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Instituto Socioambiental
Documentação
Fonte The New York Times
Data 23/1/2001 Pg A1 e A4
Class. 122

Former Slave Havens in Brazil Gaining Rights

By LARRY ROHTER

MANGAL DO BARRO VERMELHO, Brazil — The nearest telephone is 19 miles away, and television arrived only in 1998. For generations, communities of poor blacks like this one, people descended from slaves who had run away from their masters during Portuguese colonial times, have existed in wary seclusion deep in Brazil's trackless backlands.

But now, more than a century after slavery was abolished in Brazil, these settlements that hint of Africa, known as quilombos, are hesitantly emerging from their traditional isolation and poverty.

With the encouragement and support of the Brazilian government, they are now pressing for legal title to ancestral lands and reaffirming their threatened culture.

Long neglected by the rest of Brazil, the quilombos have been facing extinction as the modern world closes in on them. Improved road, river and rail links have made their once remote fields valuable to ranchers, mining companies and land speculators, who have been seeking to dislodge them and seize village lands for commercial development.

"We have been here for 300 years, resisting as best we can, but until recently no one paid us any heed, because we were black and poor and didn't even know that we had any rights," said Carlos Alberto Gomes, a leader of this community of 110 families on the banks of the São Francisco River. "But these are fertile lands on which you can grow anything, and so people covet them now." In total, 724 quilombos, some

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Fonte The New York Times
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Villages in Brazil Settled by Ex-Slaves Are Gaining Rights

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dating back as far as the 17th century, have been identified across Brazil and are seeking formal recognition of their status.

The largest single concentration of such communities, 259, is here in the northeastern state of Bahia, which has the country's highest percentage of black residents, followed by the Amazon states of Pará and Maranhão.

"When we started out, we thought there would just be a few isolated cases," said Cláudio Braga, an official of the National Land Reform and Colonization Institute in Brasília who deals with the quilombos. "As people have overcome their shame at saying they are descendants of fugitive slaves, the numbers have grown surprisingly."

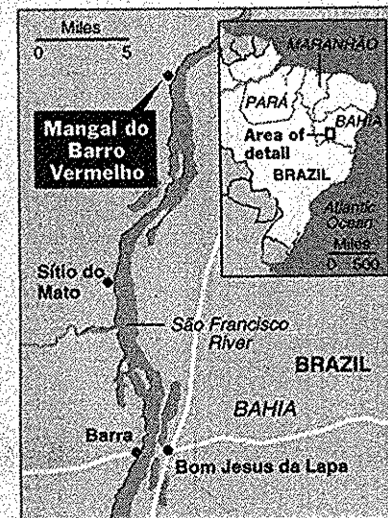
Indeed, quilombos — the word quilombo means encampment or forest settlement in various West African languages — have been found in settings as diverse as mountains, jungles and arid scrubland.

"They went wherever the geographical barriers were the greatest, so that whites wouldn't go there after them," Mr. Braga explained.

At first glance, quilombos like this one, whose name means red clay mangrove thicket, seem indistiguishable from any other poor village in the Brazilian interior. The lone school offers classes only up to fourth grade, the single road is a rutted dirt path and "the closest medical care is an 11-mile boat ride away," said Egídio Gomes Pereira, a community leader.

But the words commonly used here and in nearby quilombos for such everyday concepts as house, spoon, straw and grandparents are derived from West African languages like Yoruba. Houses in some communities are arranged in what is said to be West African style, in a circular fashion around a central space. Though most residents are nominally Catholic, their religious ceremonies and festivals contain elements that anthropologists and sociologists say are traceable to African practices even more strongly than those of other black Brazilians.

Ricardo Teles



The New York Times

Canoes arriving at Mangal do Barro Vermelho as part of the annual marujada, or river festival, held each October. The villagers, descended from slaves who ran away from their masters during Portuguese colonial times, long lived in wary seclusion.

"The African elements are there, but the people have always had a certain timidity about considering their historic culture as something positive," said Valdélio Santos Silva, director of the sociology department at the State University of Bahia in the nearby town of Bom Jesus da Lapa and a leader of the United Black Movement. "Until recently they've been treated as if they were worthless, so they have learned to hide their culture from outsiders."

