
Brazil: The struggle of the tupinambá indigenous people to protect their territory and the conservation of forests

For over 500 years, the indigenous tupinambá people have been massacred and expelled from their territory in the southern part of the state of Bahia. But, since 2004, they succeeded in regaining control of part of their territory, covered by the rich Atlantic Forest (*Mata Atlântica*) which they call the dwelling of the 'enchanted ones'. The 'enchanted ones' guide the lives and struggles of these people. This is one of the tupinambá people's main motives to guard the forest, which for them is sacred, dwelling place of the gods and the source of all life. In this article, besides explaining how they preserve the forest, they make a strong criticism of 'sustainable forest management' schemes that promote the 'selective' extraction of wood.

A tireless struggle for their territory

This is the story of *Serra do Padeiro*, one of the tupinambá communities within the tupinambá indigenous territory, in the heart of the Atlantic Forest in the state of Bahia. This forest area, one of the best preserved in the region, has been the target of attacks by large landowners (*latifundistas*) since the 16th century, when Brazil was colonized by the Portuguese and was subjected to successive cycles of capitalist exploitation. The history of the tupinambá community of *Serra do Padeiro* has been marked by massacres and attempts of evictions. However, it has also been marked, above all, by their strong struggle to defend the most sacred for them: the forests that cover the hills of the region, providing abundant food and water and a good territory to live in. Babau, the chief of the *Serra do Padeiro* community, said that the territory is "mother earth, which is made up of everything. Mother earth gave us the river, which is the milk that nourishes us and gives us water to drink, and the forest, which is our roof and our banquet to feast on." To the tupinambá people, the conservation of the forest, which is abundant on the higher slopes, is also essential because it is the dwelling of the 'enchanted ones' that guide the tupinambás during their life's journey. As Babau said, the forests "represent our faith, our culture, our religion."

Land invasions and illegal dispossession by the dominant regional elite, with the support of the State, led the tupinambás to be confined to a very small area at the beginning of the last decade. This elite assisted in the continuous logging and intensive hunting promoted by large landowners. The destruction of the forest and water springs was a fundamental reason for the tupinambá people to start in 2004 organizing for the process of recovering their lands. In that moment, the large landowners were expelled and thousands of hectares of indigenous land were reoccupied. As a result of pressure from the indigenous people, the federal government set up a Technical Group (TG) to identify the territory traditionally occupied by the tupinambás. The tupinambás wanted the return of 70,000 hectares, but the TG defined an area of 47,000 hectares, extending from the coast of Bahia to *Serra do Padeiro*. But, instead of demarcating and regularizing this already reduced territory, the government, pressured by regional landowners, company owners and influential politicians, invested since 2008 on a process of intimidation and repression, with violent invasions and arbitrary arrests in

the tupinambá territory by the Federal Police, with support from the National Security Force and the Army. To 'solve' the land conflict problem, the government proposed a process called the 'negotiating table', in which the tupinambás would have to reach an agreement with other actors from the region with an interest in the territory to be demarcated. This means that they would be obliged to give up their right to the territory, which is constitutionally guaranteed, for an elite that has always resorted to massacres and the elimination of its people.

Against the 'sustainable forest management' that promotes 'selective' wood extraction

The Atlantic Forest, still abundant in the area, feeds this struggle. The tupinambás have a special care with this forest. To them, the forest is sacred and a constant 'companion.' Babau summarizes this relationship when talking about the struggle to recover their territory: "We joined forces with nature and nature joined forces with us."

Since they reoccupied their territory and the logging stopped, they observed how the forest and, therefore, the water springs are recuperating, how the waters were also running with a greater flow. The tupinambá people are opposed to logging. Babau explains: "The main problem in extracting wood from areas where the tupinambás live is that, culturally, we depend on the forest to perform certain rituals. And in order to perform our rituals, the forest must be intact; the entire chain of life must be protected. When the large landowners began their excessive deforestation, the springs of water we needed began to disappear, the hunting we needed was disappearing, the birds were disappearing (...) As our entire spirituality is closely tied to life and nature, and nature is life, we were all being directly affected, and we had to take immediate measures to defend our life. So we set out to protect nature and then we managed to restore our territory again."

Some groups advocate the option of a 'sustainable forest management' as a way to preserve forests, but Babau said: "There is nothing sustainable about it. If you cut a tree because you need a house, it is a necessity, but when you cut hundreds of trees to satisfy society's needs, it is completely absurd, because nature cannot give back at the same rate that society is taking out. And they cannot forget the fact that that nature exists to protect other lives. When they cut the trees, how many other lives are they destroying upon the earth? And they [the logging companies] do not weep or mourn, because they do not see the deaths that follow. (...) Imagine if the animals of the forest said, 'Well, to make our houses we will go to the city to destroy such-and-such building and bring the material back to the forest to build our house.' How would that city be affected, how would it survive? So taking away the animals' home, taking away the birds' food and the hunting, has nothing sustainable about it. With the size of society as it stands nowadays, another mechanism has to be thought of (...). The largest trees in the forest protect the smaller ones from the wind, from the sun position, and so on. When one element is taken away, something else is being affected. The winds will be stronger, the sun will hit more upon the soils, and you will get the soils drier at that moment, the water will evaporate, a whole combination of connected things are set in motion. So I am against the sustainable forest management."

