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Identitarian Politics in the *Quilombo* Frechal. Live Histories in a Brazilian Community of Slave Descendants

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Abstract

Based on an extended fieldwork, the paper discusses the construction of identity in a Brazilian quilombo – a term originally used by the Portuguese authorities to juridically define the flights of the Brazilian slaves. Appealing to a Constitutional Article granting the property of the land to the descendant of the fugitive slaves, the people of Frechal (Maranhão) obtained - after complex events overshadowed by tension and violence - the expropriation of the land bought by an entrepreneur of São Paulo with the precise intent to forcibly expel the local population. Founding their right on an idea of cultural authenticity and mobilizing a symbolism capable of legitimating their claims and of giving them a legal weight, they transformed themselves from object of slavery, discrimination and racism to ethno-political subjects. Proceeding from the analysis of this paradigmatic case, the article shows how the term quilombo can be “re-semanticized” in order to be applicable to the contemporary situations of the Afro-Brazilian population. The actuality of the word, transferred from its original juridical meaning of colonial matrix, is founded on the idea that the quilombos are not isolated survivals of the past to honor in the memory of the heroes that fought against slavery. Rather they represent true projects of a new political order, nuclei of the contemporary resistance founded on the collective property of the land. As such the quilombos are considered as real counterpoints to the neoliberal expansion in the rural areas.

This article, based on an extended fieldwork carried out in Maranhão (Brazil) in the 1990's (Malighetti, 1998, 2004, 2007)¹, discusses the areas of exchange in which I defined the identity of a Brazilian rural black community, officially declared *Reserva Extrativista do Quilombo Frechal*. A Federal Decree of 1992 combined two Constitutional devices, ordering, after complex events overshadowed by tension and violence, the expropriation of about 10.000 hectares of land bought in 1974 by a entrepreneur of São Paulo with the precise intent to expel the local population. On the one hand, the ordinance acknowledged the secular harmonic relationship between the population and the natural resources protected by Article 225. On the other, it recognized the rights of the descendants from *quilombos* granted by Article 68 of the *Atos das Disposições Constitucionais Transitórias* stating that “to the descendants from the communities of the *quilombos* which are occupying their land is recognized the definitive property, having the state to emit the respective titles on their behalf”.

Deriving from the term *kilombu* of the Bantu-Quimbundo language, originally indicating the *camp* or the *tent* and, in the seventeenth century, the Western African concentration camps of the slaves to be shipped overseas, the word *quilombo* was used by the Portuguese authorities to define juridically the flights of the Brazilian slaves (Freitas, 1976, 1984).² With this legal meaning the name passed through Brazilian history, underpinning the legal dispositions of the colonial period, the repressive policies of the imperial age, the Republican legislation and the Constitution of 1988. Developed as an instrument to fight against the slave rebellions, all the conceptions of the term *quilombo* have their fundamental reference in the definition of the Conselho Ultramarino³, dated 2 December 1740 which considers as *quilombos* “all the dwellings with more than five slaves escaped, in part depopulated, even without constructions”⁴.

Structures

Exhibiting an identitarian dynamic crystallized in the course of the fight against the *fazendeiro* and in the acquisition and production of juridical documents, the case of the community of Frechal could be easily considered as a paradigmatic example of the political theory of identity. According to this approach, identity emerges in the contraposition among groups and in the competitions for the access to scarce resources. It reflects political intents and manifests itself, in its operative and instrumental character, in defense of collective interests (Cohen, 1974).

The political connotation of identity in Frechal could be traced back to external processes, founded on the contingent competition for material and symbolic resources. The threat to

¹ These books refers to an extended fieldwork in which I lived in the village of the Baixada Occidental Maranhense from August 1994 to December 1994 and from January 1996 to December 1996. Using the reflexivity implied in the notion of hermeneutical circle, the works present their conclusions as the dialogical product of a negotiation between the anthropologist's perspectives and that of the interlocutors.

² In English, escaped slaves were referred to as *marroons*, or *bush negros* (Price, 1983). In Spanish the terms used are *palenques* or *cimarron* (Barnet, 1966).

³ Institution created in 1640 by King D. João IV (1604-1656) to administrate the colonies.

⁴ Translation by the author.

structural and territorial borders had strengthened the symbolic circumscription of identity. In this sense identity could be thought of as expressing a consciousness of interests and rights which broke with a past of alienation. It favored the recovery of a personal and communal dignity devastated by the domination of other identities. By appealing to an idea of cultural authenticity and mobilizing a symbolism capable of legitimating their claims and of giving them a legal weight, the people of Frechal had transformed themselves from object of slavery, discrimination and racism into ethno-political subjects.

