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Ethnoracial Land Restitution: Finding Indians and Fugitive Slave Descendants in the Brazilian Northeast

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Ethnoracial land restitution

Finding Indians and fugitive slave descendants in the Brazilian Northeast

Jan Hoffman French

Abstract

This chapter considers how a desire for land and development can lead to a refashioning of ethnoracial identities and identifications. Debates in development studies have centered on culture as an impediment to development. I turn that debate on its head and argue that new assertions of cultural particularity have in certain settings advanced the equity goals of development. The chapter explores the contrasting responses of two neighbouring communities of related African descended, mixed race rural workers who over a 25-year period (1975–2000), under new laws, were recognized and given land by the Brazilian government. One was identified as an indigenous tribe, the other – the primary focus of this chapter – as a community of descendants of fugitive slaves. Struggles for recognition and land have provoked a hardening of family feuds and ethnicization of disputes, but have also reformulated the way in which ‘community’ and ‘race’ are expressed.

[When I learned I was an Indian] the emotional impact was very powerful, because I was born and raised on that land. Being a day labourer without education working the land, when suddenly I came to know that I was a person belonging to a community that had a past and that now we have a history . . . History that I never knew. I had no idea.¹

This remark, made to me on my first research trip to the north-eastern state of Sergipe, the smallest state in Brazil, by Apolônio, the 40-year-old former leader of the Xocó Indians, introduces some key themes relating to land restitution in the Brazilian Northeast. It shows how the claiming of land both awakens, and is nurtured by, new assertions of cultural particularity. It demonstrates how such assertions give rise to a sense of an identity valorized by history: one which is experienced as vastly superior to the devalued, and culturally non-specific, definition of poor labourer. At the same time as land restitution in this context generates new ideas about identity, a concurrent sense of community, and promises of economic development which might accompany

these, it also generates fierce contestations within such new communal formations.

The deep-seated conviction about a rediscovered cultural identity expressed in this statement belies the contingent and fluid character of such an identity. From within the same broad grouping of African-descended, mixed-race rural workers, some were recognized by the Brazilian national Indian agency as Xocó Indians² while others claimed an identity as *quilombolas* or slave descendants. It is with the latter group that this chapter is primarily concerned.

During that same visit to Sergipe, I met Maripaulo, a 37-year-old agricultural labourer and cousin of Apolônio from the neighbouring village of Mocambo. As a leader of his community, this son of a Xocó man and a self-identified black woman had been instrumental in the struggle to win legal recognition of the residents of Mocambo as descended from a *quilombo* – a rural black community that is recognized as dating to the time before the abolition of slavery in 1888. The 1988 Constitution, in a one-sentence provision, guarantees land to the residents of *quilombos*.³ This constitutional provision, enacted as part of a negotiation with national leaders of the black consciousness movement, is often referred to as the ‘Quilombo Clause’.⁴ Its effects for villagers like Maripaulo were striking. As he told me when I met him for the first time, ‘People from Mocambo are afraid of talking to whites, to people from the outside. It’s a legacy of slavery’, said Maripaulo. ‘Before the struggle, I used to be [silent] like that too. Now I can talk to anyone – even the Pope’.

Apolônio, Maripaulo, and their families live in neighbouring settlements in the semi-arid backlands of the Northeast, Brazil’s poorest region. With one of the world’s 10 largest economies, Brazil has a population that exceeds 180 million. The north-eastern region has 30 per cent of the population of Brazil, but has 20 per cent of all poor people and about 30 per cent of the rural poor. A place of cattle ranches, cowboys, bandits, fervent folk Catholic practices and millenarian movements, it is best known for its cyclical droughts, intense poverty and bleak environment requiring a hardscrabble existence. In this part of the backlands, discourses about collective identities as Indians and descendants of African slaves have taken on new meaning since the late 1970s when the military regime, which came to power in 1964, began to open up political life under pressure from massive protests. With the consolidation of political democracy, which was reinstated in 1985, peasants and rural workers who had been making a living by sharecropping rice on the fields of nearby landowners began to struggle for their own land through newly available legal means. In the process they began to reconfigure village life on new terms. Their struggles were influenced by, and pursued under, new laws interpreted and applied by local Catholic church activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies.

