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REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF A STRUGGLE AGAINST THE PERMIT PROCESS FOR A MAJOR SHRIMP FARM PROJECT IN CARAVELAS, BAHIA

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the perspectives of the social agents involved in an experience of struggle against the installation of what would be the largest industrial shrimp farm in Brazil, with a planned area of 1500 hectares, in the intact mangrove swamps of Caravelas, Bahia State. The possibility of this enterprise's entrance caused the outbreak of what is locally defined as *the politics*. Following the native conception of what is *the politics*, this article initially aims to present the different proposals of political action carried out in the field. Secondly, based on ethnographic data, this study presents an alternative concept to perceptual relativism, i.e. the idea that there is one given environment and different ways of socially conceiving or representing it. Here, I am looking to understand the different meanings of this notion – the environment – following the different perspectives of the social agents who define it and their interactions with what is locally known as the *mangrove swamp*. Finally, we reflect on the variations or differences in points of view as an exercise, in order to understand what the processes of objectivization of what the environment is are like, and at the same time the processes of subjectivization, i.e. constitution of subjects.

Key words: social conflict; Environment; mangrove swamp; shrimp farms.

PRESENTATION ¹

This article is an initial balance of my reflections on a social mobilization process that started when it was announced that a large shrimp farm project was to be installed in a small municipality in the extreme south of Bahia State. The analysis is limited to the first stage in the process for obtaining the environmental permit for what would be the largest shrimp farm ever planned in Brazil, covering 1,500 ha (hectares) of a mangrove swamp area in the municipality of Caravelas, Bahia. This study aims to trace the main lines of tension that arose between the different local social agents as from the time the possibility of installing this enterprise was announced. For those living there, it became evident that *politics* would break out outside the so-called *time of politics*, or simply outside the *politics*, an expression used for designating the electoral period.² It is worth questioning, therefore, how the introduction or extemporary intromission of *politics* provoked ruptures, associations and the realignment of social groups and municipal organizations, and how these disputes reveal the different ideas about what the *environment* is, or simply, the *mangrove swamp*, from the point of view of the different social groups involved.³

The events here described, and which I followed step by step between September and November, 2005 as a researcher, are examined in the light of the intensive field work that I carried out in this small town, where I lived for 14 months between August, 2004 and November, 2005. This is a strand of the research project for my doctoral thesis into what is defined as *politics*, *culture* and *environment*, from the point of view of an *Afro-indigenous* cultural movement that is active there.⁴ At the beginning of the 80s young people living in *Avenida*, an area on the outskirts of the town, motivated by the political and cultural movements that resulted from the country's democratization process, formed a group with the aim of *doing art and living from art*. Their artistic creation involves them presenting activities such as theater, dance and 'capoeira' [*Afro-Brazilian martial art/dance*] in public areas in the city, as well as producing sculptures and furniture using a singular technique that makes use of *dead* wood. This technique is understood as an alternative way of working, on the one hand and as a way of offering new life to the wood, by *resuscitating it*, on the other. The Cultural Movement does not understand art to be a means to something else "more fundamental", but as an end in itself, which can provide those who dedicate themselves to it both an existential and a political meaning. The perspective assumed in this article is not external to the social groups being analyzed; I am rather seeking to follow

the singular way the cultural movement, alongside which I lived and relearned the meaning of many words, has of looking and reflecting on things.

THE INITIAL SCENARIO

“The margins, on which the poorest and most mobile had managed to subsist, by taking advantage of the tolerance, negligence, forgotten rules or unquestioned facts, disappear”.⁵

One of the problems involved with doing anthropological research in a group that talks the same language as the observer is the expectation that the meaning of what the local people are talking about is self-evident. Many terms, like *politics*, *the environment* or *mangrove swamp*, for example, because they coincide with the categories of the observer's own society, may seem immediately familiar and have their meaning included in an already given repertoire of meaning. Alternatively, long term field work, allied to an attentive ethnographic look at differences, leads to the discovery of new meanings for known words. The reflections I have set out here indicate that the meanings that the locals give to the notion of *mangrove swamp*, for example, are developed and modified according to specific social contexts that are not interchangeable. The exercise that I am here proposing is to make the meanings of *politics* and *mangrove swamp* expand, by using elements from ethnography.