The *quilombola* self-definition constituted a strong model of identity founded on a primordial symbolic texture. Its patterns underlined the bond with a cultural and material legacy from an heroic past, grounded on a tangible reference of belonging to a common origin and to a defined territory. The language of the *quilombo* was the guiding principle regulating the repartition of both time and space. On the one hand, time unified the origin and the destiny in relation to a territory on which the ancestors lived and for which they fought. On the other hand, territoriality founded the identification with an historical and cultural tradition.

The antiquity of the occupation of the land, rooted in the genealogy and in the sense of belonging to the group, consolidated a history grounded in the present and relevant for it. A recurring expression during my interviews with the members of the community, justified the legitimacy of the property of the land with the fact of being “sons of the land” according to Jovina’s words: “we were born here and we grew up here. Our navel is buried [...] in the houses from which he [the *fazendeiro*] wanted to throw us out”⁵. Genealogy was strictly linked to the idea that the ancestors did not live in any other place beside Africa. The reality of the *quilombo* was founded on the common descent from a single family, called Cohelo from the name of the ancient masters, Cohelo da Souza, according to the customs of the slave regime: “We are all relatives, cousins. We descend from one single family, Cohelo. Because the master was Cohelo [...]. The people thought that the persons who were born and worked for them had to have their signature”⁶. The village seemed to follow an endogamous logic, favoring unions among members of the community: “People here marries only with people from here [...]. They marry with their cousins [...]. We wanted to stay united. We did not want to spread the family.”⁷.

In the memory of Frechal genealogy was strictly linked to the land. The members of the village considered themselves as a group from an identity founded on a territory occupied for centuries: they seemed to see themselves as “identical” in relation to a land constituting the space of a common history and configuring the positive identity of *moradores* [inhabitants]. The current term *terra comun* [common land] was used as an element of an identity indissociable from the territory and from the rules of its appropriation. The common use was a defining characteristic, founded on the collective use of the land and on its indivisibility, the tight kinship relations, the specific features of solidarity, reciprocity, and the participation in the cultural practices.

⁵ Jovina Silva Gomes (1939), 29.3.96, tape n. 12, notebook n. 14, pp. 73-74.

⁶ Jovina Silva Gomes (1939), 29.3.96, tape n. 12, notebook n. 14, pp. 79-80.

⁷ Tomaz Ribeiro “Bauta” (1932), 28.04.96, tape n. 24, notebook n. 28, p. 2.

Processes

Persuaded that identity could not pre-exist, as a structure, before the process of its formation (Malighetti, 2007), I analyzed the ethno-genetic mechanisms, wishing to deconstruct the processes of their construction. For this purpose I dialogically related my constructive conception of identity to the reification of the concept performed by my interlocutors (Malighetti, 2008). I attempted to show, Wittgensteinially, how the work of crystallization of identity had been contingently elaborated in the course of the fight against the *fazendeiro* and in the acquisition and production of the judicial documents, powerful filters in the process of identity construction. Inexorably capturing the identitarian dynamics inside the rigid categories “true” or “false”, the legal proceedings promote substantial and essential concepts like *territoriality*, *genealogy*, *race* and the cathartic eliminations of impurities and contradictions (Kilani, 1994; Remotti, 1996). They invite the researcher to look for authenticity and to adopt a positive logic of verification, putting oneself in front of the collusive risk of crystallizing not only the natives’ point of view, but also one’s own.

Relying on historical documents and on bibliographical sources, the petition of the community to the law court was founded on the argument that the present-day *comunidades negras* or *terras de preto* (land of the blacks) were, according to Article 68, descendants of the *quilombos* communities and hence eligible the entitlement of the land on which they were living. The construction of the conceptual field of the term *quilombo* had its starting point in the contemporary social situations. It was conceived as a political and organizational instrument whose main goal was the securing of the land. It proceeded from the actual realities, localized and defined by the social actors as *terras de preto* and it ended up identifying them with the *quilombos* (Almeida de 1989).

Given the difficulty of finding factual evidence, archaeological or paleontological proofs on the existence of the *quilombo*, being impossible to prove – as Article 68 demanded – that the land on which the communities supposedly descending from *quilombos* live today is the same as the one originally occupied by their ancestors, the community consultants proceeded with the assumption that all the rural black communities were descendants from the ancient *quilombos*. According to Ivan Costa of the *Centro de Cultura Negra* – the most important institution supporting the fight of Frechal – the conceptualization of the term *quilombo* acquired the meaning of making the formal recognition of the territoriality of the rural black communities possible:

It was clear that the quilombo was that of the fugitive slaves, and that we did not have any possibility, in the 20th century, to succeed in finding any community which really is descendant from quilombos [...]. We call this word descendants a ‘straitjacket’ word ... because it is very difficult to prove that a black community is really a quilombo or not. [...]. For this reason we [...] think that all the black communities are descendants from quilombos [...]. Well, for us it is difficult to prove an area as descendant from quilombo according to historical or anthropological parameters [...]. This name “descendants” is difficult, because it includes and benefits very few communities. If we extend its meaning the term applies much better, because it grants the right to all the communities having a major group of pretos.⁸

⁸ Ivan Rodrigues Costa, 7.3.96, tape n. 8, notebook n. 3, pp. 249-251.

