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CURIAÚ AND CAFUNDÓ: Somewhere in Time (More than one hundred years after the end of slavery in Brazil, descendants of runaway slave colonies still live in isolation)

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More than one hundred years after the official end of slavery in Brazil, communities populated exclusively by runaway negro slave descendants still exist in remote areas of the country.

The over 200 years of the institution of slavery in this South American giant were marked by many minor slave revolts. Negro slaves would flee their masters, into the dense forests surrounding plantations, to form colonies of their own - *quilombos* - until they were either caught, or turned themselves in, unable to survive, according to most historical records.

But contrary to popular belief, many negro colonies did indeed endure, and still thrive today, undergoing environmental, cultural, and economic pressures.

Located only six kilometers from Macapá, the capital of the State of Amapá, in the northeastern Amazon region, on the border with the French Guiana, a *quilombo* of 600 slave descendants has remained culturally and racially intact since the mid-eighteenth century.

"If a couple has differences they can't separate because we're all of the same blood," said Venina Assis, an 82-year-old matriarch of the colony. "We never heard of any white with black wedding," she said, "Our young men and women get engaged here and go to town to marry, but they don't marry anybody from there."

Named after the Curiaú ground water blanket, the quilombo is divided into two nuclei: inside and outside Curiaú. The inside village lies on the margin of Curiaú lake, an exuberant tropical paradise, transformed - during the dry season "seca" - into a number of ponds, linked by an effluent, or igarapé. The area is also the grazing ground of wild buffalos.

By contrast, the outside village, one kilometer away, is surrounded by the savanna-like cerrado, and several islands of tall vegetation. And it was precisely this contrast and diversity of habitats which led the first inhabitant of Curiaú to settle there.

The area, rich in fauna populations of reptiles, aquatic birds, rodents, and fish, was colonized in the (uncertain) beginning of the eighteenth century, by a Portuguese settler named Miranda. Miranda would have canoed up the Pedreira River, and camped near the Curiaú lake with seven slaves. One of the slaves, Francisco Inácio, supposedly discovered the igarapé and took his master to see the "paradise."

Miranda remained in the area to raise cattle in the natural pasture grounds. Years later, on his death bed, the settler freed Inácio, and left the land to the former slave.

After Miranda's death, Inácio began to use the area as a hiding place for runaway slaves from nearby plantations and farms. The Curiaú gradually became a *quilombo*.

"My father and my grandfather used to tell that it was all jungle here," said Venina Assis, "But then old Inácio came and brought all the slaves to *amocambar* (hide) here." Venina recounted that when the soldiers finally discovered the *mocambo* (hiding place), slavery had officially ended. Many of the words in the vocabulary of the Curiaú population are adapted from African dialects, not yet identified.

Slavery in Brazil was abolished in 1888 by decree signed by Princess Isabel, the daughter of the then Emperor of Brazil, Dom João II. Abolition was done in steps. Growing pressure from the United Kingdom to stop all forms of slave traffic, crowned by the Aberdeen Bill, in 1844, led the Brazilian government to eradicate the commercialization of slaves from Africa, in 1850.

Next, the so-called "free-womb" Law was passed, in 1871, which deemed all children born after the measure "free citizens." However, they were to remain under the custody of their parent's masters until the age of 21.

By that time, Brazil had begun its industrialization process, and could afford to change the nature of its socio-economic structure, based until then, on slave-master relationships and monoculture. In 1861, Brazil was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to condone slavery. The treatment of slaves here, is also considered to have been one of the most cruel in the history of the institution.

Slaves lived, for the most part, in barracks near the cultures, called *senzalas*, worked an average 18 hours a day, and were usually fed sparse meals of beans and manioc flour.

Though this was considered natural by society in general, it was this maltreatment that led captive slaves into revolts such as the famous *Palmares*.

Palmares is probably the most famous of all the Brazilian *quilombos*. The colony, led by a once *Zumbi* king (a tribe on the western coast of Africa), lasted more than 50 years. It was known as an attempt by negro leaders to recreate an African tribal system in the Brazilian rain forest, and only came to represent an actual threat to the Portuguese colonizers, once the run-away slaves began to depend on plantation pillage for their subsistence.

More than 200 people died in the battle which finally extinguished *Palmares*, in 1694.

The treatment of the slaves, their rebellions, and the late establishment of negros as citizens in this country reflects itself explicitly in the remaining *quilombos*.

"Brazil's culture is black in many ways, and there is no record of this," said sociologist Herbert de Souza, from the Brazilian institute of socio-economic analysis (Ibase). The sociologist explained that the continuing existence of racially isolated colonies shows that racism is "simply not dealt with in Brazilian society."