Slavery was instituted in Brazil shortly after the first Portuguese expedition arrived in Bahia in 1500 and endured until 1888, longer than anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere. During that time, an estimated 18 million Africans were forcibly transported to Brazil, more than any other country or colony in the Americas. But slaves often fled their harsh lives in servitude, joining Indians in the remote outback and fighting wars against the Portuguese troops sent to recapture them.

The conflicts continued on a smaller scale after Brazil achieved its independence from Portugal in 1821. During most of the 20th century, though, quilombos were largely ignored by the Brazilian state.

In 1988, 100 years after slavery ended, Brazil adopted a new Constitution that finally recognized the rights and status of descendants of runaway slaves.

But the Brazilian Congress has yet to adopt legislation to put the provision into effect. "There are just too many powerful interests at play any time an issue of land tenancy comes up," said Murilo da Costa Santos, an official at the Palmares Cultural Foundation, a government agency entrusted with preserving and developing black culture in Brazil.

So the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso has used its decree power to begin the process of identifying and registering the black settlements.

"This is a question of basic human rights" to Mr. Cardoso, Mr. Braga said. The president was a sociologist before he entered politics and wrote extensively on questions of race and class in Brazil.

Advocacy groups like the Roman Catholic Church's Pastoral Land Commission praise the Cardoso administration's initiative as long overdue. But they and other defenders of quilombo residents complain that the land titling process is so long and complicated that it encourages commercial interests to try to drive the residents off their lands before deeds are granted. "Whenever they can, real estate speculators destroy the vestiges of African culture that they find, in order to claim that there never was any quilombo on the land in dispute," Dr. Santos of the cultural foundation said.

Since the runaway slaves were illiterate, there are no documents that would verify claims that their communities date to colonial times, and because they were fugitives, they rarely registered the births of their children. The government ordered the destruction of all official records of slavery in 1890, further complicating the titling process now under way.

Remote Afro-Brazilian towns resist developers.

"There are a lot of historical gaps, and it is difficult to fill them in," said Dr. Silva, the sociologist, who has researched the history of quilombos in Bahia in an effort to help the communities here gain legal status.

Mangal do Barro Vermelho is one of only a handful of quilombos that have completed the titling process, and it now legally occupies more than 17,000 acres. But winning that status involved years of conflict with a wealthy cattle rancher, who arrived in 1971 with what he said was a deed to the community's land.

Residents say they were forbidden to graze their flocks in fields the rancher claimed as his or to fish in ponds on the contested property. Some hired themselves out to him as day laborers. They were paid with chits that could be redeemed only at the rancher's store at inflated prices.

"It was like we had fallen back into slavery again," Mr. Pereira said. "The only thing missing was the whip."

Based on oral tradition, the residents of this community believe that they are descended from Africans who jumped from slave ships as they were being transported to their masters on the São Francisco River.

Dr. Santos said other quilombos had been founded by slaves who had fled salt and gold mines farther south or cotton and sugar cane plantations nearer the coast.

Among them is another larger quilombo about 80 miles south of here, called Rio das Rãs, or Frog Creek. The testimony of the oldest of the settlement's inhabitants, José Francisco Arcanjo de Souza, was essential in establishing the claim of the community's 4,000 residents to more than 90,000 acres of land.

"Chico Tomé," as Mr. de Souza is known, who says he was was born in April 1894, just six years after the Brazilian Empire officially abolished slavery, and though his sight is failing, his mind is still sharp. In an interview in the decaying adobe house where he prefers to live on his own rather than move in with his sons, he recalled a childhood of privation and isolation.

"We suffered greatly and ate little in those days," he said. There were no whites around, "just blacks and Indians, living off the land." Mr. de Souza recalled hearing from his parents tales of attacks by Portuguese troops in the early 19th century.

"I thank God for this victory," Mr. de Souza said. "I never thought that I would live to see the day that we quilombo dwellers could live in peace, but we are the masters of our land now."