



Indigenous and quilombola identities among neighbors in the São Francisco River


Book Review:

FRENCH, Jan Hoffman. **Tornar-se negro ou índio: a legalização das identidades no Nordeste brasileiro** (Legalizing Identities: Becoming Black or Indian in Brazil's Northeast). Translation into Brazilian Portuguese by Iracema Dulley. Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2021. 373 p.

Itamar Freitas

itamarfreitas@gmail.com

Professor of the Graduate Program in History Education at the Federal University of Sergipe, and of the Graduate Program in African Studies, Indigenous Peoples, and Black Cultures at the State University of Bahia. He has published "Uma introdução ao método histórico (2021)" and holds a Ph.D. in Education from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, and a Ph.D. in History from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0605-7214>

 10.28998/rchv13n26.2022.0024

Received: October 15th, 2022

Approved: October 30th, 2022



Indigenous and Quilombola identities among neighbors in the São Francisco River

The title is self-explanatory: ‘Becoming black or indian’ addresses identity processes in the last third of the 20th century, experienced by those residing in the vicinity of the São Francisco River, in the states of Alagoas and Sergipe. The research carried out by the lawyer and anthropologist Jan Hoffman French at the University of Richmond (USA) in the 1990s narrates the identity transition of the Xocó and Mocambo populations: from rural workers with kinship ties and living in close proximity, to Indigenous and Quilombola communities, respectively, with distinct interests in the 2000s.

This is the substantive history of the work. In metahistorical terms, the book examines the positive role of the state and globalization in this process of empowerment (identity recognition and land tenure) of subalternized populations. More importantly, the book discusses the implications of this research for the production of a new theoretical model that addresses the simultaneous emergence of indigenous and black identities in societies governed by a democratic state under the rule of law: the creation of the model of “legalizing identities”. It comprises a set of procedures and categories that explain the identity formation process in which “the law itself and its interpretations” are modified “over time”, as “people who are touched by it use it in a variety of ways and, in the process, experience identity transformation” (p. 34). Such situations involve not only the classic agents of the state but also the Catholic Church, NGOs, lawyers, anthropologists, and public prosecutors (governmentality).

The first three chapters are the most significant for understanding the construction of these new identities. In the first chapter, titled “Situating identities in the religious landscape of the sertão”, the author describes and literally situates the communities of Mocambo and Ilha de São Pedro in the landscape. She then narrates the conflict of ideologies and theologies within the Latin American and Sergipean Catholic Church (Elder Câmara, José Vicente Távora, and José Brandão de Castro and Enoque Apolônio), with a temporary victory for Liberation Theology. The chapter also deals with the criticism of the harmful effects of capitalism in the countryside, the advancement of anthropological research in the São Francisco River region (Donald Pierson), the goals and shortcomings of Brazilian military governments’ policies toward indigenous peoples, specially land expropriation in the Amazon, and the interference of these same governments in the affairs of the Catholic Church. The local Church acknowledges its

role in the ethnocide practiced during the colonial and imperial periods, the military (the State) persecutes the perceived communism of Catholic clergy, losing, to some extent, indirect support from the clergy, and social scientists engage in the struggle for rights through historical and anthropological research on the then-excluded workers. The result of these unusual combinations is a transformation in the identity of the clergy and the transformation in the identity of the occupants of Ilha de São Pedro.

The events that constituted the transformation of identities are narrated in chapters two and three. In chapter two, titled “We are indians even if our faces aren’t painted”, the transformation of rural workers into Indigenous people, culminating in the trespassing, tenure and legalization of the lands in the island and the mainland, is marked by various conflicts. These include those between the oligarchy (the Brito Family) and the Catholic Church (D. Brandão and Frei Enoque), between rural workers (future Xocó) and their employers (the Brito Family), between the Xocó leaders, and between the recognized Indigenous people (Cariri-Xocó, from Alagoas) and the population seeking Indigenous recognition (Xocó, from Sergipe). The identity transformation is also characterized by the activism of anthropologists and jurists (Beatriz Góis Dantas, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Dalmo Dallari, José Alvino Santos Filho), the historical research carried out by Frei Enoque with those who occupied Ilha de São Pedro who were still rural workers, the paradigm shift in the definition of ethnicity (from identity to relational difference), and the different strategies for applying legislation. The state of Sergipe buys Ilha de São Pedro for land reform purposes, obscuring both the Xocó and Catholic struggle for Indigenous recognition. The Church claims the land of the Island based on the Statute of the Indian (“flexible and contextual” ethnicity, not linked to the concept of race), and the workers opt for purchasing the land before seeking ethnic recognition because, as stated by a Cariri-Xocó chief, “Indigenous people without land are not Indigenous” (p. 115).

The transition from workers to Quilombolas is described in the third chapter, titled “Constructing boundaries and creating legal facts: a landowner dies and a quilombo is born”. In this chapter, identical professional groups and institutions involved in the struggle in favor of the Xocó people play an active role: Padre Isaias, lawyer and nun Mariza Rios, lay religious Margarete Rocha, the Pastoral Land Commission, and the families of rural landowners, referred to as Dória and Cardoso. In this part of the book, the process of differentiation that dominates the formation of the Indigenous and Quilombola identities becomes clearer, with the advances and setbacks in the construction of boundaries between the two groups. This is based on strategies related to land

acquisition and spurred by the emergence of legislation (in the case of the residents of Mocambo, Article 68 of the Constitution of Brazil, dated 1988). It also becomes clear that the creation of legislation and its unceasing interpretation (expanding, restricting, and expanding again the nature and number of beneficiaries) is the driving force behind many of the contradictions resulting from the transition from sharecroppers to landholders and from landholders to Black individuals. With the emergence of the law, activists and land-seeking workers adapt their narratives and strategies of struggle as anthropologists and members of the Black movement reinterpret the legal framework. This adaptation also happens as the State produces inclusive public policies. Consequently, workers were able to make informed and interested choices among becoming rural workers, descendants of enslaved people, and remnants of Quilombolas.

