

PACOVAL, AN AMAZONIAN MOCAMBO: A trip revisited

PACOVAL, UM MOCAMBO AMAZÔNICO: Uma viagem revisitada

PACOVAL, UN MOCAMBO AMAZÓNICO: Un viaje revisitado

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**Abstract**

*In 1989 a group of young researchers from the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi undertook a trip to Alenquer district, State of Pará, to conduct the first fieldwork in bioanthropology among the quilombolas of the community of Pacoval. In this article the trip is revisited and analyzed, 30 years after, to take a glimpse at how it was then and how it is to be a quilombola today. Three decades after that fieldwork, when the Unified Brazilian Health System (SUS) also completes 30 years, and the National Policy of Integral Health of the Black Population makes its 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the health situation in Pacoval and in most other mocambos remain precarious, and the Black population of Brazil has little to commemorate, as it continues to fight against structural racism and for the right to full citizenship.*

**Key-words:** Quilombo, Amazon, Alenquer, Bioanthropology, Health of the Black Population.

**Resumen**

*En 1989 un grupo de jóvenes investigadores del Museo Paraense Emílio Goeldi hizo un viaje hacia el municipio de Alenquer, Estado do Pará, para conducir el primer trabajo de campo en Bioantropología entre los quilombolas de Pacoval. En este artículo, el viaje es revisitado y analizado, 30 años después, para tener una visión de cómo era ser quilombola en aquella época y ahora. Tres décadas después del trabajo de campo, cuando el Sistema Único de Salud (SUS) también completa 30 años y la Política Nacional de Saúde Integral de la Población Negra cumplió su 11<sup>o</sup> aniversario, la situación en Pacoval y en muchos otros mocambos continúa precaria, y la población Negra de Brasil tiene poco para conmemorar, pues continúa la lucha contra el racismo estructural e por el derecho de la ciudadanía plena.*

**Palabras clave:** Quilombo, Amazonia, Alenquer, Bioantropología, Salud de la Población Negra.

**Resumo**

*Em 1989 um grupo de jovens pesquisadores do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi fez uma viagem para o município de Alenquer, Estado do Pará, para conduzir o primeiro trabalho de campo em Bioantropologia*

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*entre os quilombolas da comunidade do Pacoval. Neste artigo, a viagem é revisitada e analisada, 30 anos depois, para se ter uma visão de como era ser quilombola naquela época e agora. Três décadas depois do trabalho de campo, quando o Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS) também completa 30 anos e a Política Nacional de Saúde Integral da População Negra faz o seu 11º aniversário, a situação de saúde no Pacoval e em muitos outros mocambos continua precária, e a população Negra do Brasil tem pouco a comemorar, pois continua a lutar contra o racismo estrutural e pelo direito de cidadania plena.*

**Palavras-Chave:** Quilombo, Amazônia, Alenquer, Bioantropologia, Saúde da População Negra.

### INTRODUCTION

In 1989 a group of young researchers undertook a trip to Alenquer district, State of Pará, in the heart of the Brazilian Amazon, to conduct the first fieldwork in bioanthropology among the quilombolas (afroderived populations) of the community of Pacoval. It was July, the month when the waters of the Curuá, a tributary from the north to the Amazon, reach the highest levels. This river of dark waters, 520 km (320 miles) long, was used by explorers and adventurers as a way into the depths of the largest tropical forest of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Curuá is known for the formation of a series of dangerous rapids during the dry season, especially those near the headwaters, around the Tumucumaque Ridge. The rapids can reach 20 meters (60 feet) to more than 70 meters (210 feet) above sea level. They are likewise present on the smaller tributaries, the most important of which are the Cuminá, the Mamiá, and the one known as Igarapé do Inferno (Hell's Channel). In mid-year, the Curuá carries its water fast towards the Amazon, challenging its calm surface. They meet and make waves, just as we met the people from Pacoval. That journey was published in an article of a special issue of the newspaper "O Liberal", on November 15, 1990 (AGUIAR et al., 1990). In this article the trip is recounted and analyzed, 30 years after, to take a glimpse at how it was then and how it is to be a quilombola today.