The *Centro de Cultura Negra* intended to relate the fight against the slave regime with the fight of the contemporary black workers against the exploitation of the great landowners. To this end they were looking for what Dimas Salustiano da Silva, lawyer of the community, called “a paradigmatic instance” that could allow them to elaborate and test their strategies:

*We had a thesis of which they were an actual example [...]. The thesis was on the applicability, on the feasibility of a purview referring to the black communities descendants from quilombos [...]. We chose Frechal. The people there lived under the pressure of an owner [...] about to be expelled from their land. There were a lot of stories of violence [...] perpetrated by gunmen hired by the fazendeiro.*⁹

The procedural petition inferred the necessary existence of various *quilombos* from the great concentration of slaves in Maranhão, in particular in the region of the Baixada Occidental, a place of first colonization and one of the major economic centers of the country from the 18th to the first part of the 19th century¹⁰. Founded on the already mentioned answer of the King of Portugal to the Conselho Ultramarino, for its wide applicability, the petition led to the conclusion that “it was sufficient to have six *negros* in Frechal, even without a place to inhabit... to claim the existence of a *quilombo*”¹¹.

The petition criticized the historiographic production which had always denied the existence of *quilombos* in the region, having ignored the insurrectionist activities of the slaves. To this it opposed a series of documentary evidence starting from 1832, mainly the messages of the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the Province and the alarmed reports of the Chiefs of Police that testified to the relevance of the fight against the *quilombos*. Moreover it pointed to the existence of an important but inaccessible correspondence of

⁹ Dimas Salustiano da Silva, 14.04.96, tape n. 20, notebook n. 26, pp.1-3.

¹⁰ The institution in 1682 of the Companhia do Comércio do Maranhão (1682-1755) is considered the official beginning of the introduction of slaves in Maranhão (Amaral, 1897; Meireles, 1960; Dias, 1970). The traffic intensified with the new Companhia Geral do Comércio do Grao-Para e Maranhão (1755-1778), which monopolized the trade for the following 20 years. Dias (1970) holds that during its existence the total number of slaves sold in Maranhão was 10,616. In general, Castro (1892) thinks that the flux was of 3,000 slaves before 1755; 12,000 in the period of the Companhia do Comércio; 15,000 until the end of the 18th century. The data of the 1799 census indicate 31,722 blacks and 18,573 mulattos (Goulart, 1975). Father Francisco de Nossa Senhora dos Prazeres (Prazeres 1891) and José Amaral (1897), estimates that in 1818 the population of the Maranhão was of 160,000 inhabitants (indios excluded) and that the number of slaves for every free man was of two against one. Alfonso de Taunay (1954) reports that in 1822 of the 200,000 inhabitants of Maranhão the 66,6% were slaves, the highest percentage in Brasil. Similarly, Dunshee de Abranches (1941) affirms that in 1822 there were 130,000 slaves in Maranhão, more than half the population of the state. The area of Guimarães, a municipality that until 1964 comprehended the village of Frechal, was one of the areas of major concentration of plantations, described by the sources of the period as particularly rich and productive (*O Diário do Maranhão*, 6.5.1857). In 1860 the number of factories to treat sugarcane was above 100 unities, putting Guimarães at the second place in Maranhão, which had 410 factories on the whole (Viveiros, 1954; Lima, 1981). In the Municipality of Guimarães, the datas of Marques (1970) indicate that in 1870, on a population of 14,500 souls, 5,000 were slaves.

¹¹ Petition p. 58.

the Judge of Turiaçú dated 20/04/1834 and addressed to the Vice-President of the Province of Maranhão, in which a *quilombo* named *Frechal* was explicitly mentioned.

Oral and written

The evocative power of the documents, directly linked to the prestige accorded to the written culture, constituted a central point in the community's symbolic system and in the rhetorical strategies. Usually the discourses of my interlocutors emphasized the function of the documents in assuring the claim of the *quilombola* origin, the ancient occupation of the land and the harmonic use of its natural resources. Their relation to the documents was characterized by patterns of knowledge and of action that had a decisive efficacy in the local system of representation and of identification, delimiting a variety of spaces where memory could unfold.

