

CABOCLOS



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Introduction

Although people from the arid lands of the Potiguar *sertão*, Caboclos have shown themselves to be a resistant and unwavering people in ethnic and political mobilization in Rio Grande do Norte state. Their history is crossed by constant issues caused by droughts and by the distress of finding lands for agriculture, fishing and cattle breeding. Caboclos have been fighting for their recognition as Indigenous people by maintaining the families in their territories and through political organization.



1. Denomination

The common use of the name “Caboclos” as a self-designation by the Indigenous people of Assu indicates a way of referring to a social and cultural distinction in relation to the surrounding population living on the banks of the Paraú river.

The distinctiveness of the Caboclos in relation to the habitants living around them arises, among other aspects, from their classification term. They have been called “Tapuias” by non-Indigenous people in reference to their specific physical aspects, practices and social values.

Among other physical characteristics used in the recognition of Caboclos singularities, the short stature, the flat feet, the *labrojeiro* nose and fat bottomed women with long black hair are currently mentioned. Concerning their social values and practices, their eating habits, marriage tradition (endogamous marriages, mostly with cousins) and the women’s sexual liberality are aspects of their distinctiveness. “Tapuios” is a depreciative term given by others which has a specific inference and implies some kind of inferiority. It builds walls, ethnic frontiers between their community and the people living around them, given rise to prejudices, distrust and disagreement.

On the other hand, “Caboclo” is used by the community members themselves to refer to their own Indigenous origin, which descends from a Cabocla woman taken against her will [*Caboquinha pega a casco de cavalo*]. The name “Caboclo” was incorporated by the elders as a nickname. As stated by Antonio Luiz Lopes, known as Zamba:

Our Indigenous identification comes from that. We brought this name [Caboclo] from the beginning, from the first generation, and until now some people think we are “Tapuias”, some people think we are Turkish, that we don’t have an Indigenous name: the truth is that we are all Caboclos descendants of the Cabocla woman from the forest [*caboquinha da mata*]. (oral information)¹

The “Caboquinha” Luíza, known as old mom Caboca [*mãe véia caboca*], was the one who grew everything here, beginning a different family whose characteristic is Caboclos blood running in their veins. This is a distinction that Caboclos themselves and non-caboclos living around them reinforce with emphasis. In other words, to be Caboclo means to be of an original lineage from a Cabocla who has given the name to her descendants

2. Location and occupation history



The Caboclos of Assu Village is located between the Potiguar districts of Assu and Paraú. This location is directly related to the historic processes from the colonial period, which are marked by the colonization expansion to the inlands through widening of pastoral borders and intense conflicts of Indigenous resistance to it in XVII and XVIII centuries.

The economic model adopted by the Portuguese was sugar cane coastal plantations, leaving the introduction of pastoral labor as an economic outlet for exploring the interior. Therefore, there would be necessary lands in great extension for developing economically and demographically the captaincy, and also to permanently possess Rio Grande do Norte by populating its interior.

By 1680, the donation of lands [named *sesmarias*] were going to intensify, bothering Indigenous people living on the banks of the rivers. The characteristics of the northeastern semi-arid region, such as scarcity of water and a cactus and underbrush vegetation would determine the quick dispersion of farming across the fields of Rio Grande do Norte and the consequent hinterland economic expansion.

There were created fiefs around which a corral and huts were built for the cowboy families. The corrals did spread quickly across the streams, compromising the possession of this territory by Indigenous people.

Cattle raising began to emerge as the main economic activity ensuring the subsistence of the colony which was already thriving with sugar cane plantation, followed by a significant increase of the non-Indigenous population. Cattle and horses became animals for slaughter and also for riding and traction. It is important to mention that livestock had already been developed by the Dutch due to the low quality of the soil that was not appropriate for planting sugar cane. The Dutch also had started the extraction of salt on the Assu river which was later expanded by the Portuguese.

Frontiers of pastoral settlements were pushed inland not only to hunt and slave Indigenous people, like the major expeditions into the interior, known as *bandeiras*, but mostly to reach the occupation of the lands, so it was not of the settlers interest using Indigenous labor. The consequences of this process are scathing and even tragic to the Indigenous, since it threatened directly their territory boundaries, compromising livelihood activities such as hunting and fishing and incurring a significant dispossession of their lands which were now taken by cattlemen and free-range livestock. Indigenous were an obstacle to pastoral expansion.