According to Aguiar and collaborators (1990), and our memory, that month of July was very hot, with only a moderate amount of rainfall, when our team of six young scientists, endeavored to travel upriver with a load of packs and boxes sufficient for the most sophisticated safari one could imagine. We were in search of a community living on the cliffs of the big river Alenquer, some 34 Km (21 miles) from the town of same name: the "mocambo<sup>3</sup>" of Pacoval, as it was and still is known in the region, one of the hardest to find settlements of descendants of runaway slaves in Amazonia. An unsuspecting traveler venturing through that stretch of country would pass by the edge of the hamlet and not notice anything in particular. All one would see from the river were small huts of wattle or grass, tiny dugout canoes moored in small inlets, and

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<sup>3</sup> Mocambo and Quilombo are used interchangeably throughout the text as historically the terms carry the same meaning of settlements formed predominantly by Afroderived populations originated in Brazil from slave escapees who survived in the Amazon and other regions, in relative isolation, making use of common systems of land tenure and subsistence strategies



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some palm groves here and there. If the river was high enough, one could see a rustic chapel in the little central square, and countless excited children, who would wave, call out, and celebrate the arrival of any visitor happening to pass through (AGUIAR et al., 1990; FIGUEIREDO, 1995).

Limited to this first impression, few could imagine the stirring episode in the history of the Black population in Amazonia that lies behind this unassuming location, enduring to this day. Like many other quilombos, originated as hideouts of runaway slaves (SALLES, 1971), the community called Pacoval, was established in the recesses of the region, very far from the eyes and the arms of any city. The community retains part of its original social and cultural structure, featuring the Blacks' resistance to the racial persecution which was officially carried on as late as the end of the nineteenth century, even in the remotest corners of Amazonia (SALLES, 1971; 2015). Before the formal abolition of slavery, they developed elaborate strategies of escape and defense, revealing careful social organization to enable their survival at the price of many struggles, great ingeniousness, and extensive geographic knowledge of the region. Thirty years ago, the history of the mocambo already pointed to the importance of political leadership, of the preservation of deep-rooted tradition, of a strong faith in human destiny, of the value attached to festivals and other social occasions of a syncretic character, and a great respect for their natural environment (AGUIAR et al., 1990). Even though the elderly complained that acculturation was already occurring, the community seemed to be a proud Afro-Brazilian bastion, almost lost in the vast expanse of the Amazon basin.

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### THE REGION AND THE MOCAMBO

The Alenquer district, where the Pacoval is located, belongs to the political sub-region of the middle Amazon in the state of Pará, together with Faro, Jurutí, Oriximiná, Obidos, Monte Alegre and Santarém. It borders on the latter three townships. The town of Alenquer is situated on the river also called Alenquer, whose earlier name was Surubiú, about 750 km (470 miles) west from the capital, Belém. The area of the district, over 22,692 square kilometers (9,000 square miles), is larger than some countries, although it amounts to less than 2% of the area of Pará. In 1990 the population was estimated by the Brazilian National Census Bureau (IBGE) to number 56,631, of whom 29,652 lived in rural areas. The mocambo of Pacoval, had 386 inhabitants, according to SUCAM (Superintendência de Campanhas da Amazônia). In 2011, when the quilombo received the official land recognition by the federal government there were 115 families living in the village (CPISP, 2020)<sup>4</sup>.

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(ARRUTI, 2006; SALLES, 2015; LEÃO et al., 2019).

<sup>4</sup> <https://cpisp.org.br/pacoval/>

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The rivers in this region rise during six months and recede during the other six months of the year. They start to rise in November and overflow from January to May. The river movement controls most of the activities in the area, and in the past the rapids were formidable barriers to protect the runaway slaves from their persecutors. On the high plateau of Santarém, as in the vicinity of Óbidos, Monte Alegre and Alenquer, spontaneous settlements, mainly by Northeasterners has taken place since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. And some of them made early contact with the quilombola communities of the region. The economy of the rural people of Alenquer used to rely on the exploitation of the Brazil nut (*Bertholletia excelsa*), "balata" or gutta-percha (*Isonandra percha*), "cumarú" (*Dipterix odorata*), some cattle raising, and fishing (AGUIAR, 1990; FUNES, 1995).

One of the first documented references to the mocambo of the Curuá region can be found in the minutes of the town's council of Óbidos ("Livro das Vereações do Senado da Câmara de Obidos") (1792-1815), recorded on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1800, concerning the payment of a police detachment sent to the mocambo to recapture the Blacks living there. Probably it was at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when a group of African slaves working for the Macambira family in Santarém ran away, and penetrated the jungles of the region. They likely paddled up the Amazonas to the Monte Alegre district. From there they continued by land, crossing streams, until reaching the Curuá River, which was possibly quite low at the time. Once there, realizing that they were still in danger of recapture by the "capitães do mato" (slave-hunters), decided to go up the Curuá river until they got to a remote affluent, the Cumirá, where the first mocambo was established. The name given to their new home was "São Benedito" (Saint Benedict), and they lived there for a considerable length of time (FUNES, 1995; LEÃO et al., 2019).