In this chapter, I thus consider a situation in which land restitution claims have led to a refashioning of ethnoracial identities. The form of land restitution under consideration here involves the ‘return’ of land to people claiming that

their ancestors lived on the land prior to the current landowners. These owners, it is said, obtained legal title as the result of violent seizure of the land and expulsion of its residents. Once this was accomplished, those same residents are said to have been re-incorporated as landless rural workers and sharecroppers on the land where their ancestors had lived. Opportunities for a better life were then presented in connection with legal provisions granting land to those people, but this time based on ethnoracial identities assumed to predate the law itself. In this chapter I explore how such opportunities, once taken up by rural people living in the Northeast backlands, operate to transform their ethnoracial identification, reconfigure their local cultural practices, exacerbate pre-existing tensions when new identities draw on historically negative categories, and help us think about the possibility of alternative modernities.⁵

Land restitution claims as spurred by the disappointment of development projects

The context for these two struggles and the accompanying identity transformations is that of the Brazilian Northeast: an area which has been the concern of international development agencies and Brazilian government internal development projects since the Second World War, and which was an important focus of the Alliance for Progress in the 1960s. Attention to the area increased at this point, in the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, particularly because there was a growing peasant movement and increased demands for agrarian reform and rural worker unionization, principally in the north-eastern state of Pernambuco, the original home of the Peasant Leagues (Julião 1962).

Drought cycles in the Northeast and the poverty and hunger they bring have been a concern of the Brazilian government since the early twentieth century, by which time the human role in droughts was already understood: Euclides da Cunha (1944 [1902]) wrote of desertification, the impact of cattle raising and introduction of cash crops. The first Brazilian anti-drought agency (Superintendency of Studies and Works against the Effects of Droughts) was established in 1906 inspired by Theodore Roosevelt's Reclamation Service. Over the course of the twentieth century, this spawned an 'industry of drought' in Brazil which gained speed in the 1960s and 1970s. It led to capital-intensive projects (often referred to as pharaonic) and political positioning that benefited government contractors and their supporters rather than resulting in sustained improvement in the lives of the rural poor.⁶ Both large-scale dam projects and irrigation projects have featured in development efforts in the drought-ridden Northeast. Both have affected the people who have come to self-identify as either Indians or *quilombolas* in the backlands of Sergipe.

Crucial to understanding the unusual route taken by those engaged in land struggles along the São Francisco River is the catalyzing role played by the Catholic diocese where the Xocó and Mocambo communities are located. The bishop for almost three decades, Dom José Brandão de Castro, arrived in

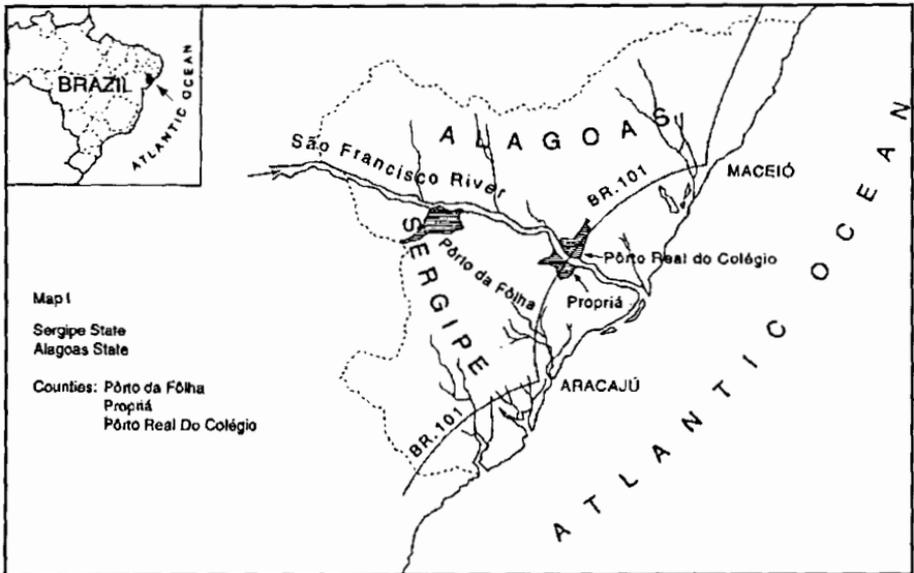


Figure 7.1 Map of Sergipe with São Francisco River.

