

For the last five years the people of Mangabal, a small community beside the Tapajós river in the Brazilian Amazon, have been trying to win definitive rights over their land. They won their case in court, but now they are in more danger than ever of being expelled from their land: the territory they occupy is wanted to make way for hydroelectric power stations to supply energy to big mining companies. But the very process of fighting this latest threat is empowering the community. Mangabal's *ribeirinhos* or riverbank dwellers have in the past viewed neighbouring indigenous groups as rivals or enemies, but now they are learning that they face many problems in common, and that only by mobilising together will they make real advances.

Biodiversity or dams?

An Amazon community fights for its land

GRAIN



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1 Sidney E.B. Santos, Jackson D. Rodrigues, Ândrea K. Ribeiro dos Santos and Marco A. Zagom, "Differential contribution of indigenous men and women to the formation of an urban population in the Amazon region as revealed by mtDNA and Y-DNA", in *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, no. 109, 1999.

2 Cristina Scheibe Wolff, "Marias, Franciscas e Raimundas: uma história das mulheres da floresta Alto Juruá, Acre - 1870-1945", Thesis for doctorate in social history, Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo, 1998.

During Brazil's rubber boom in the late 19th century, rubber barons lured thousands of poor peasant farmers from the drought-ridden north-east to the Amazon basin by offering what appeared to be good rates of pay for rubber-tapping. Between 1872 and 1900 the population of the states of Pará and Amazonas more than doubled, from 329,000 to 695,000. There was another intense migratory move into the Amazon basin during the Second World War, when demand for rubber on the world market exploded.

Many of the migrants were single men. One "solution" to the gender imbalance was for them to kidnap women from nearby indigenous groups. Dona Raimunda Araújo, born in 1938, who lives in Mangabal on the Tapajós river, remembers her family talking about the way her grandfather, a peasant farmer from the north-eastern state of Ceará, stole her grandmother, a Munduruku

Indian. This was no isolated case: in their studies of the genetic make-up of the urban populations in the Amazon region, scientists have discovered that genes transmitted by men are largely Iberian in origin, while those transmitted by women are largely indigenous in origin.¹

The kidnappings were undoubtedly carried out with considerable violence but, as Cristina Scheibe Wolff has pointed out in her study of women living along the Juruá river in the state of Acre, it is important not to see the women merely as victims. Such an approach "does not offer anything for the future, as it leads to an emphasis on defeat, subjugation and annihilation. If we do this, we are imposing another violence on the women. However, if on the contrary we think of these women as subjects, who are integrated into the rubber-tapping communities as such, new elements can be found for understanding their society."² One of these new elements is the women's role in bringing to the rubber-tappers' way of life part of

the vast knowledge of the ecology of the Amazon forest acquired over centuries by the indigenous communities.

Although the women undoubtedly carried on with some of their indigenous practices from the earliest days after their capture, they had at first to work in secrecy. This was because the rubber barons, anxious to maintain control over the rubber-tappers, who were scattered over a vast area, turned food supply into a mechanism of domination. They forbade the families from practising agriculture and told them that they must purchase all items, including food, from the *regatão*, the travelling salesman who plied the rivers and sold goods at exorbitant prices.³ Severe punishments were meted out to those who infringed this regulation.

However, this system of social control collapsed in 1912, when the price paid for rubber fell spectacularly on the world market, with the arrival of much cheaper rubber grown on plantations in south-east Asia. The rubber barons lost interest in the trade, abandoning the rubber-tappers to their fate. As the vast majority were unable to fund the 2,000-km journey back to the north-east, they had to learn how to survive in the forest. With the women's help, they built a new life based on crop cultivation, animal husbandry, fishing, hunting

and the collecting of forest products. It can best be described as forest peasantry.

This way of life survives today. The geographer Maurício Torres recently studied a group of 120 families living in two hamlets, Montanha and Mangabal,⁴ along the Tapajós river, one of the main tributaries of the Amazon.⁵ Although the families cultivate some exotic species, such as mango (*Mangifera indica*), water melon (*Citrullus vulgaris*) and cashew (*Anacardium occidentale*), their staple food is cassava (*Manihot esculenta*).

