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## The struggle for land in the Brazilian Amazon region against palm oil and mining corporations

Pará is the second largest state in the Brazilian Amazon region. It is within its boundaries that the River Amazon reaches the sea. Traditionally, the **Tembé** and **Turiwara** peoples have occupied the **Acará Valley** in the state's northeast, an area situated within Tailândia, Acará and Tomé-Açu municipalities. Starting with the process of colonization, their territory, rich in forests, rivers and fertile land, was gradually plundered in order to extract timber and exploit sugar cane and tobacco monoculture plantations to enrich the metropolis – Portugal. The Tembé and the Turiwara underwent all sorts of violence, not just colonial in connotation, but also patriarchal and racist, exemplified by the process of *aldeamento*, which aimed to remove them from their territories so that these could be appropriated. (1) Violence and repression of their acts of resistance, as well as epidemics, resulted in a veritable genocide, drastically reducing their populations.

Slavery also brought people from the African continent to be submitted to slave labor in the region. “We built the [sugar cane] mills by hand,” says a descendant of these populations, a quilombola leader. “When slavery was abolished, we were thrown here, without reparation or support. The only ‘document’ we have from back then is a sugar cane mill entirely built by our people,” he adds (for security reasons, the names of the people who gave their testimonies for this article are preserved).

On the banks of River Acará, even with the official end of slavery in 1888, until the mid-1970s, Portuguese families – holders of power, prestige and wealth – accumulated vast tracts of land under strict domination. They owned trading houses located at strategic points along the river, kept indigenous (Turiwara and Tembé), quilombola and riverine populations as *agregados*, through relations of domination based on repressive control over workers, in a system of *aviamento* (2) and territorial usurpation. (3) Much of the land usurped by these families of Portuguese origin was later sold to estate owners and major agribusiness concerns in the fields of palm oil, coconut and wood.

Starting in 1952 with the establishment of Projeto JAMIC Imigração e Colonização Ltda in the then municipality of Acará, currently Tomé-Açu, lands traditionally held by the Turiwara and Tembé indigenous peoples near River Acará-Mirim were subject to intrusion by the official project of Japanese colonization funded by public and private resources.

The pressure on traditional territories increased further with the establishment of timber extraction and ranching projects financed by tax incentives granted by SUDAM (Office of the Superintendent for the Development of the Amazon). Such incentives were instituted as part of *Operação Amazônia*, launched in 1966, which sought to stimulate the creation of rural companies and “development hubs” in different parts of the Amazon region. In this context, Tomé-Açu municipality was constituted as one of the main “logging hubs” in Pará state.

Regarding this historical process of invasion of their lands, a Turiwara leader tells us: “We are the pioneers, the heirs of the place, where our ancestors left us. Back then we were expelled by the estate owners, who arrived and asked us to leave. (...) They would say ‘look, you have two, three days to vacate, if you don’t leave, we’ll bring more people here for you to leave’, so we’d get

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scared and [this way] many, many people were expelled from the place.”

## **The invasion of indigenous, quilombola and peasant territories by palm oil and mining corporations**

While in the past colonizers invaded their lands with sugar cane and tobacco plantations, nowadays it is palm tree monoculture and ore pipelines that have taken over Temb , Turiwara, quilombola and peasant territories in the Acar  Valley.

Industrial production of palm oil is dominated by two companies: Brasil Bio Fuels (BBF), which bought Biovale in 2019, and controls some 135,000 hectares of land in the region; and Agropalma, active in the region since 1982, controlling 107,000 mil hectares. (4) Their international customers include Cargill, Hershey, General Mills, Kellogg’s, Mondelez, Nestl , PepsiCo, Stratas Foods and Unilever (5). In 2022, Agropalma had revenues worth US\$486 million; BBF took US\$305 million. (6)

Despite projecting themselves as ‘modern’, ‘green’ companies producing ‘renewable energy’ such as biodiesel, a large share of their land is public land, with forged deeds. (7) A quilombola leader describes the arrival of one of the companies: “When BBF arrived, it still was Biopalma. The company arrived all quiet, using land grabbers that took land from quilombolas and peasants. The company didn’t show itself. They were the ones who destroyed the forest; for example, I remember when they felled 600 hectares [with a concentration] of Brazil nut trees. It was these land grabbers that passed on the land to Biopalma, defrauding the ownership chain of the land.”

