

The Negros d'Água of the Ribeira de Iguape River: Myth and History in a Narrative Elaborated by the Ribeira Valley's Black Communities

Os negros d'água do rio Ribeira de Iguape: mito e história numa narrativa elaborada por comunidades negras do Vale do Ribeira

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RESUMO

Este artigo aborda a importância das águas do rio Ribeira de Iguape para a história do Vale do Ribeira. Suas águas foram exploradas desde o século XVI, quando da sua foz partiam expedições em busca de metais. Posteriormente, metais preciosos foram descobertos no Alto e no Médio Vale, onde se estabeleceram arraiais mineradores. No final do século XVIII, a mineração entrou em decadência e cultivou-se o arroz em escala comercial. A lavoura acompanhava o leito do rio e dos seus afluentes, já que as águas garantiam a fertilidade dos solos, energia para mover engenhos d'água e local de atraque para as canoas. Entre os séculos XVII e XIX, muitos africanos trabalharam nas minas e lavouras do Ribeira. Dentre seus mitos e crenças, destacaremos os negros d'água, analisados na perspectiva atlântica, ou seja, entendendo as for-

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the importance of the waters of the Ribeira River to the Ribeira Valley's history. Its waters have been explored since the sixteenth century, when expeditions were launched from its mouth in search of metals. Precious metals were subsequently discovered along the upper and middle courses of the river, where mining camps were established. In the late eighteenth century, mining went into decline and rice began to be cultivated on a commercial scale. The rice fields followed the courses of the Ribeira River and its tributaries, with the waters ensuring the fertility of soils and proving energy to run water mill and places to moor canoes. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, many Africans worked in the mines and plantations of the Ribeira. Among their myths and beliefs, the article highlights the negros d'água, analysed from

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mações culturais criadas em solo americano como elaboradas no encontro de povos diversos, postos em contato sob o escravismo e possuidores de diferentes visões de mundo.

Palavras-chave: remanescentes de quilombo; Vale do Ribeira; cultura popular.

an Atlantic perspective, that is, understanding the cultural formations created on American soil as elaborations that emerged from the meeting of diverse peoples, possessing different worldviews and brought into contact under slavery. Keywords: former quilombos; Ribeira Valley; popular culture.

Water is essential to the preservation of life. And since the human being needs to imbue the surrounding world with meaning, water, beyond its physical dimension, also has a symbolic dimension. As Queiroz emphasizes, “water is found deep in the imaginary of every people” (Queiroz, 2006, p. 721).

In Brazilian waters, Europeans, Africans and indigenous peoples inscribed and blended their beliefs and myths. As a result, Brazil has an extensive mythology of water, spanning myths relating to the seas, rivers, lakes, sources and rain.

One of the first aquatic beings described by the colonial chroniclers was Ipupiara. In 1560, José de Anchieta related that Ipupiara was a sea monster that lived in the waters and killed the local indigenous inhabitants. In the second half of the sixteenth century, there is also mention of Ipupiara in the writings of Gândavo and Gabriel Soares de Souza (Casculo, 1998, pp. 459-460).

Another indigenous myth concerns the water serpent Boiuna, also called Mãe d’Água (Water Mother) or Cobra Grande (Big Snake). For Casculo, the terrifying “water mother Boiuna is the owner of the river waters” and the most powerful and complex myth of the Amazonian waters (Casculo, 1998, pp. 173-174).

African peoples also contributed to the mythologies of the waters existing in Brazil. In relation to the Africans originating from the Guinea Coast, Arthur Ramos stressed the Orishas of the Jeje-Yoruban cultural complex: Olokum (god of the sea), Oloxá (goddess of the lakes), Oiá, Oxum and Obá (Ramos, 2007, p. 12). Nina Rodrigues emphasized that, in Brazil, in the absence of the Oxum river, the Orisha Oxum was converted into the divinity of sources and streams. In the absence of the Oiá river, the Orisha Oiá transformed into the goddess of tempests and storms (Rodrigues, 2004, p. 255). We also have a goddess of rains, Nanã, the oldest of the African water goddesses (Carneiro, 1936, p. 47). While Oxum is the divinity of freshwaters, while Iemanjá, the most prestigious female entity of the candomblés of Bahia, is the goddess of saltwaters (Casculo, 1998, p. 448). In terms of the contribution of the peoples of

Central West Africa to the mythology of Brazilian waters, we can highlight the worship of the 'water spirits.'

The Portuguese also collaborated towards the mythology of Brazilian waters. As Cascudo emphasized, "the Portuguese, seafarers, possessed the tradition of the sea legends, Tritons, mermaids and fabulous animals" (Cascudo, 2002, p. 147).

In many Brazilian myths, it is impossible to identify any single dominant cultural matrix. Such is the case of the myth of João Galafuz (Pernambuco), or João Galafoice (Alagoas), or Juan de la Foice (Sergipe), described as a sea elf who, brandishing a luminous torch, emerges from the waves on certain nights to foretell storms and shipwrecks (Cascudo, 1998, p. 482).

There are other very well-known myths, like the *boto*, or river dolphin, found in Amazonia, and the negro d'água in the Central West. The river dolphin is a seductive animal that transforms into a beautiful young man and, in the middle of the night, lures and impregnates young women from the riverside communities (Cascudo, 1998, p. 181). The myth of the negro d'água has been observed on the São Francisco, Paraná, Tocantins and Cuiabá Rivers. Also called the *caboclo d'água* ('water caboclo'), this is one of the most well-known myths of the São Francisco River valley (Pardal, 1974, p. 54), associated with the presence of *carrancas*, 'scowls,' sculpted figures placed on the prows of the boats. According to Joaquim Ribeiro, "the fishermen say that these *carrancas* ward off the evil spells of the caboclo d'água, a mythic entity of the river" (Pardal, 1974, p. 70).