Four years ago rumors started circulating that Caravelas, a small town in the south of Bahia State, had been chosen by ‘Bahia Pesca’, the fishing development body of the Bahia State government, as the place that had a ‘*natural vocation*’ for the introduction of shrimp farms. This town of 20,000 inhabitants, better known as the port from which one leaves when going to visit the Abrolhos National Marine Park, would finally find its feet again and move in the direction of *development*, in this case a word that is synonymous with the creation of employment and an increase in the money circulating in the town.

Caravelas is described by those who live there as the *town that already had*, a reference to the various economic cycles that have happened there. From being a major producer of whale oil during Brazil's colonial days, to an important regional commercial center in the first half of the XXth century, the history of Caravelas was marked by the construction of the Bahia-Minas railroad that was inaugurated in 1881 and scrapped in 1966. It was a center for the expansion of the timber industry, but the trees have all but gone, and like coffee production and crop and livestock farming, today it is insignificant.

Drilling for oil in the 80s proved to be a disappointment and tourism for the Abrolhos region is weak and patchy. As from the end of the 80s, eucalyptus growing expanded rapidly through the region and occupied major swathes of land that until then had been used for family agriculture or extensive livestock farming. The expansion of eucalyptus plantations caused an exodus of great numbers of the population from former rural areas to regional urban centers, like Teixeira de Freitas, or capital cities like Belo Horizonte or Vitoria.⁶ In this context of reduced possibilities for economic insertion shrimp farming appeared on the horizon of those living in the town as an alternative form of *economic development*.

A brief clarification about the technical definition of the production of shrimp in captivity.⁷ In summary, farms are a series of large tanks and channels, constructed over mangrove swamp areas. This is an artificial environment into which the available water is constantly pumped and where exotic species of shrimp larvae, developed in a laboratory, are introduced. The tanks are filled with large quantities of food and hormones to fatten the shrimp and antibiotics that are indispensable when it comes to preventing the spread of epidemics. These products are sold by large companies from the chemical, pharmaceutical and food sectors and make possible up to three 90 day production cycles per year, thereby guaranteeing that the farms produce uninterruptedly.⁸

While this activity needs pollution-free water it paradoxically contributes to the exhaustion of these same resources and causes the spread of disease in the shrimp themselves. The contamination of water sources has led many producers to move to areas where the mangrove swamps are still untouched. There, they privatize environments that are for common use and restart the production-exhaustion cycle all over again. In countries where this type of activity has become established a swathe of destruction on a large scale has been widely recorded as a result of the destabilization of ecosystems and ways of living and in coastal areas that where previously affluent hunger and poverty have been created.⁹

POLITICS ERUPTS OUTSIDE THE *TIME OF POLITICS*

The news that a large shrimp farming business was being licensed by the CRA (Center for Environmental Resources, the state environment body) was the reason for a meeting being hurriedly convened by the local office of CI's (Conservation International) Marine Program, an international non-governmental organization that has offices in

Brazil.¹⁰ The meeting took place in the Social Center of the Mangrove Swamp Project,¹¹ which is linked to an IBAMA¹² research nucleus. This federal environmental body is also responsible for administering the Abrolhos National Marine Park that has its headquarters in the town. Besides technicians from CI and the Mangrove Swamp Project in this first meeting there were researchers in natural and human sciences who are involved with research projects in the town, fishermen from the shell fishermen's associations and participants from the Afro-indigenous cultural movement.

A few days before, the local office of CI had had access to the company's EIA-RIMA (Environmental Impact Study and Environmental Impact Report). This had been sent by the representative of the civil society in CEPRAM (State Environment Council). Those present were told that the public hearing would take place nine days hence. Alarmed by this unexpected news they started outlining the action strategies that would be used on the day of the hearing. The technician from CI pointed out that the undertaking would infringe a series of environmental laws and resolutions and defended the importance of immediately preparing an independent technical report on the EIA-RIMA, with the support of the researchers present. Parallel to this he suggested the setting up of *articulation cells in the community* to inform the population about the underlying risks to fishing and shell-fishing, the first activities that would be directly affected by the undertaking.

A fisherman who was present was skeptical about whether his group would take part, since the entrepreneur had published that more than 3,000 jobs would be created when the farm was installed, a promise that had caused the town's inhabitants to immediately support the undertaking. Another fisherman who was present revealed that the town's administration was already active in the coastal zone, bringing together small groups of people and convincing them to support the undertaking with the argument about job creation.