The following three chapters, as suggested by their titles, “Family feuds and ethnoracial politics: what’s land got to do with it?”, “Cultural moves: authenticity and legalizing difference”, and “Buried alive: a family story becomes quilombo history”, provide detailed insights into some of the theses announced in the preceding four sections. Among these theses, I highlight: the relativity of identity markers ‘race’ and ‘skin color’ in the face of intricate disputes over social *status*, kinship relations, and the strength of the ideology of racial democracy in the country; the establishment of cultural markers such as the Toré dance and Jurema drink for Indigenous people, and the Samba de coco for Quilombo people, as events that follow the process of legalizing identities (to use the author’s terminology), months after the acquisition of rights; and, finally, the creation of a narrative transformed into a theatrical piece by Mocambo’s students, representing the life of a family (that of Antônio do Alto, the great-grandfather of the local “memory man”) as the founding memory of the place, which gradually incorporates markers of slavery, blackness, and African-derived religion to simultaneously serve as an internal and external reinforcement of the newly acquired Quilombola identity.

Jan Hoffman French’s book effectively accomplishes the announced goal. The shortcomings are minimal: an occasional revision error here, another one there, quite far away. An oversight now and then, such as the use of “newly discovered identity” (p. 93) after having praised the de-essentialization of the idea of being Indigenous. There is also an excess at the beginning that should be noted. The whole section “The Northeast and the sertão in the Brazilian imaginary” is unnecessary (for the Brazilian public). It would have been better for the writing plan to start the narrative with the ethnography of Mocambo and the Ilha São Pedro (topic 2 of chapter 1). Additionally, this section starts

a discussion that is not thoroughly examined, concerning the identities of the Northeast and the Northeastern sertanejos (which are not the focus of the book), in contrast to the sophisticated discussion on Indigenous and Black identities. Finally, the entire topic reads like a forced description of context, already adequately covered in the following chapters: it is a brief information on prevailing economic, social, and cultural relations in an extensive region throughout the first half of the 20th century.

On the other hand, there is an abundance of virtues in the book. The substantive content of the book is a lesson in methodology. The author demonstrates how to extract academic relevance from a research problem: the rarity of the phenomenon in a particular theoretical and methodological context. She explains that the situation was “unimaginable by US standards: two neighboring and closely related communities, whose fates had been completely intertwined for generations, were now separated by ethnicity, race, politics, and land” (p. 12). It is also a lesson in intellectual and ideological autonomy. Among the options of class identity and multicultural identity, she chooses the latter, while at the same time recognizing positive agency in the actions of the State and globalization.

Lastly, I believe that the greatest value of the work lies in delivering what it promised, namely, to narrate the process of transformation of two related groups of rural workers into distinct Quilombola and Indigenous groups, approached through the categories of ‘governmentality’ and ‘legalizing identities’. The author presents the model extracted from these cases in Mocambo and Ilha São Pedro as an example to be replicated, especially in processes of identity recognition in the United States of America, where (unlike Brazil) the ideology of race is essentialized, even among Indigenous peoples, disregarding class markers (biological determinants indifferent to economic determinants, for example).

To conclude, I would like to point out the stimulation that the work offers in ontological and philosophical-speculative terms (focused on my area of expertise, of course, the training of History teachers) to those who venture through its 373 pages. The ontological reflection can be summarized in a seemingly absurd question: is being prior to or simultaneous with recognition? To put it less abstractly: is Indigenous identity (always or should always be) prior to its recognition, especially by the State? The experiences of Mocambo and Ilha São Pedro demonstrate that Quilombola and Indigenous identities are formed during legal recognition process, and that this change in understanding the phenomena of identity formation is ideologically compatible with the distribution of social justice.

On the other hand, speculative reflection is not encapsulated in an authorial statement. It is necessary to go through the work to capture the response to the meaning of history, inventorying (as I attempted to do in the summaries above) the series of contradictions within and between the agents involved in these identity politics. The author made no effort, for example, to suppress (1) the importance of the Kardecist orientation of the prosecutor in his decision to support the Xocó cause, (2) the Brazilian understanding of the law as a device that “sometimes is accepted and sometimes is not”, (3) the manifestation of ethnic superiority displayed by the excluded Indigenous person over the excluded Quilombola person, (4) the possibility that a powerful institution such as the Catholic Church may consider, at a micro level, its responsibility and (due to metaphysical, legal, or casuistic determinations) acknowledge that it should compensate the 20th-century Xocó by supporting the restitution of their Indigenous identity, after suppressing it in 19th century. The history of the transformation of the identities of these rural workers into Quilombola and Indigenous identities is a narrative of many agents and no determinants, according to the author. It tastes of chaos. Readers are, however, free to formulate their own versions of the meaning of life expressed in these events, taking into consideration (above all) the concepts of governmentality and legalizing identities.

Translators: Paula Granato Aymoré Martins; Ana Paula Gonçalves Lacerda; Bruna Queiroz Assunção and Nayara Souza de Oliveira.

Layout and technical review: Joel Santos Reis.