

Nature socialized, nature contested.  
An ethnographic analysis of the Reserva Extrativista  
Quilombo do Frechal, Brazil.

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*Based on an anti-essentialist framework, this paper intends to show the potentialities of an anthropological political ecology in the study of environmental topics related to preservation. By valorizing an interpretative and monist perspective, it analyzes the case of a Brazilian Extractive Reserve from an ethnographic point of view, in order to comprehend the specificity of the local social construction of nature. The controversial role of vegetation in my interlocutors' life – interpreted in strongly negative terms and, at the same time, with a fundamental role in the definition of the common sense of social belonging – problematizes some key assumptions of the Brazilian socio-environmentalist discourse. This approach to the study of nature also allows to better understand the unexpected conflicts that began to emerge after the institution of this participative type of environmental reserve. Finally, the aim of this case-study is to underline the importance of focusing the attention not only on the socio-cultural dynamics that occur inside a protected area, but also outside of it, by considering the consequences of its presence in the wider municipal context.*

“(…) it is possible to speak about “*nature's identity*” in the same way in which poststructuralist theorists talk about individual and collective identity as unfixed and always under construction, as opposed to something that progressively develops out of an unchanging core. This is what we mean by *antiessentialism*.”  
(Escobar, Hvalkof 434, emphasis added)

### *Introduction*

This article attempts to shed light on the potentialities offered by a monist approach in cultural anthropology, notably in the study of environmental questions. Following the suggestions proposed by the upholders of a post-structuralist political ecology, it intends to show the heuristic efficacy of an antiessentialist and interpretative perspective on ‘nature’ that also proves to be sensitive to the role of historical-political component (Escobar 1999; Biersack, Greenberg 2006). By refusing the idea that ‘nature’ is only the material and objective substrate of the representations of culture, I argue that it can be thought of as a practical-discursive construct that is substantially hybrid, the “result of the intersection of biology and history in concrete situations” (Escobar, Hvalkof 434). According to Biersack, terms such as “second nature”, “socialized nature”, “humanized nature” allow to identify an object of investigation as something distinctive when compared to nature studied by the so-called “hard sciences”. In this perspective, the materiality of nature is not denied, but it acquires anthropological relevance as the “by-product of discourse and also activity” (Biersack 14).

Post-structuralist political ecology invites to explore “how the environment is negotiated and affected in arenas such as the household, the workplace, the community, the state” and to analyze the “relations of difference and power within and among these myriad locales” (Paulson, Gezon, Watts 210, emphasis added). Therefore, it becomes fundamental to adopt an actor-oriented perspective (Arce, Long 2000) centered on social actors and on their knowledge as well as on the values and the discourses that they constantly contribute to rethink. The added value of the ethnographic method allows to articulate a political-ecological thick description that represents nature and society in a unitary universe (Peet, Watts 38; Castro 180). Ethnography offers, in particular, a critical medium to deepen the analysis of the dynamics that animate environmental conflicts (Moore 126).

With the intent to valorize this analytical perspective, I considered the institution of an environmental protection area as a privileged analytic field. It represents, in fact, a space where an original confrontation among different constructions of nature produced by the subjects involved in the implementation of this new territorial arrangement is articulated. The Reserva Extrativista (RESEX) represents, in the Brazilian context, an

environmental project<sup>1</sup> which is a substantially unique case in its own, besides being original in its overall intention. It aims, in fact, to overcome the rigidity of a purely preservationist approach, based on the myth of a virgin and wild nature to be protected from human action (Diegues 1994), with a socio-environmental perspective centered, instead, on the idea of the co-management of territory. Environmental organs of government and a determined social group are, in fact, called to establish a partnership for the protection and use of a specific geographic area (Little 17-18). Differently from natural parks, in the RESEXs the human presence does not constitute an obstacle to a full realization of the governmental project of protection. Rather, it represents the *conditio sine qua non* for its very institution which has to be implemented only from explicit request of local communities. This peculiar formula of environmental protection would combine territory protection with the respect and the valorization of “traditional” modalities of use of natural resources, considered intrinsically “sustainable” and “harmonic” under ecologic profile as well as community-based. To this end, it ensures to the so-called “traditional population” a *direito real de uso*.<sup>2</sup>

The Reserva Extrativista Quilombo do Frechal, with an estimated population of about 900 people divided among the villages of Frechal, Rumo and Deserto (Almeida 1994), covers an area of 9.542 hectares in the municipality of Mirinzal, a small rural centre of the Baixada Ocidental Maranhense, almost 400 Km from São Luís, the Capital of the Brazilian State of Maranhão. Although situated within the boundaries of the so-called Amazônia Legal, it has represented the first important case of an extractive reserve approved out of the peculiar socio-economic context of *seringueiros* where it was born as an innovative political-cultural proposal.<sup>3</sup>

