

# Diasporic living in Quilombola communities\*: empowerment, self-reflection and new sociabilities in the Rio dos Macacos community

## *Vivências diaspóricas em comunidades quilombolas: empoderamento, autorreflexão e novas sociabilidades na comunidade Rio dos Macacos*

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### ABSTRACT

In what way the empowerment process in Quilombola community Rio dos Macacos has produced a reflexive capacity and new sociabilities? We propose this reflection based on the thought of Stuart Hall. We consider that Quilombola communities rely on an accrual of diasporic experiences to reinforce resistance movement. In the empowerment process of Rio dos Macacos community, we have observed the reflexive capacity within the stories, documents and on the campaign "Somos todos Rio dos Macacos" ["We are all Rio dos Macacos"]. New sociabilities were established on the campaign, in 2012, as well as in the official territory delimitation as a quilombo remainder community, in 2015.

**Keywords:** Black diaspora, Quilombola communities, communication, new sociabilities, Stuart Hall

### RESUMO

De que forma o processo de empoderamento na comunidade quilombola Rio dos Macacos gerou capacidade autorreflexiva e novas sociabilidades? Propomos esta reflexão à luz do pensamento de Stuart Hall. Consideramos que as comunidades quilombolas recorrem a um acúmulo de experiências diaspóricas para fortalecer o movimento de resistência. No processo de empoderamento da comunidade Rio dos Macacos, percebemos a capacidade autorreflexiva nos relatos, documentos e na campanha "Somos todos Rio dos Macacos". Novas sociabilidades foram estabelecidas, tanto na campanha, em 2012, quanto na delimitação oficial do território como comunidade remanescente de quilombo, em 2015.

**Palavras-chave:** Diáspora negra, comunidades quilombolas, comunicação, novas sociabilidades, Stuart Hall

\* In Brazil, the expression 'Quilombola communities' is close to the concept of Maroons, that united free Africans during slavery by English Colony of Americas and Caribbean.

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### PRESENTATION

The trajectory of African descending communities in Brazil was characterized by forced displacement and fight against slavery for almost four centuries. Historiography is not able to specify it, but the number of Africans trafficked to Brazil between 1520 and 1850 is estimated at four million. Some studies get to mention 15 million Africans enslaved in the country, once many of them were smuggled even after abolition of slavery, in 1888 (Moura, 1987).

Even apart from their families and ethnic groups, African and their descendants had created in black diaspora new ties and had engaged on several forms of resistance, such as guerilla warfare, urban rebellions and quilombos – this one referring to an African expression (“banto”), which corresponds to habitation. In the central region of Congo Basin, “quilombo” also means “place to be with God”. For the Kingdom of Portugal, in the end of XVIth century, quilombo was every “habitation of escaped blacks that exceeds the number of five, in a depopulated place, despite they may not have raised farms, nor if one may not find pylons on them” (Ibid.: 11).

These territories had congregated thousands of Africans and descendants, remaining inhabited after the abolition of slavery. Presently, Quilombolas – those who inhabit quilombo remainder territories – continues to fight for their lands titration, against racism, for their cultural affirmation and for the access to public policy of health, education, culture and agrarian development. One of the instruments of confrontation with people in power, in modernity, has been communication.

How do Quilombola communities and a network of partners employ communicational processes articulated with mobilization activities, visibility and empowerment? This was the object of the research carried out for master’s degree (Nunes, 2013), in which one had examined these items in communicational processes of Quilombola community Rio dos Macacos, located at Simões Filho city, metropolitan region of Salvador, 21 kilometers from Bahia capital.

For this particular article, we propose to think about the empowerment process in the Quilombola community Rio dos Macacos and if it has produced a self-reflection capacity and new sociabilities. We propose this reflection as a central issue, based on the thought of Stuart Hall. The article dialogues with the challenge established for Hall (2003a) to identify cultural strategies built by black community based on its traditions and battles, taking into account a black aesthetic and cultural repertoires that constitute black counter-narratives, defined by diversity and no longer by a homogeneity of black experience.

