
Quilombola communities recover land and water after 40 years of eucalyptus monoculture in Brazil

The quilombola territory (1) of Sapê do Norte, in the state of Espírito Santo, Brazil, occupied an extensive area in the current municipalities of São Mateus and Conceição da Barra. About 12,000 families lived in this area. The remaining families are distributed in 34 communities recognized by the Fundação Cultural Palmares, but with many others still in situations of invisibility without the self-recognition certificate.

These communities were expelled from their traditional territories by a violent process of state-sponsored colonization and then, in the 1970s, with the arrival of the company Aracruz Celulose (later known as Fibria, and currently as Suzano) and the expansion of its large-scale monoculture of eucalyptus. With the state endorsement, and in the name of 'development' they were forced to move to the outskirts of the cities in the region. Others remained surrounded by eucalyptus plantations.

In the midst of daily difficulties, the quilombolas continue to struggle against the various forms of violence they have faced. In 2007 they started a collective process to take back their water, crops and community life. Today it has been 15 years since they managed to take back some of their lands in Sapê do Norte. And the struggle to take back what is theirs continues.

World Rainforest Movement (WRM) talked with **Flávia from the Angelim II community**, a quilombola woman, mother and activist, and **João de Angelim**, also a quilombola activist, agroecologist and quilombola researcher. Their words and their experience in the repossessions leave us many lessons and reflections on the difficult but fertile process of resistance of quilombola communities in the territory of Sapê do Norte.

WRM: How did the history of the repossessions in Sapê do Norte begin?

João: The quilombola communities have been resisting for years. First, with the introduction of eucalyptus in the region, through the struggle for territory, the Law, with studies and technical reports that would guarantee that the community would have back part of its territory that was abruptly taken away. Years passed and we didn't see any chances. We came to the conclusion that it would be necessary to take some steps, to force, to point out some places that would show that something wrong happened there when the pulp and paper company arrived and took possession of the land.

Then, through the Quilombola Commission, which has representation from each community, together with other social movements that had more experience in land occupation, such as the MST [Landless Workers Movement], the first meetings were held. Then the reoccupations began. The first one was in 2007, in Linharinho, with the purpose of recovering the water, the food, and the soil. Today, this community claims 3,500 hectares of land.

However, it is important to consider the reoccupation in a context of social and environmental reparation that never happened. How many people died because they were expelled from Sapê do Norte? The Brazilian State has to give the land titles to the quilombola communities that are much

larger than the lands that are in the process of being taken back. I think that this is the real justice. It won't compensate all these years that have passed, but it will provide an alternative for us here in future. If you have land, you have freedom. Suzano can no longer be allowed to destroy Sapê do Norte, nor any other region.

Flávia: The first reoccupation in the Sapê do Norte territory, in the Linharinho community, was very difficult. It was the first time that we decided and said: "Look, if the state does not hand over, does not return our lands, we are going to start a reoccupation process."

After that we stayed for a while without making new re-occupations.

In the year 2010 there was the reoccupation of São Domingos and Angelim I. More recently we have [reoccupations] in the Angelim basin, Angelim 2, Angelim 3 and Angelim Disa - Angelim is a river that gives name to the communities. Even though the police come, today we manage not to let the armed force come. We are more prepared and we have a network of partners that do their part in supporting us. We are managing not to be criminalized for taking back the communities.

WRM: And how do you organize yourselves before and after the reoccupations?

Flávia: In Sapê do Norte, we have the Quilombola Commission, with representatives from each community. We have monthly meetings. When we are going to do a reoccupation, all this is thought about there, with all the supporting communities. We make a list of supporting entities and all of them are informed, and we always ask for legal advice.

Today, we know about our rights and we are able to have the same dialog as a lawyer. Despite this, when we get to the area, because of the police prejudice it is not acceptable for a Quilombola like me to have this dialog. They always ask for a lawyer. So many times the lawyer is there just to be there, but us Quilombolas, who live and know what our rights are, are the ones who really do the dialogue. Today we have some lawyers that defend us very well, tooth and nail, that have been with us for a long time. They are always with us. We call on movements, councils, and the human rights secretariat - although we don't see much action from the secretariat.