The representative from the Afro-indigenous cultural movement said that the town dwellers often see environmental NGOs and IBAMA as an indiffereniable whole, in his words, as *one thing only*. On the other hand, he pointed out that town dwellers are upset with the environmental NGOs and IBAMA because some years previously, after brief initial opposition, they had accepted the installation of a marine terminal belonging to Aracruz Celulose [*pulp company*] in the city.

In 2002, Aracruz Celulose had installed a private marine terminal on the Caravelas River, for transporting eucalyptus trunks to the pulp plant in Aracruz, Espírito Santo State.

To obtain the necessary licenses Aracruz was obliged to comply with a series of *environmental compensations*, implemented by some of the local NGOs, like the Humpback Whale Institute and by IBAMA.¹³ From the point of the view of the inhabitants, when it came to defining the *environmental compensation*, the NGOs and IBAMA were not worried about the population participating in the process, choosing to define the issue directly with the company, in a process that was understood to be not very transparent. This representative of the cultural movement finally suggested looking out certain leaders in order to *talk with them*, a way not only of telling them about the risks of the undertaking, but also of preventing them being co-opted by the company.

The following day, the organizations of those present in this first meeting organized themselves around getting the public hearing postponed by the CRA and a lot of official representations were sent to the state body, which finally accepted postponing the hearing for 20 days. During this time a technician from CRA went personally to the headquarters of the Afro-indigenous cultural movement to question its coordinators about why they had asked for postponement of the Public Hearing. Across the hood of the state body's official automobile the technician from CRA unfolded a large map of the mangrove swamp area where the company wanted to set up and tried to persuade members of the movement that shrimp farming would not have any environmental impact. This unheard of situation – a technician from a state body that is supposed to guarantee the legality of the licensing process trying to personally convince town dwellers of the supposed benefits of the undertaking – disturbed the members of the cultural movement. After the technician had left one of them commented: *We're up against avarice here... It's going to be worse than the eucalyptus. They're treating this issue as if it was a party political campaign. There's greediness involved here.*

Comparison with the *eucalyptus* is very revealing, bearing in mind that the arrival of Aracruz Celulose in the town was at a time when there was a fierce political dispute going on and money was being injected into the town, as is a common occurrence at times of election. At the beginning the NGOs and IBAMA opposed the installation of the Aracruz port, but soon started negotiating the administration of the *environmental compensation*. According to town's people the strategy, used successfully by the company to get their port localization and operating permits granted, was to liberate significant amounts of financial resources in basically three ways: *conditional, sponsorship and presents*.¹⁴

The comparison between the licensing process and the electoral period is also significant. For those living on the outskirts of the town, in the area known as *Avenida*,

where the members of the cultural movement live, the announcement of the arrival of an undertaking of this size and the appearance of state agents in its wake also bears similarities with the *time of politics*, when they are sought out by people and groups that often have jobs in public administration and are in search of support for their candidates.

The politics, here is synonymous with elections, a period in which *a lot of money flows* in the town and which generates a desire for getting rich – the so-called *greediness*– in the subjects involved in the electoral campaign. Everybody wants to enjoy the affluence of resources that suddenly and momentarily takes over the town, where current income is minimal. Although considered inevitable, *greediness* is socially condemned as divisive and identified as a cause of disputes among town dwellers who want to retain part of this flow for themselves or for their families, in a practice called *avarice*. In this sense *politics* is here understood as an uncontrollable flow that enters and crosses the town at precise moments in time, instilling in its inhabitants feelings and practices that are morally doubtful. The ‘eruption’ of *politics* outside the *time of politics* and the perception that disputes *between* town dwellers themselves were being announced, was a reason for unease on the part of members of the cultural movement. Differences occurring between town dwellers is understood as something negative, a factor of *discord* in an environment imagined as being *calm* or *peaceful*.

These initial events reveal in an acute way some of the lines of tension that entered the relationship between the NGOs, IBAMA and local groups. It is worth asking, therefore: how did the introduction or extemporary interference of *politics* cause ruptures, associations and realignment between social groups and town organizations?