While functioning as a criterion of truth and as guarantee of the authenticity of the discourse, the written records acted in a strategic context of belief and persuasion, independently of controls, verifications, and from the very possibility to be seen. The mere appeal to unobtainable documents, often non-existent and whose content was, in any case, almost unknown, had a real performative efficacy and a peculiar self-sufficiency: "the document lives with me" Inácio stated meaningfully in different occasions¹².

The documents constituted what Kilani considers "complete references" (Kilani, 1994, p. 243), which, having definitively freed their sense, become indisputable. Their mere invocation - which Kilani defines as "incantatory" (Kilani, 1992, p. 307) - was sufficient to produce a persuasive effect and to support the belief in what they enunciated.

The importance and the power of the written trace took its force from the oral, inverting the relation usually drawn between the oral and the written registers. The rhetoric of the people of Frechal attributed to the oral the foundation of the written. Indeed it was the narrative that created the document and not the contrary. What counted in the discourses was not much the designation of a content. Rather, it was the very linguistic act of designating. The use of the written document participated in a modality of action that modified the usual function of the written in favor of a purely illocutionary one. This construction revealed what Kilani (1992, p. 313) considers a sort of synecdoche turned upside down: the whole (the constructed speech) represents the part (the document).

The necessity and the efficacy of the local knowledge did not spring from the fact of pretending an objective relation with the documents and with history. Rather it derived from the fact of establishing itself against objective knowledge. The narrations of my interlocutors showed themselves to be rather contradictory and incomplete. The concept of *quilombo* itself was seldom referred to by the community. Some of them, mainly the eldest, ignored its meaning, simply identifying it, like Durvalino, with the land: "The *quilombo* are the divided lands [...] The *quilombo* are the hectares of land which he [the *fazendeiro*] took away [...] I am not able to explain it well. Inácio is the one who knows.

¹² Inácio de Jesus Ribeiro (1943), 21.04.96, tape n. 2, notebook "A", p. 118.

He is more practical”.¹³ Others, like Mauricio, confused it with the unit of length (*kilometre*): “The *quilombo* that I heard of is the distance [...] From here to the other place there are so many *quilombos*”¹⁴. In many cases the speakers did not make any reference to the term and addressed my requests of explanations to Inácio, who was thought to know how to answer because “he was always called to the reunions”¹⁵.

Regarding the origins of the *quilombo*, the different positions were also quite distinct. The majority did not know. Some maintained that the *quilombo* had preceded the *fazenda* and provoked its rise:

*There were four pretos who came here. They made this quilombo [...] From Africa [...]. From there they escaped and settled here. These four pretos... they were... benguela... mandinga... and... and... No. I forgot the other two names. Before I was remembering them... benguela... I forgot. If I remember them I'll tell you. [...] It was after they made this quilombo that Torquato Cohelo da Souza came here. They were hidden in the forest. Later they arrived and built the fazenda [...]. The beginning was like this: they escaped from the quilombo of Manuel Coelho de Souza and came here [...]. From there the hunters came searching for fugitive slaves [...]. They found that it was a place of quilombo [...]. And here they formed a fazenda.*¹⁶

Various discourses underlined that the fugitives were in contact with the slaves of the *fazenda*. Some said that they were working for the *fazenda* during the day, returning to the *quilombo* at night. Durvalino, connoting negatively the fugitives and not believing they could be from Frechal, distinguished between the slaves of Frechal and those from Africa:

*Some time they were going to the forest [...]. In order not to work [...]. And Manuel Coelho sent people to catch them [...] The capitão¹⁷ from here went to catch them [...]. Those from Frechal did not escape [...]. Those from here did not go to the forest. They were used. Only those brought from Africa went to the forest [...]. Those who escaped were the lazy slaves that didn't want to work. But those who were obedient came back [...]. Those from Frechal didn't escape. They stayed in Frechal because they liked it. They had animals, food, milk. They had a school... medicines.*¹⁸

Different stories asserted the harmonic life with the masters of the past, emphasizing the reality of slavery in a positive manner:

If we needed a bicycle the master bought it... and then we paid him back. If we needed a hat, the master bought it... and then we paid him back. In this way there were many workers obtaining many things: oxen, cows. Like my grandfather. He was a man with 4 or 5 carts of oxen with 4 oxen every cart [...]. He used to work in the great sugar cane plantations. The cane, in general in this region it was half and half. Half to us and half to the master [...]. They made money to go and buy things. They were called pretos ricos [...]. When it was harvest time

¹³ Durvalino Raimundo Nonato Carneiro “Doti” (1910-2001), 15.2.1996, tape n. 1, notebook n. 1A, p.71.

¹⁴ Mauricio Martins Araujo, (1910-2002) 21.2.96, tape n. 2, notebook n. 3, p. 142.

¹⁵ Raimunda Silva “Mundica” (1943), 30.03.96, tape n. 13, notebook n. 16, p. 24.