Within this paper, we will examine, grounded on the collected interviews and field observation: a) if the leaderships who were interviewed express in their statements the self-reflective capacity expected in a process of empowerment. How does this self-reflexive capacity manifest itself? How do leaderships express this self-reflection? ; b) if the process of empowerment in the community Rio dos Macacos has produced new sociabilities and which ones they would be. How have they been materialized?

Since the year of 2012, the community Rio dos Macacos was evidenced both in local and national media, and also in social network, because of several protests and actions which took place on the Internet. Rio dos Macacos Quilombolas occupy a territory that is claimed by Brazilian Navy, next to Aratu's Naval Base, which shelters a beach known for hosting Federal presidents in recession or vacation. The visibility of the fight of Quilombola community on the media and social network was decisive for the choice of the place as a reference for field research.

### QUILOMBOLA TERRITORIALITY AND DIASPORIC EXPERIENCES

The mobilization form of Quilombola communities sends to an accumulation of diasporic experiences (Hall, 2003b), whereby African descending groups reinvent, in territories outside the African continent, an idealized Africa and reaffirm their identity based upon new cultural and political standards, capable to fortify a resistance movement. According to the author, the common historical trajectory of forced displacement and persistent subjugation made black communities of Caribbean and Latin America establish strategies of cultural rescue in black diaspora, on environments marked by the imposition of European cultural models.

For Hall (2003a), Africa is the metaphor whereby it is possible to understand how the communities associated with diaspora are seen and treated by Occidental world. Diasporic cultural experiences, however, disclose the trespassing and transforming capacity of communities formed in the reunion of different African traditions, from the valuation of African origins, despite how fictional may be the projection of *Africa*.

In the vision of Hall (1996), the exchanges between afrodescendent groups have stimulated many productions in the field of visual representation, in an important movement of search and redefinition of identities aiming at cultural and political affirmation. Therefore, the slavery of Africans in the New World, one of the most traumatic experiences of forced separation in the history of humanity, was capable to violently expropriate cultural identities. Thus, the



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African diaspora has constituted itself as a functional myth, capable of healing ruptures, molding imageries and influencing action.

In Latin America and Caribbean, the African diaspora as a functional myth fortifies itself for afrodescendent population as a whole from the existence of quilombos remainder communities, formed by Africans and their descendants to escape or resist slavery. In many countries, these communities have continued to be articulated or have been created after abolition, once they were not followed by any guarantee of rights. 2013 data discloses that Brazil possessed 139 Quilombola communities titrated by INCRA (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária/National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform) and 2.4 thousand communities recognized by Fundação Cultural Palmares (Palmares Cultural Foundation) (Sá, 2013).

The Quilombola community Rio dos Macacos was among communities recognized for its historical trajectory of about 150 years and five generations, which descend of enslaved Africans or of people who worked under a servitude regimen in sugarcane farms of Recôncavo Baiano. After the bankruptcy of sugarcane mills, at the beginning of XXth century, the community has remained at place, with the promise that it would inherit the lands as a reward for the services offered per decades. The history of the permanence of this community in the place, however, has not yet been sufficiently registered. The main documental sources of the research which had originated this paper were territory's identification and delimitation technical report (RTID), elaborated by Regional Supervision of Bahia's INCRA, as well as a complementary anthropological report.

These reports point to a gradual and consistent awareness by the community of its origins from 1980s, after the consolidation of the Navy permanence in the place, through the construction of a military residential village and the establishment of limits to the access of Quilombolas to natural resources. In contact with the urban black movement, that got stronger since the 1988 Constitution, the Rio dos Macacos leaderships had begun a history rescue process of the community and had also begun to understand about their own Quilombola condition.

As a part of this identity process, in 2011, Rio dos Macacos community established the Associação dos Remanescentes do Quilombo Rio dos Macacos (Association of Quilombo Rio dos Macacos Remainder), through which it got self-recognized and certified by Palmares Cultural Foundation as a quilombo remainder territory. Based on this self-recognition, the community looked for INCRA, demanding urgency for the territory delimitation process, bearing in mind the "situation of serious conflict" and recurring threats by the military.