The creation of the protected area was neither a goal pursued voluntarily by the community, according to the participative logic which should characterize RESEXs, nor the result of a direct relationship with the environmental movement. Its establishment was, rather, a political choice promoted by certain militant groups close to the Movimento Negro (Negro Movement) to resolve a troubled court battle that opposed the Afro-descendant community of Frechal to the local *fazendeiro* (Malighetti 2004). In particular, the emphasis placed on communitarian control of the land as a distinctive

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<sup>1</sup> With *environmental project* I intend a institutionalized discourse with material and social effects that explicates combining ideas, politics and practices in environmental field (Tsing 4).

<sup>2</sup> The property of the area remains of the Brazilian federation that concedes, however, a right of usufruct to the resident populations.

<sup>3</sup> This peculiar approach to the protection of the territory is rooted in the fights of the *seringueiros* of the Brazilian state of Acre. In 1985 they proposed the creation of *reservas extrativistas* dedicated to them, in order to safeguard from the destruction forest areas of *seringa*, tree from which was extracted the rubber, their essential source of income. The 18 July 1989 it was approved the law n°7.804 that bestowed to public power the faculty to create this new type of protected area (Allegretti 2002).

element of a quilombo turned inherently compatible with the revaluation of commons<sup>4</sup> recognizable in the extractive model of environmental protection (Diegues “Repensando” 120). Latifundium was then expropriated by IBAMA in accordance with Decree No. 536 of May 20th, 1992. Although the villages of Rumo and Deserto were part of the reserve as well, I chose to concentrate my research in the community of Frechal, where I resided from March to December 2006<sup>5</sup>.

In the first part of paper, I will focus on local practices of socio-cultural construction of nature, in particular dwelling on the meaning assumed by vegetation and by those modalities of individual appropriation that mediate the effective fruition of it. In the second part, I will put in relation such analysis with the peculiar dynamics of conflict originated in the municipality just after the creation of the RESEX. I intend to suggest the importance of understanding the political meaning that emerges at the intersection of different ways to conceive the appropriation of nature.

*Practices of socialization of nature: the agro-forestry system of the roça*

“(…) between a structuralist nature that is good to think and a Marxist nature that is good to exploit there is perhaps room for a nature that is merely *good to socialize*” (Descola 112, emphasis added).

In the Brazilian anthropological literature, as well as in common speech, *roça* indicates a cultivated field obtained by a stretch of natural vegetation previously deforested and subsequently burned, that at the end of the crop will be abandoned again. This definition coincides with those forms of extensive agriculture better known as swidden agriculture, shifting agriculture or – with a more pejorative meaning - slash and burn agriculture (Berkes 61). Noda et alii (201) observe that the definition of “itinerant agriculture”, often used to describe this type of practice, is fundamentally misleading, because the *roça* is part of a true agro-forestry system, which integrates agricultural work with exploitation of forest resources. The two activities are complementary, and one cannot be understood without the other.

The ethnographic research conducted in Frechal did not aim at offering an ecological analysis of this type of agriculture. Rather, it sets for itself the goal of understanding the meaning assumed locally by *roça* in the everyday life of my interlocutors. It was not, in fact, simply the physical place where they cultivate, but it demonstrate to be, rather, a true spatial, social and temporal ordinating principle. It implies codified rules in the use of territory, a network of relations within and outside the village, marked by unequal force relations, and a peculiar perception of time.

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<sup>4</sup> It is opportune to distinguish clearly from *free goods* (Bresso 59, my translation), that effectively do not have any restriction in the access and are considered ideally unlimited – as for example sun, water or air – to the natural resources subjected to the consuetudinary forms of regulation of use defined on communitarian base.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of research, the population of Frechal counted almost 230 people.

The cultivated areas did not represent some “domesticated” islands within an indistinct mass of “not socialized” vegetation. Cultivations and spontaneous flora were considered an inseparable reality, so that when one wanted to inform that one was going in his own roça, strictly individual, often one would simply say «vou no mato».<sup>6</sup>

If compared to the imaginary evoked by the term ‘forest’, mato indicated a sort of “lower tone” and familiar woodland space. The real forest, recognizable for the broad and thick strand of tall trunk trees, not surprisingly, took on a different denomination and was called mata. The entire territory was interpreted through the system of the roça so, according to a common definition, mata was not other than «uma area aonde nunca foi roçado»<sup>7</sup>.

