Water as Territory: Decolonial Alternatives to Development in Brazil's Vale do Ribeira

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between water, territory, and development from a decolonial perspective, focusing on the experiences of *quilombola* communities in Brazil's Vale do Ribeira and their resistance to the commodification of the Ribeira de Iguape River. The study critiques dominant development paradigms grounded in modernity, coloniality, anthropocentrism, and market-oriented approaches to nature, arguing that such frameworks reduce water to an exploitable resource and obscure the epistemologies of traditional communities. Drawing on decolonial theory, post-development studies, and field research on the Movement of Those Threatened by Dams in the Vale do Ribeira (MOAB), the article analyzes how quilombola communities articulate alternative ways of understanding water, territory, and collective life. The discussion highlights the historical conflicts surrounding hydroelectric projects, especially the Tijuco Alto dam, and shows how community mobilization has challenged state and corporate development agendas. The article argues that the Ribeira River is not merely an environmental asset, but a living territorial, cultural, and epistemological reference for the communities that depend on it. By foregrounding quilombola resistance, intercultural mobilization, and relational understandings of nature, the study contributes to debates on decoloniality, the rights of nature, territorial justice, and alternatives to development.

Keywords: Decoloniality; water; *quilombola* communities; territory; Vale do Ribeira; alternatives to development.

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Introduction

This article critiques the conventional dichotomy in development narratives that separates society from nature. Previous research (Ferreira, 2019) analyzed the environmental sciences as a field open to the decolonization of knowledge. The shift toward a biocentric approach challenges the anthropocentric narrative that perpetuates divisions between humanity and nature, intellect and corporeality, thereby establishing hierarchies of superiority and inferiority. It also marks a departure from traditional development models that prioritize progress and modernization at the expense of environmental integrity. The biocentric perspective confronts the reductive tendencies of anthropocentrism and scrutinizes the preeminence of economic imperatives in contemporary society.

Central to decolonial methodologies, the biocentric approach seeks to broaden systemic understanding through the integration of multiple epistemologies. It advocates a holistic interaction with the Earth, blending perception, emotion, cognition, and action to uncover viable alternatives to traditional development models (Escobar, 2014). This perspective prompts essential questions: How do the quilombola communities of the Vale do Ribeira navigate the development paradigm embedded in modernity, in which both society and nature are framed by this modern context? What insights emerge from the lived experiences and resistance of these communities, especially concerning their relationship, or cosmology, with water and other epistemological approaches?

This study examines the multifaceted role of water across historical, present-day, and prospective scenarios, with particular emphasis on the challenges and adversities confronting the Vale do Ribeira territory, especially the Ribeira de Iguape River, as a consequence of Brazil’s development strategies over the past three decades. Employing a decolonial perspective, this analysis emphasizes the local knowledge of the Vale do Ribeira and the endeavors of MOAB, the Movement of Those Threatened by Dams in the Vale

do Ribeira SP/PR, as an entity that is simultaneously social, environmental, and knowledge-producing.

The discussion moves through the concepts of modernity, coloniality, and decoloniality, aiming to encourage reflection and enrich debates on public policy concerning territorial development, as well as academic discussions surrounding local knowledge systems and the diverse epistemologies that shape spaces, territories, ways of life, and the rights inherent to nature. Employing a decolonial framework, this approach emphasizes the critical role of local communities, emerging social movements, non-governmental organizations, and knowledge producers, both individually and collectively. It examines how these actors challenge, navigate, and transform existing structures of knowledge and power, thereby generating innovative perspectives and strategies for resistance and continued existence (Escobar, 2010).

Structured in four sections, including this introduction, the article proceeds by critiquing the standardized development model advocated by dominant global powers and its various interpretations in colonized and marginalized regions, with special emphasis on the commodification of water. It then presents empirical research findings from the Vale do Ribeira region, which has been exploited from the colonial and imperial periods to the present day. The discussion highlights the intensification of exploitation over the past three decades, driven by hydroelectric dam projects, and outlines the resistance strategies employed by quilombola communities in the Vale do Ribeira to preserve their lands and the rights of nature, especially water. Ultimately, by integrating debates on development with the experiences of traditional communities in the Vale do Ribeira from a biocentric standpoint and through alternative development frameworks, this study reveals distinct patterns of thinking, feeling, and interacting within the territory, fostered by alternative viewpoints.

Decolonial Approaches to Development and the Commodification of Water

According to Alier (1998), the discourse of sustainable development, emphasized at the 1992 Rio Conference, sheds light on the dichotomy between the North and the South. He expresses skepticism toward the environmental objectives professed by proponents of sustainable development, pointing out that natural resources, which support the livelihoods of economically disadvantaged communities, are commodified at minimal prices under the guise of sustainability.

Peruvian scholar Aníbal Quijano (2000) examines the notion of a “development specter” haunting Latin America, a residue of the region’s colonial history with Europe. Quijano challenges the pursuit of welfare-state benefits, perceived as symbols of progress and advancement, arguing that they obscure deeper structural problems. He calls for a critical reassessment of the concept of the “Third World,” formulated in the late 1970s, and of the development narrative directed at these countries. He argues that, within the capitalist framework, the modern nation-state plays a crucial role in promoting development.

He emphasizes the need to challenge Eurocentric views in development discourse by considering their historical and geographical contexts. The author observes that the confluence of modernity and racial categorization has led to the emergence of new social identities—Indigenous, Black, Asian, White, and Mestizo—and to varying dynamics of labor-based domination, exploitation, and conflict. At the same time, the creation of new geocultural identities—America, Europe, Asia, Africa, East, and West—has been instrumental in reshaping the global distribution of political and cultural influence.