José A. Teixeira collected the following version of the negro d'água myth: "he inhabits the shores of the rivers flowing through the gorge of the Paraná River. He is entirely black. Bald headed. Duck hands and feet. He appears among the rocks, either in the late afternoon or on moonlit nights, to canoeists and fishermen on the Tocantins and its affluents, and tries to overturn their canoes" (quoted in Cascudo, 1998, p. 210).

In the Ribeira valley, tales were collected that depict the negros d'água with characteristics like those described above. Elaborated by the black communities who have inhabited the region of the Ribeira de Iguape River for centuries, the aim of this article is to analyse the potential cultural matrices and meanings of the myth of the negro d'água.

OCCUPATION OF THE RIBEIRA DE IGUAPE RIVER

The Ribeira Valley is a natural corridor linking the continent to the coast. Navigating along the Ribeira de Iguape River is one of the forms of traversing the

Serra do Mar mountain range. The sources of the river are found on the upper slopes of one of the range's peaks – the Serra de Paranapiacaba – from where they flow for 520 km along the Serra do Mar until eventually reaching the Atlantic.

Water has played a vital role in the history of the Ribeira Valley. The presence of fluvial middens (*sambaquis*) in the region signals the Ribeira's importance for the populations who occupied the region for thousands of years. At the time of the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century, the coast of the Baixada do Ribeira (the Ribeira Lowlands) was inhabited by the Guaianá peoples and, to the south of Cananeia, by the Guarani.

The waters of the Ribeira River were traversed by the Portuguese from the outset of colonization. Like Spain, Portugal hoped to discover fabulous riches. From the area close to the mouth of the Ribeira River, expeditions set out that explored its waters, venturing deep into the forests and climbing the escarpments of the Serra de Paranapiacaba mountains. At the end of the sixteenth century, gold was discovered close to the headwaters of the Ribeira River, in the present-day municipality of Apiaí. Along the Ribeira River and its affluents, expeditions explored stones, water and sands and, in this way, they found gold in veins, river beds, shingle and rapids (Mancebo, 2001, pp. 16-17). Mining settlements were established on the Upper Ribeira (today the municipality of Apiaí) and on the Middle Ribeira (the present-day municipalities of Eldorado and Iporanga). Work in the mines was undertaken by slave labour. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Africans were introduced to the region to work in the mines. At a smaller scale, indigenous peoples also worked compulsorily in the mines (Paes, 2007, pp. 32-34).

The gold mines of the Ribeira Valley region became exhausted at the end of the eighteenth century, leading to abandonment of the mining camps. Many slave owners departed in search of more promising opportunities in other regions. For those left impoverished, maintaining the slaves became extremely onerous. Slaves were released from captivity or themselves fled, transforming into free peasants. Some of the owners remained in the region, however, and invested their resources (land, water and captives) in the new economic activity that began to flourish from the end of the eighteenth century: the production of rice on a commercial scale. A new demographic dynamic emerged on the Middle Ribeira. Across a vast region, properties with slaves and small settlements of free black people began to coexist.

In the nineteenth century, rice growing was the main economic activity in the Xiririca region (the old name for the modern-day municipality of Eldorado) and Iguape (the mouth of the Ribeira River). The most suitable soils

were in the floodland areas since these were kept fertile by the floods (Petroni, 1966, pp. 37-38), which meant that the arable land followed the course of the rivers. As well as ensuring soil fertility and allowing transportation, river water performed a fundamental role in the production process, since its energy provided the power necessary to turn the watermills that processed the rice.

The black peasants of the Middle Ribeira region also cultivated and sold rice. They ventured into forested areas as part of a process of interior colonization oriented by the rivers (Paes, 2014, p. 62). The black population spread throughout the immense forest in continuous search for new lands. Significant changes emerged from the 1950s. State parks and environmental conservation areas were implanted, reflecting the fact that the largest remnants of the Atlantic Rainforest in Sao Paulo state were concentrated (as they still are) in the Ribeira Valley. The region also possessed many unclaimed lands (*terras devolutas*: lands without property deeds and thus owned by the State), a fact that favoured the government's implantation of environmental conservation areas. However, despite these lands being unclaimed, they were not uninhabited.

Another problem faced by the region's residents was the threat of the impacts caused by the construction of dams along the Ribeira de Iguape River. The building of these dams had been discussed since the 1930s, but the discussion intensified in the 1980s.

The black peasants of the Middle Ribeira mobilized through joint actions to oppose these adversities and declared themselves quilombolas, fighting to obtain definitive ownership of their lands, a right that would be assured by the 1988 Federal Constitution. The black districts of the Middle Ribeira (a region spread between the Pilões River, in the municipality of Iporanga, and the Pedro Cubas River, in the municipality of Eldorado) were the origin of the quilombo communities of Pedro Cubas, Pedro Cubas de Cima, Sapatu, Nhunguara, São Pedro, Galvão, Ivaporunduva, André Lopes, Pilões and Maria Rosa.

In 1994, representatives of the region's black communities demanded official recognition and title deeds for their lands at the São Paulo Federal Court. From this moment on, contacts between the different State bodies and the black communities intensified.