Currently, palm oil is the world’s cheapest vegetable oil, based on a colonial production logic, where you ‘get it without paying for it’. For instance, companies are not accountable for the impacts of the deforestation they brought about. They do not pay for the water they use on the plantations – a level of consumption estimated at 34,000 liters per hectare per day (8) – or in their factories. Neither do they pay for the contamination caused by the synthetic fertilizers and above all by the agrochemicals applied, such as glyphosate, a demonstrably carcinogenic herbicide that has been found in both surface and ground water on indigenous land. (9) Furthermore, indigenous people and quilombolas have denounced the companies for spreading on the plantations a byproduct of the palm oil production process as ‘organic fertilizer’, which has been killing off life in local streams.

The result is destruction. According to a quilombola leader: “The companies contaminate the air, water and they also pollute our lives. Because after the *dend * starts growing, they apply agrochemicals that contaminate the water, and also the byproduct of palm oil production. Now we’ve lost our land, but also our water, our springs. People have health problems, around 15% of our people are ill because of the oil palm. When you go fishing at 6 in the morning, at 7 o’clock, the fish you caught is already rotten. The color of the water has changed, we see a lot of moths, a sign of imbalance. Cassava does not grow like it used to, it is sick.”

The communities’ small areas were surrounded by oil palm plantations, making the communities’ way of life no longer viable. They feel like they are in a ‘prison’. The S o Gon alves quilombola community, for example, is surrounded by Agropalma’s plantations. The corporation put up an access gate to control who comes in and out, and dug deep ditches, thus barring the quilombolas and indigenous people from their traditional cemeteries, hunting grounds and fishing areas inside the territory controlled by Agropalma.

According to a Turiwara leader: “They don’t like us going down [the river] to do anything, catch a fish, we can no longer do that, so that is affecting us a lot, it really is. We want to do something about

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this, that's why we're here, we're feeling really humiliated here by this company, animals falling into these ditches, dying."

There are also ore pipelines that cut across the area, generating conflicts. One of them, which transports bauxite from Paragominas to Barcarena, belongs to the company Hydro, controlled by the Norwegian corporation Norsk Hydro, whose main owner is the Norwegian State. (10) In 2023, the Pará Public Defender's Office requested the suspension of work on Hydro's pipeline due to irregularities in its licensing. Quilombola communities complained to the Public Defender's Office that they feel like 'refugees' in their own territory owing to the illegalities involved in the works, with workers and trucks transiting in their areas. (11) Another ore pipeline that crosses the region belongs to the French multinational Imerys; it transports kaolin from Ipixuna to Barcarena. (12) Beyond these, a new project faced by the communities is the Paraense Railway, whose route is from the south of Pará to Barcarena, and which the state government intends to use to encourage soy bean monoculture and export.

## **Seeking to reverse history: recovering territories**

For many years, quilombolas and indigenous people have denounced the invasion of their territories and all the other impacts brought about by corporations. However, the corporations' attitude has always been to deny the impacts, while seeking to strike deals with promises of social projects. According to indigenous people and quilombolas, these promises are not fully kept and, more importantly, do not solve the key question: the absence of demarcation of their territories.

Despite the 'donation' by Imeris of 500 hectares to the Tembê in the late 1990s in an effort to resolve conflicts with the community, the vast majority of lands remain in the hands of large scale corporations with the support of the Brazilian State. Suffice it to compare the 240,000 hectares in the hands of BBF and Agropalma with the size of the indigenous land officially demarcated by the Brazilian State in the region, namely the Turê-Mariquita Indigenous Land of the Tembê people: 147 hectares. This is the smallest officially demarcated indigenous land in Brazil.