¹⁶ Hélio Inácio Silva Ribeiro (1970), 24.2.96, tape n. 5, notebook n. 3, pp. 199-201.

¹⁷ *capitão do mato*: term referring to the salve-hunters.

¹⁸ Durvalino Raimundo Nonato Carneiro “Doti” (1910-2001), 15.2.1996, tape n. 1, notebook n. 1A, pp. 22-25 and p. 12.

the carts stopped there... the oxen carts... going in and out. There were many carts. I didn't see this [...]. All had oxen, cows, many pigs, many chickens, the cachaça at home to cure. Nobody bought sugar.¹⁹

Some narratives – that I found in other black communities as well - told of an owner who, having mortgaged the *fazenda*, succeeded in discharging his debts and in saving his property, with the help of the blacks. These last ones increased their productivity and solved the emergency, receiving part of the land in exchange. There were various versions of this story, diverging for what concerns the historical period and the identity of the protagonists. For some accounts the central character of the event was Manuel Cohelo de Souza, the first Lusitanian to arrive in the area and to found the *fazenda* Frechal in 1792. According to other versions it was José Junior Cohelo de Souza, son of José and grandson of Manuel Cohelo de Souza, who donated the land to the blacks in a period that should be dated between 1858 and his death in 1894. In other discourses the main character was Artur, José Junior's son and last heir of the family, judge in the province of Vitoria de Mearim and major of Guimarães from 1919 to 1922. Artur received the *fazenda* from his brother Francisco Sotero (1871-1907), keeping it until his death (1922) when it passed to his wife Raimunda Fernandez Boga. She administered it for more than thirty years before leaving it to her sister Zuleide who sold it to Adam Van Bulow, the last owner before Tomas de Melo Cruz, the protagonist of the conflict with the community (Cohelo da Sousa, 1974).

The story of a master living peacefully with the blacks was stressed in the accounts collected also outside Frechal. An article in the local newspaper²⁰ written on the occasion of Torquato's death, points out the good relations between the slaves and the owner in this way:

He treated his slaves with much charity. These ones, in illnesses, received from him consolation and cares that alleviated their sufferings. And not only on unfortunate occasions, but also in times of health, he always sought to nourish them in the best way. For this it is possible to say that in the area of Guimarães there weren't slaves treated so well. When they knew of the death of their good master, they could not keep back their tears for the pain that afflicted them, and much weeping was done in his name.

The preconception of not having preconceptions

These narratives seemed to confirm Freyre's myth of the *bom senhor* (Freyre, 1933) that has apologetically characterized the comprehension of the Brazilian slavery. The hegemonic forms of understanding, political, academic and popular, representing the master as a benevolent friend of a submissive and loyal slave, considered slavery as a form of release of the blacks, taken from a cruel place and from the yoke of barbarous masters and brought to an harmonic land and in more "human" living conditions. Supported by the ideology of the *democracia racial* and by the homologizing policies of *abrazileiramento* this system of ideas and practices led to consider Brazil as a

¹⁹ José Silva Araujo (1930), 22.2.96, tape n. 2, notebook "A", pp. 9-25.

²⁰ Publicador Maranhense, São Luis, 9 novembro 1860. Translation by the author.

paradigmatic case of well-balanced racial relations. According to its principles the blacks, seduced by the idea of belonging to the system, adopted the same models created by the whites to discriminate them. In other words, the dominated would have refuted their own cultural roots, participating in the process of removal of a past which had discriminated them and continued to do so. Inserted in the colonial formation as labor-force and deprived of their histories and their cultures by policies founded on the division and the dispersion of the same group as a precaution against insurrections, they remained “historically neuter” (Bastide & Fernandes, 1959, p. 107), unable to elaborate an alternative and contrastive culture. In this way the blacks did not articulate an identity capable of creating a counter-culture opposed to that of the whites (Moura, 1988, p.69). The Abolition had then produced ‘free’ men who did not have, within society, any physical or symbolic places from which to articulate an adequate comprehension of the new situation created from the top. The subsequent phagocytation of black culture, generically “folklorized” inside the national culture as *Afro-Brazilian*, would have neutralized the possibility of black mobilization on the basis of an identity dangerous qua antagonistic.

