

The quilombola community of primeira lagoa in Ceará-Mirim, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil: memory and resistance in its process of ethnogenesis

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of an anthropological consultancy conducted in 2022 for the Municipal Secretariat for Women, Minorities, and Racial Equality of Ceará-Mirim, (State of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil) with the triple objective of: 1) diagnosing the Quilombola Community of Primeira Lagoa (focusing on socioeconomic and environmental aspects); 2) developing an educational booklet; and 3) providing specific advisory services during the quilombola certification process with the Federal Government (at Fundação Palmares). The study, which includes an assessment of the community's social, economic, environmental, and cultural vulnerabilities, was based on a methodology combining oral history, pedagogical research with quilombola teachers, participant observation, and a socioeconomic and environmental diagnostic. The most significant outcomes include the legitimization of oral history, revealing the community's foundation by runaway enslaved women and an indigenous woman, the certification as a Quilombo Remnant, and the subsequent reopening of the local school. These results demonstrate the importance of memory, kinship, and quilombola activism for ensuring full citizenship and valuing the identity of Primeira Lagoa.

Keywords: quilombola community, primeira lagoa, oral history, quilombola certification

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Introduction

This article presents a detailed summary of a multifaceted anthropological consultancy, meticulously conducted in 2022 for the Municipal Secretariat of Women, Minorities, and Racial Equality of Ceará-Mirim. The primary objective of the consultancy was threefold: firstly, to conduct an in-depth socioeconomic and environmental diagnosis of the Primeira Lagoa Quilombola Community; secondly, to develop an interactive pedagogical booklet for the community; and finally, to provide specialized advisory during the crucial process of recognition and certification as a Quilombo Remnant with the Palmares Foundation. This work not only identified and validated Primeira Lagoa as a Community of Quilombo Remnants but also undertook an exhaustive analysis of its social, economic, environmental, and cultural vulnerabilities, revealing the complexity of its reality and the resilience of its inhabitants.

The results of the consultancy are remarkable and multifaceted. The legitimization of oral history, particularly through testimonies revealing the community's foundation, solidifies Primeira Lagoa's ancestry and resistance. The pedagogical research, conducted by Quilombola teachers, culminated in the community's certification as a Quilombo Remnant, a recognition that brought as one of its first fruits the reconstruction and reopening of the local school, previously closed. This article emphasizes the importance of collective memory, kinship relations, and Quilombola activism in the struggle for full citizenship and the valorization of Primeira Lagoa's identity, providing a solid basis for future interventions and research.

Material and methods

The methodology employed in this study was based on a robust anthropological consultancy, designed to capture the complexity and depth of the experience of the Primeira Lagoa Quilombola Community.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding, the research diligently integrated the collection of primary and secondary data. Primary data, considered the backbone of this work, was meticulously obtained through a series of ethnographic and qualitative approaches, allowing for direct immersion into the local reality and valuing the voices of the community. This methodological strategy aimed not only at collecting factual information but also at building a contextualized understanding of the social, historical, and cultural dynamics that shape Primeira Lagoa. One of the cornerstones of primary data collection was Oral History, an essential tool for unraveling ancestral narratives and collective memory. Through in-depth interviews with the oldest residents of the community, such as the venerable Mr. Antônio Pereira, aged 84, it was possible to faithfully record the oral histories about the trajectory of escape and resistance of the first inhabitants. These narratives are not merely accounts of the past, but pillars that sustain Quilombola identity and resilience, offering invaluable insights into the formation and evolution of Primeira Lagoa. Complementarily, Pedagogical Research involved active collaboration with three Quilombola teachers – two from the community itself and one from the neighboring community of Coqueiros – to collect and systematize historical and cultural information in an accessible and educational way, aiming at the construction of a pedagogical booklet that would strengthen local knowledge.