The occupation of the lands for livestock development and the conflicts about whose labor should be incorporated contextualizes the historical battle of the Indigenous Sertanejos Tapuia — known as the “Barbarian War”, “Açu War” or “Cariri Conference” — as crossed by many fights for power. There was not only warfare against Indigenous peoples but also there were intense conflicts between colonizers. The Portuguese government took more severe actions and managed to balance the interests of the colonizing agents involved in land occupation by the time the conflicts were already coming to a resolution. The conflict involving Manuel Álvares de Moraes and Bernardo Vieira de Melo can be a good example of the disputes between senior army officers [*mestres de campo*], who were also land owners, and captains responsables by defending the colony captancies [*capitães-mores*], among which can be added land claims by the settlers who were declaring themselves to be the true conquerors of the territory.

The bad distribution of lands allowed the settlement of large and disoccupied agricultural areas, which affected the living of the Indigenous people. The Law of January 9th, 1697, which forbade land donation, did not have retroactive effect, for that

reason it didn't solve the problem of land concentration inequality, because those lands which had already been donated were maintained.

The lands in this region which we have historical documents of its donations were donated to:

1. Domingos de Azevedo do Vale²:

These lands (*sesmaria*) were located in the Paraú creek (RN 0094) on the banks of the Assu river and its length was 4.47 miles, it had been given by the captain major André Nogueira [da Costa] to the sergeant major Bento Teixeira Ribeiro and his associated Manuel Neto da Cunha on 09/06/1710, but were never populated. The required lands advanced from the mentioned creek until they confronted the lands of the petitioner himself (RN 0922), Domingos de Azevedo do Vale, totaling nine miles in length and one mile and a half wide on either side of the Paraú creek.

As stated on these lands description: "The petitioner received two concessions: one on the Paraú creek, in 1719 (RN 0922); and another one at the Rabo de Bugia farm, in 1735 (RN 0409)". Neither of the letters (RN 0922 and RN 0409), according to the documents, inform the petitioner occupation or his place of residence.

On the letter RN 0409, the supplicant Domingos de Azevedo do Vale claimed to receive by inheritance together with Jose Ribeiro de Faria the lands of Rabo de Bugia farm which belonged to Manuel Ribeiro da Fonseca (RN 0046). On the same letter, it was mentioned that Domingos de Azevedo do Vale and Jose Ribeiro da Fonseca were relatives of Manuel Ribeiro da Fonseca, one was his son and the other was his son-in-law, however it was not made explicit which one was the son and which one was the son-in-law of Manuel Ribeiro da Fonseca.

2. Carlos de Azevedo [do Vale]³:

The land required was 9 miles long and 3 miles wide, located in the Paraú creek on the banks of the Assu river, bordering the lands of Bento Teixeira Ribeiro, which were known as Beldroegas, and bordering also the Caraubas plains of the Paraú creek that flowed into the Assu river."

As stated in the lands description: "The petitioner received three concessions: one on the Purim river, in 1711 (RN 0099); one on the Paraú creek, in 1735 (RN 0924); and one on the Gaspar Lopes creek, in 1737 (RN 0930)." Another observation found in the document indicates that:

The scribe of the royal farm, Bento Ferreira Mousinho, informed the royal farm owner, Timotio de Brito Quinteiro, in 06/05/1735, that the requested lands have had been donated in 07/18/1719 by the captain major Luis Ferreira Freire to Domingos de Azevedo do Vale (RN 0922), as stated in the official book Oitavo das Sesmarias (page 56) and once again had been donated in 01/29/1733 by the major captain Joao de Barros Braga to Carlos de Azevedo do Vale, as stated in the official book Nono das Sesmarias (page 11). However, none of the concessions were confirmed. The royal farm owner Timotio de Brito Quinteiro informed the major captain Joao de Teive Barreto e Menezes in 06/05/1735 that he was sending the feedback of the royal scribe, and that was up to the captain major decide what to do.

3. Sergeant Major Leonardo Bezerra Cavalcanti⁴:

[The land was located in the perimeter] The banks of the Assu river, Paraú creek, 9 miles, crossing the Jabotá lagoon between Serra do Macaco and Serrote do Riacho, crossing Pedra Lisa, Riacho Salgado and Beldroega creek, reaching for Serra de João do Vale. Olho-d'água, São José and the three Boqueirões which flows into the Assu river.

On these lands [*sesmarias*] around the Paraú river that later became latifúndia is where the Caboclos de Assu have been remaining for six generations. In the stories of the elders, several migratory movements have been pointed as indicators of the first family settling in the area where all the community currently resides. Two migratory movements have historical and cultural significance to the comprehension of this process: the first encompasses migratory displacements from the Upanema riverbanks caused by the evictions provoked by land occupiers, and the second occurs due to evictions and burnings of Indigenous houses and fields in Serra da Cepilhadeira, nowadays known as Serra de João do Vale. About these situations there is in the oral tradition the report of “huge fires” which made the Indigenous abandon their houses. The ones that remained were persecuted and easily caught and enslaved by the farmers under the allegation that they were “savages”.