Source: Mota (1997)

Sergipe in 1960. He came to be known as a 'red bishop', in recognition of his efforts to minister to rich and poor alike and to iron out inequalities. Initially, like the Brazilian Catholic Church more generally, a supporter of large-scale development projects as a means to achieve this end, he soon changed tack. His earlier support for a large irrigation project downriver from the island claimed by the Xocó Indians, for example, arose from his conviction that it would improve agricultural development and provide employment to his parishioners. He thought it would amply compensate those who might be displaced. However, when he visited the project and learned of the pain his poor constituency was suffering as the result of the project, he changed his mind. He could see that those being displaced were left with even less than they had before and were not being compensated. At this point, he took action, based on the education he said he was receiving from his parishioners – that such forms of development needed to be questioned. From the 1970s onwards he became one of the leading liberation theology figures of the Northeast, and an instigator of identity-oriented social movements.⁷

Dom José Brandão almost immediately helped initiate a movement of poor people affected by these developments. Alongside his antipathy to the irrigation project, he mobilized the populace in opposition to a massive hydroelectric dam that was being built upriver at Paulo Afonso, one of many being constructed in the Northeast at that time.⁸ In Sergipe, as in many cases of dam-building, the effects of its construction were multiple and unexpected. In addition to

the outright displacement of people living in the path of the dam, as well as inadequate compensation and failed resettlement plans, there were also collateral effects. The lowering of the river's level visited drastic impacts on peoples' livelihoods and cultural practices. Particularly relevant to the communities along the São Francisco River was the tragic disappearance of the rice lagoons. People who lived along the river, including both those in the area of São Pedro Island and in the village of Mocambo, had formerly sharecropped the rice on plots of land belonging to a wealthy landowner. This agricultural activity had been accompanied by the performance of dances (such as the *samba de coco*) associated with the stages of the harvest (see French 2002). The disappearance of the rice lagoons, caused by the construction of the dam, is often cited as the beginning of Mocambo's conflicts with this landowner. Indirectly, it then led to their eventual restitution claim and their assertion of an identity as *quilombolas*.

'Discovery' of indigenous and black identities

Beginning in the early 1970s, around the same time that Dom José Brandão was learning of the pitfalls of development in his diocese, the Native American movement was gaining momentum in North America and Amazonian Indians were becoming central to indigenous politics in the western hemisphere. During the darkest days of the Brazilian military regime, African-descended rural workers in Brazil's Northeast began to win government recognition as Indians. The Xocó recognition in 1979 marked the first emergence of over 30 such 'rediscovered' tribes in the Northeast, where it was assumed for more than a century that descendants of the indigenous inhabitants in the Northeast had been assimilated into the local peasantry when their land was taken for cattle raising by wealth-seeking families moving into the hinterlands from the coast. These 'new Indians' in non-Amazonian regions of Brazil are composed primarily of mixed-race individuals with few of the 'traditional cultural diacritics'. Almost all of them speak only Portuguese, and their Indianness is 'not always evident from their physical appearance' (Ramos 2003: 370). Their recent recognition is described by Brazilian anthropologist João Pacheco de Oliveira (1993) as 'ethnogenesis'.

In the case of the Xocó, it was a dispute with their employer, a local oligarchical landowning family, the Brittos, that started this claim for indigenous identity. Spurred on by this conflict, Apolônio, their leader at the time, accompanied by his mother, grandfather, and 22 other families, illegally occupied the Island of São Pedro in the São Francisco River, claiming it as their ancestral home. Spurred on by the arrival of a liberationist priest who had been brought to the diocese by Dom José Brandão, and assisted by the expansion of the definition of 'Indian' in the Indian Statute of 1973, it was also reinforced by anthropologists' reports and historical research, and by connections forged with other land struggles sponsored by the Catholic Church. Xocó success in

being recognized and receiving permanent access to land (French 2004) soon looked set to become a reality.⁹

When they first illegally occupied São Pedro Island to claim it as their ancestral home, the rural workers who would soon definitively become the Xocó Indians planted a Brazilian flag on the sandy beach. Although this action seemed to signify a collective aspiration to full citizenship by people who had been the objects of patron–client relations and hence marginalized from power for generations, it had ironic implications. By becoming Indians in the 1970s, these rural workers were forfeiting full citizenship rights because Indians were (and continue to be in many respects) wards of the Brazilian state, considered and treated as children, relatively incapable of conducting their own affairs (Ramos 1998).