In addition to oral history and pedagogical research, the methodology included Participant Observation, where researchers immersed themselves in the daily routine of the community to understand in loco the social, economic, and cultural dynamics, observing the organization around family farming and productive gardens that are the basis of their subsistence. A detailed Socioeconomic and Environmental Diagnosis was also carried out, covering an exhaustive survey of data on crucial aspects such as land availability and ownership, housing, access to education and health

services, transport conditions, water supply, communication, leisure opportunities, and the socio-environmental impacts of the region. This combination of methods ensured a multifaceted analysis, capturing both the richness of lived experiences and the need for objective data for a complete diagnosis. Here is an image illustrating the interview with Mr. Antônio Pereira, representing the Oral History methodology.

To complement the rich primary data collection, this study also utilized a careful compilation and analysis of secondary information, which provided a broader context and validated local narratives. Institutional Documentation was a fundamental pillar, involving the meticulous analysis of all official documents and administrative processes related to the recognition of the Primeira Lagoa Community as a Quilombo Remnant with the Palmares Foundation. This certification process is a vital milestone for the community, and the review of these documents allowed for tracking the legal and bureaucratic steps, as well as understanding the arguments and evidence presented for the legitimization of their Quilombola status.

In addition to institutional documentation, Existing Literature was exhaustively reviewed to contextualize Primeira Lagoa's reality within a broader academic framework. This included consulting relevant academic works, such as Francisco Cândido Firminiano Junior's master's dissertation,¹ which not only attests to the community's Quilombola status but also offers in-depth perspectives on its origins, struggles, and social organization. The integration of these academic sources strengthened the theoretical basis of the study, allowing for comparisons and deeper dives into specific topics. Finally, Community Archives were carefully explored, comprising records and documents maintained by the community itself, such as old photographs and handwritten accounts, which offer an intimate and authentic view of local history and culture, often absent in formal records. This process was not limited to passive recording but actively sought to highlight the importance of careful observation and deep respect for the elders, who are the guardians of memory and tradition. A crucial aspect of this legitimization was the emphasis placed on the central role of female figures in the community's founding, recognizing their contributions and resilience in the construction and maintenance of this Quilombola territory. Thus, the study sought not only to document but also to value and give voice to the narratives that shaped Primeira Lagoa's identity and existence.

Results

The oral history of primeira lagoa

Oral narratives, especially the testimony of Mr. Antônio Pereira, reveal that the first inhabitants of Primeira Lagoa were enslaved fugitives seeking refuge in the region. The community, according to Mr. Antônio, has its roots in three women: two enslaved fugitives and an Indigenous woman "caught by horseback." According to him, the community's lands served as a hiding place and a starting point for other communities, such as Lagoa Salgada and Queimadas.

Sharing childhood memories, Mr. Antônio Pereira highlights the importance of listening to and observing elders, a lesson that became an unforgettable seed for him.

I was a child and always paid attention to the conversations of the elders... and observed what the elders said. Observation is important because it always brings us a hidden seed... one that never fades. So, these things came to me so that I could share them with people.

Continuing his account, he describes the origins of the community, the arrival of the first inhabitants as fugitives, and the beginning of a simple and resilient life.

At that time, there were few houses here. My father came from São Paulo do Potengi and married my mother, who was from here. And I remember the elders saying that there were only three small houses here. The people who came here came as fugitives. They built a small wattle-and-daub house, made a small clearing to plant... and that's how they lived. They built a flour mill, worked, and multiplied. Because this was a good place to live, it was hidden... there were Indigenous people here, but with the arrival of the Black people, they left. When they saw those people increasing, they started to leave. However, it is known that an Indigenous woman was 'caught by horseback'... they 'tamed' her and married her.

He emphasizes the union and ancestry that shape the place, revealing how families intertwined and formed a refuge for those fleeing slavery.

This place is a gathering of one family — everything, everything, everything is just one family. Except for some who came from outside and married those from here. At that time, there was slavery. And it was a place that served as a hiding place. And from here, some went to Lagoa Salgada and others to Queimadas. Everything comes from these people here: fugitive people who are a single family.

Concluding his memories, Mr. Antônio Pereira highlights the community's longevity and the fundamental role of three women in its founding, a legacy passed down through generations.