Within this racialized framework, shaped by colonialism and development, alongside dichotomies of superiority/inferiority and developed/underdeveloped, and the estrangement of humanity from nature, Quijano (2011) notes that the notion of development has been persistently endorsed by liberal capitalist society. This society has attributed various descriptors to development—ranging from economic, social, local, global, rural, and sustainable to ecodesign, ethnodevelopment, endogenous development, gender-equal development, transformative development, and territorial development. However, the core principle of “development” has remained substantially unchanged.

To enrich our comprehension of development narratives, it is imperative to grasp Quijano’s (1992) insights on Eurocentrism, particularly how coloniality and rationality shaped the project of modernity during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This historical understanding allows us to examine development possibilities that purport to offer choices. Quijano identifies an imposed social classification, which he terms coloniality of power, used to categorize the world’s population along racial lines. This categorization, a conceptual artifact of colonial ventures, has significantly shaped the primary axes of global power: authority, knowledge, and identity, all anchored in Eurocentric rationality. The consequences of this coloniality of power include the exploitation of specific regions, cultural hegemony, losses in biodiversity and sociodiversity, the normalization of mortality, and epistemicide.

Cida Bento (2022) underscores how European narratives during colonization stressed skin color as a pivotal determinant of societal status and worth, designating Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans as “barbarians,” “pagans,” “savages,” and “primitives.” According to Bento, “European colonization of the Americas marked the inception of a worldwide capitalist system, intertwining race, land, and the division of labor” (author’s translation), establishing a dynamic of domination over native peoples and enslaved individuals.Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2014) observes the rise of discourses imbued with modern, colonial, and Western influences, which

articulate the divisions between the so-called First and Third Worlds. These narratives, propagated by institutions, endorse a development model that is globally acknowledged and applied.

Escobar (2010) identifies at least three major paradigms within development theory: liberal theory, which promotes equitable development as a continuation of the modernity project initiated in the sixteenth century; Marxist theory, which advocates a reorientation of development toward social justice and sustainability; and poststructuralist theory, which critiques both the modernity project and the conventional development narrative predicated on progress. This latter theory advocates an ethic of specialized knowledge as a means of liberation, highlighting the role of community members as both creators of knowledge and defenders of their territories and the environment.

Eduardo Gudynas (2010) offers a critique of the dominant market paradigm, characterized by its inherent unsustainability. Driven by unceasing economic expansion and the pursuit of profit, this paradigm engenders an artificial interaction with the environment, primarily advancing the ideology of progress and leading to socio-environmental unsustainability. Nevertheless, Gudynas emphasizes that this paradigm represents merely one facet of development, underscoring the need to acknowledge a spectrum of sustainability, ranging from weak to strong and super-strong.

In his analysis, Gudynas elaborates essential criteria for evaluating the robustness of various development models, classifying them into three distinct categories:

1. Weak sustainable development: This approach suggests modifications to existing production methods to lessen their environmental footprint, acknowledging the importance of conservation for economic prosperity. It tends to concentrate on technical adjustments, such as improving energy efficiency and reducing pollution, with substantial reliance on economic mechanisms. Inspired by recent research on the “economic valuation” of natural

resources, this model introduces the notion of “natural capital,” aiming to integrate environmental considerations into economic planning.

2. Strong sustainable development: This model contests the reduction of all natural entities to natural capital, positing that not all aspects of nature can be captured by economic metrics. For instance, while trees can be processed into furniture, indicating the conversion of natural capital into commodities, species preservation and the safeguarding of critical habitats remain of paramount importance, independent of economic value.

3. Super-strong sustainable development: This paradigm acknowledges the value of the natural world through multiple lenses beyond economic considerations, integrating cultural, ecological, spiritual, and aesthetic values as equally important, if not more so. Championing a biocentric perspective, it advocates both social and ecological equity and seeks to formulate alternatives to conventional development paradigms.

This framework underscores the multiplicity of values, accentuating the need to recognize intrinsic human values and the fundamental worth of other life forms. The table below provides a comparative overview of these three models of sustainable development, detailing their respective characteristics and philosophical underpinnings.

Table 1: Key Aspects of Sustainable Development Approaches

Aspect	Weak Sustainability	Strong Sustainability	Super Strong Sustainability
Worldview	Anthropocentric	Anthropocentric	Biocentric
Objective of Development	Material Growth	Material Growth	Quality of Life, Ecological Health
Nature's Role	Natural Capital	Natural Capital	Natural Heritage
Valuation	Instrumental	Instrumental and Ecological	Multiple and Intrinsic
Primary Actors	Consumes	Engaged Citizen Consumers	Active Citizens
Primary Context	Market-driven	Society-focused	Citizen-centric
Knowledge Paradigm	Privileged Knowledge	Privileged Knowledge	Diversity of Knowledge Celebrated
Recognition of Other Knowledge Systems	Overlooked	Acknowledged, Yet Underappreciated	Fully Respected and Integrated
Implementation Practices	Technical Management	Consultive Technical Management	Comprehensive Environmental Strategy
Social Justice	Unlikely	Possible	Essential
Ecological Justice	Unattainable	Possible	Essential

Source: Adapted from Gudynas (2010)

In light of these discussions, it becomes clear that the struggle for access to water is also a struggle for territorial rights, as it seeks to legitimize different forms of relating to water according to the priorities of social actors.