These arguments which I rather attributed to what Florestan Fernandes correctly defined *o preconceito de não ter preconceitos* (Fernandes, 1965, p. 25) are totally inadequate to comprehend the violent Brazilian reality, racist and discriminatory. Above all they cannot explain the contradictions, dramatically expressed in Frechal’s narrations about the hard racial discrimination:

It was a criminal form, a hard discrimination [...]. Colour is racism. In ancient times racism existed. It exists also today, among the people that do not know the things. In Mirinzal²¹ the preto didn't exist. The preto didn't live in Mirinzal and didn't participate in anything... in the feasts. He didn't go there. He didn't dance there [...] when you arrived to a feast and you were preto... you could also be white with a very white skin but if you had the curly hair you couldn't take part. You were preto. They know the preto not for the colour. But for the hair. [...]. This hair, the curly hair... they are hair of the blacks, of the negros. In this way the caboclos²² didn't allow the pretos to participate in their feasts [...]. They were spitting, they were giving nasty looks. At that time the pretos for the caboclo were like poo-poo, shit [...]. We used to wear a wig... with animal hair... we put a bowl on our head that looked like hair... hair of white men [...]. The caboclo considered the black as a wild animal, as an irrational animal, that did not have any value, because he was slave. He was discriminated, maltreated, whipped, sold, negotiated [...]. They called him urubù [vulture].²³

Actually, the hierarchization of the differences through the negative consideration of the color *preto* had produced, also in the discriminated subjects, what Cross calls *anti-black* feeling (Cross, 1995, p. 54), dominated by racist stigma:

²¹ Mirinzal a municipality that includes the village of Frechal.

²² The term *caboclo* derives etymologically from *kari'boka*, a *Tupi* word whose meaning is “deriving from the white”. In the modern Brazilian language it indicates the results of the unions between whites and *Indios*. Today, especially in the North of the country, it indicates also the unions between blacks and whites.

²³ Inácio de Jesus Ribeiro (1943), 05.05.96, tape 05, notebook “C”, p. 35; 07.05.96, tape n. 6, notebook “D”, pp. 10-13 and pp. 27-29; 21.5.1996, tape n. 8, notebook n. 1B, pp. 77-79.

Previously the preto didn't know that he was preto [...] At that time the negros were more hidden... because they were ashamed to say they were negros [...]. Before the struggle against Tomás [...] it is logical that they didn't like to say 'preto from Frechal' [...]. We were pretos of ourselves [...] Because we didn't do what we wanted. Up to humble ourselves, our person. We were slaves of ourselves [...].²⁴

Live history

The contradictions, the oblivions, the hesitations of the memory were constitutive elements of the memory itself, points of view on the past and, above all, signs of the perspective of the present. In this sense the past, in being comprehended, became part of the present that originated it. This did not mean to confer truth to the past, considered as a true history. Rather it meant to consider the past as *live history*, according to the meaningful words of Inácio²⁵.

In Frechal the reorganization of the historic memory was done through chronological cuts and the selections of features considered relevant in the contemporary perspective. The partial and often contradictory character of the informants' narratives was well anchored in the circumstances of the present and in the ideological patterns organizing them. These were flexible enough to incorporate and integrate new elements and divergent interpretations. The demands of the structuring contemporary context determined the performance of the ethno-genetic structure, its permanence and its changes.

The history told by the community of Frechal, cannot thus be considered as fixed in time and having its own ontological autonomy from the present and from those who adopted it granting its continuity and persistence. On the one side, it was something constantly reinvented by the projective imagination turning backwards. On the other, the memory of the events was restructured and transformed into an account by the structuring processes of the narrative (Ricoeur, 1983). In this way tradition in being preserved was altered and, in being altered, was also preserved.

Frechal's history, like a myth, did not register a past to preserve, but it was a selective account of it. It adapted the past to the conditions of the present and, as such, it was not pure memory. Rather it consisted in a work on memory that, aiming pragmatically at convincing, was grounded on the removal of any manipulation.

The memory of the people of Frechal, in the process of identity construction, often drew from the great reserve of the learned history deposited in the documents. In accordance with their possibilities and through the aid of the lawyers and of the activists, my informants combined the events of the great history with local meanings. Universal history was inside the local event and in turn, the local event took the form and the pretensions of the great tradition, becoming itself universal or national history. The main reference was

²⁴ Maria da Paz Santos Gomes "Cota" (1942), 22.05.96, tape 27, notebook n. 31, pp. 53-56.

²⁵ Inácio de Jesus Ribeiro (1943), 21.4.1996, tape n. 1, notebook "A", pp. 51-52; tape 8, notebook 1B, pp. 65-73.

to the figure of *Zumbi* and to the *quilombo* of *Palmares* - in many ways the place of re-appropriation of their own history and identity²⁶.

The past, inserted into the present as political language and as foundation myth, functioned as a model for reality and as an instrument to claim the ownership of the land. The inconsistencies of historical knowledge were thus recovered and used as strategic weapons to ground identity claims. They founded the right to property on different trajectories, interwoven in often contradictory ways: the *quilombo*, the ancient occupation of the land, the story of the mortgage and the harmonious use of natural resources.