The mato, however, was not necessarily associated with the work of the roça, but it also had a more general meaning. It indicated also any visible vegetal element that had one, albeit small, density, as for example the variegated whole of brush, lianas, scrub and palm-trees that surrounded the habitations.

Vegetation, in general, was interpreted through criteria that resulted problematic if considered in relation to the protection finalities pursued by the reserve. One must bear in mind that the preservation of natural resources was an integral part of the objectives of the protected area, although the practice of the roça was not in any way prohibited. On the one hand, the environmental legislation in the field of RESEX considered recognition and legitimacy of customary forms of survival as a vital element of that “socio-environmental heritage” that it intended to safeguard. On the other hand, local people were asked to set aside some of the areas for the integral conservation of the forest mantle.

Mato was defined *sujo* (dirty) when presented some characteristics that suggested a relatively easy cutting. It was therefore classified according to pragmatic criteria that became also canons of aesthetic evaluation, so a mato *sujo* was considered to be manifestly ugly as well. *Sujo* was not only an adjective which qualified the state of spontaneous vegetation, but was also often significantly used as a substantive synonym of mato, intended in all its various meanings. The ‘dirt’ could be the weed to be eradicated during *capina* (weeding) as much as the plants to deforest for the roça or the blossomed nymphs that covered the waterways. The vegetation not only created a feeling of dirt, but it was also the dirt par excellence. Also referred to as *sujeira*, ‘dirtiness’, mato was the emblem of something unpleasant that people were entitled to remove in order to restore a state of order. As Mary Douglas underlines, “[t]here is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder [...] Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment” (Douglas 2).

The system of the roça was not only an essential tool to ensure survival, but also a means to establish an order in the “chaotic” natural element, whose excessive and

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<sup>6</sup> «I go in the *mato*». During the exposition, I preferred to avoid to translate this term to not lose the shades of meaning that defined its peculiarity.

<sup>7</sup> «An area that it has never been deforested», definition that has been offered by a lot of people.

imperfect exuberance could be controlled only through human action. The ‘dirt’ created a fullness of spaces and an obscurity perceived with concern or with a sense of oppression. On the other hand, the free land, darkened by the action of the fire in the roça, became the greatest emblem of cleanliness and esthetic enjoyment.

The pervasive presence of mato also in the inhabited zone and its central role in every sphere of my interlocutors’ life invited to consider in critical terms the idea that the contraposition between forest and settlement could represent a sort of spatialization of the nature-culture dichotomy. As already highlighted by Croll e Parkin (1992), this distinction can sometimes result scarcely significant for those who experience it in everyday life. Places were not, in fact, recognized as “human” or “natural” on the basis of the presence or absence of vegetation. There was rather a sort of “natural continuum” scanned by two different modalities to socialize the mato.

On the one side, it was outlined quite clearly a space that we could define as a working space since it was the place assigned to carry out the main activities of subsistence. On the other, I have defined domestic a space where the “natural” element was experienced as an integral part of the practices and the discourses strictly connected to the world of home and affects. Although they constituted two well distinct spheres, were experienced in different modalities and moments of community life, they appeared substantially complementary if observed from the perspective of the common logic that characterized them.

The working space was organized by the inseparable alternation between roça and capoeira. According to a poignant definition of an interlocutor of mine «a capoeira è aonde foi uma roça»<sup>8</sup>, that is a roça became capoeira at the same time as the harvest is finished and the series of directly transformative human actions are concluded. In this phase of rest of the land, the spontaneous re-growth of the luxuriant equatorial vegetation would give a “natural” appearance to the area that had once been roça, if with this term we intend the lack of human interferences opposed to the direct engagement which agricultural practices require.

Capoeira was not only a possible classification of mato, identified in its early stages of regrowth. It also implied the relation between the former and the subject who had previously established his own roça. To define a mato “capoeira” implied the recognition on the part of the collectivity of an individual direito de pertencia (right of belonging) on a specific stretch of common mato. The cession of a capoeira could not entail monetary based transaction, but required a form of respeito (respect). Before deforesting, it was always necessary pedir licença (to ask for permission) to do the own roça. If the person consulted agreed, he or she would loose automatically all rights for the future and the capoeira had a new dono (master).

In the same way as the roça becomes capoeira in the moment in which the ground is emptied out of its latest product, the casa<sup>9</sup> changes denomination when deprived of its effective use. A house abandoned, along with what had been the unfailing quintal

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<sup>8</sup> «The *capoeira* is where has been a *roça*».

<sup>9</sup> *Casa* is the Portuguese term.

