



# Rethinking representations of the space in human-environmental relationships in Uruguay



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to discuss the representation of spatiality in the interaction between humans and the environment. The work focuses on the movement and relations involved in these past and present interactions. Theoretical reflections are based on the study of the human use of Butiá palm trees in Uruguay. A variety of techniques were used to carry out an ethnographic work that proposes an exercise for the representation of spatiality. The dialogue among these different ways of representing diachronic spatiality in human-palm relationships aims to critically analyse the use of participatory mapping in land management. We propose a non-aerial representation of the spatiality of human-palm relationships with implications on the discussions on the hegemonic ways of representing space.

## 1. Introduction

Discussions on the concept of space and spatiality are at the centre of disciplines such as geography (Merriman et al., 2012) and are a core element in other disciplines such as anthropology (Gupta and Ferguson, 2008). The representation of spatiality has been a widely discussed topic in geography, mostly as a reaction to the high incidence of quantitativism and formalism of the second half of the 20th century. Understanding that a scientific representation or modelling of reality is not reality in itself is an important point which is often overlooked and naturalised, thus hiding asymmetrical negotiation processes regarding the construction of power relations (Blaut, 1970).

According to Actor-Network Theory (ANT), space and spatiality are not understood as something absolute or preexisting but as something that arises from the locations and relationships of the actors that compose the network (Murdoch, 1998). The ANT is focused on analyzing how human and non-human actors configure networks according to their locations, altering them and generating new power relationships (Latour, 1999; Law, 1999). The ANT began to be used in geography in the 1990s, making many types of actors (human, non-human, hybrid), relationships and power configurations visible (Bingham, 1996; Murdoch, 1997, 1998; Murdoch and Marsden, 1995; Woods, 1998). Currently it is very powerful in dissolving dualisms as

micro/macro, local/global, subject/object, particular/universal (Murdoch, 1997), wild/domesticated, nature/culture (Whatmore, 2002), subject/object (Duff, 2012).

The anti-essentializing notion of space and spatiality is also present in the mobilities studies in geography (Urry, 2007). This approach encompasses not only the corporeal travel of people and the physical movement of objects, but also imaginative travel, virtual travel and communicative travel (Urry, 2007). In the last 20 years, a new line of mobilities studies has become consolidated, linking migration, transport, tourism, development, environment, justice and security at different scales (D'Andrea et al., 2011). This field has been referred to as the New Mobilities Paradigm, comprised of disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, geography, migration studies, science and technology studies, tourism and transport studies, and sociology (Sheller and Urry, 2006).

Based on the call for attention on the relational perspective proposed by ANT (Bosco, 2006) and the multiscalar view of movement (Law and Urry, 2004), this paper analyzes the spatiality of human-palm trees relations and proposes reflections related to movement, representation and participation. We approach the role of spatial representation as a tool for dialogue within the framework of asymmetrical power-knowledge relations (Foucault, 1980) involved in any proposal for land management (Cortés Vázquez, 2012). In land management, participa-

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tory mapping techniques are increasingly being incorporated as ways to reduce these asymmetries (Chambers, 2006).

The ways of representing reality are understood as naturalised cultural constructions that are part of colonial control systems of the Other (Said, 1978). According to these theoretical aspects, this work critically discusses the dialogue between different forms of spatial representation. Theoretical reflections presented arises from the analysis of original information regarding the representation of the spatiality in human-environmental relationships, related to the use of *Butiá odorata* palm trees (hereinafter referred to as *Butiá palms*, its common name) in Uruguay, in an area where there are initiatives to conserve Butiá palm forests. In this case study, a diachronic approach is used, considering the human-environmental relationships for the past 8500 years, yet focusing on a period that ranges from the 17th century until today.

Researches that connect diachrony, movement, plants and people are not new in geography. Voeks (1990) studied the movement of slaves and plants from Africa to Brazil and the configuration of the candomblé religion and afro-descendant identities. Voeks (1990) proposes that the persistence of candomblé in Brazil and the use of a plant universe is part of a process of cultural differentiation and colonial resistance. Along a similar line, yet more specifically focused on human-palm relationships, Case Watkins (2015) analyzed the diffusion of African oil palm from Africa to northeastern Brazil during the times of slavery. He proposes that the strong cultural imbrication that this palm has nowadays in Afro-Brazilian culture, allows us to speak of the existence of an African oil palm landscape. It is a landscape of resistance understood as a historical process in which the human-palm relationships of the African Diaspora were part of a process of self-identification and resistance.

Throughout this paper, spatiality is understood as the way of living space, distinguishing perception from representation (Ingold, 2002). It is a concept that is based on James Gibson's ecological psychology and on the premise that perception of life and space is a multi-sensory action in which the representation is part of a perceptive process embedded in the body (Gibson, 1979). Therefore, the representation of spatiality is seen as a dialogue tool that refers to something yet it is not completely equivalent to it. The representation of life spatiality is strongly influenced by the ways of understanding it and vice versa. The ways of perceiving space are determined by the hegemonic ways of representing it. This poses a criticism towards a cognitivist view of spatiality which he calls cartographic view of the world and that leads us to think that "we are all cartographers in our daily lives" (Ingold, 1993:155).