Inversions

In the case of Frechal the problem of identity was understandable inside a discriminating social and political order. It expressed the belonging of the members to the community, overturning the negative identities produced by more powerful groups. Identity could be comprehended as the symbolic inversion of the characteristics of identification defined by the racist and slave society.

The terms *negro* or *preto* [black]²⁷ themselves had been transformed into positive marks of identity:

*I am proud to be preto. Satisfied with my colour. I take it upon myself [...]. I shout it loud [...]. Because we are negro, we are preto, we are coloured [...]. In any cabocla family there is a negro, because they are more dark than my son, who is yellow [...]. My family likes the curly hair, my family likes these plaits. At least I like it. My family likes the negro, all of the negro, everything. I like the preto from Bahia [...]. They are negros with fine skin, true negros, strong, with nice teeth. I adore them. When I see the negro on television, nobody knows how I feel. I feel... satisfied... I feel... proud. I feel full of happiness. For me... it is like a starry sky. I like negros. I don't know whether it is because I go to the meetings so often, but I like negros a lot.*²⁸

The appropriation of the term *negro* was part of the struggle for the conquest of an economic basis on which to found subsistence practices. The people from Frechal identified the terms *preto* and *negro* with the socio-economic condition of the rural worker. Black identity, not passively endured but accepted with pride, emerged as a main factor of cohesion and mobilization:

Identity in Frechal is to be of an origin of traditional race... negra... traditional as rural workers, with their fishing, their breeding practices, their struggle for their rights. From here

²⁶ This great concentration of slaves, localized between Algoas and Pernambuco, had a centralized government, led by the historical figures of *Ganga-Zumba* and of *Zumbi*. The *Quilombo de Palmares* already existed at the beginning of the 17th century, as it is possible to infer from the fact that the Governor Diego Botelho prepared, between 1602 and 1608, an expedition commanded by Bartolomeu Bezzerra against it. It grew during the Dutch domination, reaching the 25,000 inhabitants before being destroyed by the military troops at the end of the 17th century (Carneiro, 1947; Freitas, 1976).

²⁷ In Frechal the two terms were used interchangeably.

²⁸ Jovina Silva Gomes (1939), 29.3.96, tape n. 12, notebook n. 14, pp. 108-109.

we have become recognized persons, interviewed persons, persons seen by the Brazilian population. And our identity means that we have [...] a whole tradition of preto origin. [...]. Previously in Africa it wasn't called preto but negro... negro of Afro... negros from Africa... [...]... the race from Africa.²⁹

The emphasis on black identity was founded on a dignity linked to the fight against discrimination. The identity construction was based on a praise of the cultural qualities and on the redemption of slavery which, in its turn, passed from being considered an element of shame to a factor of pride:

Wasn't it the work of the slaves to make this country called Brazil a rich country? Wasn't it the slave to do all this? Did he contribute to the development of the entire country? Can't I then be considered as a hero?' [...]. Because if it exists a country built by the hands of the negros, then, we all are heroes [...]. Why should I feel humiliated? No. I must feel proud to have a country today, Brazil, built by my ancestors.³⁰

The term *quilombo* as well, inverted its formal negative connotations classifying crimes, and became a positive category of self-definition. The narratives recovered the legal sense of the term, extending its original meaning produced by the representations of the dominant group which held the learned lexicon of the juridical culture. The wide applicability of the original legal definition lent itself to be a useful instrument to consider *quilombo* any case of flight and hence to prove the existence of the *quilombo* of Frechal. The claim of *quilombola* identity was used as a lever to institutionalize a group produced by the colonialist and slave legislation, whose conceptualizations of the *quilombos* deliberately negated the slave system and placed the *quilombos* at the margins of society.

Before the promulgation of the Constitution of 1988, nobody, comprehensibly, aimed at self-defining himself or herself as *quilombola*: neither in Africa because it meant capture and deportation, nor in Brazil because it was a sign of criminality. This could explain the reticence and the lack of self-definition in terms of *quilombo* by the rural black communities. It also clarified the use, in the narratives, of the term *terra de preto* or *comunidade negra rural*:

Article 68 came to give priority to the descendants. It was from 1988 [...] Until then we did not know this article. What made us know the article was the struggle against Tomás. [...] The conflict had a form which provided a juridical advisor who recognized us as descendants from slaves and as descendants from quilombo. [...] Article 68 says that those who live in the land as descendants from quilombo have the right that the State issues a definitive title.³¹

The theoretical implications and the practical translations of the concept considered as *quilombo* what was outside the system. More correctly, it referred to the periphery of the plantations and referred to economic activities considered as marginal. The definition established a division: on one hand, it put solitary places, uninhabited lands under the

²⁹ Inácio de Jesus Ribeiro (1943), 06.05.96, tape n. 5, notebook "C", p. 74.