Each family clears a small area in the forest, between one and four hectares in size, and sets fire to the felled vegetation so that the nutrients of the plants are incorporated into the soil. They cultivate this area for three years and then abandon it so that the area can "rest". After 7–10 years, the vegetation has recovered sufficiently for another round of slash-and-burn. This kind of farming is encountered throughout the Amazon basin.

On closer examination, however, Torres discovered the families' relationship with their ecosystem to be more complex than it at first seemed. They farm the land in a way to satisfy their basic food needs while at the same time taking measures to protect their ecosystem and to enhance the genetic diversity of their main crop. The families cultivate more than 30 different varieties of cassava, most of which are unknown to the Brazilian government's research body, EMBRAPA (Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária). The different varieties have different qualities, and together they ensure that all the community's cassava needs are satisfied.

The families want tasty *farinha* (cassava flour) to eat at home. This is provided by the Paraísa variety, the one known as the "mother of all cassava". But Paraísa takes at least a year to grow and at times the community needs food quickly. Another variety – Seis-Meses (six months) – responds to this need, for it can, as its name suggests, be harvested after just six months. *Farinha* is the community's main cash crop. The families sell small quantities on the local market to raise the money to purchase goods that they cannot produce for themselves. Many customers, particularly gold-panners (who, the farmers say, are obsessed by anything that glitters), prefer *farinha* with a strong yellow hue. The Najá variety takes a long while to grow and doesn't taste as good as Paraísa, but *farinha* made from it has this tint and is thus easy to sell. Other varieties have a moister texture and are thus better for making *tucupi*, a sauce used in cooking. Yet other varieties don't rot, even if they are left in the



Photo: Maurício Torres

In Mangabal, Rosildo roasts cassava flour. Cassava accounts for more than 85 per cent of the food eaten by ribeirinho communities in the Amazon.



3 Octávio Ianni, *A luta pela terra: história social da terra e da luta pela terra numa área da Amazônia*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1979.

4 In this article, "Mangabal" is used to refer to the two communities.

5 Maurício Torres, "A despensa viva: um banco de germoplasma nos roçados da floresta", unpublished paper. Additional information is supplied by Torres for this article.



Photo: Maurício Torres

Like many other forest people, the people of Mangabal are struggling to stay on their land. Only if they obtain effective control over their collective lands will forest devastation be stopped.

ground for three years, and thus guarantee food even if something unforeseen occurs.

Cassava is usually propagated by cutting stalks from the plant. These stalks, which last for at least six months without deterioration, are then broken to into shorter pieces and planted in the ground, where they will sprout. Although extremely practical, this type of propagation does not permit breeding, as all plants are obviously genetically identical. So the *ribeirinhos* also allow some of the plants to flower and to reproduce sexually. In this way they can cross plants and produce new varieties with different characteristics. In fact, the difference between one variety and another is quite blurred. In practice, the community is managing a living seed bank, with constant evolution and change.

The families have other practices that reveal their indigenous links. The areas that are “abandoned” for 7–10 years so that the vegetation can recover are in fact used in many different ways. Some of the sprouting plants are good to eat, such as native varieties of sweet potato (*Ipomoea batata*), water yam (*Dioscorea alata*) and *ariá* (*Maranta lutea*), and the families use them to enrich their diet. Others provide good material for fishing rods, fishing nets and house construction. The cleared areas with their fresh vegetation also attract animals and so become hunting fields located conveniently near the community.

The farmers get significantly higher yields from their cassava than those obtained by other communities in the region that were established more recently, without the incorporation of indigenous women. The *ribeirinhos* attribute this to the care they take in

choosing the variety of cassava, the location for the crop and its treatment during the growing season. Conditions vary from year to year, and the farmers need to adapt their practices to the circumstances of that particular year. Their approach differs greatly from the “one size fits all” attitude of so-called modern farmers using chemical inputs.

The Mangabal community has documentary evidence that some of their forebears were living in the region in 1871. Yet images captured by Landsat satellite between 2001 and 2007 show that after at least eight generations living in the area they have caused no significant damage to the ecosystem. Torres attributes this to the way the families have combined extractive activities (gathering forest products, fishing and hunting) with crop farming. Practising this combination makes it possible for the families to have a constant supply of food without carrying out harmful activities, such as the clearance of large areas of forest.