Historically, development has been dominated by Eurocentric norms, casting a global shadow. This condition underscores the critical need for epistemic decolonization that genuinely engages with the knowledge systems and ways of life of Latin American communities, or Abya Yala. Osejo and Borda (2006) underscore the need to move beyond Eurocentric perspectives in order to cultivate an understanding consistent with a life enriched by wisdom. Since the era of conquest and colonization, knowledge has been wielded as a tool for the subjugation of both nature and the Indigenous populations of Latin America.

Along similar lines, Mignolo (2016) incisively explores the concept of humanity and the construction of racism, demonstrating how decolonial methodologies have enabled the reimagining of histories, subjectivities, and knowledge systems occluded by the discourse of modern rationality. For Mignolo, the essence of decolonial thinking lies in contesting and reshaping the colonial matrix of power.

Within this framework, the paper adopts a critical stance on interculturality, confronting the structural, colonial, and racial challenges inherent in the modernity/coloniality paradigm and its connection to capitalism, while scrutinizing its instrumental rationality (Quijano, 2011). This represents a substantial advancement in social theory, emphasizing cultural and epistemic perspectives that facilitate the exploration of territoriality. This approach diverges from monolithic thinking, acknowledging the richness of knowledge and the existence of multiple epistemologies. It draws attention to the suppression of local knowledge and experiences caused by Eurocentric globalization.

Viewed through the prisms of decoloniality and interculturality, this discussion reaffirms the significance of place, nature, and territoriality, enriched by a decolonial viewpoint (Restrepo, 2010). It calls for an epistemic

reassessment and the investigation of alternative frameworks, aiming not only to confront the coloniality of power and knowledge but also to envision alternatives to development. As Walsh (2019) observes, interculturality and the decolonial shift in power offer a distinctive mode of thought and positioning, rooted in an appreciation of colonial difference. Interculturality, derived from the specificity of this difference, suggests an innovative trajectory of thought and directs the initiatives of social movements across political, social, and cultural domains. This approach seeks to reform and decolonize both prevailing structures and hegemonic paradigms.

In her critique of existing paradigms, and in light of post-development and the sustainable existence of Mother Earth, Cullinan (2021) expresses concern about nations primarily focused on maximizing Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Such a focus frequently results in environmental degradation and intensifies climate change, underscoring the urgency of championing the Rights of Nature.

Cullinan argues that the Rights of Nature, like Human Rights, are essential and seek to guarantee the rights to exist, to occupy physical space, and to engage with other entities in ways that foster evolutionary and ecological processes. Significantly, countries such as Ecuador have embedded this concept in their Constitution since 2008. As stated in Article 72, “Nature or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain, and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes” (Cullinan, 2021, author’s translation). Both the Ecuadorian Constitution and Bolivia’s Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, adopted in 2010, embrace an ecocentric outlook, challenging the anthropocentric orientation of modernity, marked by consumerism and exploitation, which views the Earth and its resources as mere commodities. The acknowledgment of Nature’s rights envisions the Earth as a living, self-regulating entity comprising interconnected beings, emphasizing the imperative for humans to live in harmony with the Earth rather than exploit our shared habitat.

Furthering the critique of established paradigms and engaging with post-development theories, Escobar (2014) examines the notion of "feeling-thinking with the Earth," introducing innovative approaches to understanding development, territory, and diversity. He underscores that social movements, particularly those from tropical forest regions, consistently advocate four fundamental rights: identity, territory, political autonomy, and a distinct conception of development. For these communities, the right to existence is multidimensional, encompassing cultural, political, and ecological aspects.

Escobar posits that localized, place-specific knowledge offers a unique worldview that is increasingly marginalized by the forces of globalization. A crucial task, he suggests, is to highlight practices and processes that demonstrate resistance to capitalism, modernity, and the ideology of development. From this perspective, adopting a post-development framework is essential for reimagining sustainability and conservation as integral to localized political engagement. This viewpoint treats territory as a living entity, infused with its own cosmologies, where ancestral knowledge and connections with the natural world are acknowledged and valued, marking a shift away from conventional modes of thought.

The concept of "sentirpensando" (feeling-thinking), revisited by Escobar (2014) from the work of Fals Borda, celebrates the wisdom of riverside communities. It portrays how these communities, closely bonded with their territories, have cultivated a way of life that harmoniously blends intellectual and emotional intelligence. Moncayo (2009) discusses these communities' ties to their territories, particularly their interactions with water, drawing on Fals Borda's depiction of riverside inhabitants as "hombre-hicotea" or "sentipensante." This characterization epitomizes resilience amid life's hardships and the ability to navigate these challenges through acts of resistance, continually endeavoring to protect their way of life and restore their lands. A "sentipensante" embodies the integration of logic and affection, corporeality and emotion, overcoming obstacles that disturb equilibrium with their surroundings.

Gómez (2021) elaborates on the concept of “sentirpensar” as investigated by Fals Borda within Colombian riverside communities, especially among Afro-descendant populations and fishermen. This notion, understood as acting with the heart while engaging the intellect, serves as an affective lexicon for these communities, blending experience with expression to cultivate a groundbreaking way of life and a distinctive linguistic framework. In this context, “sentirpensar” is perceived as an act of radical defiance, actively opposing the capitalist forces of dispossession, conflict, and corruption that destroy ancient and long-standing worldviews essential to the resistance of these communities.