I am 84 years old. And I remember that when I was a boy, I already knew many old people. This place is at least 150 to 200 years old. When I was born, there were already old people who spoke of their grandparents. What is said is that the origin of this place was two enslaved women who escaped and this Indigenous woman who was 'caught by horseback'. These three women were the foundation of this community."

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Kinship relations and official version of history

Oral history and research indicate a kinship relationship between the Primeira Lagoa Community and two neighboring Quilombola communities: Queimadas, in Taipu, and Coqueiros, in Ceará-Mirim. Complementarily, the research by Quilombola teachers Luís Antônio Teixeira da Silva and Eritanildo Santos de Lemos reveals the official version of the community's history. It began in 1804 when Mr. José Varela inherited land from his father, Luiz Varela. He sold plots to the old residents, who passed the land to their children. These, cultivating the land, discovered a lake in the middle of the forest, the first and only one in the locality, giving rise to the name Primeira Lagoa. The biography of the patron José Adelino Teixeira da Silva (born on December 8, 1894), son of farmers and illiterate due to the distance from school, is also being detailed. He and Rosa Basílio had twenty children, and their family donated land for a school. Most of the families in the community today descend from these children, and the Primeira Lagoa community is included in existing literature, with the most recent reference in a 2020 master's thesis.

Academic context and community origins

The confirmation of Primeira Lagoa's Quilombola status is substantiated by the 2020 master's research of Francisco Cândido

Firminiano Junior, a member of the Coqueiros community and a doctoral student in Anthropology at UFRN, which stands as the most recent and crucial literary reference. In his thesis, Firminiano Junior not only highlights Mr. Francisco's statements about the community's ancestry, referenced for the first time by a resident, but also complements the official version of Primeira Lagoa's history. This official version dates back to 1804, when José Varela inherited land from his father, Luiz Varela, and sold it to the old residents, who subsequently bequeathed it to their children. The discovery of a lake in the forest by these first cultivators is pointed out as the origin of the name "Primeira Lagoa." Firminiano Junior's investigation delves into the community's origins, discussing the decline of sugar mills, the migration of the Tapuas people, with special attention to the movement from Alagadiço to the interior, and the rise of the Queimadas community, which had its first settlements around 1840 with four initial dwellings. The author extends the analysis to the origins of other communities in Taipu, Ielmo Marinho, and Ceará-Mirim, reiterating that Primeira Lagoa remains engaged in in-depth studies of its own memory and historical formation.

Socioeconomic and environmental diagnosis of the primeira lagoa community

The community of Primeira Lagoa, located in the picturesque rural area of Ceará-Mirim, in Rio Grande do Norte, is a place where the cultural richness and resilience of its inhabitants intertwine with a series of socioeconomic and environmental challenges. This in-depth diagnosis aims to illustrate the complexity of the local reality, addressing everything from basic infrastructure and livelihoods to the nuances of land ownership and the cultural vitality that persists despite adversity. Primeira Lagoa's journey is a testament to the human capacity for adaptation and the incessant search for dignity and recognition, especially after the recent certification as a Quilombola community, a milestone that promises to redefine its future.

Education and health: essential pillars with latent needs

Education in Primeira Lagoa has been a turning point, marked by a period of uncertainty and, fortunately, by a promising reopening. The local school, which once served as the educational heart for elementary school children, was forced to close its doors due to serious structural problems, a determination by the Public Ministry that highlighted the precariousness of the facilities. However, with the achievement of Quilombola certification in 2023, the community gained new momentum and, with it, the long-awaited renovation and reopening of the school. Although this is a monumental step, the institution still longs for modern equipment and a sustainable maintenance plan to ensure an effective and inspiring learning environment for future generations.

Regarding health, the community is relatively well served by a local Basic Health Unit (UBS) and an attached daycare center, demonstrating a commitment to the well-being of its youngest members. The UBS stands out for the quality of its services, relying on the dedication of four resident community health agents, who ensure continuous and personalized monitoring. The regular presence of doctors and the availability of an ambulance reinforce the community's ability to respond to emergencies and promote preventive health. This health system, although functional, still seeks optimization, especially in health education and the prevention of chronic diseases, aiming for a healthier life for all residents.