In the first place the prevailing trust that the NGOs and IBAMA are on the “good side”, as defenders of the common interests of the *environment* and the *traditional populations*, was counterbalanced, in the shape of the Afro-indigenous cultural movement, by the *mistrust* of these entities on the part of the inhabitants. This mistrust was motivated by the recent actions of certain NGOs and IBAMA in their relationship with a major company, Aracruz Celulose. For local groups, NGOs and IBAMA had capitulated or colluded with the company, a fact that was decisive when it came to increasing their *mistrust*. Furthermore, it was proof that the NGO-IBAMA relationship with Aracruz Celulose was interpreted locally as an alliance relationship and because of this it would be hard for these entities to be accepted as legitimate spokespeople by the town’s social groups. Although not all NGOs accepted resources from the environmental compensation (as is the case with CI-Brasil), from the point of view of the town dwellers there is not much

difference between the NGOs and not even between them and IBAMA, given that the activity objective of all of them is the *environment* and groups that *use the environment*.

A second break, this time at the discourse level, operated between the NGOs and local groups. The preparation of an independent technical report on the EIA-RIMA was one of the political strategies for opposing the undertaking. CI dedicated its efforts to building up a scientific counter-argument, an instrument that was fundamental in the legal battle that was subsequently fought.¹⁵ Graced with highly qualified technical staff in academic terms CI is considered to be an organization that has legitimacy when it comes to producing scientific arguments about the *environment*. Because of this it elicited and got the collaboration of researchers who were present at the inaugural meeting to prepare the so-called *Counter-RIMA* or Independent Report on the EIA-RIMA.

A more careful look at the *Counter-RIMA* reveals a division between subjects considered socially fit for production of a scientific argument on the undertaking and those that have no legitimacy for such a purpose. In the technical and scientific plan of things the *Counter-RIMA* works effectively when it analyses, argues and refutes the countless errors, omissions, falsehoods and lies produced by the consultancy company hired by the enterprise to legitimize its installation. However, this argument very clearly sets out the limits of the competent report when it includes only technicians, scientists, masters and doctors from its own network. The necessary opposition at the technical and scientific level has its downside: it prevents other arguments from being heard, among which the most significant absence is notably that of the social groups that are going to be potentially affected.

Finally, a last line of tension had to do with the strategy for mobilizing the people as proposed by the researchers from away and that defended by the cultural movement. The researchers from away proposed unleashing a process of *ostensive mobilization*, to be carried out in public areas, with the idea of informing the *community in general* about the undertaking. Once informed it was supposed that people would be enlightened about the harmful social and environmental effects of the shrimp farms, and therefore, they would take a public stance against the undertaking entering the municipality. The researchers from away believed in the intrinsic power of *information*, which would be capable of mobilizing and setting off a chain reaction resistance movement in the social groups that were exposed to it.

However, the participants of the cultural movement countered the researchers with a certain degree of skepticism, caused by the political clashes that were announced. They

proposed another way of becoming engaged in politics: *conversation* with certain people who have the *respect* of many local groups. In their opinion this would be the way *par excellence* of setting up local micro-alliances, strengthened by the relationships of trust, friendship and kinship that already existed between those living in the town. This is a dialogue between subjects 'with a face', who recognize each other and know the limits of their exposure. In the words of one of the members of the cultural movement: *It is a relationship of colleague to colleague. We establish the basis of the conversation at opportune moments. I was born in this town and I am a colleague and friend and my family is friendly with their families; it's a different way of living. If you talk to him properly you are going to leave a doubt in the mind of the guy. He's going to think about it when he gets home and he's going to think about it before going to bed.*

Both the cultural movement as well as the researchers from away defended the position that the *co-opting of leaders by the company* was not an inevitable fact, since the discussion about the risks of the undertaking could be a way of at least preventing certain groups adhering to the shrimp farming project. Nevertheless, the two action strategies are different, since the emphasis of the researchers from away is on the inherent power of *information*, while, from the point of view of the cultural movement, information is simply the content of *conversation*, and this latter *is* what is fundamental. They understand that pure and simple *information* without any type of previous relationship between the subjects is useless and incapable of creating the social ties of proximity or rupture. The policy of *conversation* proposed by the cultural movement indicates that the relationships between the subjects are first and more fundamental than *information*; *conversation* is capable of causing the spokesperson to adhere, but this happens above all as a result of the pre-existing relationships of kinship, friendship and trust that link them.