This viewpoint highlights the significance of Indigenous knowledge, communal living, and emotional bonds in strengthening territories. Luiz Macas (2010), an Ecuadorian Indigenous leader and thinker, examines alternative ways of living that are deeply rooted in community engagement. These approaches arise from collective experiences of contesting coloniality, challenging modernity, and devising strategies against the prevailing neoliberal capitalist framework, which is deeply entrenched in colonial legacies. Macas argues that, from the perspective of Indigenous nationalities, the notion of “community” integrates both the human community and its surroundings, embracing the whole of the natural world and relationships of care. He posits that this comprehensive understanding is central to the conceptualization of “territory,” since it is within this context that the full spectrum of life’s potentialities is fostered.

Vandana Shiva (2006), an Indian activist and scholar, examines the intricate networks and interactions enabled by water among human beings and other forms of life. Water, an essential resource for Earth’s biota, is a communal asset that, regrettably, is not universally accessible. Shiva emphasizes that water is unique among natural resources because it is irreplaceable and plays a fundamental role in daily existence, cultural development, and the identities of diverse communities and peoples.

Geographer Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves (2008) asserts that territorial sovereignty over water bodies is fundamental to any community of life,

given water's foundational role across biotic systems, including human societies. Water's ubiquitous presence—in the atmosphere, soil, agriculture, industry, domestic settings, and the human body—sharply highlights the socio-environmental paradoxes we face. The perception of water merely as a commodity for exploitation starkly contrasts with alternative conceptualizations that transcend its economic valuation. In such paradigms, water is intrinsically linked to cultural practices, demonstrating the enduring impact of coloniality and modernity on societal and individual relationships with the natural world. Indigenous peoples and traditional communities, rooted in localized natural frameworks, exemplify diverse, often ecologically centered, non-capitalist practices (Escobar, 2018).

Porto-Gonçalves (2009) further notes that water is emerging as a pivotal element of power within the dynamics of an expanding capitalist society, intensifying its influence over territories and exacerbating global social conflicts. These disputes are centered on claims over water control, access, and stewardship, which are constantly under threat from privatization and appropriation by multinational corporations and development initiatives.

The control and management of water are intrinsically tied to territorial sovereignty, calling for a decolonial lens capable of recognizing the many epistemologies and forms of local wisdom surrounding water and its territorial implications. This perspective encourages a reevaluation of water not merely as an exploitable resource, but as a collective good crucial to the sustenance of communities and ecosystems. Shiva (2006) asserts that the water crisis constitutes one of the most profound and neglected dimensions of the Earth's ecological degradation.

The author argues that the capitalist ethos of market-oriented development erodes communal sovereignty, favoring technological interventions, such as dam construction, that disrupt the natural water cycle and lead to water scarcity. This scarcity is seen as a consequence of capitalist logic, fostering a conflict between two distinct paradigms: the market paradigm, which interprets water scarcity as a crisis requiring the commodification of water, and

the paradigm upheld by Indigenous peoples, peasants, and traditional communities, who regard water as a communal asset (Diegues, 2007).

Alier (2017) highlights the vital stakes involved in safeguarding rivers from privatization, commodification, and conversion into capital assets. These challenges are central to the broader struggle for the rights of nature and the preservation of communal resources. The trend toward privatizing rivers and water resources, particularly in developing nations, is rapidly escalating. This privatization often unfolds subtly, perpetuating a colonial mentality that permeates thoughts, bodies, knowledge, and territories. It manifests through various means, from transferring water management and distribution responsibilities to municipal authorities to establishing public-private partnerships (PPPs) or auctioning hydroelectric dams, thereby granting extensive water-resource exploitation rights to individual corporations.

Shiva (2006) argues that the concept of scarcity, entangled with notions of growth and development, essentially constitutes a form of “theft” from both nature and local communities. She identifies the conversion of natural forests into monocultures for industrial purposes, thereby generating revenue and growth, as a principal strategy for stripping territories of their water resources.

Espinoza (2016) illuminates the market-driven motives behind the establishment of the World Water Council (WWC). He portrays the WWC as a multilateral entity composed of various stakeholders engaged in water management and use, charged with the mission of shaping global public opinion and influencing national leaders through a “global water vision.” This vision, essentially a doctrine of the Council, represents a unified stance on water, in which large corporations foster an ideology that views the diversity of perspectives on water as problematic, pushing an agenda aimed at the commodification of water. Within this colonial, developmentalist, and mercantilist framework, water is trivialized as a mere commodity, reducing communities to the status of users and consumers.

The author notes that, despite numerous international agreements and conferences involving governments and NGOs, only a handful have made substantial contributions to a transparent and fair global water-management strategy. Moreover, notwithstanding attempts to engage various stakeholders, a sociological analysis grounded in the coloniality of power reveals a persistent hierarchy of knowledge and the sidelining of groups that lack influence in water-related debates.

Hence, opposing the commodification of water and defending its status as a communal asset is paramount. Shiva (2006) underscores that water, indispensable for all life forms, can be conserved sustainably through regulated use based on a community-led conservation ethos. This viewpoint resonates with Elinor Ostrom's (1990) research on the common good, notably in her seminal text Governing the Commons. Ostrom's work, comprising several case studies of communities effectively stewarding shared resources such as rivers, forests, and lakes, demonstrates that collective management often produces more efficient outcomes. These findings highlight practices that depart from the norms of selfishness, scarcity, and individualism that characterize alternative management approaches.

