Embroidering Trouble: Creating Stories with the Mango Trees of the Mituaçu *Quilombo* Community

Gabriela Novaes Santos
Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte | Natal, Brazil
gabrielanovaesantos@gmail.com

translation Caroline Spitzner
Radboud University | Nijmegen, Netherlands
carolspitzner@gmail.com

technical review Joaquim Pereira de Almeida Neto
University of São Paulo | São Paulo, Brazil
Joaquim.almeidaneto@yahoo.com.br

DOI 10.11606/issn.2316-9133.v34i1pe234133

This work presents *"Cenário Fabuloso"* ("Fabulous Scene") an embroidery inspired by the stories told in Mituaçu, a *quilombo*[1] community located in the city of Conde, in the state of Paraíba (Brazil). This embroidery was one of the processes and results of the research I conducted as part of the *"Histórias de Quilombo" (Quilombo Stories)* outreach project (Unila/UFPB)[2], an initiative that has been developing a series of activities with the community since 2017 and whose main objective is to find ways to collaboratively, creatively, and empoweringly construct territorialized practices and knowledge[3].

I discovered Mituaçu in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period marked by social isolation, the outreach project team began meeting remotely, conducting readings and revisiting the online research archive created in 2018, which contains thousands of photos, videos, audio files, and descriptions. Considering different possibilities for continuing these activities, we concentrated over these materials and transformed them into texts, drawings, and collages, while also exploring the various questions that arose about the relationships between humans, plants, animals, rivers, and fungi in the community. This allowed me to

[1] *Quilombos* are settlements of Afro-descendant peoples whose communities were established by runaway enslaved peoples in Brazil. [Translators note].

[2] The research was conducted throughout 2022 and 2023 and gave rise to the monograph I defended in my undergraduate program in social sciences at the Federal University of Paraíba, where I reflected on embroidery as a tactile-reflective practice (Santos, 2023).

[3] Among the project's various collective actions, I highlight the free embroidery workshops with the *Fuxico do Bem* group (Santos, 2023) and the production of the *Cordel Ilustrado* with health and safety information in the pandemic context (Azevedo; Paixão; Pinheiro, 2022b), the *Coleção Etnobotânica* (Azevedo; Paixão; Pinheiro, 2022a), and the booklet *"Plantas que têm história: Mituaçu"* (Azevedo; Paixão; Pinheiro; Santos; Santos; Guimarães; Chianca, 2022).

connect with the stories told by the elderly women of Mituaçu, such as Dona Beré, Dona Penha, and Dona Maria Aparecida.

One such story, told by Dona Beré, concerns the arrival and transformations caused by the so-called "Recife disease" (mango wilt), a disease caused by the fungus—*Ceratocystis fimbriata*—that attaches itself to mango trees (*Mangifera indica*) through their canopies or roots, affecting the color of the leaves and trunk until the plant dies[4]. The arrival of this fungus killed countless mango trees in Mituaçu, transforming not only the landscape but also the community relations. The members of the community maintain, for example, that before the arrival of the fungus, some trees served as a way to locate people in the community (Paixão, 2014) and that there was a time when it was dark due to the shadows cast by the mango trees. The mango trees darkened the paths, and the color of the leaves served as a point of reference: "I live near the dark mango tree," "I'm going there, on the path to the light mango tree."

Except for a few photos, when I created the embroidery, I hadn't yet seen the Mituaçu mango trees or the architecture of the community's houses. Even though I was physically distant from the territory, I decided to incorporate embroidery into my work, a practice I learned from artisans in my family. For the *"Cenário Fabuloso,"* I was inspired by the stories of the arrival of the "Recife disease" and, above all, by the drawing *"O Choro das Mangueiras"* (The Cry of the Mango Trees) by Aina Azevedo (Aina Azevedo; Aline Paixão; Patrícia Pinheiro, 2022).

I understand that the embroidery is "fabulous" because of my fabled creation of the community and its relationships (Haraway, 2023). The threads interact with circulation of memories, with women's practices, their sociability with plants, with gardens, *roçados* (small farmed plots), and backyards. The mango tree leaves lie over the community's houses as they weep, and the threads placed in backstitch by the needle over the fabric's weave seek to reflect on the multispecies relationships within the community. Thus, embroidery outlines reflections on the scientific and manual practice carried out by and with women, hinting at other affective relationships and theoretical-methodological paths that assume that listening to and telling stories is essential to a shared anthropology.

By sharing stories like this, which transform into other graphic, manual, and oral narratives, of collaborative and creative production, we learn that, in Mituaçu, "plants protect, heal, and nourish" (Azevedo; Paixão; Pinheiro, 2022a, p. 170). The women of the community play a leading role in safeguarding knowledge, by making recipes for healing and prevention, and telling tales of life and death involving the mango trees and various other plants that grow spontaneously on their sidewalks, or are planted and cared for in their backyards and *roçados*. Among the "weeds" that sprout on their own in the cracks between walls or along the dirt roadside are plants that can be used as medicine, as a salve, as protection, as blessings.