(backyard) assumed the assonant denomination of *tapera*. Also defined as *terreno de herança* (land of inheritance), it indicated the *direito de pertencia* that a family exercised on the whole area in which it had lived before. It was no accident that a person said that «aonde foi uma casa è uma *tapera*»<sup>10</sup>, reprising the expression used to qualify the *capoeira*. The point is not to highlight a simple linguistic similarity, but to grasp the interpretative analogy that pertained the relation to the rapport between common use and individual appropriation of ground.

When the old houses of *taipa*<sup>11</sup> were abandoned, they were often dismembered by the same owners who reused the components to build elsewhere. After that, what remained of the houses was encompassed again by spontaneous vegetation. However, the areas apparently reconquered by the forest carried on the traces of the past human presence. Fruit trees, which distinguished the courtyard of the house from the generic *mato*, continued to represent a true property markers even after a house was abandoned. A “natural” and, at the same time, “social” signal that everyone was able to decodify. If *mato* was considered just as a generic dirt to eliminate, in evident contrast with the finalities of environmental protection promoted by the reserve, in the case of fruit trees, symbol of *tapera*, a coincidence of intents and perspective, even if differently motivated, emerged.

Often nothing more than a whole of fruit trees scattered in the *mato*, the *tapera* suggested the necessity to think the domestic dimension not as a reality confined inside home walls and flatly opposed to *mato*. It constitutes, rather, a widespread social imprint, sometimes imperceptible, left in a space that was only apparently “natural” or “re-naturalized” but where it was always possible to reconstruct the very history of the community.

A *tapera*, exactly as the *capoeira*, could be ceded through simple request to the person directly concerned. It was however an event much more rare if compared to the extreme variability in the possess of portions of forest dedicated to cultivations. Differently from the rights on *capoeira* that expired with the death of the legitimate *dono* (master), the *direito de pertencia* on the *tapera* was inherited by his sons that conserved it jealously.

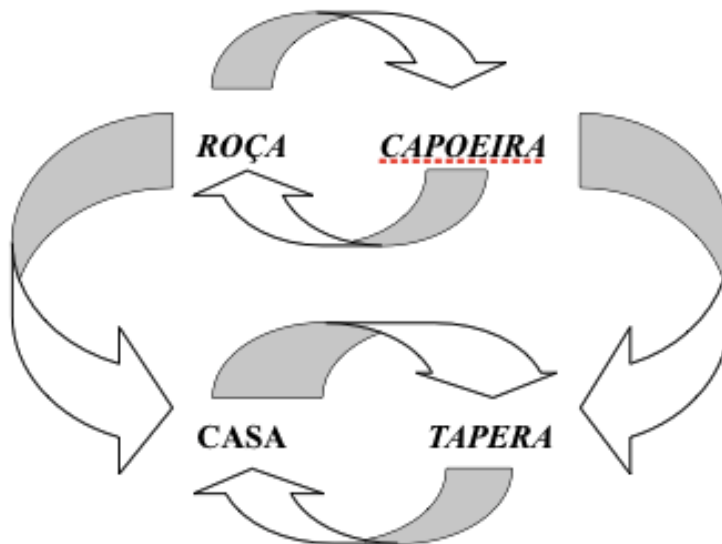
If the working space was therefore marked by the inseparable spatial and temporal alternation between *roças* and *capoeiras*, the domestic space was defined by the presence of *casas* and *taperas*. Spatial, because – from a synchronic point of view – coexisted physically in the territory defined as own by the social group. Temporal, because – in a synchronic perspective – there was a cyclic progression between these two forms of “pragmatic” identification of nature. In both cases, the passage to a different terminology

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<sup>10</sup> «Where has been a *casa*, it's a *tapera*»

<sup>11</sup> Houses consisted of a wooden framework filled with a clayey mud and re-covered with dried boughs of *pindoba* – a type of palm -. They represented a modality destined to disappear. Frechal, in fact, started to beneficiate from government projects which ended up favoring the transition to brick- and-cement houses.

underlined the end of the human action on nature and, at the same time, the permanence of a social meaning.



In relation to a the case of Frechal, Almeida (1989), observed that the naked land was not recognized as an economic good. So it was neither an object of appropriation nor it could be bought and sold. Just the product of work – the roça and the casa – could become object of exchange and economic transactions in monetary form. Almeida defined “common usufruct” a similar system, based on the compresence of individual and collective dimension.

Though confirming this analysis, I considered necessary to broaden this perspective, trying to understand the meaning assumed by the capoeira and tapera. An ideal extension of roça and casa, they ratified in fact the retract of the man and the concomitant advancing of the mato, but continued to prove the control exerted by the individual on a portion of communitarian “renaturalized” territory. The interpretative co-belonging between the domestic dimension of the casa/tapera and the working dimension of the roça/capoeira put in evidence the tie between use and individual appropriation as inseparable modalities of construction of a socialized nature.