Given the discourse on sustainable development and related narratives, it is evident that advancing environmental policy requires the adoption of biocentric or ecocentric perspectives capable of cultivating alternatives to conventional development paradigms. This paradigm shift entails questioning prevailing narratives of progress, developmentalist ideologies, racism, and the notion of scarcity, in order to reconceptualize water not merely as a resource but as the fundamental essence of life.

Water, Territory, and Resistance in the Vale do Ribeira

Understanding the resistance movement of peoples and traditional communities in the Ribeira de Iguape River basin, especially in relation to the Ribeira River, requires an understanding of the historical development and

formation of MOAB. Rosa (2007) explains that MOAB was formed in response to the threat of proposed dams on the Ribeira River, which endangered many nearby quilombola territories. A critical juncture for these communities was the promulgation of Brazil's 1988 Constitution, notably Article 68, which affirms the constitutional rights of quilombola territories and emerged as a fundamental safeguard against the potential construction of the Tijuco Alto Hydroelectric Plant.

Rosa's (2007) research illuminates the extensive exploitation of the Vale do Ribeira region during the colonial and imperial eras. Mining ventures in the sixteenth century, originating from the southern coast of the state and advancing inland toward the Vale do Ribeira, culminated in European colonization by the seventeenth century. These settlers fueled the extractive and agricultural economy of colonial Brazil, relying on enslaved Africans from various parts of Africa and on Indigenous labor from the surrounding areas.

Nascimento (2005) notes that inward migration was propelled by the navigability of the Ribeira de Iguape River, which created favorable conditions for transportation and thereby facilitated economic development in the region through mining activities.

Sueli Berlanga (2017), a prominent leader and founder of MOAB, emphasizes that the colonization of the Vale do Ribeira was primarily motivated by mineral extraction, leading to historical and continuing conflicts. Alves and Sahr (2010) contend that territorial disputes in the area have been consistently influenced by its potential for mineral extraction, especially gold. Yet the region's early and significant contributions to the mining sector are often neglected in official historical narratives. It is therefore crucial to recognize that these territorial conflicts have unfolded in fragmented ways, often overlooking the collective history of these repeatedly marginalized areas.

The Ribeira de Iguape River, historically notable for housing some of Brazil's earliest gold mines, became a hub of activity following the discovery of gold in the middle Ribeira region. Iguape, strategically situated, emerged as a

critical port and route for transporting gold to the colonial capital, leading to the establishment of the country's first Gold Foundry House (Nascimento, 2017). The enslaved population in the region, especially in Alto Ribeira, reflected the scale of economic activity. For instance, in the town of Apiaí, at its peak, approximately 400 of its 700 residents were enslaved, meaning that the enslaved Black population outnumbered white settlers and highlighting the indispensable role of slave labor during this period.

Marinho (2007) delineates the economic evolution of the Vale do Ribeira, highlighting a profit-maximizing strategy characterized by rapid industrialization, infrastructure development, and export-oriented agriculture, which began to accelerate in the 1950s and continued through the military government period. From 1950 to 1980, the region experienced a surge in land speculation and "illegal land appropriation," leading to heightened land concentration and the emergence of large estates, predominantly owned by São Paulo businesspeople. This dynamic generated tensions and conflicts throughout the Vale do Ribeira.

A significant source of conflict was the encroachment on traditional territories by newly established conservation units. In the early 1970s, efforts to regularize rural landholdings were initiated through a collaboration between SUDELPA and the Procuradoria do Patrimônio Imobiliário, as documented by the Instituto Socioambiental (2006). This effort marked the beginning of land demarcation and the distribution of titles to small landholders in the Vale do Ribeira. Nevertheless, this "demarcation" frequently failed to acknowledge communal lands, resulting in their fragmentation. The state, treating the areas earmarked for park creation as vacant, imposed environmental restrictions while disregarding the enduring and historical presence of Black communities and other traditional groups in the Vale do Ribeira and across Brazil (Nascimento, 2017).

Nascimento (2017) underscores that the majority of those who have historically resided in the Vale do Ribeira, descendants of enslaved individuals, remain excluded from the benefits afforded by the modern republican state.

Rural and urban Black communities, along with quilombola territories in the region—whose ancestors are intertwined with the colonial past—have only recently gained political visibility. These traditional riverside communities have a deep connection to the river, which is fundamental to their way of life. The river functions as a vital artery for communication, transportation, fishing, and leisure, and embodies the symbolic heart of the territory's residents.

The Ribeira de Iguape River and the Struggle Against the Tijuco Alto Dam

Nascimento (2005) traces the origins of the Ribeira de Iguape River to the confluence of the Açungui and Ribeirinha rivers in Cerro Azul, Paraná. The river flows through Ribeira, in the state of São Paulo, passing through towns such as Apiaí, Iporanga, Eldorado, and Registro before ultimately discharging into the Atlantic Ocean at Iguape. With a length of 520 kilometers, the river and its tributaries, which run through areas including Ribeira, Apiaí, Eldorado, Registro, and Jacupiranga, have played a pivotal role in shaping human settlements within the Vale do Ribeira. As a result, these watercourses have fostered the development of diverse communities, such as quilombolas, caiçaras, Guarani Indigenous villages, and family-farming groups, cultivating a rich cultural mosaic.

The preservation of the Ribeira River represents a cornerstone in the history of resistance among the traditional peoples and communities of the Vale do Ribeira, particularly in terms of their connection with water. Over the last three decades, a variety of groups, including organizations, leaders, and collectives, have voiced concerns over the detrimental effects of the proposed construction of a hydroelectric dam complex, which posed a threat to their ancestral ways of life. In response to these developments, traditional communities, especially quilombola groups, initiated the Movement of Those

Threatened by Dams in the Vale do Ribeira (MOAB). This movement was sparked by a federal government study in the early 1990s that proposed the establishment of four hydroelectric projects: Funil, Itaóca, Batatal, and the Tijuco Alto Hydroelectric Plant, as depicted in the map below.