It was only 20 years later that the inhabitants of the neighbouring village of Mocambo began the long march to self-recognition. As in the Xocó case, what started the process for Mocambo villagers was a land dispute, but in this case the landlord – and their primary employer – was a former community insider who had become a landowner. She was the daughter of a Mocambo resident who had made good and purchased the land on which all of her father's neighbours worked as sharecroppers. Again, it was partly at the instigation of a liberation theologian that villagers took action. Mocambo residents, advised by a nun-lawyer, made moves to take advantage of the Brazilian Constitution's



Figure 7.2 Xocó Indian with Bishop.

Quilombo Clause, which allowed them the collective ownership of the lands putatively occupied since colonial times. The lawyer had heard of a claim in the neighbouring state of Bahia at a Church meeting in 1993 and introduced the possibility of such a claim to Mocambo. In 1997, the Palmares Cultural Foundation, an agency of the Ministry of Culture, recognized Mocambo as a *remanescente de quilombo* (descendant of fugitive slave community) under the Quilombo Clause and other articles of the 1988 Constitution that govern cultural patrimony preservation. It was through these sets of materially similar circumstances, yet contingent and idiosyncratic contacts and networks, that the two communities ended up being classified along such distinct lines. But in both cases, the result was some form of land restitution.

With recognition – of the Xocó as an indigenous group and of the neighbouring Mocambo's residents as a *quilombo* – came land access. In the case of the Xocó, the full swath of land they claimed finally became an indigenous reserve in 1991, while Mocambo received title to its land in 2000.¹⁰ A land grant, however, was just the first step in meeting the basic needs of people who only received electricity in 1997, still have no running water, and are competing for the primitive concrete outhouses which serve as 'bathrooms'.

Multiple meanings of land and their impact on the value of restitution

The value and meaning of land when granted as restitution for ancestral dispossession can be more symbolic than concerned with economic viability. This was



Figure 7.3 Quilombo supporter.



Figure 7.4 Quilombo women of Mocambo dancing.

especially true for the Xocó and Mocambo, both of whom received possession of land that was not particularly arable. Most of it had for many years been used for cattle raising. Rainfall in this region is at best unpredictable, and irrigation, technical assistance and the machinery necessary to make the land truly productive have not generally accompanied government land grants based on indigenous or *quilombo* identity claims. Nonetheless, land has multiple meanings for members of these groups, involving a depth of feeling that in many respects goes beyond practical considerations. The struggle to obtain land both enhanced that 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) that gave its protagonists an enhanced sense of their own identity and history, and simultaneously undermined this by leading to or entrenching family feuds. Indeed, it created new fault lines among community members who agreed on needs but not on the means to achieve them.

In Mocambo, as with many other cases discussed in this book, present-day land struggles were premised upon conditions experienced as a result of those experienced in the past, with the state as a forceful interventionist presence (see Chapters 2, Fay; 11, Tiedje; 10, Nuijten and Lorenzo, in this book). In the area of Mocambo, back in the 1940s, in connection with a state land reform attempt, some of the older workers had been given individual title to small parcels of land, the size of which was based upon the number of children in the family. Each family was given a receipt that served as the equivalent of a deed. About 20 years later, most of the recipients of these parcels took advantage of their legal ownership, sold the land and moved to the village of Mocambo,

itself built on land purchased by the state from a local landowner during the same land reform period in the 1940s. As the use of the land in the area changed from crop production to cattle by absentee landowners who had pieced together large holdings, those who had worked on the land moved their families to Mocambo, which grew to the 90 houses it now has. Landless families newly concentrated in the village began to work as sharecroppers, or collected state retirement pensions. Since each of the three rows of houses share walls to ease the burden of building entirely new dwellings, the demographic configuration of the area was radically changed from scattered dwellings and families living far apart to a concentrated settlement. This change in land use and the resulting change in settlement pattern was instrumental in the later ability of community and church activists to organize the *quilombo* movement.

What clearly distinguished this later episode – clearly conceptualized as restitution – was the element of struggle and the sense of a need to self-identify culturally. The receipt of individual titles in 1946 had been a welcome windfall, viewed as an entitlement like a pension.¹¹ By contrast, the land now held under collective title in the name of the *quilombo* association was directly linked to the struggle for recognition of history and culture, even though some of the land involved was the same as that which had earlier been individually owned (and sold) by members of the community. Unlike the individual, alienable land grants of the 1940s, the collective, inalienable title of the year 2000 carried with it meanings grounded in cultural and ethnoracial identification that had developed as the result of collective struggle.