They planted cassava and cotton brought from Monte Alegre on their flight. They also lived on the fruits native to the land, bananas, potatoes and tubers of several kinds, made flour by grinding the oil-rich nuts of the babassu palm (*Attalea speciosa*). They obtained salt from other palm trees, such as the açáí and the burity (*Mauritia flexuosa*), hunted and fished<sup>5</sup>.

During the colonial and imperial periods of Brazil, before slavery was abolished, they avoided all contact with the rest of the Brazilian society, mainly because of the constantly renewed raids for the recapture of runaways that were promoted by the state of Pará and by the district officers of Alenquer, Óbidos and Santarém, who employed soldiers and Indian scouts that knew the territory very well (SALLES, 1971, 2015). Contact with the outside world was eventually reestablished through the commercial activity of the "regatões", bush traders traveling in small, flat bottom boats, that plied the waterways of the Amazon to

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<sup>5</sup> Interviews with José Santa Rita Monteiro and Osvaldo Ramos do Nascimento, in 1989.



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trade with local groups in areas hidden in the upper reaches of rivers and streams. The people from the mocambos had to sell or exchange their products with these traders in order to acquire what they could not produce, including firearms, and metal implements (GOULART, 1968; QUEIROZ, 2017; LEÃO, 2019).

They were granted freedom of persecution and land rights through a donation of Emperor Pedro II, in 1877, eleven years before the Lei Áurea<sup>6</sup> (LEÃO, 2019). Following the emancipation of the slaves, the freed men and women moved to a location nearer Óbidos and Alenquer, in the Curuá river zone. The Decree number 751 of Alenquer Municipality, edited in February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1901, raised the quilombo to a "povoação", which gave it at the time the status of village. The present day community remains at this site. The mocambo owes its name to the extensive stands of the "pacovi" or "pacovan" banana (*Musa sp*) which was one of the staple foods used by the first inhabitants. On her expedition to the Curuá, in 1900, the French explorer Ottilie Coudreau visited the descendants of the founders of the Pacoval mocambo. She refers to them at length in her account, "Voyage au Rio Curuá", published in France (COUDREAU, 1903; FIGUEIREDO, 1989).

### THE RESEARCH EXPEDITION

Due to our goals and resources, the expedition, promoted by the Human Biology Program of the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi (SILVA, 2014), had to observe a rigorous time schedule. Its principal objective was the collection of bioanthropological and socioecological data about the small community and its inhabitants, and also to provide some general health assistance to the quilombolas. At the time, we did not have much information on how the community was formed, as official documents were rare. For this reason, the historian of the team Aldrin de Moura Figueiredo, started collecting some oral accounts among the leaders and some of the elders as he had been previously visiting the community and knew some of them (FIGUEIREDO, 1995). Those narratives provided an idea of the great difficulties which the ancestral fugitive slaves had to face as they were paddling upriver and walking long distances in search of a safe refuge to hide in an unknown region of difficult access.

It took us about sixteen hours altogether to reach Pacoval on motor boats especially adapted to the local conditions by the resident craftsmen. The northbound crossing of the Amazon river from Santarém to Alenquer, approximately 55 km (88 miles), consumed a little over four hours, passing the junction of the Tapajós and the Amazon, steering between numerous islets which are covered with water during periods of floods making navigation difficult in the region. There, the beauty of the Amazon is almost impossible to describe, as one might come upon flocks of majestic egrets taking wing or scanning the water for the fishes

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<sup>6</sup> Law number 3.353, signed by Princess Isabel, daughter of D. Pedro II, on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1888, freeing all the enslaved individuals in the Brazilian territory.

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that make up their daily diet, and observe some of the most amazing sunsets in the world. As the boats moved along we enjoyed restful, meditative moments, while contemplating the vast expanse of the river. Some of us had the good fortune to behold the rare "tucuxí", the Amazonian dolphin (*Sotalia fluviatilis*), a symbol of the river's charm and mystique.