NEGROS D'ÁGUA IN THE QUILOMBO COMMUNITIES OF ELDORADO AND IPORANGA

Today, older residents of the quilombo communities of Eldorado and Iporanga affirm that the Ribeira River is the dwelling place of many enchanted

beings. They underline that “everything that exists on the land, exists in the water.” As an example they cite the presence in the Ribeira River of the inoffensive water bulls, water cows, water dogs and water horses (*bois d’água, vacas d’água, cachorros d’água* and *cavalos d’água*). A dangerous being also inhabits their waters – *a mãe d’água*, the water mother.¹ However, the entities most often recalled are the *negros d’água*.

Many quilombo residents claim to have seen *negros d’água* in the Ribeira River.² They declare that lately they have vanished, but were very present some years back. Today’s informants agree about the skin colour (“very black”) and teeth (“very white”). They also agree about the height (short). They disagree about the hair: in some accounts the hair was defined as “very dry,” while in others the *negros d’água* were described as possessing a “bald head.” There is also no consensus about the feet. For most informants, their feet were normal, however some relate that they possess duck feet, an aspect also emphasized by the researcher Rosana Mirales. Based on interviews conducted in the region, she was told that at the time of slavery, the *negros d’água* were placed “in tanks so that they could adapt to the terrestrial world. Their hands and feet were cut with razor blades, since they were like those of ducks” (Mirales, 1998, p. 73).

According to the accounts of people from the Quilombo Communities of Eldorado and Iporanga, the *negros d’água* turned over canoes that plied the river. This forced the canoeists to stay alert. As soon as they saw the hands of the *negros d’água* touching the canoe, the canoeists cut off the *negros d’água*’s fingers with a machete or with their oar. Some thought that, aside from turning over canoes, the *negros d’água* offered no danger. Many emphasized their playful spirit and reported that they were joking with the people of the land. However, others affirmed that the *negros d’água* liked to cause harm. Some said that they enchanted the women and took them to live with them at the bottom of the rivers. Others believed that they killed the men and ate the children. The accounts converged concerning the dwelling place of the *negros d’água* (deep pools and counterflows). Many stressed that, in reality, they lived in the caves found at the bottom of the rivers where it was dry.

Although they lived at the bottom of the river, they frequently approached its shores. They were seen sat on or close to the rocks in the river. These moments were dangerous since the *negros d’água* could capture people from the land and take them to the river bottom, and they themselves could be captured by the land people. The capture of *negros d’água* was achieved using nets, cast nets, lassos and ropes. Many of them were kidnapped and taken to live on the land. They had to be tamed and, to do so, people gave them food with salt,

unknown to them. These negros d'água ended up adapting to life on land, learnt the language, married people from the land and had children. As a result, many of the current inhabitants of the quilombola communities of Eldorado and Iporanga claim to descend from a “nation of negros d'água.”

Rosana Mirales detailed how their body was adapted to survive in a different world to the original. Hence when the negro d'água abducted a person from the land, “to ensure that the person being taken to the other world did not die, the negro da água places him or her on his back and, as he moves under the water, forms a channel of air on his spine so that the person being carried did not drown” (Mirales, 1998, p. 74). The negro d'água did not drown because he possessed a stone in his stomach that allowed him to survive in the water. However, the same stone transformed into poison on land and, to expel it, the negro d'água had to eat salt (Mirales, 1998, p. 72).

There are many accounts of negros d'água who were captured. In Ivaporunduva, they recount an event that occurred many years ago during the Festa de Santa Cruz (Holy Cross Festival), commemorated on May 3 and lasting about three days. On these days, Ivaporunduva received many visitors coming from distant places. As well as entertainments, people participated in religious activities organized by a vicar. People confessed, communed and prayed novenas. On one of the festival days, some men went fishing. They cast the net and, when they hauled it back in, discovered a boy along with the fish. He was a negro d'água. Struggling wildly, the negro d'água was tied up and taken to the place of the festival. He was dressed and then baptized by the vicar, given the name Inácio Marinho. They gave him food with salt, which gradually tamed him. Some time later he married and had children. Many of his descendants live today in the region and bear his surname, Marinho.

Another negro d'água, whose name and surname are still often remembered, was called Gregório Marinho. Many years ago, while he was visiting the river surface, in the region of Pedro Cubas, the negro d'água became enchanted with an enslaved woman who lived in the locality. Equally enchanted by the negro d'água, the slave encouraged her admirer to come to see her. Planning to capture him, she prepared some food with salt for him to eat without the negro d'água suspecting. Gradually he was tamed. One day, the black woman asked other people for help and the negro d'água was captured. A tank was built on land so he could survive. As the negro d'água had no name, they called him Gregório Marinho. The slave woman and the negro d'água formed a family. Today many quilombo residents from Pedro Cubas trace their descent from this couple.

Historical documents show that there really did exist an Inácio Marinho in Ivaporunduva and a Gregório Marinho in Pedro Cubas in the mid-nineteenth century. They existed and possessed lands, which were registered by the parish of Xiririca. Other Marinhos can also be found in the Xiririca Land Register (Paes, 2014, p. 80).

The presence of the historical Marinhos (Inácio and Gregório), captured by the documentation, and the mythic Marinhos, recalled by the local population, highlight the importance of these figures for the locality and also signal the rooting of the belief in the negros d'água.

THE RIBEIRA RIVER, THE CUANZA RIVER AND SLAVERY

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the Ribeira Valley received many Africans. At first they were sent to the mines. Later, the primary destination became the rice fields.