We propose a "horizontal turn" regarding the way of conceiving and representing spatiality, basing the essay on the case study of Butiá. In this kind of non-aerial representations, we suggest that the view should be located from the human eye's perspective at ground level, articulating in depth and structure both past and present times, making explicit a type of view from a specific location that is a key element in the representation. This proposal emerged as a result of critical reflections on the application of ethnocartography or participatory mapping (used as synonymous here) which was carried out at the end of a three years fieldwork, aiming at identifying spatial units that the local people who lives in the Butiá forest area deemed important in the event that a proposal for the conservation of Butiá were to be presented.

## 2. Conservation of human-Butiá relationships

Butiá palms form monospecific forests of around 70,000 ha of extension in the southeast of Uruguay (mainly in the department of Rocha<sup>3</sup>) and part of the southern tip of Brazil (Fig. 1) (Rivas and Barilani, 2004). These palm forests, characterised for having up to 600 palms per hectare,<sup>4</sup> are a key element for regional identity to such an

extent that they appear in the coat of arms of the department of Rocha as well as in the local anthem.

The human-Butiá relationship is a long-standing one, as there is archaeological evidence that refers to the consumption of its fruits about 8500 years ago (López Mazz et al., 2004 among others). Between the 18th and the 19th centuries, palms were used to build pens to manage cattle near the Uruguayan-Brazilian border (Cardoso, 1995; Oliveira and Teixeira, 2006; Oliveira et al., 2009). In the late 19th century and during much of the 20th century palm leaves were processed by the industry to extract fibre that was used to fill mattresses, cushions and dolls, as well as to fabricate cords, doormats, etc. (Cardoso, 1995).<sup>5</sup> Since the late 20th century until today some 10–15 families have worked in the manufacture and sale of Butiá by-products (locally known as Butiá products) located in Vuelta del Palmar, a small rural village.

These families make their own products based on a know-how that has been passed on from generation to generation among the dwellers of the area and its surroundings. The sale of Butiá products is not their only economic activity, though. They also raise cattle on a small scale for personal consumption, to sell it or to obtain milk, as well as some forms of agriculture for self-consumption or sale (Dabezies, 2012). There are also three microbusinesses that manufacture products with Butiá fruits. These are small family businesses (from 1 to 5 permanent employees) that usually sell their products at a regional level, although some may achieve small-scale sales at a national level (Pizzanelli and Xavier, 2013).

The aesthetic element of the Butiá palms and mostly of the Butiá forests, the density of the palms in the forests (Fig. 2) and their use for the productive human being have caught the attention of the first naturalists that visited the area in the 19th century and the early 20th century (Araújo, 1912; Arechavaleta, 1892; Fiebrig, 1933; Herter, 1933; Puig y Nattino, 1915).<sup>6</sup> After 1980, Butiá palms and palm forests in particular, have probably been the most studied plants and plant formations for scientific works in the southeast of Uruguay. Even though there may be different approaches to study Butiá palms, most of the existing works have a biological-agronomic approach, particularly in terms of their preservation from a productive point of view (phylogenetic resources, ecosystem services, etc.) (Dabezies, 2014). In this respect, most visual representations of palm forests highlight the biological or ecological aspects, with open-shots (panoramic views) without human life and closed-shots that usually emphasise the different parts of the palms as well as the fauna and flora of the forests (e.g. Barbieri et al., 2015).

The high density of palms in the forests restricts sunlight, which together with the diverse agricultural activities is preventing the forest from regenerating as an ecosystem. Considering the symbolic importance for the local identity and the economic importance for the different actors that economically depend on the sale of products made of these palms, the potential disappearance of the palm forests is seen as a critical ecological and social issue (Rivas, 2005).

This has created a scenario in which since the late 1990s and the

<sup>4</sup> There are about 200ha with such density of palms. The major surface has densities between 20 and 50 palms per hectare (Zaffaroni et al., 2005).

<sup>5</sup> There also existed other factories (one of which made liqueur and another one that extracted the oil from the fruits) that had a comparatively minor impact in terms of population organisation, symbolic presence in the region and economic impact.

<sup>6</sup> José Arechavaleta, one of the most important naturalists in Uruguayan history, highlighted the palm forests in that they are "a cluttered palm jungle [...] that rises as a huge fence" (Arechavaleta, 1892:97), in contrast with the wetlands, the predominant landscape in the region in which palm forests are located. Orestes Araújo, one of the first geographers to visit the area states that "the forest is so dense at times that it becomes impossible to penetrate it by horse" (Araújo, 1912:161). As per its benefit for human beings, the author states that "fruits called Butiás are drupes grouped in large bunches or clusters. They have a nice sweet and sour taste. These fruits ripen in the autumn and are of great profit to the poor dwellers of the countryside, as they provide support for them and for many animals. It could be said that Butiá plays in some areas the same role as the chestnut in Europe. It is eaten ripe and harvested for the winter" (Araújo, 1912:161).

<sup>3</sup> Uruguay is subdivided in 19 administrative subdivisions called departments.

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