According to Robbins (2006), the property can be thought of as an institution that lays a fundamental bridge between nature and culture and can therefore lead to a new prospective between these two polarities, in view of a renewed monist epistemology. In Hegel’s relational perspective, to which Robbins refers, property allows people to think of themselves as self-conscious subjects through a process of mutual recognition. A sense of social belonging is built in this way and it is not based, as in Hobbes, on contract among people egocentrically concerned with self-preservation and self-assertion, but on mutual recognition as part of a community of people able to exert their own will in social significant modalities. Institution of property would had therefore a crucial role in this



process constitutive of sociality, but only if understood in this broad sense. According to Hegel, in fact, the notion of possess is not enough to define property. The latter results understandable only if one considers also the use and the alienation of what is possessed as integrant part of the process of recognition and not as a form of negation of property itself (Robbins 180-183). In particular, Robbins maintains that “the theory of recognition is another way of conceiving of politics, one in which mutual regard replaces personal material gain as the key value toward which political struggle orients itself” (Robbins 183, emphasis added ).

Applying this approach to the case considered, I suggest to consider acquisition, use and cession on the part of single individual of portions of mato defined capoeira or tapera as essential and inseparable phases of the same process of reciprocal recognition which is at basis and at the core of the very sense of social belonging. Taking possession of a mato for the first time marked the entrance in adult age in the same way as the cession of a capoeira – or of a tapera – cemented the relationship between single individuals and the respective families. In both cases, the appropriation of nature ratified the affiliation of single individual to a same social group and, at the same time, legitimated the use of natural resources for personal aims.

The symbolic-political importance covered by the individual control of some particular parts of mato did not prevent from a concomitant valorization of common use of other areas as well as of others natural resources, first of all water. It remained implicit the idea of a substantial inalienability of the land which was considered usable by the individual but not really appropriable. Property was therefore not the institution that mediate in toto the relations with natural world, as pointed out by Robbins at Urapmin of New Guinea. It was rather to understand what elements of nature could be temporarily detracted to that common use which, anyway, remained underneath to all the interpretative model.

*The territorialization of power: the issue of the indiretos*

- “(...) too much emphasis on structural determination elides other factors shaping conflict over Third World environmental resources:  
(1) the micro-politics of peasant struggles over access to productive resources;  
(2) the symbolic contestations that *constitute* those struggles”  
(Moore 126, emphasis in the original).

The creation of the RESEX had started a process of social pacification that put an end to a long period of fight against the nester. Meanwhile, it unexpectedly laid the basis for new forms of discords. During the judicial fight that had opposed Frechal to the fazendeiro a contrast was perceivable that we could define of vertical type, where differences in status were decisive and represented the very origin of the conflict itself. Difficulties emerged instead between Frechal and the inhabitants of some zones located out of the borders of reserve – defined “the “indirects” (indiretos) – appeared rather of horizontal nature. The clash surfaced, in effect, among communities that shared the same relative position in relation to a wider social tissue in the municipality of Mirinzal, that

was made up almost exclusively of rural workers, big landowners and some little or medium shopkeeper.

The “indirects” issue shows as the system of *roça* permits to understand in depth way some of the unexpected conflicting dynamics that emerged after the institution of reserve. The rules of RESEX did not have, in fact, in any way erased the pre-existing customary norms that legitimated the access to the resources. They had produced, instead, an original set of perspectives of unforeseen outcomes at the level of all those relations entertained by Frechal with the communities situated outside of the protected area. This very aspect will constitute the object of the second part of the article .

The term “indirects” specifically indicated all those individuals which established their own *roça* within the borders of the reserve, though did not live there. They were thus distinguished from those that unduly entered in the protected area to take possession of their resources – for example sand and timber - for only commercial aims. They were, instead, a precise category of people individuated in the occasion of the drafting of the *Plano de Uso*<sup>12</sup> of the reserve.

At the time of the conflict, the inhabitants of some villages of the large estate decided to give in to the fazendeiro’s pressures and, after paying of a compensation, they decided to move to the neighboring municipality of Mirinzal. After the creation of the reserve, however they continued to deforest and to cultivate their habitual territories which had then fallen into the borders of the protected area. A custom that the community of Frechal decided to legitimate, taking advantage of the decisional role granted by RESEXs to local communities.