We arrived in Alenquer during the weekend, and anxious to reach our destination we immediately sought the local logistic support, indispensable for the continuation of our journey to Pacoval. In the 1980's and today, even though with some improvement, the town may be considered typical of the interior of Pará, with its pier crowded with boats of small and medium size, loading and unloading regional produce, fishermen, young and old, walking along the rivers' bank, carrying in one hand the catch of the day or night, the hubbub in the business district, the central square, the century-old St. Anthony church, the narrow lanes, the stillness of the nights but, above all, the gracious and helpful people, concerned with our needs, and awed because we had come all the way from the capital to meet the quilombolas. At that time, there were very few initiatives in Brazil to investigate the lifestyle and health of the rural afro-derived populations as the law of the Unified Health System (SUS) was still under construction, and the National Policy of Integral Health of the Black Population had not been created yet (BRASIL, 2010). In Alenquer, that was the first time many of the townspeople had seen a group of researchers with their heavy equipment and such a hurry to move on to the jungle.

Senhora Maria do Carmo, gave us lodgings at her inn, which faced the town hall square. Despite our tiredness, her hospitality made us feel very comfortable in those simple facilities. After some negotiation with the district officials, we arranged to depart two days later to Pacoval without incurring in further expenses. But before departure there were still surprises to come. On Sunday afternoon, when some of us were revising the equipment and others attended to details for the journey, a noisy truck stopped in front of the inn. A young black man jumped out, approached us and asked if we were the "team of doctors" sent from Belém. He was Raimundo Peres Lopes, known as "Baré", and he talked in a hesitant, low voice. We noticed the writing on the doors of the truck: "Quilombo de Pacoval". He told us that the vehicle had been donated by the state government to help making faster the trip from Alenquer to Pacoval. The route could be done partly by a dirty road, and partly by river, and not totally by the traditional, lengthy route via the Amazon and the Curuá.

Thanks to the appearance of Baré we made our first contact with the most prominent people of the most prominent mocambo in the Alenquer district. To this day we do not know how they found out about us, but having learnt of our intentions, they came to the town on their own to get acquainted with us, and to seek more information about our mission. There they were spontaneous, always in a good mood, sometimes shy,



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sometimes at ease, people whom we came to respect and admire profoundly as heirs to a remarkable history, proud of their ancestors and the hard work required for daily subsistence. Baré was the youngest member of the group being twenty-six years old at the time. The group also included Osvaldo Ramos do Nascimento, nicknamed "Seu Roxinho" (61 years old), Maria Viana Pimentel (55), Maria da Cruz de Assis, nicknamed "Dona Cruzinha" (50), Maria Leonor Caripuna Vasconcelos (41), Maria do Socorro Freitas de Moraes (34), and, arriving a little later, Joaquim Nogueira Monteiro, known as "Joaquim Carolino" (59), the "King of the Congo," walking fast, wearing a broad grin and a hat he never took off. Joaquim and almost all the others belonged to the group of the "Marambiré" dancers. The "Marambiré" is one of the most important traditions of Pacoval, being a ritual dance performance, with dramatic and religious elements of African influence, during which chants are performed to tell the saga of the Amazonian Blacks to the accompaniment of the intense "bataque" drumbeat (FIGUEIREDO, 1995). Famous throughout the State of Pará, a symbol of its folklore, and an official expression of the States' art and culture, the "Marambiré" arose, grew and survived due to the people of Pacoval (Figure 1). They perform it annually, working themselves up to high pitch of pure and profound ecstasy (LEÃO et al., 2019). Once having understood the purpose of our journey, the group departed to inform the others about our arrival in the next few days.

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**Figure 1.** Representation of Marambiré in Pacoval



Photo: Hilton P. Silva (1989).

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Having chosen to take the traditional route by boat from Alenquer because of the amount of our equipment, we profited from the high water level, and got to the high cliff protecting the community against the floods, just at the spot where its founders had settled long ago. Judging from the few available historical records, many of the Blacks who, well over two hundred years ago, ran away and became the ancestors of the present dwellers, had been slaves owned by a dreaded woman called Maria Macambira, a landowner about whom the old people in Pacoval told horror stories of the harassment and cruelty she was capable of (AGUIAR et al., 1990; FIGUEIREDO, 1995). The name Macambira ended up being used by them as synonym of menace and bad omen.