Nevertheless, in 2010, Navy obtained in justice a preliminary decision which would determine community eviction. Such a decision, however, had not been performed, because after the community's mobilization and case's repercussion, in addition to the components of articulation and visibility we should hereupon approach, federal government opened a negotiation between the parts, led by the General Secretariat of Federal Presidency.

This process culminated, in 2015, on the recognition by INCRA of a 301,2 hectares area, of which 104,8 had been destined to Quilombola community, and the other 196,4 had remained under the Navy administration, upon the justification that the area refers to "strategic interest to national defense" (G1 BA, 2015). Although Quilombolas of Rio dos Macacos recognize the 104,8 hectares as fruit of resistance movement, they continue to fight for the full title of the territory, which would never even include the river designating the community, whence families draw its lifeblood through fishing.

We can perceive the conjuncture of the empowerment process of this Quilombola community when dialoguing with the proposition of Hall, concerning what he should call "tectonic plates", in other words, when visualizing economic, cultural, social and ideological structure of Quilombola community of Rio dos Macacos and its surroundings, a scene drawn both by interviews and by other documents informing about this particular situation.

Therefore, concerning ideology, one of the dimensions of the tectonic plates in action in a certain conjuncture, Hall (2005) situates what he calls a problem of ideology noticed in two dimensions. On the one hand, as the author affirms, theory of ideology helps to understand how a particular set of ideas becomes dominant, in the line of Gramsci. On the other, theory of ideology also enables to perceive the process by which new forms of conscience and new concepts of world appear, into a scene of ideological fight. For this purpose, the author argues, "we need not only a theory, but a theory adequate to the complexities of what we are trying to explain" (Ibid.: 26). We are interested in highlighting the perspective of ideological fight that was identified in the statements of people who were interviewed, which make clear the antagonism position.

### **VISIBILITY, NEW SOCIABILITIES AND SELF-REFLEXIVE CAPACITY**

The research which had originated this article was based on a field study of applied work, in a qualitative approach, exploratory purposes and the employment of semi-structured interview, in addition to conversation and empirical observation with leaderships of the Quilombola community Rio dos Macacos, at Bahia, and representatives of the partner network. The interviews



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were performed based on orienting general questions, reformulated and modified in the course of the encounters. Some excerpts of the interviews were classified onwards the references of content analysis and thematic categories, in such a way that this dismemberment of the texts would enable a deepened understanding of the statements, as well as the achievement of inferences about the described processes.

Based on initial surveys during field observation in the Quilombola community and on the permanence in the community for a better understanding of its reality and history, we interviewed five Quilombola leaderships and five social movement leaderships of support networks.

The field visit to the community was preceded by a research of historical documents concerning the community, such as the Relatório Técnico de Identificação e Delimitação (Technical Report of Identification and Delimitation – RTID of the territory, elaborated by Regional Supervision of Bahia’s INCRA), as well as a complementary anthropological report, coordinated by the anthropologist Bruna Zagatto (2012). This study carried out before field research contributed to the comprehension of the history and the fight trajectory of the Quilombola community, providing more elements to the interviews with leaderships and representatives of partner network.

Based on the interviews with Quilombola leaderships of Rio dos Macacos and with representatives of the support network, we took as a basis instruments of the content analysis (CA). This methodology enabled to identify the most frequent text units (words and expressions) to understand the enunciation of interviewed people and, thenceforth, to proceed to critical analysis of the concerned content. One of the categories shaped by CA was empowerment.

In this category of empowerment, we sought how visibility elements, new sociabilities and self-reflexive capacity could emerge. We will observe the presence of these three elements in the process of empowerment of the community Rio dos Macacos, taking as empirical material for the analysis both the interviews performed with Quilombola leaderships and the observation of social networks during the year of 2012, especially the campaign “Somos todos Rio dos Macacos”.