We observed, therefore, that the announcement of the arrival of a major project in the town provoked the extemporaneous emergence of this uncontrollable flow called *politics*. This event passed through the town and caused tensions to appear where it is supposed there were none or, if there were, they were not seen, a fact lamented by the inhabitants who were not counting on the introduction of disputes into an environment that is held to be peaceful; this would only obviously occur at the next *politics* [election]. On the other hand this flow allowed for an explanation of the former conflicts that had set the group of local town dwellers *against* the NGOs-IBAMA group, which were seen by the former with *mistrust*, as an indistinguishable whole talking with one voice. Although the NGOs have their own agendas that differentiate between them, from the point of view of the NGOs the

independent report on the EIA-RIMA marks the same division that it was supposed only existed in the point of view of the town dwellers: on the one hand technicians from away and on the other the local population. This opposition finally gains relief and a clearer outline in the proposal of political action put forward by the researchers from away, based on the presumed transforming power of information, against which is set the town's cultural movement that defends the supremacy of *conversation* and relationship over information.

FOUR CARTOGRAPHIES

The intention of this part is to express the difference from the point of view of four social agents – the entrepreneur, the NGOs, the shell fisherwomen and the children – in their relationship with the *mangrove swamp area*. What does ethnography help reveal about their different environments?

1. The entrepreneurs

Field observations indicate that the *entrepreneur* category not only applies to COOPEX (Shrimp Farmers Cooperative of the Far South of Bahia), the consortium of 26 businessmen and investors – many of them from the same family – that intends to set up shrimp farms in Caravelas. To reduce the word *entrepreneur* to the business group in question would be to ignore other agencies seen operating and whose actions promoted shrimp farming in the municipality. Therefore, for taxonomic coherence, we must include among the *entrepreneur* group the institutions that acted with the aim of guaranteeing that shrimp farms would be installed in the municipality.

Directly related to COOPEX we can see the enterprise, '*Bahia Pesca*'. Since July, 2002 this entity that focuses on the development of fishing activities in the State of Bahia, has been investigating alternative sources of profitable business and publicizing them to potential investors. In addition to '*Bahia Pesca*', the representatives of the municipal government are *entrepreneurs* – i.e. the Town Administration of Caravelas and the Chamber of Councilors – that altered the Normative Resolution regulating the shrimp farming activity in the municipality and deposed local organizations from the Municipal Environmental Council that were against the installation of the large farm, thus making the undertaking legally feasible.

Finally, within the classification of *entrepreneur* we must include the consultancy company hired by COOPEX to carry out the EIA-RIMA, which evaluated the setting up of the shrimp farming industry in the town's mangrove swamp area. The environmental feasibility of the undertaking is attested to by the consultancy company, notwithstanding the statement in the EIA-RIMA itself that serious environmental risks would arise as a result of the installation of the large farm. An example of this is contamination of the water table, the source of the town's drinking water, by the polluted water coming from the shrimp tanks. The consultancy offers an instrument that legitimizes the setting up of the undertaking in technical terms, despite stating that the impact to the water table caused by the infiltration of water from the tanks will be *irreversible, permanent and long term* (PLAMA, 2005, p. 27).¹⁶ Therefore, in the case studied, the *entrepreneur* must be understood as being the described set of agents, in which the private investor, state bureaucracy organs, the town government and the consultancy companies that specialize in the production and sale of scientific reports coexist harmoniously.

The entrepreneur's environment is called the area of the undertaking, an area of 1,500ha of land, defined as unoccupied and supposedly bought from former squatters with legal rights between 2002 and 2004.¹⁷ This land is located at a strategic point that has abundant water resources, in addition to being close to the town's head quarters, cold stores and airport. According to the technician from 'Bahia Pesca' who was present at the Public Hearing, this is a piece of land with a natural vocation for the creation of shrimp in captivity, and which in addition is close to a warehouse and has direct exit to international markets. The environment of the entrepreneurs, the businessmen, 'Bahia Pesca', the Town Administration and the consultancy company is therefore an vacant and unproductive piece of land, inhabited by illiterate people¹⁸ and with no economic alternatives,¹⁹ in line to becoming a dynamic and profitable agribusiness, producing for the export market.