Tired of waiting, in 2021 the Tembê and quilombola communities began a fight to take back their lands, currently in the hands of BBF and Agropalma, in order to ensure possession of at least some of the territory from which they were expelled in the past. In the midst of this process, the Turiwara publicly staked a claim to their identity, demanding lands along River Acará where their forebears were found by German biologist Meerwarth in 1899. (13) They joined their fellow Tembê indigenous people, as Turiwara leader explains: "I am Turiwara, because our ancestors on my mother's side, we are Turiwara. There is a Turiwara people but also a Tembê people, we are mixed, but united."

At present, one of the main references of resistance is Movimento IRQ (Indigenous, Riverine and Quilombola), which seeks to unify and obtain more support for their struggle, as explained by one of its leaders: "We fight to ensure all of our rights, but today our biggest fight and challenge is to guarantee the right to our territory. This is why the Movement was created, so that we could make our voices resonate, and reach the ears of the authorities to resolve this territorial problem that we indigenous peoples, quilombolas and riverine populations live through today, when we are having our territory invaded by oil palm monoculture, like Brasil Biofuels, and by mining corporations, like Hydro."

This leader underscores women's participation: "The participation of indigenous, riverine and quilombola women is a way for us to demonstrate that our struggle is for our family, for our people as a whole. It is meant to show that our struggle is to ensure the survival of our future generation and

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that this future generation should have their rights guaranteed. Our participation as indigenous women in this Movement is meant to join forces with the warriors and guarantee the right of our future generation.”

The Temb , Turiwara and quilombolas have already asked official agencies for the immediate demarcation of their land. In the case of the indigenous peoples the body in question is FUNAI, the federal indigenous affairs agency. And in the case of the quilombola communities the bodies in question are INCRA, the federal land regularization agency, and ITERPA, the Par  state lands agency. Furthermore, peasant communities are in the same fight to ensure possession of their land in the face of the threat posed by the expansion of oil palm plantations:

### **The fight of the Virg lio Serr o Sacramento peasant community**

Peasant communities residing in the area have retaken living spaces from which they were expelled in the past by loggers and ranchers, through land grab processes. The families from the Virg lio Serr o Sacramento community in Moj  municipality are an example of this. In late 2015, several families came together to re-occupy their former territory lost to land grabbers. The motivation was BBF’s threat to take over the land in order to expand its plantation in the environs of Moj . Beyond that, the families were sure that the land was public. Therefore, it should favor peasant families and not private companies like BBF.

After the re-occupation, the families requested from ITERPA the regularization of the c.700 hectares of the settlement. However, the process was halted in 2020, when BBF was granted a preliminary injunction by a court, ordering repossession of the area in favor of the company. This did not occur because the families managed to prove that BBF used irregular land deeds. In mid-2023, BBF obtained a new preliminary injunction ordering the families to vacate the area. At present, the case is under analysis by the Land Conflicts Commission of Par  state. The families are demanding from ITERPA an inspection of the area to reveal once and for all that the land is public and, therefore, should be legally granted to the families.

Blowing off steam, a member of the community says: “We built everything here: our houses, our vegetable patches, our crops, our animals, for our survival. Today, the families live off of everything that was built by them, collectively, and working in a tender way, looking after the land, respecting the environment, all things that live in nature. Today, the families really need this land to continue living, their daily lives, helping their family, helping other communities that need support from ours. Today, BBF is trying to take away the families’ land through a preliminary injunction, while there are many signs of the land grabs BBF has been engaging in all over Par  state, and through this it tries to remove the families from their land; what is happening is truly deplorable. The community is located on public land, it belongs to the State, so if the land where the families live is public, the state government needs to provide support, to back the families. We express here our repudiation of this situation; may the authorities come here and help us sustain ourselves, to be able to live here as a community.”