Infrastructure, housing, and access to basic services

The infrastructure and housing in Primeira Lagoa reflect a mix of progress and persistent challenges. With a population exceeding 1,500 people, distributed among 365 families and approximately 290 houses, the community shows demographic growth that requires constant attention to housing needs. The predominance of 270 masonry houses demonstrates significant progress compared to more precarious constructions, although the existence of about 20 wattle-and-daub houses still points to the need for continuous improvements and housing replacement programs. The main street, paved with cobblestones, offers better mobility and dignity to residents, contrasting with secondary roads that still lack paving, especially the rural roads.

Access to potable water is a positive point, with the community benefiting from a supply network and the use of cisterns, ensuring a vital resource for health and well-being. This water infrastructure is fundamental, especially in a semi-arid region where water security is a constant concern. However, transportation remains one of the main bottlenecks for socioeconomic development. The dependence on private cars, motorcycles, and rides to travel to the municipal seat of Ceará-Mirim, due to the absence of regular public transport, imposes significant barriers. The situation is aggravated by the condition of the access road, which is unpaved and becomes practically impassable during rainy periods, further isolating the community and hindering access to essential services, markets, and job opportunities.

Economic activities in Primeira Lagoa predominantly revolve around family farming, with the practice of small farms and vegetable gardens being the backbone of local subsistence. This agricultural base, although traditional, is complemented by other sources of income: many men find work in the nearby quarry, while a considerable number of women work as domestic helpers in the municipal seat, seeking to supplement family income. Retirement pensions and social welfare policy programs play a crucial role, providing a food security net and essential financial support for many families, contributing to the reduction of social vulnerability.

Land tenure, culture, and socio-environmental impacts

Land tenure in Primeira Lagoa is a matter of profound historical and social relevance, with roots in a secular occupation that dates back generations. Although some owners possess private documentation, the vast majority of houses are in a situation of legal irregularity, generating a persistent sense of insecurity and vulnerability among residents. This land tenure uncertainty has been an impediment to the full development of the community, limiting investments and the capacity for long-term planning. Certification as a Quilombo Remnant in 2023 emerges as a beacon of hope, representing the first and crucial step to guarantee legitimacy over the lands and, consequently, prevent undue sale to third parties, ensuring the right of permanence and the preservation of ancestral legacy.

Culture, although vibrant in its essence, has seen its manifestations currently limited to religious festivals, which still serve as important moments of congregation and celebration of faith. Musical and dance groups, which once strengthened bonds of solidarity and cultural identity, now reside only in the memory of the elders, a reflection of social transformations and the migration of young people in search of opportunities. The revitalization of these cultural expressions is a challenge, but also an opportunity to reaffirm Quilombola identity and foster community pride. The preservation of intangible heritage,

through the promotion of workshops and events that rescue these traditions, is essential to keep the flame of Primeira Lagoa's culture alive.

Socio-environmental impacts represent a new layer of complexity for the community. The imminent installation of a wind farm near Primeira Lagoa's territory generates a mixture of expectation and concern among residents. There is an urgent need for clarity regarding the exact distance of this undertaking and the specific typology of impacts it may entail, both for the environment and for the community's way of life. The expectation is that detailed socioeconomic studies will be carried out and that environmental and social compensations will be guaranteed, in accordance with ILO Convention No. 169, which ensures the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. The community's voice must be central in all stages of this process, ensuring that energy development does not compromise the integrity and future of Primeira Lagoa. The following image shows a wind energy farm, representing the type of enterprise being installed near the community.²

Final considerations

The Quilombola Community of Primeira Lagoa represents a vivid example of resilience and social organization, whose trajectory culminated in its recent and crucial certification as a Quilombo Remnant in 2023. This recognition transcends mere legal formalism, constituting an essential milestone for guaranteeing historically neglected territorial rights and for accessing a range of social benefits and protection programs provided for in both national legislation and international conventions, such as ILO Convention No. 169. Despite persistent socioeconomic vulnerabilities, particularly evident in the sphere of education – which historically suffered from precarious school infrastructure –, the community has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for overcoming. Its strong connection with family farming not only sustains local subsistence but also strengthens community ties and the connection with the land, elements intrinsic to Quilombola identity. Furthermore, there is a growing environmental awareness among residents, fundamental for the protection of their territory and for adapting to new realities driven by development projects in the region.