The merchants of the Ribeira Valley obtained slaves in Rio de Janeiro. A large number of Africans came from Central West Africa, as shown by Xiririca's *Maços de População* (Population Lists) for the year 1806. Though most of the slaves from this locality had been born in Brazil, 32 were African in origin. Of these, 31 came from Central West Africa (12 from Angola, 18 from Benguela and one from the Congo) (Paes, 2007, p. 35). The origin of Xiririca's enslaved population at the start of the nineteenth century confirms the data obtained by Robert Slenes, suggesting that, during this period, the majority of slaves living in the Brazilian Central South came from Central West Africa (Slenes, 1991/1992, pp. 55-56). Even during an earlier period, given the intensity and importance of the slave trade in Central West Africa, the number of Africans from this region brought to the Ribeira Valley seems to have been high.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, thousands of slaves from Central West Africa crossed the Atlantic and were taken to live in various places in the Americas. The contact between Portugal and Central West Africa began at the end of the fifteenth century with the dispatch of the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão by the king of Portugal to the estuary of the Zaire River (Souza, 2002, p. 52). The expedition landed at the mouth of the latter river in Soyo Province, belonging to the Congo. Formed by a set of provinces, the Congo encompassed an extensive region of Central West Africa. Large regional markets existed in the kingdom where slaves were sold (Souza, 2002, p. 48).

As the Atlantic demand for slaves increased, Portugal turned its gaze to Dongo, located to the south of the Congo (Souza, 2002, pp. 74-75). Dongo, a

chiefdom previously subordinate to the Congo, stretched from the Bengo river to the mouth of the Cuanza River. The strategy adopted by Portugal to guarantee the acquisition of slaves was control of the Cuanza. In 1575, close to the river mouth, the Portuguese founded the colony of São Paulo de Loanda (Souza, 2002, p. 74, 75, 103 and 124). Next three trading posts were built along the Cuanza: Muxima, Massangano and Cambambe. As the years passed, new Portuguese trading posts were built along the river. This set of Portuguese trading posts delineated what would become known as Angola.

Angola was seen as a giant reservoir of slaves (Souza, 2002, p. 102). Brazil was emerging as a colony and the acquisition of enslaved people for Brazil became one of the priorities of Portuguese policy for Angola. Founded on slavery, Portuguese colonization formed a space composed of an area of slave production, located in South America, and an area of slave reproduction, centred in Angola (Alencastro, 2000, p. 9). Thus Brazil and Angola, “two parts united by the ocean, combine to form a single system of colonial exploitation” (Alencastro, 2000, p. 9).

Angola and Brazil were so interlocked that when the Dutch decided to control the sugar economy, the two localities were both targeted for invasion. In 1630, the Dutch conquered Pernambuco and, in 1641, it was the turn of the Dutch to disembark in Luanda. Portugal, in response, concentrated its forces to restore sovereignty over the two colonies. In 1654, the Dutch were expelled from the Brazilian territory. Prior to this, in 1647, Salvador Correa de Sá e Benevides had commanded the military forces that had expelled the Dutch from Angola and restored Portuguese control. Next, he assumed the post of Governor of Angola. Highly regarded in the Portuguese court, he formed part of the Overseas Council (Conselho Ultramarino) and had direct links to the slave trade (Alencastro, 2000, p. 41). He occupied diverse positions within the Portuguese Empire and, in 1658, was named for a new post on the other side of the Atlantic, “Administrator of Mines,” with jurisdiction over the captaincies of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Espírito Santo (Taques, 1954, p. 45).

The activities of Salvador Correa de Sá e Benevides on both sides of the Atlantic suggest close ties between Angola and the mining operations in the captaincies of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Espírito Santo. It is worth noting that at this time, in the mid-seventeenth century, the Além-Mantiqueira mines had not yet been discovered. The Ribeira Valley was one of the main areas of gold exploration. These facts thus point to Angola as one of the departure points for many Africans brought to the Ribeira River region.

However, other origins should also be considered. In the nineteenth

century, a period of intense rice cultivation, the number of Africans in Xiririca and Iguape grew. In Xiririca, the African contingent rose from 9% of total slaves in 1801 to 29% in 1815. In Iguape, between the same years, African slaves rose from 8% to 30% of the total number (Valentin, 2006, p. 167). Africans from the Ribeira River region were purchased at the port of Rio de Janeiro. From 1808, the number of people from East Africa arriving at this port increased. The opening of the Brazilian ports led to the growth of importations from the Indian Ocean. Even so, the large majority of the slave ships or *tumbeiros* (floating tombs) to arrive at Rio de Janeiro left from the ports of Congo and Angola – eight in ten between the years 1795 and 1830 (Florentino, 2014, p. 83).

The number of Africans coming from Central West Africa to the Brazilian Southeast was considerable. However, in the Ribeira Valley, many enslaved people may have come from other regions of Africa.

THE RIBEIRA RIVER, THE CUANZA RIVER AND THE WATER SPIRITS

In Central West Africa, the ethnolinguistic groups tended to coincide with the main water courses (Miller, 1995, p. 32). Among these groups we can highlight the Ambundo. Farmers “without any motivation to transform themselves into warriors” (Parreira, 1997, p. 181) and speakers of the Kimbundu language (Parreira, 1997, p. 161), they inhabited the region drained by the Cuanza River, in the area immediately to the north of the Benguela plateau (Parreira, 1997, p. 161). In their origin myth, the world began when their ancestors left *Kalunga*, identified as “the great water,” and came to settle in the valleys and hills inhabited by their descendants (Miller, 1995, p. 55 and 59).