The very existence of “indirects” configures itself as a true anomaly within the environmental legislation in place, which established, on the contrary and in an unequivocal way, that the only ones who had the right of use of the resources of a RESEX would be the “traditional populations” that already permanently resided in the territory before the creation of the protected area (Ministério do Meio Ambiente 2004). Thought intermediate conditions of usufruct were not being in any way foreseen by law, the choice of Frechal has been tolerated for a long time on the part of the government organs with the aim of guaranteeing the managerial autonomy of community. The case of Reserva Extrativista Quilombo do Frechal therefore represented a situation of dispensation to the rules which was unique in its genre and that made particularly interesting the analysis of the interactions found with the ex-inhabitants of the area.

The reserve had, therefore, contributed to favor the creation of original social ties among individuals that used to identify themselves just on the basis of affiliation to the same village. “To be an indirect” became a consolidated modality of collective identification that provoked ambivalent feelings. On one side, it stigmatized the overwhelming distance that separated them from the *diretos* (“directs”), the sole legitimate users of the natural resources of the reserve. On the other side, it went on to

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<sup>12</sup> The inhabitants of a RESEX were obliged to establish in a collegial way a “Plane of Use” – said also “Plane of Utilization” – where to list the rules of use of the natural resources of the area. The *Plano de Uso* of the *RESEX Quilombo do Frechal* had been approved by IBAMA in 1996, after thirteen consultations.

become an “active category” of political action, thus distancing from a label imposed by outside. The “indirects”, in fact, became a true lobby, being able to mobilize resources and support in the attempt to carry action towards the recognition of specific claims.

The preferential treatment that Frechal had reserved to “indirects” would cannot be understood simply by considering RESEX as an element of absolute novelty that had altered a presumed preexisting social balance given by the presence of the latifundium. One should rather think the Unidade de Conservação (Unit of Conservation) in terms of a form of redefinition of the relationship with the place that has come to intersect preexisting modalities of conceiving the appropriation of nature that testified, in the bargain, the diachronic sedimentation of experiences.

Before, we focused on the double *roça-capoeira/casa-tapera* juxtaposition intended as modality of organization of space that explicated in the natural world the web of social relations existing within the same community. Delving into the question of “indirects”, such customs also seem to represent the fundamental instrument of definition and control of relations with “the outside”, in a spatial perspective much more overstated if compared to the one of the village alone.

The inhabitants of every settlement of the zone actuated a peculiar territorial conduct, taking possession in a individualized form of specific portions of nature autonomously chosen, but always inside of areas recognized by others community of the zone as of their pertinence. So the same ethic of respect which regulated the relations among individuals of a same community was also applied to the relations among villages. The modalities of appropriation of *mato* characteristic of the agro-forestry system of *roça* represented a form of recognition of the other – in the Hegelian sense discussed before - not only among the members of a same group, but also in the framework of a wider network of social relations.

Moreover, the ties among the villages were not based only on habitual forms of cohabitation mediated by *roça*, but also on essential parental and friendly bonds, among which the *compadrio* played a central role. The figure of *compadre*, but also of *comadre*, respectively the godfather and the godmother, was highly taken into consideration and highly esteemed. The very strong sense of union that was established through baptism permanently interweaved with the lived experiences of not only of singular individuals but of two whole families inside a new, or simply reinforced, parental relationship. The big respect paid to *compadres* and *comadres* further reinforced the bonds of reciprocity established by an organization of territory marked by the alternation of *roça e capoeira*.

The borders of the reserve, creating the category of “indirects”, had therefore produced an asymmetric distinction of status among communities that were once part of a system of relations marked by a paritarian condition defined by the peculiar ethos of *roça* and reinforced by customs as that of *compadrio*. This whole of relations surely had a determinant weight in the perception of the sense of responsibility that the community of Frechal felt toward many of the families that got excluded from the right of use of land. On the other hand, it explained why the “indirects” felt to have been victims of an evident injustice that deprived them of lands that had been “theirs” for generations.

If the individual appropriation of mato was considered inseparable from its use, one could understand why, unlike capoeiras, the “indirects” did not bring forward any claim of possession toward taperas. In the case of capoeiras, in fact, thanks to the decisions taken by Frechal, the work in those areas never got interrupted, thus reinforcing the perception that “indirects” would have the full right to continue to use them. The rules of the RESEXs had, instead, bindingly forbidden to create new settlements or re-establish those that had existed before its institution. In the perspective of customary norms that regulated these practices, the definitive impossibility to transform again the taperas in casas had made loose to “indirects” any right on their old taperas.