The legitimization of oral history, meticulously collected and valued in this study, emerges as a fundamental pillar for the reaffirmation of Primeira Lagoa's identity and ancestry. The proactive engagement of local researchers, acting as agents and mediators of knowledge, has been crucial for the reconstruction and dissemination of the narratives that shape the community's collective memory. This participatory approach not only values traditional knowledge but also empowers residents in building their own history and facing contemporary challenges. The reconstruction and reopening of the local school, a direct result of Quilombola certification, symbolizes the realization of the struggle for rights and the commitment to the education of future generations, reinforcing the importance of community organization and dialogue with governmental and academic instances.

In essence, Primeira Lagoa's journey is a testament to the capacity of a people to maintain their culture and resist in the face of adversity. Quilombola certification is more than a title; it is the recognition of a history of struggle and the opening of paths to full citizenship and sustainable development. The community's future, although still permeated by challenges such as complete land regularization, diversified economic strengthening, and monitoring the impacts of external ventures, is promising. The continuity of ethnographic and historical studies, support for family farming, cultural preservation

and revitalization, and continuous investment in education and health are crucial to consolidate advances and ensure a future of prosperity and justice for Primeira Lagoa, contributing significantly to the knowledge about Quilombola communities in Brazil and to the promotion of truly inclusive development.

Recommendations

In line with the final considerations presented, which underscore the remarkable resilience of the Quilombola Community of Primeira Lagoa and the challenges still present, the following strategic recommendations are proposed. They aim to consolidate the achievements made with the Quilombola certification and pave the way for sustainable and just development. These suggestions are based on the findings of the socioeconomic and environmental diagnosis, oral history, and pedagogical research, and seek to offer practical guidelines for strengthening the community in various spheres, from basic infrastructure and the local economy to safeguarding its valuable cultural and environmental heritage, ensuring the full realization of rights and the valorization of its people's identity.

- I. Investment in education:** There is an urgent need to fully equip the renovated school and ensure its continuous maintenance, in addition to seeking the expansion of education up to the 9th grade and offering technical and higher education courses in partnership with institutions such as IFRN.
- II. Economic strengthening:** Develop income and employment generation programs for youth and women, exploring agricultural potential and local traditions, and promote community participation in food security programs.
- III. Support for family farming:** Encourage the obtaining of the Declaration of Eligibility for PRONAF (DAP) and access to credit lines and technical assistance and rural extension (ATER) programs.
- IV. Cultural preservation:** Revitalize musical and dance groups, as well as other cultural manifestations, to strengthen bonds of solidarity and a sense of local belonging.
- V. Monitoring socio-environmental impacts:** Closely monitor wind energy projects in the region, ensuring that socioeconomic studies are carried out and that due compensations, in accordance with ILO Convention No. 169, are effectively implemented.
- VI. Land regularization:** Continue the process of land regularization, taking advantage of the Quilombola community status to ensure possession and prevent sale to third parties.
- VII. Continuous research:** Encourage more ethnographic and historical studies that deepen knowledge about the community, its traditions, and challenges.

With these suggestions, we reinforce the importance of integrated and participatory approaches to the recognition and development of Quilombola communities, such as Primeira Lagoa. The validation of their memories, the promotion of their culture, and support for local development strategies are not only acts of social justice but also contribute to the construction of a more equitable and plural society. Primeira Lagoa's journey, marked by resistance and hope, serves as an inspiring model for other communities and a call to action for governments, institutions, and civil society to continue supporting the full citizenship and valorization of the diverse identities that make up the rich social fabric of Brazil.

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None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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