In this way, all the movements get to know that there is going to be a certain action in a certain community, at a certain time, and everyone stays alert. Those who can come, come; those who can't, support us from their places.

And there is also an initial organization at the reoccupation moment. Whoever can, takes seedlings, seeds, whatever they can contribute with, so that we can really occupy the unoccupied space or with eucalyptus. Moreover, we also organize identification boards in the territory to demarcate the space, with process numbers, with articles of the law that gives us the right to the land. The reoccupation is a tense day, of hard work, until the police arrive. Of course, there is no reoccupation without the police. Then the negotiation process begins, which, thank God, we are all winning, and the police leave.

The community that is going to take back the land will be well mobilized and articulated so that there are people there every day, guarding the land, working, so that they don't get there the next day and destroy everything that was done the first day. The reoccupation of Angelim II happened on December 19, 2020.

João: The reoccupation of Linharinho was very quickly repressed. We didn't have a chance to plant.

We spent three years thinking about a strategy of how to make a reoccupation last longer and permanent. So, in 2010, the reoccupation happened in two communities: São Domingos and Angelim I, one month later.

The strategy in Angelim I was that we did not stay there. We would go in, plant, and leave. What happened in this first area was that it lasted. There was no police interruption, no isolation of the area, we were able to create ways and manoeuvres through direct dialogue and other resistance strategies. In São Domingos it was the same strategy. We gradually removed the eucalyptus, starting food based agriculture, and more adaptable to the soil situation.

WRM: How did water become so important to your struggle?

João: In one of the investigations carried out by the quilombola movement here in Sapê do Norte in 2002, around 200 streams and wetlands were found to have disappeared in the region. People often did not even have water to drink.

In the reoccupation of Angelim I, we did an action near a flooded area. Then, in 2014 and 2015, we experienced a very dry period. We went back to the area where the flooding was, where there was a reduction in the number of eucalyptus trees, but not enough. People started to remove eucalyptus. From that moment on, the region took on a different shape. The rain came; the soil became more humid and let things happen there.

From there we started keeping an eye on what was happening in the region: where the people were and the springs were regenerated, the water was occupying the points that were dry. One of the clear examples is the Velha Antônia Stream, which had disappeared and we have already managed to recover part of it. This has been gratifying. The bodies of water have been filled with more water and a significant volume, made by the reoccupied lands, with more than four hundred families in the surroundings removing eucalyptus.

We saw in this small sample how water sprang up, which had not happened for many years. People fishing. In a place where there were no fish, fish started to appear. You start to navigate in a place that had no water. We are talking about one stream, but there are hundreds of streams and rivers impacted here in the region. Imagine how abundant it was before the eucalyptus.

That is, the big problem here is the eucalyptus monoculture, which makes us have no water; the rivers have no water.

The issue of water is immeasurable; we have treated it as the main link between everyone here.

Flávia: In fact, all we had here in the territory was land, water and forest. That was our entire survival. We had no other way to live. So we always say that the forest is our mother and the river is our father. We have always been sustained by them. When I first saw the river, there were still plenty of fish in it, and I managed to get some vines out of the forest, but today our greatest difficulty, in the whole territory of Sapê do Norte, is the lack of water.

Angelim 2 had 105 families, today it has 40. From the moment the companies arrived, they cut down all the forests, and soon after came the planting of eucalyptus. The water and the fish started to diminish and die because of the poisoning. The springs began to dry up.

The monoculture of eucalyptus trees depletes the water of the streams and soon that space is used to plant more eucalyptus trees, getting closer to the source of the water until the spring dries up completely. There is also the issue of dams, which are always built above our communities, leaving

the streams below without water. In very dry periods, they roast, they turn into soil. The eucalyptus trees are watered by tanker trucks. They go to the dams, fill the water tankers and water the eucalyptus, the eucalyptus seedlings. That's what they build dams for: to have abundant water all year round.

We don't even have water to drink, it is inhuman. When I attend meetings where the State is represented by the environmental agencies and even by the current government, I usually say that it is shameful to leave more than a thousand families inside a territory without water to drink.