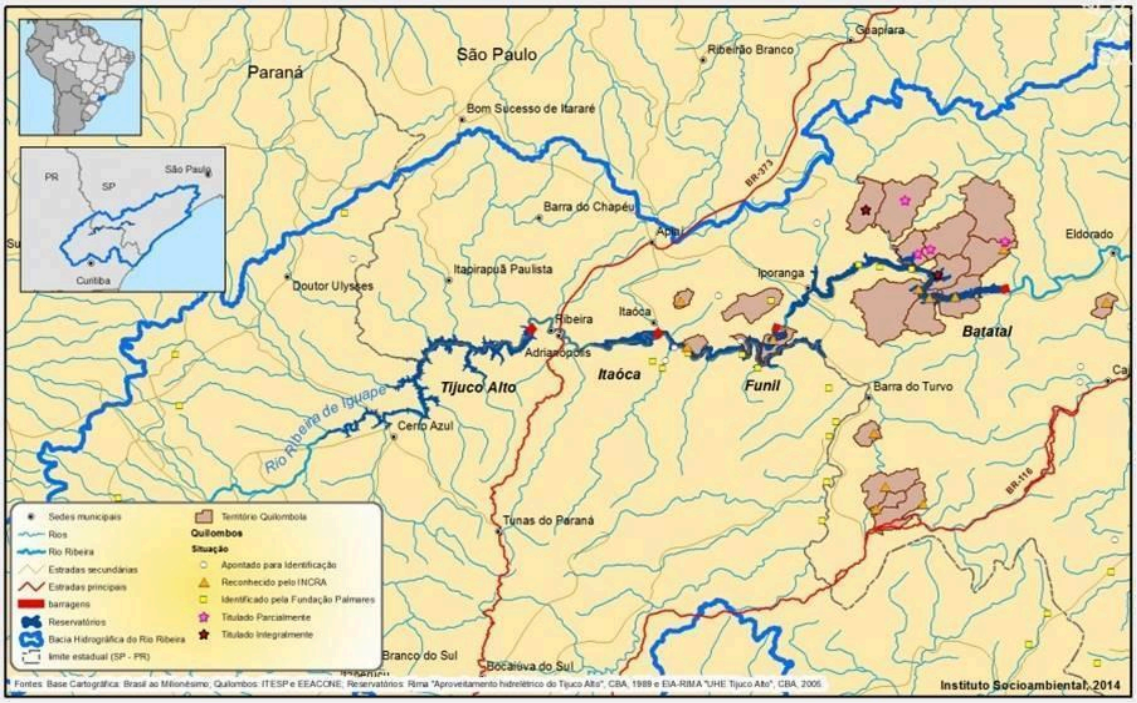

Illustration 1. Proposed Construction of Four Hydroelectric Plants in the Vale do Ribeira
Source: Instituto Socioambiental (2016).

Three of the proposed hydroelectric projects were under the authority of the São Paulo State Energy Company (CESP), while the Tijuco Alto Hydroelectric Plant (UHE) was earmarked to serve the energy needs of Companhia Brasileira de Alumínio (CBA), a subsidiary of the Votorantim Group. The designated flood area, encompassing 51.7 km², posed a severe threat to the region's natural and cultural heritage by disrupting riverine activities such as fishing and agriculture, which are essential to communal livelihoods. In resistance, local populations voiced their opposition in public hearings, carrying banners proclaiming, "No to dams, we choose life" and "Land, not dams,"

underscoring the critical importance of land rights for quilombolas. They also articulated the river's fundamental value through statements such as "Rivers are the arteries of Mother Earth, and rivers are our existence" (Pinto, 2014, author's translation).

Jeronymo, Bermann, and Guy-Guerra (2012) highlighted that the reservoir's impact would extend across parts of São Paulo and Paraná, affecting municipalities including Ribeira and Itapirapuã Paulista in São Paulo, and Adrianópolis, Cerro Azul, and Doutor Ulisses in Paraná. The envisioned reservoirs threatened to submerge areas of environmental and sociocultural significance, sever social ties, and exacerbate environmental degradation. This degradation includes the proliferation of disease vectors, the destruction of riverbeds and streams, and adverse effects on water quality and aquatic life.

In the face of these serious consequences, local inhabitants, mobilized by MOAB, garnered support from Guarani Indigenous communities, quilombolas, smallholder farmers, organized labor, and social movements. These coalitions, in collaboration with the Catholic Church, rural workers' unions, and non-governmental organizations, initiated a series of campaigns, protests, and public interventions against the exclusionary and ecologically harmful development strategy advocated by CBA and CESP for the hydroelectric facilities. Working closely with the Federal Public Ministry (MPF), various public entities, and academic institutions, they sought to halt the licensing process for the hydroelectric plant and prevent the start of dam construction.

Nascimento (2005) points out that regional authorities and various stakeholders predominantly supported the construction of the Tijuco Alto dams. Part of the community believed that the project would bring "development" and "progress" to the Vale do Ribeira through financial compensation and job opportunities. In addition, the dams were perceived as a potential remedy for the region's chronic flooding problems.

