the construction of emancipatory principles such as cooperation, solidarity, participative democracy, cultural creation, justice and peace. This entails a paradigm shift, principally in relation to the role of science that holds the stamp of truth and has historically hijacked knowledge produced by the *quilombolas*.

In a solidarity economy, decisions are collective and transparent so that the workers’ fragmented understanding can be integrated in order to take decisions, unlike the capitalist model in which administration is exercised by a leadership, based on the domination of capital over work. Therefore, knowledge is a constructive process, in which management and administration of ventures is different from in capitalist business. The decision-making process is restricted to one group in the capitalist model, while in a solidarity economy it is shared by all those involved through the construction of roles and functions.

These development alternatives ensure the maintenance of characteristics that are inherent to the communities, respecting their ancestors and the environment. The *quilombola* communities of the Iguape Basin and Valley are strengthening the ties of integration and participation by taking steps towards collective, mutually beneficial construction, by identifying local potential and valuing traditional cultural identity. In this way, communities evolve and understand their capacity to create development alternatives and are able to express the richness and the legacy of the traditional Afro-Brazilian people.

## NOTES

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- 8 • Eliane Cantarino O’Dwyer, *Quilombos: identidade étnica e territorialidade* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2002).
- 9 • See Girólomo Domênico Treccani, *Terras de Quilombo: Entraves do Processo de Titulação* (Belém: Programa Raízes, 2006).
- 10 • The *Quilombo* Charter was put together with the participation of the Council and other members of the *quilombola* communities in the Recôncavo territory, during a two-day seminar, at which needs were presented and solutions advocated. The document was signed by everybody and delivered to the authorities that represent the federal, state and municipal institutions at the *Festa da Ostra*, in 2015. The Charter has investigated communities’ claims and serves as a reference for the construction of a set of projects to benefit communities, for the process of evaluating results obtained since then, within the Council and at future *Festa da Ostra* events.
- 11 • Cooperação e Apoio a Projetos de Inspiração Alternativa – CAPINA, *Puxando o Fio da Meada: Viabilidade Econômica de Empreendimentos Associativos Solidários e Populares* (São Paulo: ADS/CUT, 2004): 54.
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