³⁰ Hélio Inácio Silva Ribeiro (1970), 30.5.96, tape n. 31, notebook n. 38, pp. 4-6; 24.2.96, tape n. 5, notebook n. 4, pp.37-43.

³¹ Inácio de Jesus Ribeiro (1943), 24.5.1996, tape n. 10, notebook "F", pp. 17-18.

absolute dominion of nature, a synonym of wild, criminal and undisciplined life; on the other it classified those situations in which the slave regime established productive unities, oriented by the principles of civilization ruling the sphere of the master house.

In Frechal the stigmas of the legal thought (disorder, indiscipline, marginality) were overturned and made positive. The constitutive elements of the term *quilombo* comprehended the collective actions which deliberately negated the slave system, placing its actors at the margins of society. They founded themselves on the criminal classification of the escapes, seen as a way to refuse and negate the domination of the plantations. From these perspectives the concept of *quilombo* does not allow for localizations. Rather it refers to the relations of production: the *quilombo* is where the social actors produce autonomously creating an economic and social system based on the collective appropriation of the resources in opposition to the system of the monoculture. As the anthropologist Alfredo Wagner Berno de Almeida – coordinator of the researches in Frechal – maintained:

Now from our point of view we don't have a geographical definition of quilombo, nor we have a historically frozen definition [...] Because the quilombo is not where this document indicates [...] This could be the position of an archaeologist. But it is not ours [...]. I am interested in where are the social actors influenced by that situation. If in that moment they deployed themselves very far in the quilombo and were then captured and brought near the casa grande, the historical phenomenon taking place was the aquilombolamento of the casa grande [...]. Because the imperial troops withdrew the quilombos from their places [...]. The quilombo was there, where they stayed. They took it away from there and they brought it here. Now they want to take it away from here and bring it there, saying that here isn't theirs, that the quilombo can only be in the forest. Before it wasn't theirs there, where there was the quilombo. Now it isn't theirs here. [...] Now, if they were producing autonomously here, the quilombo was here [...] Even at one hundred meters from the casa grande, it is quilombo [...]. The quilombo is not the sphinx, it is not a pyramid. [...]. They are not monuments. They aren't part of the artistic patrimony. They are part of the productive life of the country [...]. The quilombo expresses a whole of relations. Hence the quilombo is where those that are producing and living this relation, self-defining as such are.³²

The concept of *quilombo* could thus mean the process of freedom from slavery and it could comprehend any case of transition from slave to free worker. It could include the identities founded on the expression *terras de preto* and constructed from the myth of the *bom patrão* who gave the land in a critical moment of the *fazenda*. These identities, implying the autonomy of the group *vis à vis* the dominion of the *fazendeiro*, contradicted the dominion of the master and enunciated the formation of a free group that had known different situations, including the episode of the legacy and the capture and the return to the *senzala* near the *casa grande*. What wasn't conceived in the place where there was the *quilombo*, it was obtained with the crisis of the power of the *casa grande*: the independence which characterized the *quilombo* went on to represent the *senzala* in a condition of economic crisis which reduced the coercive power of the great owners, forcing them to grant concessions to the slaves in order to escape destruction³³.

³² Almeida de, 23.04.1996, tape n. 22, notebook n. 27, pp. 16-18

³³ The fluctuation in prices of the primary products on the international market produced the crisis of the productive system of the plantations. The cotton crisis and the consequences of the civil

Proceeding from its historical content, the term had thus been “re-semanticized” in order to be applicable to the contemporary situations of the Afro-Brazilian population. The *quilombos* were seen not only as a national manifestation of the fight against slavery, but as true projects of a new political order. They became forms of the collective desire of freedom, subversive and revolutionary. The *quilombos* showed blacks’ capacity for mobilization and organization of an alternative society. Hence they were not interpreted as isolated survivals of a past to be honored in the memory of the heroes that fought against slavery. Rather they were considered as *nuclei* of the contemporary resistance founded on the collective property of the land, and as such, real counterpoints to the logic of the capitalist expansion in the rural areas. This was the actuality of the term *quilombo*, transferred from its original juridical meaning of colonial matrix.

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war in the United States caused a process of decay of the great land properties intensified in the second half of the XIXth century. This was further complicated by the lack of agricultural modernization, incapable to stand the competition with the United States, and by the impossibility of the sugar cane cultivators to compete with the firms of the south of Brazil, which took benefit from the State financing policies privileging the South to the detriment of the North (cfr. Law 6/11/1875). The informal dismemberment of the great plantations, resulted in the formation of rural workers that didn’t live enslaved nor immobilized in the ancient productive units. Rather, it gave rise to a galaxy of little autonomous units, based on the cooperation among the different domestic groups and on the collective use of the natural resources (Lisboa, 1972; Oliveira, 1984; Panini, 1990).

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