Land rights

The community is currently engaged in a fierce struggle to retain possession of its land. The first threat came in 2004 when a company from the southern state of Paraná went to court, claiming ownership of the land and saying that the families were “invaders”. With the assistance of Torres himself and the federal public ministry, the community managed to prove that it had been living there for generations and, after a long struggle, the courts acknowledged their right to



Photo: Maurício Torres

After a 12-day journey – including stretches in a non-motorised canoe, in the back of a lorry, by boat and by plane – Mangabal leaders reached Brasilia. Their aim was to put pressure on the government to sign the decree that will turn their lands into a Resex (a type of conservation unit)



stay on the land. In June 2006 the courts gave sovereignty to the community over a 70-kilometre stretch along the Tapajós river. It was the first time that a non-indigenous community was granted collective rights to its land.

However, the celebrations were short-lived. “Today the families are facing their greatest threat, which comes, paradoxically, from Brazil’s first left-wing government”, said Torres. To guarantee their permanent control over their lands, the communities asked for the creation of a *reserva extrativista (Resex)* – a type of conservation unit that was created after the assassination of Chico Mendes in 1988 to allow rubber-tappers in the state of Acre permanent rights to their lands. The Mangabal communities went through all the necessary bureaucratic steps, which included carrying out a rigorous consultation process (in which they obtained the unanimous support of all families for the initiative). For more than a year the decree for the creation of the reserves has been ready, waiting for President Lula’s signature.

Perplexed by the long delay, the federal public ministry asked for an explanation. President Lula’s office and Eletronorte, a subsidiary of the state-owned electricity utility Eletrobrás, issued a joint statement in which they said that they plan to construct two dams along the Tapajós river and that a conservation unit should not be created because it would interfere with these dams. It is believed that another three dams, along the Jamanxim, the largest tributary of the Tapajós, are also under consideration. Torres is outraged:

“The government says that a Resex would interfere with their plans for dams, but this is completely the wrong way of seeing things. The people were here first. The dams would upset their lives. If dams are now planned for the river, it is more urgent than ever that a Resex is created, so that the people’s rights are respected. The refusal to take this step is extremely worrying because it suggests that the government doesn’t want to respect the community’s rights.”

But why does such a remote area of the Amazon basin need so much energy? The giant US aluminium mining company, Alcoa, is installing a huge smelter in the region. Aluminium smelting uses vast quantities of electricity, with Alcoa already consuming, at subsidised prices, 1.5 per cent of Brazil’s total electricity output. “Most of the aluminium, produced at the cost of damaged lives and degraded forest, will be exported, mainly



Photo: Maurício Torres

In Mangabal, proximity to the river and the forest means that people have ready access to many important products that they need for everyday life.

to Europe. People there need to know at what price they are receiving their aluminium”, says Torres. “It is a heinous crime that these communities that represent so much cultural and social wealth should be seen as an obstacle to development.”

The federal public ministry is considering whether there are grounds for an appeal to the Convention on Biological Diversity. “I think political pressure is more effective than judicial action”, said Torres. “On 13 May 2008 the Mangabal community, for the first time in its history, sent a delegation to Brasilia. President Lula didn’t send a representative to speak to them but others listened. The situation has never before been so bad, but they have never felt so empowered. This gives me hope.” As well as making the community feel stronger, the very process of struggle is changing the way it views its history. Traditionally, Mangabal and other communities saw their takeover of Indians’ land and the capture of indigenous women as part of a “heroic” struggle to establish themselves in the region. Today perceptions are different. Dona Santa, a 80-year-old blind woman, who is still the de facto authority in Mangabal, told Torres how years ago her uncle had been killed in a clash with Indians. She stopped in the middle of her story and turned to him: “Today I have a very different view of what happened. I realise that what we did then to the Indians is exactly what the *grileiros* (land thieves) are doing to us today.” This new awareness, also growing in other parts of the Amazon, is leading to new alliances between indigenous and non-indigenous groups. In the midst of all the problems, this too is a reason for hope. 🌱