Upon arrival in the settlement the boat docked in the inlet which also served as a beach for the daily bath of children and adults, where we were greeted by a veritable swarm of children. Their faces gleaming with happiness to see visitors in their community, a rare event. Later we were to discover that many were suffering from infestations of parasites and many other diseases, a situation still faced by the majority of the quilombola populations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (BRASIL, 2006; OLIVEIRA, 2011; SILVA et al., 2016). The diverse physique of the barefoot, half-naked youngsters, bespattered with the mud in which they had been playing, showed us the first facet of the character of the community, the longtime presence of people of diverse ancestries and their descendants, a result of gradual integration occurring in Pacoval with the surrounding communities including the influence of Native Americans and Europeans.

This initial impression would be confirmed afterwards in closer contact with the villagers, then a community of almost 500 people, who lived in 91 dwellings distributed over an area of roughly one square kilometer (a third of a square mile). Among the elders, those aged sixty or more, most had clearly African ancestry, whereas among the men and women under forty there were a considerable number of individuals from different origins. The main evidence of the villagers' break with isolation is a tendency now observable in other Amazonian mocambos such as Curiaú in the Amapá territory, Erepecurú and Cuminá in the region of Oriximiná, Silêncio do Mata in Óbidos, among others of fusion with different neighboring populations (GUERREIRO et al., 1999).

The changes brought about by regional integration have led to a degree of social contentment in Pacoval, due to the linkage through commerce with other hamlets and with the district capital, which has become common. However, this has also entailed losses in the cultural level, much to the regret of many of the Black elders, in spite of the resistance which is represented by the "Marambiré", the "Boi" (Ox), a folk manifestation similar to the "Bumba-meu-Boi" of Maranhão, and other traditional manifestations of syncretic character (FIGUEIREDO, 1995). Because of their likely Bantu origin in Angola and the Congo, the mocambo dwellers do not practice nor refer in their accounts of the past to any of the so-called "Afro-



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Brazilian" cults, such as the "Candomblé" of the Nagôs, the "Miná" of the Jejês or even the "Umbanda", which is extremely common in the state of Pará (FIGUEIREDO and VERGOLINO E SILVA, 1972; MORAIS FILHO, 1979). On the other hand, despite the influence of the Catholic Church, they did have magical rites in past times. In these a certain Alexandre played an outstanding role. He was mentioned by the traveler Otilie Coudreau, in her work "Voyage au Rio Curuá", published in the beginning of last century in Paris (COUDREAU, 1903). However, those rites did not withstand the inroads made by European religions, and the prejudices prevalent among the people of the nearby communities. They considered them bad witchcraft. Nevertheless, some maintain that those rites continued to be performed by a few diehards among the old dwellers, in happy communication with the Catholic faith professed by the entire community (AGUIAR et al. 1990).

Baré was the official religious authority there. We attended one of his sermons in the small white church with blue windows, and witnessed the fervor with which the faithful chanted the anthems on Sundays. The whole interior of the chapel, placed at the center of the village, vibrated with the sound of their combined strong voices. Aside from spiritual values, music plays a fundamental part in the ardent devotion of the residents (AGUIAR et al., 1990).

In 1989, one element of the magical universe that had survived through the ages in the community was the medicine called "Remédio dos Pretos" (the remedy of the Blacks), a miraculous potion capable of saving the lives of people bitten by poisonous snakes. The ingredients included the juices of several special herbs, combined according to a secret formula passed from father to son for generations in one family, the Assis family. The way of preparing the remedy is "tabu", never to be revealed. According to the healers, the mixture could be administered orally as well as on the bite. According to many local reports, within a few hours the potion effects a complete cure. In addition to its therapeutic properties, the potion also possesses prophylactic activities, since it keeps poisonous snakes away from a dwelling if poured on its grounds. In Alenquer everybody swears by the efficacy of the remedy. No one recalls an instance of a snake bite that was not completely healed. It is one more mystery of the traditional knowledge present in myriad forms in all quilombos throughout Brazil.