The Ambundo were organized in lineages. The chiefs of these lineages venerated an insignia called *lunga*, described by Miller as “a sacred relic that takes a variety of physical forms, but generally that of a human figure sculpted in wood” (Miller, 1995, p. 59). Each *lunga* ‘inhabited’ a river or lake, “under the care of a dignitary who was the only one to know the secret of communication with spiritual forces” (Miller, 1995, p. 62). An insignia was an object associated with supernatural powers. Thus the chiefs of the Ambundo lineages, guardians of the *lunga*, intermediaries between the living and the dead, were the power holders.

A strict correspondence existed between the *lunga* positions and the hydrography of the territory (Miller, 1995, p. 94). The guardians of the *lunga* controlled “the rains that fell in the hydrographic basin of any stream or river occupied by its *lunga*,” thus ensuring the fertility of the fields (Miller, 1995, p. 62).

In research on the modern Ambundo, Miller observed the belief in numerous 'water spirits' and claimed that this belief is widespread throughout Central Africa. The author associated the present-day 'water spirits' with the ancient *malunga* (the plural of *lunga*). Today many lakes and rivers go by the name of the spirit that they once sheltered in the past.

Journeying through the region of the Cuanza River in the seventeenth century, the Capuchin missionary Cavazzi observed the existence of various altars and small houses used in rituals worshipping the river (Cavazzi de Montecúcolo, 1965, vol. 2, pp. 129-130).

Chatelain, researching the popular tales of the Luanda region in the twentieth century, also stressed the importance of the 'water spirits.' According to the material collected by this researcher, *Kianda* was a genie of the waters and one of the most popular spirits of Luanda's mythology (Chatelain, 1964, p. 521).

The 'water spirits' were not important only to the Ambundo. Robert Slenes emphasized the importance of the 'water spirits' for diverse peoples of Central West Africa. He reported that the Baongo (speakers of Kikongo) also believed in the 'water spirits,' called *simbi* by the Basundi, *kiximbi* by the Bampangu, and *simbi* or *kinda* by the Mayombe. Slenes emphasized that the attributes of the *simbi/kiximbi/kinda* among all these groups were essentially the same as those described by Chatelain for the *Kianda* (Slenes, 2002, p. 192).

These peoples, who shared a common set of ideas about the 'water spirits,' crossed the Atlantic and began to live in various parts of the Americas. Examining the crossing of the Atlantic, the researchers Mintz and Price highlighted the fact that the Africans who landed in the Americas were taken from different regions of the African continent and thus from numerous linguistic and ethnic groups. The authors argue that due to this heterogeneity: "the Africans who reached the New World did not compose, at the outset, *groups*. In fact, in most cases, it might even be more accurate to view them as *crowds*, and very heterogeneous crowds at that" (Mintz; Price, 2003, p. 37). However, despite the cultural heterogeneity, the Africans presented widely shared basic principles and there existed a 'general heritage' fundamental to the creation of a new culture in the Americas. They thus propose substituting the explanation of formal similarities with the comparison of general premises (Mintz; Price, 2003, pp. 27-33).

Thornton, meanwhile, asserts that African cultural diversity was being exaggerated (Thornton, 2000, pp. 253-256). Based on language, the author claims that the enslaved peoples who supplied the Atlantic trade could be divided into just three cultural zones: Upper Guinea (extending from the Senegal

River to the area south of Cape Mountin present-day Liberia), Lower Guinea (spanning from the lakes of the western region of the Ivory Coast to Cameroons) and the Angola Coast (which stretched as far as the Lunda Empire in Shaba province in modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo) (Thornton, 2000, pp. 256-263). Furthermore, these linguistic units did not each contain an entirely different culture. Both geographic proximity and commercial relations generated cultural similarities across diverse regions.

Considering the large number of enslaved people originating from Central West Africa introduced into the Ribeira Valley, based on Thornton's work, we can classify them as coming from one large cultural zone – the Angola region. There the vast majority of people spoke Kikongo or Kimbundu. Robert Slenes emphasized that the slaves coming from Central West Africa were of Bantu origin and defined this term as the generic name for a large linguistic group, composed of languages spoken by different peoples, villages, confederations and kingdoms of Central West Africa. The affinity uniting these peoples went beyond language since they also shared basic cultural premises (Slenes, 1991/1992, pp. 57-58).

In the case of the Ribeira Valley, it seems that there existed a 'general heritage' shared by the peoples of Central West Africa who arrived in the region – the belief in the 'water spirits.' The negros d'água of the Ribeira River region resembled the 'water spirits' of the Angolan tales described by Héli Chatelain. They also displayed points in common with the 'water spirits' reported by Slenes, denominated *simbi*, *kiximbi* or *kinda*.

The negros d'água of the Ribeira River, just like the Central African 'water spirits,' were small in stature and turned over canoes. Another point in common was their dwelling place. The negros d'água of the Ribeira lived in stone caves found at the bottom of rivers, but were also spotted in counterflows, strong currents and deep pools. As for the Central African 'water spirits,' MacGaffey emphasizes that they inhabited stones, pools, lakes and currents (MacGaffey, 2002, p. 212). Slenes, based on Tuckey, indicated that stones were the peculiar abode of the *seembi* and, based on Laman, points out that they lived in stone caves found in the depths of the waters (Slenes, 2002, p. 201).