In the oral tradition of the group, the founder couple of the community, Antonio Francisco and Luíza, and other Indigenous people who lived on the banks of the Upanema river and other nearby regions on the Paraú creek were expelled from their lands by people who alleged themselves to be the owners of that territory. Despite being called “civilized” it is also said that Antonio Francisco is from the Upanema region, where he used to live with his family (all of them were Indigenous people). Luíza is mentioned to be from Serra do João do Vale region. The narratives which tell about the “savage Tapuia woman” and the “civilized cowboy hunter” reveal a sense in which the “natural” essence of the “Tapuia Indigenous” presumes a radical otherness that falls upon, one side, on what is classified as Tapuio (Luíza) — embracing the Indigenous who were known as savages — and as Tupi (Antonio Francisco) — embracing the Indigenous who were known as civilized.

About the founder couple, the narratives evoke that Luíza was a “mad Tapuia” [*tapuia braba*] or a “caboquinha from the forest” who were persecuted, captured and domesticated by a cowboy, named Antonio Francisco. It is by encompassing this capture that the Caboclos de Assu are demarcating their ethnic specificity and their Indigenous origin. The “Tapuia woman” or “caboquinha” used to live inside caves before being captured by the civilized man. The elder demarcate the Gargantina cave, located on a farm of the region, as the location of the capture. According to some

caboclos, in some flagstones near the cave and other places on the farms of the region is common to find pestles on the stones, where meals were prepared, which has also been indicated as symbols of the Indigenous presence in the region.



Besides being a hiding place, the cave above mentioned was a place used by the Indigenous as a "ranch". The "cave of the Aborigines", as "Gargantina Cave" is also called, served as a resting place during the long and tiring walks of the Indigenous that sought to access the dense forests, sierras and *caatinga* vegetations in order to hunt animals and collect eatables plants such as some cactus. Back in "Colonel Sierra" or "Olho D'Água Sierra", closer to the community, there are two big old cashew trees that were planted by the Indigenous people, near to a waterhole. In *caatinga* region, which is today located near the BR 304 highway (which connects Natal to Mossoró), the Indians would stay for a longer period of time, in order to develop agricultural activities, especially in the dryer periods, because this region had favorable water and fertile soil.



The occupation of the lands by farmers had two main forms: firstly, the farmers, who mostly had the title of colonel, used the strong political influence they had in the region and claimed the lands to be their property. The farmers also recruited the Indigenous to work on their lands, building stone fences, clearing brush, opening roads, among other laborers. The dependence relationship between the Indigenous and the farmers increased throughout the groceries stores the farmers built which deducted the money the Indigenous should be paid for working whenever they needed to buy foodstuffs; it was also common exchange work for a "plate of food". The second form of land occupation occurred when people who alleged to be relative to the indigenous took advantage of the agonizing situation provoked by the farmers and demanded the right to inherit the properties.

Despite all these conflicts, the Caboclos de Assu have remained in the place where they currently reside, facing the disadvantageous working conditions, whether in agricultural and fishing labor (nowadays everything that is produced and caught still has to be shared with the farmers) or working for the farmers, considering the aggravating factor that at that time there were no payments in currency, but only exchanges for "plate of food" and products which the farmer himself sold in his grocery store.

In the oral tradition of the Caboclos, the manual labor of the Caboclos themselves was used to delimit the farms. The stone fences, very common in this

territory, are important indicators of how their labor was used in the construction of the farms and the organization and division of the territories.

3. Social and Political Organization



The members of the Caboclo community are descendants of a common origin, the couple Antonio Francisco and Luíza, and this fact (being generated by a Cabocla) is seen as what constitutes the Caboclo family. The couple had four sons (Pedro Caboclo, José Caboclo, João Caboclo e Antonio Turco) and five daughters (Joana, Maria, Cândida, Júlia e Damásia).

In 2019, the village had the following population:

POPULATION			
Indigenous		Non-Indigenous	
Families	People	Families	People
40	96	06	33

Source: Adriano Lopes (local leader)

In a genealogical survey conducted by the researchers José Glebson Vieira and Jailma Nunes Oliveira between the years of 2011 and 2013, this Indigenous population had 37 Indigenous families and 115 people. Approximately 90% of them presented parental attachment to one of the three sons of Antonio Francisco and Luíza: “Pedro Caboclo”, “Zé Caboclo” and “João Caboclo”, who are known as the “ancient lineages”. The other 10% presented parental attachment to the sisters “Cândida Cabocla”, “Joana Cabocla” and “Maria Cabocla”, also children of the founder couple and known as “ancient lineages”.