The abundance of symbols among the people of northern Brazil takes on a fundamental importance in Pacoval, probably due to their powerful imagination, which is so evident in all their cultural manifestations. The nights were brightened with kerosene lamps or, as was the case during the month of our adventure, by the light of the silvery full moon, which rose later each day, just as the water level of the Curuá became lower each day, according to local legend, increasing the risk of being attacked by the carnivorous "piranha" fishes. At the time of the visit the village owned a diesel-powered electric generator,

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but it was rarely used (AGUIAR et al., 1990). Today all houses have access to electricity, an enormous change from thirty years ago. In the past there was light only when nocturnal parties were held at which the "brega" and the "lambada" were danced without fail, as in most other parts of Pará. Then and now, the hot night air filling the unpaved village lanes, tempered by fresh breezes emanating from the woods irresistibly induces belief in the folk legends of Pacoval. The villagers always have a lot of stories to tell. In the course of our research we came to know various intriguing "casos" (cases), stories of possible "actual" occurrences, none of which were as fascinating as the tales about children who had been taken to another world through magic, because they had looked at certain forbidden spots in the jungle and rivers, where people completely vanish from the face of the earth without leaving any trace, to dwell in fairyland, the world of the "encantados", the enchanted (AGUIAR et al., 1990; FIGUEIREDO, 1995).

The multicultural mysticism inherited by the people of Pacoval and their friendly traditions, made them humble in their habits and attitudes. Their ways reflect an acceptance of the mysteries that face them in their daily lives. The social relations are maintained with a sincere informality, apparent in the manner of constant teasing among neighbors and friends, provocative jokes, and good-humored gossiping as groups of people gather in high spirits, especially at night, after work. Sullen faces are uncommon among the mocambo dwellers, who relish a life full of excitement and hard work. At first they were suspicious of the strangers from the capital. It was a natural reaction for a community that used to have merely sporadic contact with other small villages and had escaped slavery less than five generations ago. Little by little we drew closer to each other as they began to treat us with spontaneity as we visited each house. Within a short time we were treated as longtime friends.

On the political level, the "Associação da Comunidade Remanescente de Quilombo do Pacoval de Alenquer" – ACONQUIPAL/PA, the official community association, was formed only after our visit, so the leadership was still under development and no single community leader existed in the mocambo at the time. The most experienced and responsible people were the ones that made the main decisions, usually after personal consultation of their fellow villagers. For private or even partisan reasons, in the past as today, disputes arise among some of the leaders. But if it is a matter of common good, the disagreements tend to disappear. Charismatic leadership was their form of government, and the organization of their society is collective, centering on the family, the same as in other quilombos of Brazil. The ACONQUIPAL/PA was created specifically for the purpose of receiving the official community land title ("Título de Reconhecimento de Domínio") number 001/96, given by the National Colonization and Agrarian Reform Institute (INCRA) in November 20<sup>th</sup> of 1996 (LEÃO et al., 2019).

The economy of Pacoval was based chiefly on the trade of Brazil nuts. The nuts are harvested



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during the last and the first months of the year. The labor of harvesting the nuts consists of gathering piles of the burrs ("ouriços") that, when ripe, drop from the trees when there is wind or rain at night. Having gathered several hundreds of burrs, usually after many hours walking in the forest, these are split with machetes or axes. Each burr contains between 15 and 30 nuts. Some laborers are capable of splitting more than three and a half bushels a day. During that period there is plenty of food on the table of every village family. The older people were reminded of times of plenty in a not very distant past when the rubber trade made the village so prosperous that it almost attained the status of a town, when it acquired electric lighting with gasoline generators, fine clothing, and even a landing field for single-engine planes (AGUIAR et al., 1990).

Usually the sale of the Brazil nut was able to provide money to buy foodstuffs in sufficient quantity to provide adequate nutrition. However, the low price at which the nuts are bought by the traders who travel up and down the river in flatboats causes annual income to be spent rapidly. Thus soon after the harvest, before the resources of the Bolsa Família Program were implemented, the people of Pacoval again experienced times of serious hardship so that they could barely subsist, a fact still observed in many quilombola communities (BRASIL, 2008; GUIMARÃES and SILVA, 2015). In those times they have to fall back to their basic diet on the local natural resources. Considering the seasonal regime of the river, the low fertility of the soil, and the lack of technological resources, the need for food that is richer in protein requires them to hunt for small game, to fishing, to gardening, mainly beans, cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), and a large number of other tubers, and the gathering of tropical fruits. Flour ground from cassava constitutes the main source of energy throughout the year. Animal husbandry is practically non-existent, being limited to raising of a few chicken and small herds of sheep and pigs. When food is scarce the foodstuffs which provide a greater variety of nutrients, such as meat, dairy, and cereal products, become especially rare. Nowadays, with a somewhat more regular bus service between Alenquer and the community, recent economic improvements, a variety of processed foods is available to the quilombolas. The effects of these on their food security and health still need to be investigated.