They also share another point in common: the kidnapping of women. The negros d'água of the Ribeira River region abducted women from the land, just as *Kianda* would take a woman to live with him at the bottom of the river (Chatelain, 1964, p. 249).

The myth of the negros d'água of the Ribeira River may also be related to a cultural premise widely shared by Central Africans, the 'fortune-misfortune

complex.' As described by Marina de Mello e Souza, based on the work of Fox, Craemer and Vansina, the natural order is good and desirable, meaning that were life to flow in its natural course, everything would run according to fortune. But this seldom happens since malevolent forces divert life from its path (Souza, 2002, p. 70).

Related to the 'fortune-misfortune complex,' we can identify another fundamental Central African principle: a cosmology based on the division between the world of the living and the world of the dead, with a particular emphasis on the importance of ancestral spirits (Sweet, 2003, p. 103). The world of the dead can interfere in the world of the living, causing fortune or misfortune. The ancestral spirits expected to be revered by their living kin, since it was the offerings that guaranteed their potency in the world beyond. In return, they would protect their descendants from evil, intervening in the day-to-day life of the community. For example, they helped hunters in the forest and women when giving birth. These two worlds, the living and the dead, were separated by a large volume of water (Sweet, 2003, p. 104).

Thompson emphasized that the world, in 'Kongo' culture,³ is apprehended according to the 'Kongo cosmogram.' Graphically it can be represented by a cross (+), whose horizontal bar symbolizes the *kalunga* (the waters of the river or the sea, or any reflective surface, such as a mirror), which divides two specular worlds: the world of the living (the upper half) and the world of the dead (the lower half). The vertical bar links the visible world of the living to the invisible world of the dead and the spirits. The four points of the cross represent the four moments of the sun. The point located on the right horizontal tip (East) represents sunrise, while the sun breaks the barrier of the *kalunga* and begins its journey through the world of the living. The highest point of the cross on the vertical axis (North) signifies midday and the peak of the force of a person from the realm of the living. The point located on the left horizontal tip (West) symbolizes the end of a person's visible life and the sunset, the moment when the sun again breaks the *kalunga* and begins to travel through the world of the dead. The lowers point of the cross on the vertical axis (South) represents midnight and the peak of the force of a being from the other words. As it travels through the four points of the cosmogram, the sun traverses the realms of the living and the dead, realizing an eternal return of night/day and life/death (Thompson, 1984, p. 108).

The myth of the negros d'água of the Ribeira seems to echo the basic premise of the existence of these two worlds. As well as the negros d'água, the Ribeira River also contains other beings, such as the *boi d'água*, the *cachorro*

d'água and the *cavalo d'água* (the water bull, water dog and water horse). The existence of these beings is explained as follows by today's residents of the region: "everything that exists on the land, exists in the water." Once again, the belief in the existence of two specular worlds (of the living and the dead) seems to underpin this assertion.

Negros *d'água*, like Inácio Marinho and Gregório Marinho, were beings who traversed waters and circulated between different worlds. It was possible to traverse the waters from bottom to top, signifying to be 'reborn,' and from top to bottom, signifying to 'die' (Slenes, 1991/1992, pp. 53-54). Originating from the deep waters, the negros *d'água* belonged, then, to the world below, the world of the dead. As they generated descendants, they were not just dead people, they were ancestors. Consequently, the negros *d'água* represented ancestral spirits, originating from the realm of the dead, who, as they traversed the waters, propitiated life – in other words, they originated descent. Hence the myth of the negro *d'água* alludes to the continuous movement of life and death and to the eternal return of day/night. We can thus inscribe this myth in a set of cultural references centred on the concept of *kalunga*.

THE ATLANTIC AND *KALUNGA*

The myth of the negro *d'água* narrates the crossing of the freshwater of the Ribeira River. Symbolically, though, it may also represent the saltwater crossed by many Africans who arrived in the Ribeira Valley. The surname of the negros *d'água* – Marinho – reinforces the hypothesis that the myth's meaning is tied to sea water. Symbolically and concretely, an enormous number of Africans crossed 'the great water,' *kalunga*, the ocean, and this experience left profound marks, which may well have influenced the creation of the myths.

Principally during the long crossing of the Atlantic, but also prior to the voyage itself, while still in Africa, in the convoys and trading posts, the first social bonds were formed between captives. Homogenized by a dehumanizing system, men and women developed forms of cooperation, which can be seen as the primordial beginnings of Afro-American cultures (Mintz; Price, 2003, p. 65). New social bonds were established, just as new cultural systems began to take shape (Mintz; Price, 2003, p. 68). A strong bond united the *malungos* or 'shipcompanions.'

Robert Slenes examines the root of the word 'malungo.' According to the historian, contemporary dictionaries contain two competing hypotheses. In Kimbundu (the language of the Ambundo) and Kikongo (the language of the

Bacongo), *mu+lungu* signifies 'in the boat.' Thus a process of metonymy transformed 'my boat' into 'my ship companion' (Slenes, 1991/1992, pp. 52-53). Another possibility is that 'malungo' derives from the word *malungu*, which means 'brothers/companions' in Kimbundu and Umbundu (the language of the Ovimbundu). For Slenes, both the explanations are incomplete. The historian emphasized that today *malungu* has the meaning of 'gigantic canoe' in Kimbundu, Kikongo and Umbundu.⁴ Furthermore, it also means 'companions' in Kimbundu and Umbundu. According to Slenes, slaves speaking Kimbundu, Kikongo and Umbundu arrived at 'malungo,' at least in part, through the concept of 'gigantic canoe,' while slaves coming from the interior, speakers of Bantu languages different from Kikongo, Kimbundu and Umbundu understood *malungo* to mean 'companions,' not through the concept of 'boat' but through the concept of 'sibling/kin' (Slenes, 1991/1992, pp. 52-53).