Negros and whites alike "do not accept each other," said de Souza. This is also seen in the lack of literature and study of the issue. In fact, one of the forefathers of the present Brazilian republic, Rui Barbosa, ordered all of the records of slavery to be burned, in the early 1900's, as he considered them a reason for shame.

Curiaú is a rare example of the influence suffered on the slaves by their white masters. The slave descendants closely follow a mixture of Catholicism and African religions. In May, the *Marabaixo*, a slave ritual is celebrated, and in August, there is a party for the patron saint, *São Joaquim*.

Superstition is also an intrinsic part of the lives in the Curiaú quilombo. Francisco Cruz, 73, told the story of a runaway slave, called Jacinto, who had the power to disappear when the soldiers came after him: "He would just sit on a tree stump, say a prayer, and disappear."

Francisco himself has "some prayers that cover `I' up, but cannot tell."

The older inhabitants of the colony also refuse to teach the secrets of their home medicines, *garrafadas*. If the sick were to know what they are taking, they believe, the medicine would lose its power. The *garrafadas* are usually a mixture of herbs, and are generally used to cure colds and pain.

The longevity of the population of Curiaú is attributed to these herbal mixtures. In the quilombo, most people live way past 80-years-of-age. The herbs, together with a diet rich in fresh fruit, fish, and vegetables grown in the villages, provide a healthy existence.

The survival of the quality of living in the area is threatened, however, by the approach of nearby Macapá. In 1982 the state government constructed a road from the town to the village, in order to ease the trade of the Curiaú manioc flour, a traditional source of income for local inhabitants. Together with the road, the government brought electricity and running water.

"But they also brought people, who come to swim in our lake, hunt, fish, and throw garbage," said Beatriz Rosa dos Santos, who does not know how old she is. Her granddaughter, 21, goes to Macapá every Saturday to sell the manioc flour the family produces.

Joaquim Cruz complained of the new houses built by the mayor of Macapá, made of brick. "Our old houses weren't so warm," he said. The houses in the two villages were made out of straw. Joaquim admitted that "at least you don't have to change the straw every year."

The young people in the villages do not agree with the old. Many of them welcome the television sets that have replaced the evening bingo games and religious festivals. Only the *Marabaixo* and the *São Joaquim* days remain.

"They (town's people) come in and learn about the culture that our great grandparents brought," said Beatriz, "and in that sense it's good."

The patron saint's party begins with a procession, sung in latin, and accompanied by the rhythmic beat of guitars with the *cheque-cheque* (a local plant used as a musical instrument), and drums. The singing, called *ladainha*, is lead by 63-year-old João da Cruz. The song-leader is ruler for the day, and a failure to follow his instructions may get "wrong-doers" on their and praying.

In Portuguese, *Marabaixo* sounds like "down the sea." An Amapá historian, Eduardo Rodrigues, said that the celebration probably stems from the arrival of the slaves from Africa, in the galleys of the Portuguese ships. "It is a record of the suffering endured during the long boat trips," said Rodrigues. The *marabaixo* is also sung in other parts of the state of Amapá.

There are another three known quilombos in Brazil, in different parts of the country. The largest and the most well-known is called *Cafundó*, only 130 kilometers from São Paulo.

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Though it has existed for the past one hundred years, *Cafundó* made the news in 1978 for the first time, when a journalist from the São Paulo newspaper O Estado de S. Paulo visited the area, and discovered a negro colony, which not only lived completely isolated from Brazilian society at large, but also had its own language.

The 86 inhabitants of the quilombo speak a dialect foreign to any community in the world. The name *Cafundó*, means "a far away place." It is a typical word from a language that originates in dialects like the *quimbundo*, and *umbundo*, from the *bantu* language family, spoken in Angola and parts of the Congo region, in Africa, said linguist Carlos Vogt, of the Universidade de Campinas (Unicamp).

It was the language, according to Vogt, that kept the cultural hegemony of the *Cafundó* village, despite the proximity with São Paulo, and the nearest town, Salto de Pirapora, only 10 kilometers away. "Times passes very slow here," said Benedita Pires, at 108, the oldest person in the village.

Like the *Curiaú* quilombo, the land *Cafundó* lies on was donated by a farmer, who freed his 15 slaves and gave them 290 hectares, now shrunken to 18, due to real estate speculation in the area. Of the original 15 people, two women, Antonia and Efigênia, were the base of the Almeida Caetano and Pires Cardoso families, leading members of the community.

"Years ago, the men of *Cafundó* married the women of *Caxambú*," recounted Benedita Pires. *Caxambú*, another quilombo in the region, ended 20 years ago.

Life is not easy for the people in *Cafundó*. There are 41 children in the town, and no outside help to educate or feed them. The first newspaper story on the community, written 13 years ago, launched a series of measures like a medical post, agricultural aid, and better housing on the part of the government, which were discontinued as the newspapers lost interest in the quaint story.