We are in a lot of trouble because of the lack of water. Part of the community is supplied by a tanker sent by the municipality, but they don't see the alternative of cutting back [moving] the eucalyptus trees from the waterholes and reducing the poison (for us to have access to clean water), instead of spending years and years supplying us with tankers.

In the community of Angelim 1, Angelim 2 and Angelim 3, we just need to reoccupy the land and move the eucalyptus trees back. We don't even need to do any spring recovery work, because we can't recover all the springs in such a short period of time. We do recovery work in some strategic springs to advance the process. But just by cutting back [the eucalyptus trees], the water already starts to sprout. It is unbelievable. Springs that had nothing a year ago, now have water again. This proves that what dries up our springs is eucalyptus, although they say no, that eucalyptus is a plant like any other. Yes, but it is a monoculture. If it had diversity, maybe it wouldn't dry up like it does today

WRM: In this reoccupation process, was the support of movements and organizations in the region and of international allies important?

Flávia: Very important. We always have this vision. When we are alone, the company comes with everything, they are very violent. As they have, as they say, "a name to uphold", they end up perceiving that we are not alone, so they want to keep the dialogue going.

Today, they talk to us in a different way, because they realize that we are not alone. And when they go to the dialogue table, they say that we are the truculents. It is always like this. But the support from the communities and from outside Sapê do Norte is essential. We are in a network maintenance process, with each movement. We need to hold everyone's hand so that we are never alone.

João: The Quilombola struggle already comes as a connected struggle; of denunciations, of partners. The Quilombola struggle of Sapê do Norte is known internationally. The most important thing in the strengthening of this cause were the alliances that we had at a national and international level, even though the reoccupations are self-managed, that have the power to decide what to do, what to plant, what to eat. All this is happening thanks to this block of defence, from human rights, from FASE (Federation of Organs for Social and Educational Assistance) from Espírito Santo, which has always been a partner, from the landless social movements, the MST, in all the networks that it is articulated, the Alert Against the Green Desert Network, the WRM, and many other partner groups in the Latin American networks. We try to articulate ourselves so that we are always feeling each other's pain, aware of what is about to happen in our territories.

They tried to separate us, now we want to become closer, to be near the river and recover the forest that they took away. The relationship was so intimate and so valuable that the places had names and were symbolically respected. Today we talk about forest protection, legal reserve areas, PPAs [Permanent Preservation Areas], but this does not even compare to what the real forests were.

WRM: What were the main challenges in this struggle?

Flávia: As a woman, there are many challenges. A woman is a militant, a mother, a housewife. In my case, I have two children, and it was much more challenging because I had just given birth. My son was four months old when we had to do reoccupation. I am a front-line leader, I depend on the support of the staff. But they only feel confident if I am in the middle of them. I had to be there, so my boy and I were there in all the reoccupations. It is exhausting, we suffer. Not for the community, because the community gives all the support if we have a child, everybody holds her.

We also suffer the prejudice of being a woman, black, Quilombola, farmer, poor. The company usually underestimates us too much. They think that this woman doesn't have the capacity to enter into a negotiation process, so we have to keep proving all the time who this woman is, so that they don't underestimate us or even try to forcefully go against the community. The prejudice is very visible. The day that the pushing happened, I asked them if they could imagine, if it had been him pushing them [Suzano's employees], all white, where he would be now. He would be in jail, for sure. But since it was a white man who pushed a black man, no: they say "I'm sorry" and "let's have a dialogue. Would they have dialogue with us at that moment if it were the other way around? It is always resistance, always watching closely.

Another thing that makes me very worried is the threats. I am always afraid here in the territory. Also because of the human rights movement, all the coordination has a special attention [to me], a question of life. Here there is no phone signal, I only have internet when I am inside the house. If I go out, nobody will know where I am. I always have to be careful not to go out alone, not to go out at night, not to leave my children alone at home. It is very challenging to study, I go out at night to college, and how can I come home if I can't walk at night? It's a whole process that I'm still trying to deal with.