The categorization of the statements allows us to confirm that the activities organized by Quilombolas and the network of support employ already consecrated symbols and formats, whilst bringing new elements of dispute concerning political field, such as the capacity of establishing a media agenda and engagement to the cause in social media. To mobilize partners, meetings, seminars, public hearings and visits to the community were organized.

These meetings have led to the writing of notes, manifests, posters and banners. Words of order had been incorporated by artists, rappers, students, capoeira players and other social actors who possess an eminent place of speech in society.

As an example of the amplification of this support network we find the engagement of the São Paulo *rapper* Emicida in the mobilization in defense of the community Rio dos Macacos (Figure 1). On his Twitter profile, at the same day he had visited the community for food distribution, we could read the following: “I was at Quilombo Rio dos Macacos. There’s a life before and after that”. The phrase summarizes the way the functional myth of Africa or of a community that refers to it is strong enough to inspire actions and to establish connections in the diaspora, as the reflections of Hall has already pointed (1996, 2003a, 2003b).



FIGURE 1 – Community Rio dos Macacos presents posters of the campaign

Source: Facebook page SOS – Quilombolas do Rio dos Macacos. Available in: < <http://bit.ly/2gPzPNe> >;. Access in: July 30th, 2016.

The partnerships and the texts collectively written supported in a strategic way the moment right after the mobilization, when community and partner network closed highway tracks, occupied public buildings and performed acts in events about other themes. The format of the activities mixed traditional cultural elements (Bumba meu boi *giving birth* to posters of protest and politi-

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cal theatrical plays) to contemporary forms of mobilization, such as reuniting people through Facebook. The protagonists of the actions agree the force of the movement is in fact on street mobilization. All these elements proportionate new sociabilities, considering they create new spaces of interaction and sharing of social experiences, that are amplified by virtual environments, although the community itself has no Internet access.

To guarantee perennial visibility, the partner network has resorted to an important diversity of media formats and dissemination platforms related to an ampler strategy of communication. It has produced videos with artists statements, Facebook groups, it has created a Twitter profile, brands (Figure 2), stamps (Figure 3) and avatars (virtual representations upon a image form). Activists and communicators were assigned to cover the acts and to send information, images and videos to other militants, that remotely fed social media.



FIGURE 2 – Brand of the campaign “Somos Quilombo Rio dos Macacos”

Source: Archive of the movement Quilombo X



FIGURE 3 – Poster of the campaign “Somos Quilombo Rio dos Macacos”

Source: Website of the Movement DESOCUPA. Available in: < <http://bit.ly/2gPziUS> >; Access in: July 1st, 2013.

Quilombolas and partners network have also searched to establish contact with journalists and more receptive medias to the demands of a community in confrontation with a military institution; either for strict ideological reasons of the political left (“military horror”), either for the fact they went through activities of formation of the black social movement. From these communi-

cational processes concerning *visibility*, the stories of violence and political claims of the community Rio dos Macacos started to resonate on society and instances of public power. Such strategical actions had resulted on the amplification of the union and strength feeling by Quilombolas and support network, and the national and international repercussion of this territorial dispute.

We observed a demonstration of the community's self-reflexive capacity expressed both in the research interviews and in other documents, as an example of the campaign "Somos todos Rio dos Macacos" or the slogan "Nós num somo invasor não, meu senhor, quando eles chegaram, acharam a gente" ("We are not invaders, Sir, when they arrived, they found us"), that one may find in the Letter of Quilombo Rio dos Macacos (2012).

One may notice the self-reflexive capacity figuring within Quilombola narratives that, throughout the process of claiming a collective title of the land, turned themselves towards what could be seen as a diasporic culture and the history of their ancestors. Since then, they have started to fight for rights historically expropriated and rights yet to be conquered. This reflection is highlighted on the speech of Quilombola Jose Rosalvo de Souza, as known as William, who expresses the desire to take "all our culture back", to teach children to fight and "to have our life dignified as the right of any Brazilian citizen" (verbal communication).