Dona Maria Aparecida tends her *roçados* and backyard, which are filled with passion fruit and mint trees, lemongrass, and fruit trees, like the mango trees. In Dona Beré's backyard, there were lemongrass, okra, and pumpkin, large-leaf mint, and *mastruz* (Jesuit's tea). On her property, there were jackfruit and mango trees, a coconut tree she planted herself, a banana tree, a yellow mombin tree, and *acerola* (Guarani cherry) (Azevedo; Paixão; Pinheiro; Santos; Santos;

[4] To create the drawing, Aina Azevedo was inspired by the narrative about the arrival of the "Recife disease" (mango wilt) written by Dona Beré (in memoriam). This narrative was recorded in an interview conducted by another member of the project, the anthropologist Aline Paixão.

Guimarães; Chianca, 2022). Dona Penha tends to the same plants in her backyard, but has also *boldo* (woolly plectranthus), stone breaker, and bristly starbur.

In the relationships women weave with mango trees and other plants in their backyards, or in the designs and embroidery on raw cotton fabric, we can perceive the intertwining and continuities between humans, plants, and fungi. In this sense, the speculative fabulation (Haraway, 2023) that I propose based on *"Cenário Fabuloso"* aims to highlight that the most important thing is to be playful and speculative about lives we encounter in our unexpected co-shared scientific endeavors. Embroidery connects with storytelling. These are methods that think methods, stories that tell stories, actions that handle actions. As a textile canvas on which we construct new problems and organize old ones, embroidery is important for thinking about—and embroidering—epistemologies, especially because even if the space on the canvas of the raw cotton textile is completely covered by the skein threads, it's still possible to embroider new threads over them.

Storytelling has been an important choice in the process of presenting anthropological research, underscoring the importance of paying attention not only to the process but also to the starting point in our research. By using embroidery as a theoretical, methodological, and political possibility (Peixoto, 2020), anthropological practice is transformed into a tactile-reflexive art of research (Ingold, 2022). This artisanal approach chooses and aligns tactile contact as fundamental to creation and, at the same time, articulates art and anthropological research, helping to weave meanings and relationships. Here, the story of the mango trees and their relationship with the women of Mituaçu inspired artisanal approaches to reflecting on the potentialities and problems of the bond between the *quilombola* community and the university, between plants, fungi, and stories, between non-*quilombola* women and *quilombola* women, between crafts and anthropological practice.

Figure 1: *Cenário Fabuloso (Fabulous Scene).*

References

AZEVEDO, Aina; PAIXÃO, Aline; PINHEIRO, Patricia. 2022a. "Convivendo no quilombo de Mituaçu (PB): De uma coleção etnobotânica a uma coleção de histórias". *Iluminuras*, 23, no. 61: 149-174. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22456/1984-1191.123398

AZEVEDO, Aina; PAIXÃO, Aline; PINHEIRO, Patricia. 2022b. "Diários de extensão em tempos de exceção: o projeto "Histórias de Quilombo" na pandemia." In: RAMIRO, Patrícia; FRANCH, Mónica; AMORIM, Ninno. (Org.) *Ciências Sociais em Debate: crise e crítica social em tempos da covid-19, 225-239*. João Pessoa: Editora UFPB.

HARAWAY, Donna. 2023. *Ficar com o problema: fazer parentesco no Chthuluceno*. São Paulo: n-1 edições.

INGOLD, Tim. *Fazer: antropologia, arqueologia, arte e arquitetura*. Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 2022.

PAIXÃO, Aline. 2014. *"Aqui todo mundo é parente": Dinâmica territorial, organização social e identidade entre os Quilombolas de Mituaçú, PB*. Monografia (Bacharel em antropologia social). Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Rio Tinto.

PEIXOTO, Fernanda. 2020. Os riscos da agulha. *Revista Trilhos*, Santo Amaro, Bahia, v. 1, n. 1, p. 75–91. https://revistatrilhos.com/home/index.php/trilhos/article/view/19

PINHEIRO, Patrícia dos Santos; PAIXÃO, Aline; AZEVEDO, Aina; SANTOS, Gabriela Novaes; SANTOS, Thayonara; GUIMARÃES, Ana Julia; CHIANCA, Luciana. 2022. *Plantas que têm história: Mituaçu*. São Leopoldo: Casa Leiria.

SANTOS, Gabriela Novaes. 2023. *Fuxico do Bem: alinhavos entre memória, educação e bordado no quilombo de Mituaçu*. TCC (Licenciatura em Ciências Sociais) – Universidade Federal da Paraíba. João Pessoa. https://www.academia.edu/116092527/Fuxico_do_Bem_Alinhavos_entre_mem%C3%B3ria_educa%C3%A7%C3%A3o_e_bordado_no_quilombo_de_Mitua%C3%A7u_Conde_PB_

about the author

Gabriela Novaes Santos
has dedicated herself to researching embroidery as a shared, anthropological, and pedagogical methodology. She is an embroiderer and popular educator, with a degree in Social Sciences (UFPB) and a master's degree in Social Anthropology (PPGAS/UFRN). Since 2020, she has been part of the *Histórias de Quilombo* (Quilombo Stories Project - UNILA), where she has researched alongside the *Fuxiqueiras do Bem* artisan group in the quilombola community of Mituaçu (Conde/PB/Brazil). She is a member of NAVIS (UFRN) and serves on the editorial teams of Revista Equatorial (PPGAS/UFRN) and Revista Direitos Humanos e Transdisciplinaridade (DCJ/UFPB).

Autorship: The author is responsible for collecting data, systematizing and synthesizing the arguments presented throughout the text, as well as for writing it.

Funding: This work was carried out with the support of the *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil* (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.

Received in: 20/02/2025.
Approved for publication in: 14/03/2025.