Among these Indigenous people, there is a preference for marriages between cousins, close relatives, uncle and niece or aunt and nephew and brothers and sisters.

The distribution of the houses obeys a family logic, starting with the constitution of domestic groups composed by an older couple occupying a central place, and around them the married children go on building their houses. The area where the residences are built belongs to the community itself, thanks to the acquisition of the land by the Assu Municipal Government and its later donation to the Caboclos Community Association. On the other hand, the areas for agricultural production, extractivism, hunting and fishing belong to the farmers. In spite of this, the use of the lands for farming and other productive activities is maintained among the Indigenous people, whose land occupation replicates the village organization, in other words: each family belonging to a domestic group works in a certain area. In general, the father works together with his single children, his marriage children and their partners, and also his grandchildren, nieces, nephews.

The political organization of the Caboclos is closely related to their social organization. The founder couple, Antonio Francisco and Luíza, were political leaders because they represented the “first ancients”, so they were the main figures mediating the relationship between the families and the farmers in order to get access to the cultivation lands and fishing reservoirs and to find sponsors as well. Since then, the families of the Caboclos are involved in a historical and persistent patronage relationship: first as farm workers, later by sharecropping everything they would grow and produce with the farmers. The employer is the owner of the land, from which the Indigenous people receive the right of economic usufruct, but some obligations are also carried out, such as working on the land with the condition of paying half of their profits. This relationship is sustained by a series of practices, also involved in mutual expectations and symbolic values.

After the death of the founder couple, the leadership was passed to their sons and daughters who had remained in the village. They were: Pedro Caboclo, José Caboclo, Maria, Cândida and Joana; two daughters and one son of the couple migrated from the village to Potiguara cities such as Mossoró, Riachuelo and Itajá. Pedro Caboclo had four marital unions which resulted in the constitution of the bigger family in the village, also the family with the greatest influence. Pedro Caboclo's successor was his son Luiz (also known as "Luiz de Pedro"), who also raised a large family as a result of three marital unions from which came Luiz Francisco da Silva Filho (known as Luiz do Carmo), who became a community leader and integrated the ethnic-political mobilization in Rio Grande do Norte.

Luiz do Carmo, son of Luiz de Pedro, grandson of Pedro Caboclo and great-grandson of the founder couple was one of the Caboclo Community Association founders, in the beginning of the 2000s. It was throughout the Community Association within the mobilization for ethnic recognition of the rural communities of RN that his leadership had greater visibility and legitimacy before the government. Luiz was their leader before public institutions and indigenous organizations such as APOINME. Later he passed on his position to Antônio Adriano Lopes, son of his brother (Antonio Lopes), great-great-grandson of the founder couple, who is the current leader of the Caboclos.

4. Environment, territorial situation and productive activities



The Caboclos de Assu inhabit a semi-arid region between the cities of Paraú and Assu. *Caatinga* hiperxerófila is the predominant vegetation in this region, which is characterized by a dry environment with prevalence of cactus, herbaceous and bushy plants. Jurema-preta tree, mufumbo tree, marmeleiro bush, xique-xique and mandacaru (both cactus) are some of the common species in this biome. Small areas are cultivated with corn and beans.

This is an unspoiled vegetation area resulting from the development of livestock by both ranchers and some residents of the community. Across its entire extent, lands are destined for animal breeding (cattle, chicken and horses). Deforestation has directly impacted the river and the creeks, since without the riparian woodlands there is an increase in the erosion and water sedimentation levels. The vegetation are increasingly being affected by the commercialization of wood for ceramic factories, and about that it is important to mention that Vale do Açu and Polo Cerâmico Açu & Itajá are both companies which concentrate a significant amount of factories demanding the indiscriminate use of wood as a fuel to their furnaces.

There are two other factors that also contribute to the degradation of this region. The first emerges from an ownership concentration of the best lands with a small number of people, pushing the majority population to the marginal lands. The second is due to the weather instability of the region, especially the irregular precipitations.

The village families occupy lands of collective ownership belonging to the Community Association or lands passed down through inheritance. The inheritance lands have belonged to Pedro Caboclo and are spread in an area that crosses from east to west the Paraú river, now belonging to some of his daughters and sons. The Community Association had acquired a small property where some residences are settled and later on received a donation of 31,58 acres from Assu Municipal Government where most of the houses of the village are established.

