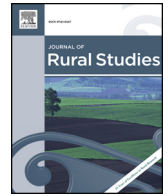




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Landscapes and resistance in the African diaspora: Five centuries of palm oil on Bahia's Dendê Coast

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the long-term development of palm oil landscapes in the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia. In contrast to the agroindustrial monocultures that dominate global production, palm oil in Bahia emerges from a biodiverse cultural landscape constructed through five centuries of transatlantic socioecological exchange. Native to West Africa, African oil palms (*Elaeis guineensis* Jacq.) diffused to the New World during colonial overseas expansion, becoming established in Bahia by the seventeenth century. There the palms helped form a complex cultural landscape that continues to supply local alimentary and spiritual demands for palm oil—an essential resource in many Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions. Extending approximately 70 km south of the capital Salvador, Bahia's traditional palm oil landscapes are now officially dubbed the Dendê Coast (*Costa do Dendê*), following the Kimbundu Bantu-inspired Afro-Brazilian term for palm oil. Historically colonial officials and elite Brazilians showed little interest in Bahia's palm oil economy, effectively conceding it to Afro-descendants until the mid-twentieth century. Since then, a series of modern development interventions have sought to transform the complex, biodiverse landscapes of the Dendê Coast into a legible oil palm monoculture based on an improved hybrid variety. Yet despite recurrent top-down efforts, emergent or “subspontaneous” groves and traditional polycultural landscapes continue to dominate land use in the region. Drawing on ethnography, landscape interpretations, archives, and geospatial analysis, this paper analyzes the historical development of Bahia's palm oil economy, recounting five centuries of socioecological changes on the Dendê Coast. The study integrates recent geographical treatments of the African diaspora with theories of complexity to comprehend the ongoing proliferation of Bahia's traditional palm oil landscapes despite top-down promotion of modern monocultures.

1. Introduction

As the Earth's most produced vegetable oil,¹ palm oil ranks also among its most contentious commodities. Typically produced in agroindustrial monocultures displacing tropical rainforest environments in the Global South, modern palm oil development is a leading global contributor to deforestation, biodiversity erosion, greenhouse gas release, and land grabbing (Fitzherbert et al., 2008; UNEP, 2011; Pye and Bhattacharya, 2013; Rival and Levang, 2014; FAS, 2017; Linder and Palkovitz, 2016). Southeast Asia currently accounts for 85 percent of global production, but the industry continues to expand in Latin America (Escobar, 2008; Johnson, 2014; Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen, 2015, 2016; 2017; Potter, 2015). Historically a minor player, Brazil has recently renewed initiatives to expand palm oil development in its Amazon region, which accounted for 87 percent of national production in 2015 (Villela et al., 2014; Backhouse, 2015;

IBGE, 2016). The remaining 13 percent came from the northeastern state of Bahia where palm oil landscapes and development schemes derive from a much longer history and more complex cultural-environmental collaborations (Hartley, 1965; Balick, 1979, 1985; Watkins, 2015a) (see Fig. 1).

Native to West Africa, African oil palms (*Elaeis guineensis* Jacq.) diffused to the Neotropics early on during colonial overseas expansion, becoming established in Bahia by the seventeenth century (Watkins, 2015a, 2015b). There the palms helped constitute a biodiverse, cultural landscape whose biological origin and composition remain inextricable from human decisions and preferences (Sauer, 1925; Whatmore, 2002, 2006). Constructed through centuries of transatlantic socioecological exchange, those landscapes continue to supply national demands for palm oil, an essential ingredient in Afro-Brazilian cuisines and religious practices (Lody, 1992, 2009). Like its antecedents in West Africa, the viscous red palm oil produced in Bahia contrasts markedly from the

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¹ In terms of total yield or “world supply” in the twelve months ending April 2017, palm oil accounted for 62.79 million metric tons of vegetable oil, while its nearest rival, soybean oil, accounted for 54.56 MT; see FAS (2017).

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Fig. 1. A “subspontaneous” or emergent grove of African oil palms surrounding a home on Bahia’s Dendê Coast, Curral district of Igrapiuna, Bahia (2012).

industrially fractionated, bleached, and deodorized palm oils traded internationally. Locally produced, unrefined palm oil invigorates many of Bahia’s most revered recipes—including *moqueca* and *acarajé*—with antioxidant provitamin A carotenoids, metabolism-boosting medium chain fatty acids, and E vitamins (Mba et al., 2015). Developed in collaboration with African-inspired gastronomic cultures, Bahia’s palm oil landscapes remain a living testament to African agency in the transformation of the New World (Carney and Rosomoff, 2009, 2017).

In 1993, Bahia’s Secretary of Culture and Tourism formally designated the region as the Dendê Coast (*Costa do Dendê*), highlighting the Afro-Brazilian term for palm oil in a formal nod to the diasporic landscapes that had come to symbolize the region (Bahia, 1993) (Fig. 2). Distinguished by a useful palm of African origin and serving as the socioecological base for Afro-Brazilian cultures, the Dendê Coast thus represents a veritable Afro-Brazilian landscape² and a vital source for

regional livelihoods, cultural resources, and nutrition (Watkins, 2015a, 2015b).

Despite demonstrated worth, Bahia’s palm oil economy remained of little interest to colonial officials and elite Brazilians until the mid-twentieth century. Since then recurrent modernization efforts have failed to impose control over the traditional economy and its biodiverse landscapes. Building on previous studies of the early emergence of

(footnote continued)

suggested by the regional appellation Dendê Coast, oil palms dominate and symbolize local landscapes, emerging both spontaneously and planted in farms and fields as the region’s most visible, and indeed its most produced and lucrative commodity (IBGE, 2016). I emphasize, however, that Bahia’s Southern Coasts have long benefitted from inputs and cultural influences from a diverse range of peoples and groups, including indigenous Brazilians and various migrants from Europe, the Levant, and East Asia, among other regions and places. In the twentieth century, Japanese migrants in particular contributed a range of botanical species and agroecological techniques that remain influential in the region (Flesher, 2006; DeVore, 2014). While in this paper I focus specifically on the biodiverse, emergent landscapes dominated by African oil palms, I acknowledge the broader diversity of landscapes, cultures, and species that have long characterized the region.

² In framing the Dendê Coast as an Afro-Brazilian landscape I intend to highlight the regional prominence of *Elaeis guineensis*, native to the African continent, as well as the primacy of those palm oil landscapes in supporting Afro-Brazilian cultural forms. As

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