In regard to the extraction cycles of 'selective' logging of approximately 15-years in areas under 'sustainable forest management', with the promise that three or four seedlings will regrow from each adult tree –which would guarantee forest regeneration-, Babau commented: "I agree with them that three or four seedlings will sprout up, right? But, how many years will it take for that species to produce fruits to feed the birds, and for the first animals to be able to live around that adult plant?" And he continued: "Can a hungry person wait 15 years for a meal? No, they can't. (...) So, this kind of thinking is not compatible with someone who loves life on the planet. Because they are not cutting down just one tree. With this 'selective' process, they are cutting down hundreds of trees. So, they

are taking away an enormous amount of food from the forest animals, and the whole food chain is being affected, the whole forest society is affected. But because human beings think that society is only theirs and that the forest does not have its own society, they think they have the right to rule, saying that nature can regenerate by itself. That is not true: nothing regenerates by itself. There is a context, everything, for the regeneration of anything.”

Securing wood without destroying the forest

The tupinambás’ most important traditional agricultural crop is cassava, which they use to make flour of excellent quality. It is the community’s main source of income, together with shade-grown cocoa grown under the forest trees. They also cultivate a wide variety of other foods, including fruits, which contribute to the community’s food sovereignty. Cassava and the other crops are grown on plots reserved for farming. According to the tupinambás, it is not necessary to use forest areas for agriculture.

However, they need firewood to roast the cassava flour. To satisfy this need, they have planted fast-growing native species that are good for firewood on an area of degraded land, close to one of the flour houses. Marluce, an inhabitant of *Serra do Padeiro*, said: “It only takes three pieces [of this firewood] to roast one sack of flour. We can even burn the green firewood.” Célia, one of the teachers in the community who contributes with indigenous education, calls their reforestation as the ‘energy forest,’ and says that it also meets other demands for wood: “This energy forest also provides fence posts for cattle and livestock enclosures, because the pasture areas require a lot of fence posts. (...) If we would have to get the wood from the forest, the trees would take many years to grow back. But this energy forest takes only a few years to grow, makes excellent wood, is resistant to plagues and it lasts. We made this experience and it has given good results.”

According to Célia and Marluce, the forest plays a very important role in women’s lives. Célia explains: “Mainly because of our rituals, we are deeply identified with the forest, even for medicines, herbs, animals, we use all sorts of things from the forest and it must always be intact (...) to make certain remedies.” Marluce adds: “Our flora and fauna already were seriously plundered, even our fish, they [the landowners] poisoned them back then, but after, things have changed (...), now, there is a water shortage in the nearest city, while we have plenty of water here. Our concern is to preserve our forests and our animals (...), it is a source that we can need someday in the future or our grandchildren, won’t they? That is why we protect them.”

What is a forest for the tupinambás?

To the tupinambás, a forest is much more than a collection of trees, which is the definition internationally adopted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The FAO definition serves the interests of logging companies that see forests as a huge ‘wood warehouse’ to be extracted solely for the purpose of generating profits. The FAO definition also serves the interests of companies that promote eucalyptus monocultures, which Babau refers to as “the monocultures of death.”

As for the tupinambás’ definition of forests, Babau says: “The forest, for us, the tupinambás, is the home that protects life. Do you remember that we, the tupinambás, used to live in this country without building houses of bricks and mortar? And, who ensured our survival here for generations? Was it not the forest? Was not the forest our roof? Was it not also the forest that fed us? So, the forest is not just a collection of trees. The forest supports a dynamic society that depends on it. The birds make their nests in the branches of the trees. Several types of animals, like monkeys, need the *gravatá* (an

epiphytic species of plant) to live in, they need tree trunk hollows to live in. The forest also provides food for many animals, including the wood itself, when it rots and falls to the forest floor and generates different bacteria, creates life which nourishes other animals. So, defining a forest as a collection of trees shows that human beings, at the very least, are backward in thought and in their understanding of life.” And he warns: “To destroy the forest is to destroy the life on earth, and if the life on earth is destroyed, no one will survive, because earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes will increase in frequency and intensity (...). Just let them do forest managements, let them intervene with what they should not intervene with; you have seen nothing yet, (...) because nature will revenge itself, and human beings are not yet ready to survive nature’s rage.”

Winnie Overbeek (email: winnie@wrm.org.uy)

International Secretariat of the World Rainforest Movement

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