Both inheritance lands and those acquired by the Community Association are almost exclusively for living. The first ones have better agricultural and livestock potential, but the ones from the Association offer no conditions to this kind of activity, because of the stony soil poor in organic material. The way found by the families was to occupy these areas with chicken, pig and goat breeding.

That's why most families cultivate and grow crops in nearby farms, which offer proper soil conditions because they are located near the Paraú river and some reservoirs. The river currently crests from January to May, during the heavy

precipitations. The river flow also increases when the Beldroega reservoir (which lies upstream the river) leaks. Besides the Paraú River, the existing reservoirs around the village are also used by the families for fishing. Some of them are located on the farms outside the village, so the fishermen have to share half of the fish with the owners of the properties, just as they do with the agricultural production.



Besides cattle and goat raising, artisanal fishing and subsistence agriculture, some families also extract carnauba straw for the production of objects for domestic and commercial use, oiticica oil for medicines and xique-xique for animal feed. The handicraft made of carnauba straw is becoming an important source of alternative income.

Probably the secondary economic position of carnauba manufacturing comes from the fact that the community has to buy it, making production and the commercialization more costly. The restricted access to carnauba limits its uses as well, and the rich dust produced after drying the straws, the fruits (rich in nutrients), and the medicinal use of its roots are currently eliminated.





5. Indigenous Movement Articulations

The participation of three Caboclos leaders in a public audience in Natal in 2005 was a mark to the political mobilization of this community in RN. The event also had the presence of community leaders from Eleutérios do Catu and Mendonça do Amarelão. Calling themselves as the “raising indians” of Rio Grande do Norte, the Caboclos de Assu claimed the recognition of their ethnic and cultural specificity and the right to unique public policies. The Indigenous made official their demands throughout a petition assigned to state legislators, FUNAI officials, the Public Prosecutors Office (MPF), the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), the State Government, the Human Rights Commission and the Indigenous Affairs Committee of the Brazilian Anthropology Association (CAI/ABA).

The participation of the three communities in this event had a symbolic meaning, not only to these specific leaders, but also to the state and regional scenario. From the standpoint of the Indigenous themselves, the demand for their recognition implied a greater visibility of their resistance by valuing Indigenous ancestry through specific historical processes such as the connection with the former settlements and the narratives that emphasizes elder living experiences and knowledgement: evictions,

occupations, migratory movements and the violence they have faced forcing the loss of their territory and their consequent subordination to land owners.

For both state and regional scenarios, the "emergence" of the three Indigenous communities subverted the official discourse — supported by the historiography — that suggested the extinction or disappearance of Indigenous people in the state since the colonial period. The “Barbarian War”, “Açu War” or “Cariri Confederation” and the colonial expansion are seen as the most important facts which would have determined the end of the Indigenous existence within the state. In the mid-18th century, it was a shared opinion that the Indigenous were already dominated, assimilated and enslaved into the farms or in the religious missions, suffering the consequences of the loss of their territory.

Ever since this mobilization moment in 2005, leaders and other Indigenous from the village have been participating in activities of the Indigenous movement, such as the public audiences, Indigenous assemblies, among others. The community integrates the Articulation of Indigenous People of Rio Grande do Norte (AIRN) established in 2017.

Endnotes

¹ Zamba (Antonio Luiz Lopes) speaking in the interview conducted by José Glebson Vieira in September, 2010.

² NATAL (city). Petition of Domingos de Azevedo do Vale requesting from the King [D. João V] the acceptance of the letter about the donation of a land located in the Paraú creek, Açu river, which had been donated by the major captain Luis Ferreira Freire. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino-RN, reference code: Box 3, Document 218. Available at: <http://www.silb.cchla.ufrn.br/sesmaria/RN%200922>. Accessed in: Feb. 14th, 2022.

³ NATAL (city). Petition of the colonel Carlos de Azevedo [do Vale] requesting from the King [D. João VI] the acceptance of the letter about the donation of a land located in the Paraú creek, Açu river, which had been donated by the major captain João de Teive Barreto e Menezes. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino-RN, reference code: Box 3, Document 222. Available at: <http://www.silb.cchla.ufrn.br/sesmaria/RN%200924>. Accessed in: Feb. 14th, 2022.

⁴ NETO, Antônio Rogério Peixôto. Breve Histórico de Paraú. Rogério Paraú, 2009. Available at: <http://rogerioparau.blogspot.com/2009/06/>. Accessed in: Feb. 14th, 2022.

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