Deepening his reflection on the origin of the word, Slenes ventured the hypothesis that *malungo* is also associated with a root word from the proto-Bantu widespread in Central and Southern Africa – the word *donga*, which means river, valley or canal. In Kikongo, Kimbundu and Umbundu this word takes the form of *kalunga*,⁵ also acquiring the meaning of 'sea.' Consequently, 'malungo' would not signify just 'my boat' and, by extension 'ship companion,' but inevitably "companion in the crossing of the *kalunga*."

Crossing the *kalunga*, the dividing line that separates the world of the living from the world of the dead, signifies to 'die' or 'be reborn.' Thus *malungos* were "companions of the crossing from life to death" or "companions of the crossing from death to life" (Slenes, 1991/1992, p. 53-54). Many people from the regions of Congo and Angola related the colour white with death. Thus men were black and spirits white. The dead went to *Mputu* – the land of the whites, the land of the dead. They associated Portugal with *Mputu*. Symbolically, therefore, crossing the *kalunga* towards the land of the whites meant 'to die' (Slenes, 1991/1992, p. 53-54). And, indeed, in crossing the Atlantic in the slave ships, thousands of Africans did perish.

Crossing the Atlantic towards the Americas signified rupture and death. But, as mentioned earlier, following the 'Kongo cosmogram,' the sun's movement is circular: there is an eternal return of day/night, life/death. Crossing the *kalunga* also meant rebirth. The negro d'água of the Ribeira River crossed the waters of the *kalunga* from bottom to top, or in other words from the realm of the dead to the realm of the living. Thus the myth also emphasizes rebirth and the realm of the living. This is made clear by the fact that the negro d'água generated descent – or, in other words, life.

The myth explores the continuous movement of life and death. During the crossing of the *kalunga*, something dies and something is reborn. What is reborn is related to what has died. In this way, the myth of the negro d'água narrates the birth of a new world through the transformation of elements of an old world. According to Mintz and Price, with the Atlantic crossing and the consequent destruction of ancient social ties, “the ‘cultural baggage’ of each individual undergoes a phenomenological transformation until the creation of new institutional structures allows the content to be refabricated, based on the past – and very distant from it” (Mintz; Price, 2003, p. 71). In the creation of the myth of the negro d'água, therefore, pre-existing cultural contents were used, such as the belief in the ‘water spirits’ and the *kalunga* that divides the realms of the living and the dead, and these contents were transformed into something new.

Likewise, a new world also emerged in the Americas, marked by the Atlantic crossing and characterized by slavery. New social and cultural forms were forged to confront the everyday needs of a slave society (Mintz; Price, 2003, pp. 112-113). An explanation for the trauma of the Atlantic crossing and slavery was one of these needs. As Mintz and Price emphasized: “before any aggregate of plantation slaves could begin to create viable institutions, they would have had to deal with the traumata of capture, enslavement and transport” (Mintz; Price, 2003, p. 65). The myth of the negro d'água served this purpose since it conferred meaning to the new lived reality by addressing questions relating to the ocean crossing and the world of slavery.

The myth depicts the violence of the world of slavery. The initial point was imprisonment. Generally the negro d'água were caught with fish hooks and cast nets. Involuntarily and violently, therefore, the negro d'água were ripped from their own world and thrown into a new reality. Similarly, Africans were removed from their land of birth and introduced into another space. The passage from one world to another – from the depth of the waters to the land, in the case of the negro d'água, and from Africa to the Americas in the case of the Africans – was achieved by migrating across the waters.

The violence of slavery can also be observed in the fact that the negro d'água, during the slavery period, had their “hands and feet cut with razor blades, since they were like those of ducks” (Miraes, 1998, p. 73). Consequently, the myth seems to foreground physical violence and the loss of mobility and, symbolically, freedom. The question of learning a new language also comes to the fore – both negro d'água and Africans had to learn the language of the place where they had been taken to live.

In the world of slavery, relationships developed between men and women of different ethnic groups and places of birth. These relationships were also present in the negro d'água myth. The negros d'água cited here, Inácio and Gregório Marinho, married land women and fathered children. Land women could also be kidnapped by the negros d'água. The women became their wives and lived at the bottom of the river. These relationships between people of the land and people of the water occupied a prominent role in the myth, pointing to the fact that relationships between people born in different localities (for example, between those born in Africa and Brazil) were frequent at the time of slavery. Unlike women, though, men and children could face different fates. In the myth, the fear appears that the men would be killed and the children devoured. Fear of death and fear of being devoured⁶ were fears similar to those felt by Africans faced by the possibility of being enslaved and forced to cross the Atlantic ocean.

In the myth of the negro d'água, one element stands out: salt. The negros d'água were tamed with salt – that is, after its ingestion, their wild temperament was tamed and adapted to the rules of the place to which they had been taken. Among the Central Africans, there exist certain beliefs associated with salt. Monica Schuler (2002), researching Africans of Congolese origin who were taken to Jamaica between 1841 and 1865, noted that they believed that, just as spirits did not consume salt, abstaining from this element would grant them similar powers, such as the power to interpret the world around them and fly back to Africa. In other words, the absence of salt guaranteed spiritual integrity (Slenes, 1991/1992, p. 54). Likewise, giving salt to the negro d'água caused him to lose his original characteristics and thus adapt to a new situation.