Despite the advantageous treatment obtained by the “indirects”, the difference in power that distinguished them from Frechal was clear-cut. The “territorial” relations between these two communities were no longer based only on the recognition of the right of belonging over capoeira. They were also mediated by the practice of *aforamento*. According to this custom, particularly widespread in the Maranhão region, the workers that deforest an area to make after a *roça* are obliged to give - they said “to pay out”- to the effective owner of the lands cultivated a part of their harvest. Such taxation, that remain fixed in the course of time, assumed the name of *foro*. After the creation of the reserve, Frechal had conceded the right of use of lands to “indirects”, but provided for a payment of this type of “contribution” on the part of them.

The fact to have halved the entity of the *foro* required, compared to that usually demanded in the zone, represented for my interlocutors the proof of an advantageous and preferential treatment toward the “indirects”, something that differentiated the community from the abuses of the big land owners. Instead, according to the direction in office of the Centro Nacional de Desenvolvimento Sustentado das Populações Tradicionais (CNPT)<sup>13</sup>, taken over in 2000, it was an illegal custom since the origin, considering that the land of the reserve was a property of União (Unione).<sup>14</sup> It was also considered deeply immoral, since it reproduced the practices that the same Frechal had been fighting against for a long time toward others workers. CNPT believed, besides, that the runaway growth of “indirects” had produced important environmental damages to the territory. So it was decided to forbid immediately the payment of the *foro* and, on the long run, to cut out to the anomalous presence of “indirects” in the reserve. Two resolutions that produced a fracture in the relationships between the government organ and the Frechal community as well as between the latter and the “indirects” themselves. On one side, Frechal held as an injustice the prohibition of the *aforamento*, obviously welcome by “indirects”. On the other, it showed itself favorable to the end of a presence

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<sup>13</sup> The National *Centre of Sustainable Development of Traditional Population*, instituted in 1992, was the section of IBAMA that, at the time of research, was specifically supposed to follow the management of RESEX. The law 11.516 of 2007 August 28 established the transformation of CNPT in the *Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade* (Chico Mendes Institute of Conservation of Biodiversity) an organ completely detached from IBAMA and directly dependent on Department of Environment.

<sup>14</sup> The term *União* indicates the confederation of Brazilian states.

become, by the time, more and more cumbersome and hardly manageable. On the contrary, the “indirects” were very worried by the perspective of their definitive expulsion. Although the conflicting elements were evidently present, they never reached paroxysmic or violent forms showing the tie that continued to unite the two social groups.

During my analysis, I have never intended to deny an opportunistic reading of the relations come to be established between Frechal and the “indirects”. Collecting foro represented undoubtedly a fundamental income for the coffers of the community, as well as – from the “indirects” point of view – claiming the right of use of the lands of the reserve meant guaranteeing for themselves a simple and economically more advantageous access to lands of which all the characteristics were known. I found crucial to understand and contextualize the symbolic meaning that the *aforamento* assumed for those who had the control of it.

Despite the presence of other two villages inside the Unit of Conservation, the *diretoria*<sup>15</sup> of Frechal monopolized the relations with “indirects” and the relative proceeds that derived from them. This supremacy was justified both in virtue of the geographical nearness to the territories granted to “indirects” and also by the particular status that the community attributed to itself. The inhabitants of Frechal claimed, in fact, a condition of superiority both because of the fight that, in the past, they had been able to conduct against the *fazendeiro*, and also in virtue of the occurred recognition as *quilombo*. From stigma of social inferiority, it had become in fact a sign of distinction shown off with pride. The very fact that the reserve was entitled only to the *Quilombo do Frechal* heighten, besides, the feeling of being the only, true “owners” of the whole protected area.

This attitude was often reinforced by a much more rooted misunderstanding as regards to the autoperception of their own condition. Contrary to a clear legislative definition that wanted them simple users, there was the widespread conviction to have been recognized as effective owners of the land. Such interpretation was not the result of a meagre familiarity with the legislative classifications. It appeared also as the unexpected product of the attempt accomplished on the part of the same IBAMA to instil in the inhabitants of the protected areas a “posture of owners” (IBAMA/CNPT “Projeto” 23; “*Amazônia*” 24, my traduction). According to the expectations of this organ, the same fact of “feeling owners” could guarantee a sort of spontaneous assumption of responsibility toward RESEX and a consequent collaborative conduct in their management, ultimate goal of the socio-environmentalist approach.