A more recent example reinforces this conclusion. An important member of the Mocambo community is a man who owns a large house about a mile up the road from the nucleus of Mocambo. He runs a bar out of his house where people in the area stop to chat and socialize on their way back from working in the fields or visiting the county seat. This man, whose son, a metalworker in São Paulo, has paid for improvements to the house over the years (see Figure 7.3), decided early on that he was willing to forfeit his individual, alienable title in exchange for an untried, collective title that would leave him without the right to sell his property. By doing so, he is also risking the inheritance of his son and other children, since the question of whether children automatically succeed to the membership of their parents in the *quilombo* association upon death is entirely unresolved. In other words, this man has exchanged a known property right for a right, the legal status of which is unknown and untested. Land, in and of itself, is thus not enough to provoke action or commitment. Rather, it is the process and form of obtaining it and the concomitant sensibilities that are produced through that process that provide the meanings of both land and struggle.

In addition to the way various forms of struggle influenced the changing meanings of land, the requirement of communal ownership also affected the way the new owners worked on the land. Because the government stipulated that the land be held collectively on the grounds that the key index of *quilombo*

identity was the communal use of land, during the planting and harvest of 2000 an effort was made to intensify the collective nature of land use. By insisting on communal land title, the government's ostensible purpose was to distribute land in a way that would not disrupt pre-existing land-use patterns. This insistence embodied an inaccurate assumption about the nature of community amongst *quilombo* descendants. In the case of Mocambo, areas on the riverbank had been occupied by individual families on individual plots, and the only communal work was that which they had done as sharecroppers. It was only once they received their large parcel of land collectively as a *quilombo*-descended community that the villagers for the first time began to work it communally on their own account. Therefore, the government's interpretation of the Quilombo Clause requiring land to be owned collectively by an association was instrumental in consolidating, if not provoking, a shift in land use that paralleled, and coincided with, the shifts in the meaning of land.

Behind the state directive lay romantic assumptions about the collective nature of African-descended communities. As I watched their early attempts at collective production, both with co-operative milk sales (from the cows that were individually owned) and with bean planting, harvest, distribution and sale, it became obvious that there was much to be learned before they became successful collective farmers. It did not come naturally, particularly for people who for generations had worked on other people's land and lived their lives in an individualistic society.¹²

Although Dom José Brandão, the bishop who was crucial to the commencement of land struggles in this part of the Northeast, was no longer alive by the time Mocambo received land through its claim as a *quilombo*, it is instructive to consider how his particular critique of development projects might be affected by the Mocambo story. For those in Mocambo with a staunch belief that the government would come through for them, the land had long been seen as a harbinger of development. For them, development did not mean large irrigation projects, the building of dams or the re-routing of rivers. As academics and activists involved with issues of ethical development might posit, it did signify the possibility that their basic needs would be fulfilled: healthy food on a regular basis, consistent medical care, clean water, sewers, paved roads, means of travel to the county seat to collect mail and pension cheques, visit doctors, means of communication like telephones, refrigeration, means of cultivating their land, seeds and agricultural technical assistance, a tractor, irrigation equipment, and sufficient cash to have dental work done and to purchase clothes and shoes.¹³ Whether all residents of Mocambo shared the view that government recognition as a *quilombo* was the best path toward development in this sense is the subject of the next section.

Factions and ruptures in the Mocambo 'community'

The tenacity with which people viewed the new, collective title granted to Quilombo Mocambo by the government was, in part, attributable to the opposition they faced from within their own families in the village. The strategy for achieving improved conditions through 'good change' (Edwards 1999) is not always agreed upon by the members of a community. Almost from the beginning of the *quilombo* movement there were families in Mocambo who were opposed to pursuing recognition. In hindsight, now that more than 5,000 acres of land have been declared the property of Quilombo Mocambo and now that the political shift to the left at state and national levels has begun to bring attention to the plight of the rural poor in Brazil, it seems difficult to imagine why people living under the impoverished circumstances of the early 1990s in Mocambo would have opposed a move that would eventually provide such rewards. However, when an untried law is invoked there are risks as well as rewards to consider. In this case, both factions – residents in favour of self-identifying as a *quilombo* and those opposed to it (known as *contras*) – thought their route was the better way to achieve an improved life with the amenities mentioned above. The problem, from the point of view of the *contras*, was that to get such modern improvements they were being asked to identify themselves with a pre-modern sensibility, a slave category and a racial category that had been reviled since the moment their ancestors arrived in Brazil, whether as slaves or colonizers. To buy into the possibility of an 'alternative modernity' (Gaonkar 2001) would require a leap of faith that the *contras* were not quite ready to take.