Salt and water. These are the fundamental elements of baptism. In Brazil and Africa alike efforts were made to convert Africans to Catholicism, a process in which baptism formed the rite of initiation. Consequently, this sacrament occupied a central role in the religious life of the societies formed on both sides of the Atlantic. Some authors have stressed the association made by Central Africans between salt and Catholicism. Cavazzi emphasized that Africans called baptism 'eating salt' (Cavazzi de Montecúccolo, 1965, vol. 1, p. 353). Sweet also stressed that they associated the ritual practice with the act of 'eating salt' (Sweet, 2003, p. 195). Cascudo makes this observation about the black population from Angola who lived in Brazil:

The black population of Angola could not find a better symbol (salt) for the baptism. If they are Christians, they state: *Didimungua*, I ate salt. The godfather is

the salt father, *tatà mungua*. The godmother, the salt mother, *mamã munga*. The godchild, the salt child, *monã munga*. The baptism companions, the salt siblings, *pange a mungua*. (Casculo, 1998, p. 796).

In the myth of the negro d'água, salt appears to be a clear allusion to baptism. After ingesting salt, the negro d'água was tamed – that is, his spirit was modified and he began to have a behaviour adequate to the new rules. Hence the myth of the negro d'água seems to depict the insertion of the African in the a new world characterized, fundamentally, by Catholicism. This association between the negros d'água and the Christian world becomes even more evident in the history of the negro d'água of Ivaporunduva (Inácio Marinho), who had been captured during the commemoration of the Festa de Santa Cruz and baptized by a vicar.

According to Rosana Mirales, the ingestion of salt provoked the expulsion of the stone lodged in the negro d'água's stomach. The stones were the dwelling places of the negro d'água, meaning that they may have been related to the original world, in this case, to Africa. Symbolically, perhaps, the stone represented the African traditions and beliefs. The opposition of Catholicism versus African beliefs may have been represented by the opposition of salt versus stone. The myth seems to explore not only the conversion of the African to Catholicism, but also the efforts made to 'eliminate' traditional African religiosities.

Salt and water. These are the elements that composed the Atlantic crossing. Like baptism, crossing the saltwater of the ocean also represented a rite of passage. The crossing led to a new world. Undertaken by Africans and Europeans, from this rite of passage emerged Brazilian colonial society.

Possibly the rooting, longevity and strength of the myth of the negro d'água derive from his capacity to serve as a metaphor of the sea crossing, slavery and the forming of a new world. A metaphor capable of translating the reality of death and life of many Africans who crossed the *kalunga*. A metaphor of slave society. A metaphor of the forming of a new world from the encounter of three old worlds. A new world constructed by the indigenous peoples who were there already, joined by the Africans and Europeans who crossed the waters of the Atlantic. And a "New World it is, for those who became its peoples remade it and, in the process, they remade themselves" (Mintz; Price, 2003, p. 113).

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NOTES

¹ The presence of the myth of the mãe d'água among indigenous peoples in diverse regions of Brazil suggests that, in the Ribeira River region, this myth was a contribution of the indigenous peoples. Oral accounts and documents point to the presence of indigenous peo-

ples in the region until at least the mid-nineteenth century (PAES, 2007, pp. 33-34). These peoples lived with others, like the Africans and their descendants, and contributed to the local mythical narratives. The indigenous peoples mixed with others, engaged in cultural exchanges and left an important legacy, especially in terms of fishing techniques, shifting agriculture and regional toponymy (OLIVEIRA JUNIOR et al., 2002, p. 61).

² The information relating to the negros d'água was obtained through interviews conducted by myself with residents of the Quilombo Communities of Eldorado and Iporanga between 2001 and 2008.

³ Given that many of the Africans originating from Central West Africa possessed a less particularist culture than frequently presumed (SLENES, 1991/1992, p. 58), that they were socialized in the “kongo” culture or in related cultures (SLENES, 1991/1992, pp. 55-56) and that the “Kongos” and “Angolas” who came to the Americas shared many beliefs and languages (THOMPSON, 1984, p. 104), here I am treating “kongo” culture as paradigmatic for an extensive region of Central West Africa.

⁴ According to Slenes, *malungu* in Umbundu signifies not just ‘companions,’ but ‘companions in suffering.’ Thus “the same elderly person, for example, who would call a boat a *malungu* may also use this word to refer to himself and a former prison companion” (Slenes, 1991/1992, p. 53).

⁵ As discussed in the section “The Ribeira River, the Cuanza River and the water spirits”, Miller underlined that *kalunga* was identified as “the great water.” The historian also emphasized that *lunga* was a magical-religious object that gave its owner supernatural powers, since it enabled communication between the living and the dead. He also emphasized that each *lunga* inhabited a river or lake. Miller associated the present-day ‘water spirits’ with the ancient *malunga* (plural of *lunga*). Slenes also referred to a category of spirits of ancestors (*malunga*) who communicated with the living. Note that *lunga*, *malunga* and *kalunga* share the same root (*ma* and *ka* are prefixes) and relate to the same symbolic set.

⁶ Sweet writes, “it was widely understood that Europeans carried away black bodies in order to ‘eat’ them” (SWEET, 2003, p. 162).