### **State omission in the midst of extreme and structural violence**

Since the land re-occupations began in 2021, the communities have faced violent practices by several armed groups, including the State’s police forces, companies’ private security guards and militias, and organized crime. Death threats, humiliation and even racism directed by segments of the regional population against the Temb , Turiwara and quilombola communities have increased frightfully. They stand accused of hampering development. Repeated complaints and police reports

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filed by the communities have been in vain. Leaders have continuously reiterated: “Agropalma and BBF do not export palm oil, they export our blood”.

BBF in particular has launched a campaign to criminalize the communities by filing hundreds of police reports against community members, accusing them of crimes such as threatening behavior, theft, robbery, extortion and criminal damage, (14) and suggesting that the communities’ objective is to have access to the oil palm plantations. On this point, a Turiwara leader states: “They keep humiliating people, saying that their oil palm we won’t get, because it’s theirs. So, I’ll tell you one thing, we are not focused on the oil palm, we are not focused on anything inside there, we are focused on our territory, it is our territory that we want, to go into what is ours, our home.”

In the midst of worsening conflicts over land, the posture of the international certifier RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) has been one of collusion with the oil palm companies. After briefly suspending Agropalma’s ‘green’ seal due to the conflicts, RSPO soon gave it back in June 2023. (15)

One of the many episodes of violence occurred on the eve of the Belém Summit in August 2023. This brought together the presidents of Amazonian countries, who met less than 200km away from the area in question. Between August 4 and 7, there were attempts on the lives of four Tembés as a consequence of the fight to take territories back from the hands of BBF in Tomé-Açu. (16)

Upon visiting the area at that occasion, the National Human Rights Council (CNDH) requested, among other measures: the immediate establishment of a crisis management unit by the Office of the General Secretary of the Presidency of the Republic; a change in the police forces charged with public safety in Tomé-Açu and Acará; the creation by FUNAI of working groups to demarcate the indigenous lands; and that INCRA and ITERPA do the same in order to provide the quilombolas with deeds to their lands. (17) The Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA) sent a formal letter to the authorities regarding the same episode, requesting the immediate resumption of the process of regularization of indigenous and quilombola territories, as well as the investigation of mechanisms of criminalization of leadership figures and the suspension of incentives to companies involved in violence, among other measures. (18)

Almost half a year later, one finds that practically none of the recommendations made by CNDH and ABA have been implemented. Not even the deployment of the National Public Safety Force in the region has prevented the violence from escalating in recent months.

On November 10, 2023, Agnaldo da Silva, a Turiwara indigenous person, was murdered by Agropalma security guards inside land that the company claims, according to a denouncement made by the indigenous group to which Agnaldo belonged. (19) Since December 2023, Movimento IRQ has lodged complaints with the authorities regarding invasions and violent attacks suffered by the communities and death threats against leaders. On December 14, four quilombolas were attacked with firearms; luckily, nobody was killed. Miriam Tembê, a Tembê leader and reference figure in the struggle for land, was arrested on January 3, 2024, with strong indications that this aimed to criminalize and weaken Movimento IRQ. (20) Among such indications is the explicit, unconstitutional and absurd order by Judge José Reinaldo Pereira Sales conditioning her release on her ceasing to be the chief of her community. (21) The Movement has warned that it fears more violence and arrests of leaders.

The omission of the State vis-à-vis this situation is inadmissible. The winners are the corporations mentioned in this article. In their eyes, communities represent an ‘obstacle’ to their lucrative

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activities and expansion plans. Clearly, a situation of continued and extreme violence and of criminalization affects the capacity of indigenous peoples and quilombolas to organize, unite and continue to fight for the demarcation of their territories.

In order to stanch the spilling of blood and contain other forms of violence, the recommendations contained in the documents of CNDH and ABA need to be urgently implemented by the authorities. We want to stress the recommendation that the territories that by right belong to the Tembê and Turiwara peoples, and to the quilombola and peasant communities be demarcated by the relevant state and federal agencies.

Lastly, all our solidarity with the Tembê, the Turiwara and the quilombolas, who are the victims of violent practices taking place right now.

*(For security reasons, the names of the people who gave their testimonies for this article are preserved).*

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