By the year 2004, approximately two-thirds of the 90 families living in Mocambo were participants in the *quilombo* movement, while the other third belonged to the *contra* faction. This faction included people who could have qualified as *quilombolas* (members of the *quilombo* based on their heritage and long-term residency), as well as relative newcomers to Mocambo who were less eligible for this status – families who had been forced to move when the land they lived on was expropriated for the Xocó reserve. The *contras* and their allies had determined, from the early days of the struggle, that it was to their benefit to remain loyal to local politicians who for years had been the only source of promised services. Such politicians provided favours in exchange for political support at election time, leaving many people, particularly those who preferred the losing candidates, with practically no access to resources such as agricultural technical assistance, irrigation equipment, seeds for planting and legal help with claiming pensions and resolving disputes. Despite these disadvantages for the losers, the federal untried promise of *quilombo* collective landownership and use initially seemed less reliable than local clientelist political configurations that were at least predictable, if often unfair or unjust.

There was also a strong element of competition between the leader of the



Figure 7.5 Supporter of *contra* opposition to Quilombo movement.

contras and some of the leaders of the *quilombo* movement who were also his first cousins. Within the first three years of the struggle for recognition, this had developed into a full-scale family feud, with some tragic results. For example, the matriarch of one of the leading *quilombo* families, Dona Maria, did not speak to her sister, Dona Rosa, the mother of the leader of the *contras* who lived three doors down the street, even though Rosa was dying of cancer. On Dona Rosa's part, shortly before she died, their 80-year-old brother walked the 100 yards from Dona Maria's house to visit Rosa who berated him so severely for being a *quilombola* that it reduced him to tears: a shameful situation in the eyes of the rest of the family.

The moment most identified with a hardening of positions was the disagreement in late 1995 over whether the already constituted community association, whose president was to become the official leader of the *contras* (Dona Rosa's son), would be a viable entity which could hold title to the *quilombo* land. This was a crucial issue because Brazilian land law has no provision for collective ownership. The Palmares Cultural Foundation, the body charged with facilitating *quilombo* land access, required that title be held in the name of an association formed expressly for that purpose. In the face of opposition from the *contras*, a new community association was formed to hold title to the land. Only residents who had supported the struggle for recognition were entitled to membership and hence to indirect landownership when the land was finally titled in the name of the new community association in July 2000. There is evidence to suggest that a pre-existing power struggle was being acted out

through the *quilombo* movement and was, perhaps inadvertently, being exacerbated by the nun-lawyer who was responsible for drafting the new association's by-laws.

Talk of 'community' works 'to reduce and deny social differences and power relations' within a particular group (see Chapter 8, Beyers, in this book). Moreover, it is often used to paper over the fractures, feuds and cleavages that are always present, constituting and reconstituting, that make a community a dynamic, processual space and place. Additionally, in Brazil the word '*comunidade*' is associated with Catholic liberationist-based ecclesial communities (CEBs) so that there is always a religious connotation lurking behind the everyday use of the term. CEBs are locally based groups in which 'poor people, inspired by their interpretations of biblical images of justice, solidarity and liberation, seek to transform the world' (Vásquez 1998: 2). As a result of this liberation theology practice, the word 'community' has come to signify a site of both struggle and solidarity. In the case of Mocambo, once the *quilombo* movement began in earnest, the invocation of 'community' became a point of intense dispute. Could it still mean the entire village, or had it become something to which membership needed to be actively asserted or denied? Initially used as a definitional term tied up with religious belief, it acquired new meanings once the land was granted to the *quilombo* community association. At that point, it also became an invocation of exclusion.

The premise of perfect social solidarity and unity has long been called into question by ethnographers, who have shown that 'within the nearest kinship group rivalries, dissensions, the keenest egotism flourish[ed]' (Malinowski 1926 [1972]: 48), and have questioned whether 'a focus on regularity and consistency should not be replaced by a focus on change, on process over time, and on paradox, conflict, inconsistency, contradiction, multiplicity, and manipulability in social life' (Moore 1975: 217).

The case of Mocambo illustrates the proposition that 'incompletion' is the principle of community, 'an uninterrupted passage through singular ruptures' (Nancy 1991). At the same time, the relations among the factions in Mocambo revealed themselves to be moments of articulation, times when the two factions took shape in relation to one another, in the 'play of the juncture' (Nancy 1991: 76).