João: The company is always looking for a ruse. At each reoccupation, the company would come up with a project or with programs to divert attention. This happened a lot, this cooling down of the struggle. They ended up co-opting the Quilombolas, the leaders, by employing them, by bringing some programs, saying that they would be better for the community.

What happened with some of the reoccupations was that, as soon as the areas were consolidated, non-quilombola people arrived and, by one means or another, ended up entering. And, many times, because they didn't understand the struggle for territory and the Quilombola struggle, they ended up creating a twisted dialogue and confusing the process. We had a lot of difficulty with this. Recently, in 2020, we suffered a massive invasion attack on the communities' territory by organized non-quilombola groups. It was necessary for us to take a stand, because they had been referring to the localities and using our narrative, as if it were us, and referring to localities as reoccupied areas. A little dangerous. We had to be careful to separate which had been reoccupied with our participation and a little bit of the philosophy of what we think of as a movement. These people ended up leaving.

Maintaining the reoccupations has also been challenging because of the invisibility in public policy. If we are in a condition of self-management, we will have no support from public policy, we will have support from almost nobody. We have been dealing with the farmers, with the quilombolas that are in the field almost as a direct effort from them. And this has been the great differential, it is making it possible to "extract milk from stone", from where it was said that it would not come out. It is possible to have water again where there is no water, to have food where there was no food, to have a forest, to have more animals where there were many.

Another challenge is the eucalyptus' capacity to regrow: it is gigantic. After ten years, we have places that still haven't managed to eliminate the residues. These more than 40 years of abusive use of heavy machinery, hundreds of kilos of glyphosate, tons thrown into the headwaters, into the waters, have left us in a very bad soil condition. We need to regenerate, to recover [the soil]. In this way, agroforestry has always been part of quilombola life. But in order to regenerate you need to understand the place, to look for the ancestry, what is connected to the environment and what is not. To know what to plant, to know what to let grow.

WRM: What advice would you give to other peoples who are facing a similar process of land or water reoccupation?

Flávia: Here in Brazil, I think that we can't get land if we don't take it back. So, the first thing: you have to take back the land. But, in order to take back land, it is necessary to have a minimum of organization to avoid failing. We need to be connected, to network, even if it is outside the state, outside the country. It is very important to have network support, contact with the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, with the State Defender's Office, with the human rights councils, because these are the State institutions from which we can get some legal support. It is also very important to take care of the lives of our defenders.

And never give up, right? Because if we give up on any process of fighting for rights, one way or another, we are going to die. If we are not defenders, we are going to be shot because we are black, or we are going to die of hunger because we don't have anything to eat, or we are going to die of cold because we don't have a place to live. We have to stay connected and try to stay alive. The priority is life, not giving up, and networking. Support is very important.

João: Don't stop planting, don't stop believing, keep going. In many moments there will be difficulties, but where there is a spring that needs help, one cannot remain in discourse. Action is needed. You can't expect a decision to be made by the judge's pen, because he doesn't feel on his skin how those who are down there are being contaminated.

The reoccupations are a reality today, and just as we were daring to do, we will be daring to keep doing it. This time that has passed has allowed us to reflect and to better understand the situation. It is not easy to understand an isolation of more than 40 years without access to land. And when this possibility opens up, it is normal that crises and confusions come along as well. The reoccupations have taught us this, and I am very grateful that today I have a better understanding of this great plan that worked. And that it is showing that this is the way to go.

I think that the most important thing was to have broken the silence that existed in the midst of the eucalyptus suffocating the communities, which were isolated there. A silence was broken in a place that the community could not enter or cross part of a eucalyptus area to go into a stream without a little fear of surveillance - which they still have, but which had much more control. So, this silence is broken and community relations return.

I see the lands of the peoples of the whole world, of our indigenous brothers, of the tribal communities of each country, that they unite and seek strength together. We have difficult moments, but our big enemy are the big projects that come to occupy lands, waters; to kill our people. So, first of all, it is union and local action. Every day, if possible.

(1) Quilombola communities are those formed by descendants of African people who were subjected to slavery and escaped to start quilombos in Colonial and Imperial Brazil.