As in many other riparian communities of the Amazon, the mocambo lacked minimal public facilities of medical assistance and sanitation, a situation still common to most quilombos in Brazil (BRASIL, 2008; OLIVEIRA, 2011; GUIMARÃES and SILVA, 2015). At the time of our visit there were no septic tanks, no artesian wells, no health post, nor any guidance in basic health care. The small two or three-room dwellings with walls made of palm leaves or mud, and roofs covered with thatch or wooden slabs, generally housed large families, which favored the spread of contagious diseases. In 1989 and in 2020 doctors are very rare visitors, whose appearance never fail to coincide with an electoral campaign. The main difference is that thirty years ago, in an emergency, the only way out was to get hold of sixty-five year old

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Damião José Estévan and be taken to Alenquer on his motor launch to try a consult in the public health service there. Today, the locomotion is easier by road, but the medical services in the city remain limited. The absence of medical care was reflected in an extremely high perinatal and infant mortality, high even for Amazonia. The drinking water for many families is still obtained from the Curuá river, and during the dry spells contamination is common and gastroenteritis becomes epidemic among the children. A disease easily preventable with adequate vaccination and hygiene, rare even thirty years ago, tetanus *neonatorum* (AGUIAR and JENNINGS, 1993; GOMES et al., 2011), was responsible for the death of countless newborn babies every year in Pacoval. During our field work it was rare to find an adult woman who had not lost at least one child to the terrible “disease of the seven days”<sup>7</sup> (AGUIAR and JENNINGS, 1993).

Malnutrition, respiratory illnesses, and infections with intestinal parasites wreaked havoc in the health of the population, especially among the children and adolescents. Our research showed that almost 100% of the people tested had intestinal parasites (AGUIAR et al., 1990). The rural communities of Amazonia still live with the lack of medical and sanitary assistance, the absence of treated water and health care facilities, as well as the failure of physicians and dentists to pay regular visits in order to take care of basic health needs (SILVA, 2010; OLIVEIRA, 2011; GUIMARÃES and SILVA, 2015; SILVA et al., 2016; SILVA and FILGUEIRAS, 2019). The neglect which the rural villages have to endure leads many of the younger dwellers to move to the urban centers in search of education and better living conditions.

However as we talked with the residents we came to understand the rapture of just being alive that reigned in Pacoval. They know the exact meaning of the word freedom, and we came to feel their rapture even in the simple things, like the nocturnal baths in the Curuá under the protective mantle of the moon. In her 1903 report, Madame Coudreau writes about the nights in the Amazon: "I utterly enjoy the exquisite, indefinable charm of the nights on the equator. In the sky the stars shine brightly, the moon spreads its amber glow on the yellow sand of the beach ...", and about the sandbanks during the day: "... those beaches present a peculiar appearance. One might even say that they are beautiful as their mica scales are glistening in the sunshine like flakes of silver in a vast field of gold ...". There is freedom in the air and beauty to be seen everywhere. Not even the menace of the terrible red piranhas (*Pygocentrus nattereri*), smaller yet more dangerous than the black piranha (*Serrasalmus rhombeus*), or the fatalities caused, according to old stories, by anacondas (*Eunectes murinus*), which dragged children into the river's depths, prevented our happiness when we were swimming in the cool current of the broad river after a long day of data gathering in the heat

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<sup>7</sup> Neonatal tetanus usually develops between 3 and 13 days after birth, often because of use of contaminated cutting instruments carrying the bacteria *Clostridium tetani* during parturition (GOMES et al., 2011). According to the medical literature and the local midwives' observations, the average time for a baby to die of the infection is one week, hence the



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of the sun. It was a pleasure joined to the tasting of the local food offered as we visited the houses, including agouty (*Dasyprocta aguti*), deer (*Mazama sp*), armadillo (*Dasyopus sp*) - cooked in the milk of the Brazil nut, and the fishes locally known as "acará", "tucunaré", "aracú", "tambaquí", "pacú"<sup>8</sup> prepared boiled, roasted, fried or broiled, and dishes which are specialties of Pará, such as "Pato no tucupí" (duck in hot cassava sauce), cassava pancakes, dozens of different types of sweet potatoes roasted, and the fruit juice of the açáí palm (*Euterpe oleracea*) (Figure 2). Above all, it was the joy of daily life shared with human fellow beings whose behavior was always friendly, ready to help whenever necessary, lending support at the right time, relaxing the tension in our minds because so much had been planned for such a short period of time in the field.