As these sliding articulations manifested themselves in Mocambo, the atmosphere there remained tense throughout the entire decade of *quilombo* mobilization. The question of community membership even extended to disputes over entitlement to the government-provided cement outhouse 'bathrooms'. When government workers arrived with materials, a drama unfolded over who was or was not a *quilombola* qualified to receive these facilities. What complicated matters further was that the exclusivist definition enforced by the *quilombo* association contradicted the more inclusive approach of the federal attorney who insisted that all the 'black' residents of Mocambo were entitled to the land.

Being black or Indian when land is at stake

Once the land was titled in the name of the *quilombo* association, the *contras*, even though they were black, were excluded from working on the land. This has also led to a refashioning of what it means to be 'black' in this part of the Northeast backlands. Whether community members would assume a black identity had been a subject of concern since the *quilombo* recognition movement began in 1994. Choosing to 'be' black or to 'assume' a black identity was a new phenomenon in Mocambo. Recognizing the fundamental importance of each such personal decision advances an understanding of how the transition from a typical backland community to a legally recognized *quilombo* has affected racial self-identification. Stuart Hall describes his own experience of 'becoming black' in Britain after migrating from Jamaica where initially the label 'black' was simply not available, even though almost everyone there was African-descended. In Britain, however, 'black was created as a political category in a certain historical moment'. It included South Asians as well as immigrants from the Caribbean and East Africa and was 'created as a consequence of certain symbolic and ideological struggles . . . [plucked] out of its negative articulation and articulate[d] in a new way'. This led to a 'change of self-recognition, a new process of identification, the emergence of a new subject' (Hall 1991: 55, 54).

In Mocambo, 'becoming black' as a political process is tied up with the repeated exhortation to 'assume' one's identity as black. The assumption of a black identity, however, is more than 'a narrative tie that connects micro-political conflicts to macro-political ideological clashes' whilst not altering very much the micro-political terms (Arruti 2002: 393). Racial identification, here, is more than a formal nominalism since it has definite material effects. With new categories tied to land and promises of a better life has come a self-recognition that can open up 'a new world of new possibilities and impossibilities [that are] born when acts of objectifying racial classification move [people] to understand themselves, to formulate aspirations, and to plan future courses of their lives under descriptions of themselves as black . . .' thus 'actively contribut[ing] to the construction of their identities as black persons' (Gooding-Williams 2001: 243). *Quilombolas* in Mocambo are discovering that some of the 'most politically salient modes of being a black person involve the assignment of a *collective* significance to being black' (Gooding-Williams 2001: 243).

In Mocambo, the majority of residents are taking seriously this new 'collective significance to being black' – celebrating Black Consciousness Day, and dancing their *samba de coco* dressed in a way that creates a tie to Afro-Brazilian religious practices, even though they are Catholic. A similar process has taken place with the Xocó, in the context of their history and struggle (French 2004). They, too, have adopted dances and rituals that have come over the past 25 years to be required for indigenous recognition in the Northeast.

Conclusion

In both cases discussed here, new identities are being experienced in the crucible of struggle for land and a better life, as the people in the northeastern backlands perceive it. We can see through these examples that as new legal categories interact with ethnoracial transformations, universalist goals promised as a result of land restitution, such as better living conditions and improved access to crucial services and resources, are called upon to incorporate cultural and ethnoracial difference and the value of diversity. Notions of community, while playing a key role in precipitating self-identification by some as Indian and by others as the descendants of black slaves, are also keenly contested. Restitution, while shaping groups, also serves to exclude many from them.