This type of relationship with the local communities produced, however, unexpected results. Many inhabitants of Frechal were convinced that an effective collective property of the land had been recognized by the law. The fact of considering themselves legitimate owners – and not simply possessors, devoid of juridical recognition –, brought back the same idea of “property” that was present in well-known models. The practice of *aforamento*, that in the CNPT’s perspective was not other than an undue form

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<sup>15</sup> It was a sort of ‘board of directors’ elected every three years.

of oppression, for the community configures itself as the necessary consequence of the condition of owners that has been recognized to them. This system was thought of as the unique possible way to relate themselves to some users – the “indirects” – on the part of a legitimate owner. So Frechal reproduced toward “indirects” the same mechanism that the village had been subjected to. In the context of the reserve, the aforementioned represented the possibility to “grant” the broadening of the right of use of resources to non-members of the community, but underlying the own role of supremacy.

The question of “indirects”, one of complicated resolution, manifested the double political meaning assumed by the protection of nature. At local level, the institution of the RESEX had represented for the villages that had benefited from it - Frechal, Rumo e Deserto – a modality of acquisition of prerogative that would have been difficult to imagine otherwise. It was, instead, perceived as a further form of exclusion that added up to the subordination to local nesters, by those who were found, despite themselves, to live physically and metaphorically on the fringes of the Unity of Conservation. The legislative distinction that was traced between who “were inside” and who “were outside” the protected area had therefore established a fundamental inequality of power among the community starting by a new institutional border which had ratified a different right of use of the natural resources of the territory.

According to a process for many aspects opposite compared to the situation experimented with the creation of natural parks, based on the expulsion of local population (Colchester 2000), the Reserva Extrativista had guaranteed a form of legitimate access to the land inside a regional context, as that of Baixada Ocidental Maranhense, marked by the presence of enormous land estate properties. The event of “indirects” represents an interesting example of how the protection of nature, mostly through the particular “extractive formula”, turns out to have a political weight completely peculiar in a national context marked by a never realized agrarian reform. The environmental question shows to be by now interwoven with the problems of historically marginalized groups – in the specific case, the quilombolas – who can find, in such interpretative frame, a way to access to natural resources and to valorize also their own cultural specificity.

### *Conclusions*

In the first part of the article, I focused on the interesting complementarity that emerged between an interpretation of vegetation in hardly negative terms (mato as sujo-dirt) - intrinsically problematic for the finality of environmental protection characteristic of a reserve - and its essential social role. The acquisition, the use and the eventual cession of the mato represented, in fact, the essential passages of a reciprocal process of recognition both among individuals belonging to a same group either among different communities.

The relationship they had with vegetation suggested to problematize the concept of ethno-conservation at the basis of socio-environmentalist discourse<sup>16</sup>, according to which the conservation of ecosystems, above all the most fragile, depends on the safeguard of the cultural diversity of “traditional populations”. A similar perspective seems sometime to attribute in a non critical manner to those social groups – anything but univocally detectable – a paternalistic attitude (Pálsson 1996) towards the natural world or a primitive ecological wisdom debtor of the Rousseauian imagine of “good savage” (Milton 1996).

According to Diegues (2001), the birth of a model of environmental protection as the Extractive Reserve is part of a process of cultural change which aims at valorizing the communitarian dimension in the management of the natural resources. The central importance covered, in Frechal, by the individualized appropriation of the mato in a context marked by the inalienability of land imposes a reconsideration of the opportunity to establish a clear-cut dichotomic opposition between communitarian control of resources and individual possess, fundamental not only in the state legislation, but also in the socio-environmentalist discourse. These two opposite polarities have to be intended, rather, as two weberian ideal types that articulate themselves locally in original syntheses.

In the second part of the article, the issue of “indirects” allowed to penetrate the stratified meanings that pertain the very concept of ‘property of natural resources’. The ethos of the roça, the aforamento and the ‘posture of owners’, thought in support of the idea of participative management of reserve, did not defined autonomous and temporally sequential ambits, but a whole of references copresent in the semantic horizon of my interlocutors that influenced their strategies of action.

The complex situation lived by “indirects” becomes, finally, a tangible example of the possible “perverse effects”<sup>17</sup> produced by the institution of a particular typology of reserve that had been conceived since its origin exactly with the intent to take in consideration, if not to resolve, the most problematic social dynamics of a given socio-cultural context.

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<sup>16</sup> In the perspective of Milton (1996), environmentalism configured itself as a peculiar *cultural perspective* that defines pragmatically the relation entertained with the environment as a *transcultural discourse* – in the *foucaultian* meaning of the term – that constructs itself through globalized communicative channels. In this circumstance, the attention is focalized on the peculiar *social* declination assumed by environmentalism in Brazilian context.

<sup>17</sup> In the meaning proposed by Boudon (1981), it deals with those effects not foreseen – and not predictable – generated by a social action explicitly addressed to the realization of others aims.

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