Employing content analysis around the main subjects *self-reflexive capacity*, *empowerment and mobilization* and *visibility and empowerment*, we choose the analysis of the category of *empowerment*, seeking to perceive if this process appears in association with a self-reflexive capacity and new sociabilities.

It is important to notice the relations established between Quilombolas of Rio dos Macacos and Ilha de Maré: they built a relation of mutual cooperation, marked by the recognition of common historical roots, as well as for similar current challenges, such as the fight for land and the preservation of memory. The way each one of these communities faced challenges suited the strengthening of both of them. Quilombolas of Ilha de Maré, that had already tried the articulation of actions in social media and the organization of protests focused on media visibility, transmitted to Quilombolas of Rio dos Macacos their own strategies of confrontation. Quilombolas of Rio dos Macacos, in turn, had shared knowledge and practices that had already been lost at Ilha de Maré, as well as they had disclosed strategies of resistance towards military force.

It is a matter of a continuous, inspired, ancestral and respectful exchange, rescued from the statement of Eliete Paraguassú, a Quilombola representative of Ilha de Maré Fishing Movement, that makes reference to the articulation with Rio dos Macacos: "The people that discovered the force of the communi-



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ty weren't ourselves. They already possessed force, they knew that they wanted to remain there. The fishing colony finances the articulation and the participation in the acts to call society's attention.

Still in the aspect of sociabilities, it is possible to notice that, although leaderships consider the final goal of the fight has not been conquered yet, new partnerships, fronts of negotiation and external repercussion had led to a strengthening of the unit and the disposition of the group to resist, which is expressed in several statements of interviewed leaderships. Among them, we highlight the following one, of the Quilombola leader of Rio dos Macacos Rose, Meire dos Santos Silva: "We have always thought that we would die here fighting for this land. The difference is now we know that we are going to die, but many people are going to know that" (personal communication). We look at this phrase as a synthesis of the whole process analyzed, from mobilization to empowerment, and we consider that based on it we may find answers to several questions that had motivated this research.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

From investigatory study and field research, we have verified that Quilombola communities employ communicational processes linked to activities of mobilization, visibility, empowerment and production of new sociabilities.

The beginning of these processes, in general, arises within the worsening of eviction threats and actions of violence against the communities. The African descendants, who had constituted themselves as a group from a strategic invisibility as a possible opposition to slavery, rely on other social movements to build a network that moves itself based on identities, on adversaries and projects in common, becoming visible with linked objectives (Scherer-Warren, 2008).

The study concludes that reflection, discussion and action spaces, produced onwards this new network, contribute to the rescue of the memory and to black and Quilombola ethnic affirmation (Moura, 1990; Moura, 2012). On the other hand, it also confirms the employment of digital platforms in a gesture against the excess of collective oblivion (Moura Figueiredo; Nunes, 2014). The mobilization format sends to an accumulation of diasporic experiences (Hall, 2003b). The actions planned and executed in the search for visibility and empowerment involve the history of diasporic experiences, in the sense proposed by Hall, but in an experience located in Brazil, marked by the elaboration of a valuable system of attack, defense and resistance – defense and resistance that

might call into question the main contradictions of the dominant political order (Moura, 1987; Anjos, 2011).

However, this scene still does not produce structural alterations on the agenda and ideology propagated by private media, moreover from the fact it is subordinated to detainers of economic and political power interests, quite often located on the opposite edge of black and Quilombola communities (Blacksmith, 2004; Clavelin, 2011).

Overall, in the analysis of this mobilization of the Quilombola community Rio dos Macacos, we evidence, one more time, the centrality of the culture, as suggested by Hall (1997), in the direction of understanding how social action may be cultural action, since such as social practice it communicates a meaning. In this in case, a meaning of empowerment and self-reflection of a community that started to tell their own history (through cultural events, videos, web posts etc.) to place themselves and to get visibility in the political and media arena, aiming at guaranteeing their permanence on the ancestral territory and conquering social rights.