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Figure 2. Making of açáí juice in Pacoval, 1989



Photo: Hilton P. Silva.

At the end of the expedition we had the good fortune to take an excursion to a hamlet named Batelão for a visit with Senhora Maria Pimentel, who insisted that we must see her place before returning to Belém. Batelão is a secluded settlement reached in about two hours by canoe from Pacoval, going up a narrow

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nickname given to the disease.

<sup>8</sup> Many different genera and species of fish are known by the same popular names in the Amazon.

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stream, in the distant interior of the immense flood plain of the mid-Amazon. Seven strong boatmen paddled the two minuscule dugouts into which eleven people were squeezed. Aside from the intense heat of the tropical sun and the "tiririca", an ubiquitous sedge, whose sharp blades can cause deep cuts into the skin as we passed through the narrowest parts of the "igarapé" (small channel of a river), the journey and the meeting with Maria Pimentel were another fascinating experience for the young researchers, most of which were still finishing their degrees.

"Hey there, Maria Pimentel! Are you still hiding from the Macambira in these backwoods?" shouted Senhora Cruzinha when we were still at some distance from Batelão. Everybody had to laugh. But the impish, apparently innocent remark of our friend from the mocambo had a meaning that went beyond the mere joke. In the flash of a second it revealed the saga of a people that had tenaciously struggled along those "igarapés" to achieve its autonomy and its freedom, at the cost of much sweat, much idealism, and much blood (AGUIAR et al., 1990).

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the oral accounts<sup>4</sup>, in the middle of last century, Brother Protásio, the parish from Alenquer, was the first priest to land officially in Pacoval. The intense religiosity of the villagers amazed all the clergy that visited the settlement ever since. Typical of the process of structural racism prevalent in Brazil (ALMEIDA, 2018), these priests sought to change the community's religious patterns, which were characterized by syncretism of European, Amerindian, and African elements. In the past and in the present, religion forms an integral part of a complex symbolic web of myths and beliefs, where Africa has a solid place in the collective memory, side by side with elements borrowed from the European and the Native American traditions (FIGUEIREDO and VERGOLINO E SILVA, 1972; FIGUEIREDO, 1995; LEÃO et al., 2019). This reflects a history marked at times by conflicts, at other times by alliances, which has created an ever flowing well-spring in the daily existence and mentality of the community of Pacoval and many other mocambos, as can be seen in almost every aspect of their lives even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In 2020, looking back to thirty years of bioanthropological research among rural populations in Amazonia it is possible to see that a lot has changed in the region in terms of economy, technological development, access to transportation, to education, to electricity, to communication and information. However, unfortunately, the changes in health care and particularly those related to the implementation of the National Policy of Integral Health of the Black Population (BRAZIL, 2010) have followed a much slower pace than the other developments. In Pará, according to the Coordination of the Quilombola Associations of the State (MALUNGU) most of the 528 self-identified communities existing in 58



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municipalities remain without official recognition or land title by the State and the Federal governments. Because of that, the sanitary, health conditions, access to health care and to other public services to the quilombolas throughout Brazil changed very little from the situation seen in Pacoval in 1989 (GUIMARÃES and SILVA, 2015; ARAUJO et al., 2019; CAVALCANTE and SILVA, 2019; SILVA and FILGUEIRAS, 2019). In many municipalities the local authorities do not recognize the existence of quilombos in their territory, and the current federal government has unofficially declared that it will not grant any new land rights to these traditional communities or to the indigenous groups during its mandate.

As another demonstration of racism by the State, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the black populations have suffered the most, and the quilombola communities in general, and particularly those from Pará, have been heavily hit, while the governments' actions to prevent the spread of the disease, and to help guarantee food and nutrition security have been almost completely absent (GOES, 2020; EVANGELISTA, 2020; SILVA, 2020).

Thirty years after our visit to Pacoval, when the Unified Brazilian Health System (SUS) also completes 30 years, in the middle of the United Nations' Decade of People of African Descent (2015-2024), and as the National Policy of Integral Health of the Black Population makes its 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Black population of Brazil has little to commemorate as it continues to fight against racial discrimination and for the right of full citizenship. Even though the quilombola communities are the guardians of immense traditional knowledge, have a long history of cultural resistance, and of protection of the environment in Amazonia, they continue to be neglected by the health authorities, to have the constitutional rights to their ancestral lands denied, and to be exposed to all sorts of structural racism.

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