In advocating for the Tijuco Alto project, proponents championed a narrative focused on regional development, land regularization, flood management, and improvements to the water-supply infrastructure, drawing on various developmentalist rationales. Yet empirical research on dam construction practices has consistently exposed severe human rights abuses and the exacerbation of social disparities in affected communities (Jeronymo, Bermann, & Guy-Guerra, 2012).

The opposition to the Tijuco Alto initiative and the broader campaign to protect the Ribeira River vividly demonstrate the ways in which speculation and private interests have commandeered lands and natural resources and disrupted the traditional practices and ways of life of local communities. According to the author, rural populations found themselves displaced from their social environments as economic development projects advanced.

Notably, the Tijuco Alto Hydroelectric Plant (UHE) project did not resort to the national defense justification frequently invoked in Brazil to rationalize such developments. Hydroelectric projects and dams are generally presented as beneficial to the Brazilian population as a whole, despite the fact that families would be compelled to abandon their lands and ancestral ways of life in order to meet the infrastructure's demands, primarily for the benefit of CBA's industrial operations. The resistance to the Tijuco Alto UHE project mobilized a broad alliance of groups and organizations spanning diverse social strata, ethnic backgrounds, and objectives, effectively countering the corporation's efforts to shape public opinion in its favor (Nascimento, 2005).

Rosa (2007) delineates MOAB's foundational objectives, which centered on educating, empowering, organizing, and disseminating information to the population of the Vale do Ribeira about the deceptive nature of the developmentalist rhetoric associated with dam projects. Another crucial endeavor of MOAB, as identified by the author, was the creation of EAACONE, the Articulation and Advisory Team for Black Communities of the Vale do Ribeira SP/PR. Unlike MOAB's broader scope, this entity focused its efforts on

coordinating and mobilizing the demands of the region's Black and quilombola communities.

Thus, MOAB is recognized for its origins in social conflicts driven by capitalist notions of growth and development, representing historically marginalized groups. The movement is known for its commitment to cooperative, self-reliant, and collaborative management within the local and regional economy, particularly during challenging times, through its close collaboration with communities. For quilombola groups, their legally recognized lands are not merely assets but essential conditions for their sustenance, resistance, and ongoing struggle.

The inception of MOAB is deeply entwined with the ethos of Liberation Theology and the pastoral efforts initiated by Sueli Berlanga and Ângela Biaggioni, the Pastorinha Sisters from the Congregation of the Sisters of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Their direct involvement was pivotal in the movement's formation.

Rosa (2007) further explores MOAB's interactions with governmental entities, noting its continued autonomy. While MOAB engages strategically with the state to advance its objectives, it persistently critiques the state's technocratic, racist, and colonialist policies and practices within the region. Additionally, MOAB sets itself apart by incorporating racial discourse into its mission, positioning itself as an anti-racist and decolonial entity that champions the recognition of Black resistance and addresses Black communities' marginalized status within society. The convergence of two historical dynamics—the liberationist Church's pastoral initiatives and the legal recognition of quilombola territories—played a significant role in MOAB's emergence as a new social movement. The collaboration among MOAB, the Church, rural unions, the Public Ministry, and other allies has been crucial in strengthening community bonds.

This historical narrative underscores the enduring dedication of the movement's leaders to the Vale do Ribeira and their resistance against a

development paradigm that favors land accumulation and large-scale enterprises to the detriment of the livelihoods and welfare of traditional communities and the goal of socio-environmental sustainability.

MOAB's defense of the Ribeira de Iguape River embodies a biocentric philosophy, interculturality, and decoloniality, championing strong sustainability in the face of considerable adversities confronting quilombola communities due to market and governmental pressures. In 2014, MOAB commemorated its 25th anniversary, celebrating a quarter century dedicated to community empowerment, as illustrated below:

Illustration 2. Celebration of MOAB's 25th Anniversary

Source: Pinto (2014)

In conclusion, a review of MOAB's journey over the past thirty years demonstrates the diversification of the movement's activities across numerous arenas and its use of a range of tactics and strategies. MOAB has organized a broad spectrum of activities, including marches, demonstrations, community workdays, thematic gatherings, seminars, public hearings, pilgrimages, religious ceremonies, and festive events. Moreover, MOAB has extended its reach by

visiting areas affected by dam projects, engaging in dialogue, and highlighting the discriminatory and inequitable nature of developmental practices in the Vale do Ribeira, while also contesting the privatization of these lands.

Conclusion

The decolonial paradigm shifts our perspective by recognizing Indigenous and traditional communities as vital stewards of diverse and rich cultural and environmental knowledge systems. These communities undertake practices designed to challenge the Western and colonial imposition of modernity on their territories—an imposition that frequently regards all forms of life as potential commodities for exploitation. When we consider the concepts of territory, water, and communities, our focus shifts to everyday life, viewing territory as a space lived in and experienced by these communities. This perspective is rooted in the communal matrix of peoples who live in symbiosis with nature, perceiving themselves as an integral part of the natural world. This approach in decolonial studies confronts dogmatic, homogenizing, universal, and hierarchical epistemologies, critically examining the narratives of development and progress.

Acknowledging the portrayal of society and nature as constructs of modernity, our objective was to explore the response of quilombola communities in the Vale do Ribeira to Brazil’s advocated development model. Field research indicated that quilombolas possess an integrative view of their environment, highlighting the symbiosis between the Ribeira River and their territory. The river is not merely peripheral to their lives but has been a cornerstone of these communities since the era of colonization. Hence, their fervent and enduring resistance to the commercial exploitation of rivers is both understandable and justified.