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Notes

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- 1 I conducted preliminary research in 1998 and 1999, and then moved to Sergipe for the entire year 2000 to conduct ethnographic field research in Mocambo and on São Pedro Island, and in the state and national capitals. I returned to Sergipe in the summers of 2002 and 2004 to conduct follow-up research. I conducted participant observation and interviews with residents of the two villages and surrounding areas, former landowners, lawyers, anthropologists, activists, priests, nuns, politicians, and government officials. I also conducted documentary research in court, government, Catholic Church, newspaper and personal archives.
- 2 'In Brazil [the term] Indian has gone through phases of denigration and of regeneration. The indigenous movement of the 1970s and 1980s reappropriated the term and infused it with a substantial dose of political agency' (Alcida Ramos 1998: 5). Janet Chernela (personal communication 5 May 2004) explains that the term 'Indian' is imposed by the state and when it is accepted and used by indigenous people, it is a means of articulation with the state.
- 3 The 1988 Constitution was the first democratic constitution promulgated since the military coup in 1964, after a year-long Constituent Assembly involving people and interests from around the entire country.
- 4 The word 'Mocambo' is synonymous with *quilombo*. Both are African-derived words meaning, among other things, a settlement of runaway slaves.
- 5 Traditional cultures adapt and change under stresses of modernization and push to enter into modernity (Gaonkar 2001; Taylor 2002). 'Modernity' is the reified label for complex, contradictory and contested processes and beliefs with multiple temporalities and jagged edges (Walley 2003:34).
- 6 A similar dynamic has been playing itself out upriver from my field sites, where there is a proposal to divert water from the São Francisco River for use in the more northern states in the Northeast. The *transposição*, as it is known, has been debated for many years and its potential success doubted. The World Bank denied funding at one point in the process because studies showed that it would be a waste of resources and money. Moreover, its effects on the communities and cities along the lower São Francisco (Sergipe and Alagoas) were taken into account. In 2005, Catholic Bishop, Dom Luiz Flávio Cappio, went on a hunger strike to oppose its construction, which was scheduled to begin in 2006, with some revisions meant to appease opponents (one source indicates that the volume to be taken from the river has been reduced from 6.2 per cent to 1.4 per cent). The movement to save the river has many adherents in the area.
- 7 Dom José Brandão's critique of development in his diocese foreshadows the kind of critiques put forth by anthropologists in the 1990s (Escobar 1994; Ferguson 1990), while his analysis of the pain caused by development and the balance between economic and human development is in keeping with analysts who were creating the subfield of development ethics beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Berger 1976; Goulet 1971; Lebreton 1967).
- 8 The struggle of people deleteriously affected by dam projects became known as the movement of *atingidos* (literally, those reached by the water) and is still active throughout Brazil wherever dams displace communities.
- 9 For an account of Xocó recognition and the Indian Statute of 1973, see French (2004). For an account of the use of the Quilombo Clause by Mocambo, see French (2002, 2006).
- 10 Indian land in Brazil is not transferred to the indigenous group or to individual Indians. Rather it is held by the government for the use of the tribe in perpetuity.

However, the possession of the land does not include the subsoil: in many parts of the Amazonian region, for example, mining by private enterprises is permitted.

- 11 See Chapter 10, Nuijten and Lorenzo, in this book, for a similar point about Mexican land reform.
- 12 George Foster's (1965) 'Image of Limited Good' is an instructive way to think about the issues raised by an imposed collectivity among peasants under a capitalist system. Foster proposed that peasants view their environment as one in which all desired things in life (land, wealth, health, friendship, love, manliness, honor, respect, status, power, influence, security) exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply. There is no way directly within the peasant's power to increase the available quantities. 'Good' is to be divided but not to be augmented (Foster 1965: 296). An apparent relative improvement in someone's position with respect to any 'good' is viewed as a threat to the entire community. Since there is often uncertainty as to who is losing, any significant improvement is perceived, not as a threat to an individual or family alone but as a threat to all individuals and families (Foster 1965: 297), hence the reaction is one of extreme individualism (Foster 1965: 301). When benefits are provided from outside the system, it is seen as luck and each person looks for ways to maximize that luck (Foster 1965: 308). Such a view of the social and economic universe might present problems when land is given to these individuals who must exercise power locally, rather than as agents of outside forces.
- 13 Edwards' normative definition of development comes closest to the desires that motivated both the Xocó and the *quilombolas* in Mocambo to use the law to help them redefine their ethnoracial self-identifications. Edwards defines development as an increased opportunity for valuable being: 'the reduction of material want and the enhancement of people's ability to live a life they consider good across the broadest range possible in a population' (Edwards 1999: 4). For him, development is 'good change' and is subjectivist in that the specification of valuable being is left to each group, but having said that, he also believes that people agree on a lot and those things, it is fair to say, are the elements of the meaning of development for the people who live on the banks of the São Francisco River in Sergipe. For Edwards, 'good change increases the fulfillment of these aspirations' (Gasper 2004: 44). He identifies the following universal aspirations: to be free from poverty and violence and the servitude these bring in their wake; to be loved and enjoy a sense of belonging; to feel more in control and less vulnerable to the vagaries of unaccountable power; and to be subjects of their own destiny rather than the objects of the intentions of others (Edwards 1999).