A new language of communicational and political action is developed based on silenced cultural practices by the holders of economic political power. A vigorous off-line mobilization comes before the occupation of media space. First, communities had shared information and had fortified themselves in their actual presence and then they occupied highways, streets, public agencies and theaters. We can see within this process the words of the poet Nelson Maca (2008): “Black War, Quilombola strategy!”

These new spaces of sociability could be observed both in a more literal, physical meaning of social space, such as events, marches, meetings etc. and in a extended meaning, including virtual network. In this perspective, the claim for collective property of land, historically occupied by African descendants fighting against slavery, is no longer a restricted battle against courts and parliaments, but also mobilizes other black social groups used to act in blogs, social media and websites.

In Quilombola community Rio dos Macacos we notice the self-reflexive capacity manifested in the narratives of interviewed leaderships and in documents of the mobilization process in the campaign “We are all Rio dos Macacos”. We also realize a critical attitude of the community over Quilombola territoriality, expressed in other eventual documents, under the example of the slogan “Nós num somos invasor não, meu senhor, quando eles chegaram, acharam a gente”, which is in the Letter of Quilombo Rio dos Macacos (2012); *new sociabilities* had been noticed both on the campaign itself, performed in 2012, and during the achievement of the



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securitization of part of the territory officially recognized as a remainder of Quilombo, in the year of 2015.

Since the point of view of a diasporic experience (Hall, 2003b), history and experience of Quilombolas of Rio dos Macacos discloses the potentialities described by Hall. It is about a black community, afrodescendent, that shares with other communities, families and groups the African origin, the history of fight against violence and slavery, as well as the capacity to face several forms of oppression. A confrontation that invokes cultural practices transmitted orally and the capacity of collectivization as a way of producing common strategies of survival. Strategies allowing the constitution of new identities and protagonisms, capable of causing discomfort to detainers of power.

Even if all this process of mobilization, empowerment, self-reflection and opening to new sociabilities is strong, the community Rio dos Macacos continues to live an impasse since 2012 – when it has initiated the campaign for media visibility – until the date of this article, 2015, without success on the definitive process of lands titration. This scene confirms once more that, even if it is actually important, visibility “is not everything” (Sovik, 2014: 181). However, it constitutes a basic element in the framework where Quilombola community Rio dos Macacos achieved a spotlight in media and could build its empowerment process, on which it has demonstrated self-reflective capacity. These are some of the factors that could be – only the future may say – steps which may consolidate the definitive conquer of the territory for the community, the final goal of the whole mobilization process.

Looking at the scene we drew concerning this impasse of territorial ownership, we consider that institutional and legal proceedings were only the first step of a series of actions that had burst into culture and communication fields, with strategies able to perform differences and dislocate established arrangements of power (Hall, 2003a). Although we are in front of a carefully regulated visibility, there is an inversion in course, that aims at creating its own models and identities.

The strategies employed sends to the black repertoire pointed out by Hall, on the famous text “What is this ‘black’ in black popular culture?”: style as a substance of the event, music as a structure and body as a representation screen (Hall, 2003a). These three factors permeate the actions of Quilombola community and its partners network, either in manifestations on the street, either on cultural acts, or yet within social media through the Internet. These are strategies that, upon the perspective of Hall, sew a linguistic innovation able to occupy a social space originally belonging to others and to construct an alternative repertoire from the diversity of black experience, which, in this specific case, joined the experience of communities of black diaspora that,

although coming from different contexts (countryside and city), articulate themselves and mutually fortify as people of black diaspora.

This possibility of displacing power arrangements is an essential contribution by Stuart Hall, who noticed, in the meeting and joint of black groups, an enormous potential of decolonizing minds, generating empowerment and influencing the historical process permanently opened. The experience of Quilombolas of Rio dos Macacos and its partner network demonstrates that Hall knew how to translate academically the transforming potential of citizens and diasporic citizens, being, at the same time, an inspired theoretician for these black transatlantic articulations. ■

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