The initiatives undertaken by MOAB reflect a profound concern for water, the Ribeira River, and territory among the region's traditional peoples and communities. Their dedication to protecting their homeland and environment is manifested in their resistance to the construction of the Tijuco Alto Hydroelectric Plant (UHE) in 2016, alongside ongoing vigilance against other regional development initiatives and proposals, such as mining, which pose risks due to mercury pollution.

In terms of their perceptions and actions regarding water, these communities present an alternative to the model of modernity, characterized by a deeply lived and relational engagement with the Earth. The relationship with the Ribeira River exemplifies this ontological connection, underscoring a fundamental, lived interdependence with the natural world.

Research underscores the perception of the Ribeira River as a common good among MOAB members, traditional communities, and the Indigenous peoples of the region. This designation stems from the river's role in nurturing and structuring community life, evident through its symbolism, geography, spirituality, poetry, literature, and historical significance. Embracing an ontological perspective is imperative to fully comprehend the essence of the Ribeira River territory. Analytical efforts should move beyond merely economic, political, and social dimensions to also encompass ontological conflicts and interculturality. This territory, contrary to what a dualist ontology might imply, is not uniform but a complex mosaic that demands an inclusive framework capable of capturing the diversity of realities and the many groups coalescing around the theme of water, as exemplified by MOAB.

Echoing Escobar's (2010, 2014) research on Black communities, mobilization efforts are profoundly interwoven with the notion that biodiversity conservation is intrinsically linked to the territories and cultures of these communities. From this perspective, the conservation of nature is intertwined with care for, and affection toward, the territory, and any conservation strategy is

rooted in the cultural knowledge and practices of the communities. This viewpoint introduces the concept of “territories of difference,” highlighting the ongoing struggle for these territories. In the Vale do Ribeira, the river and Black communities, unified in social activism, champion a perspective that interprets territories through the dynamics of river flow, particularly within the river basin, advocating a synthesis of territory and culture as fundamental to understanding biodiversity.

The importance of the Ribeira River to the traditional peoples and communities of the Vale do Ribeira was vividly expressed by MOAB participants. Their commitment to defending the river is deeply anchored in the emotional and affective ties of those involved.

We recognize that, despite a prevailing modern paradigm that tends to dichotomize society and nature, the quilombola communities of the Vale do Ribeira confront the advocated development model through resistance, mobilization, and unique perspectives and practices concerning water. To some extent, the endeavors of these quilombola communities through MOAB articulate an alternative epistemology of living, diverging from the mainstream market-centered rationale.

MOAB’s ongoing struggle, spanning more than three decades, underscores the persistent challenges faced by quilombola communities under Brazil’s dominant development paradigm. This continuous pressure is notably manifested in recent initiatives to license Small Hydroelectric Plants (PCHs), perceived by MOAB as the latest capitalist maneuvers following the abandonment of the Tijuco Alto UHE project. As a result, community mobilization persists, confronting new adversities as the licensing processes for these smaller-scale projects are typically less rigorous. This scenario poses distinctive challenges in terms of reconciling the rhythm of capitalist organization with the community’s ability to engage state mechanisms for the defense and preservation of its territory.

Moreover, the Vale do Ribeira territory is entangled in a web of conflicting interests that threaten the sustainable existence of these families and communities. A decolonial reevaluation of history, viewed through the experiences of MOAB participants, illuminates the region's long-standing role as a battleground for resource extraction and as a site of obstruction to traditional ways of life—a continuum extending from the colonial period to the present, driven by state and market dynamics ranging from gold prospecting to energy production, agribusiness, and mining.

Adopting a decolonial perspective reveals several vital considerations for discussions of development strategies, projects, and ventures in the Vale do Ribeira. It illuminates the adverse repercussions and escalating risks these initiatives pose to the lives of the region's traditional communities and Indigenous populations.

For the communities allied with MOAB, the Ribeira River transcends mere historical significance; it serves as a guide for their future. Their practices, communication, mobility, and knowledge are deeply intertwined with the river and its well-being. MOAB underscores the river's resilience in the face of capitalist encroachments, resonating with contemporary notions such as the Rights of Nature.

The body of knowledge and local wisdom emphasized by the experiences within MOAB has catalyzed learning processes and brought recognition to these communities. This empowerment has strengthened individuals in their steadfast resistance to safeguard the Ribeira de Iguape River, nurturing an ongoing defense deeply rooted in an intimate connection with the Earth.

Reflecting on the experiences of quilombola communities and their persistent struggles, it is evident that their efforts have provided profound insights into their relationships with water. MOAB's three-decade-long journey, anchored in the principle of strong sustainability, serves as a testament to the quest for alternative development paths through intercultural mobilization. This

endeavor promotes epistemologies that challenge and seek to decolonize entrenched structures and paradigms.

In essence, the Ribeira de Iguape River emerges as a crucial and vibrant entity for these communities, fostering a sense of belonging among the people of the Vale do Ribeira. This emotional attachment signifies a deep, intangible bond with water, in which the river surpasses its characterization as a mere resource and development is often viewed as an alienating force. MOAB's leading figures champion alternative perspectives and resistance to the capitalist model of development that aims to commodify nature. Their "sentipensante" methodology highlights the significance of solidarity, participation, and cooperation, laying the groundwork for the emergence of new knowledge by recognizing the imperative to resist in order to remain within their territory. Furthermore, they demonstrate a transformative outlook and practice in their engagement with the world, fostering new epistemologies for life.

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