2. The Non-governmental Organizations

The Non-governmental Organizations come into the picture, in principle, in a relationship of opposition to the entrepreneur, in other words, publicly positioning themselves against the installation of shrimp farms in the municipality. It is important, however, to establish the differences in this group that is often wrongly taken as an homogenous and stable whole over time. At least three NGOs took part in the mobilization process: the already mentioned CI (Conservation International - Brasil), IBJ (Humpback

Whale Institute) and Ecomar (Association of Coastal and Marine Studies of Abrolhos, a local environment organization). At the outset the NGOs did not oppose the entry of the shrimp farm to the municipality in the same way, or to the same extent. Observing their actions it is possible to detect differences and nuances between them in the way they are managed internally.

While CI and Ecomar acted energetically in the *mobilization* activities and in introducing the *Counter-RIMA*, IBJ initially limited itself to taking part in some meetings and abstained from putting any mention of the threat of shrimp farming on the agenda of its main public annual event, Whale Week, sponsored by BR Distribuidora and Aracruz Celulose. This is because the Town Administration threatened not to liberate the permit for holding the event in a sports hall in the town if the topic of shrimp was ever brought up in the debates. This happening opened up a split, obliging IBJ to take a decision: either to look for an alternative place, or come to an agreement with the town administration and keep quiet about the shrimp farming. IBJ preferred this latter option and this guaranteed that the event took place in the town's sports hall. It therefore declined at the start to oppose the entrepreneur.²⁰ It thus became the target of criticism from the recently formed opposition coalition to the shrimp farming, which directly intervened by invading a debate in the auditorium of the main state school in the town during Whale Week. Members of the coalition took the microphone and after they had criticized the lack of debate about the shrimp farms in an *environmental education* activity, they showed a video about the environmental impact of shrimp farming and debated it with the students.

Among the NGOs themselves the issue of shrimp farming is a controversial topic. The case of CI-Brasil is exemplary in as far as a change in internal orientation is concerned. Initially the mobilization activity was being led by an analyst from the local CI office, who unreservedly made available the NGO's physical structure for coalition activities. In this first stage, however, CI had limited funds for pursuing an activity for which it has no specific budget, because it is understood as *reactive*, i.e. motivated by an unexpected event. Activities of social and political mobilization are not computed in the projects and allocation of resources of this institution that prioritizes activities of a scientific nature and is defined as *apolitical*. However, as the mobilizations and confrontations with the entrepreneur intensified, notably after the Public Hearing, other technicians from the organization started to act on the frontline of the dispute. In this way, over the time of the process opposition to the shrimp farming activity also began to count on the support of more technicians, in addition to the director of the CI Marine Program himself, in actions

involving the Public Attorney's Office, press campaigns, political articulation and articulation with other NGOs.

What is this mangrove swamp area where it is planned to install COOPEX from the point of view of the NGOs? Almost all the staff of the NGOs is made up of biologists and oceanographers, people trained to cast a scientific eye on the world, and which supposes the definition of the area in question as an *ecosystem*, regulated by a natural dynamic of its own, inhabited by certain *populations* and protected by specific legislation.

The scientists from the NGOs understand that the Caravelas River and its tributaries are the main estuary of the Abrolhos Bank, the reproduction and birth place of marine fauna and therefore crucial when it comes to maintaining fishing activity in this region, which, not by chance, is the most productive in the Northeast of Brazil.²¹ According to the researchers the production of shrimp in captivity would contaminate this estuary, since the effluents from the farms that contain pollutant chemical compounds, would be thrown into it without being duly treated. They also state that the shrimp farming project plans to remove native vegetation – sandbanks and mangrove swamps – from a wide area and that the introduction of an exotic species of Asian shrimp would be a direct risk to native species, the basis of survival of significant numbers of the human population. An unpredictable picture, as far as the biological and ecosystem consequences are concerned, would result from the introduction of shrimp farming in this environment.

In addition to being regulated by a natural dynamic the mangrove swamp is also the subject of a series of legal regulations. This is an area considered to be of Extreme Biological Interest by the Brazilian Government; it is located on the edge of the Buffer Zone for the Abrolhos National Marine Park, within an area that is being studied for the creation of a Federal Conservation Unit; it also includes Permanent Preservation Areas and beds of rivers and is defined as Marine Lands, in other words, Government Property. This is an area covered by a series of legal devices provided for in the Constitution, in environmental laws and in resolutions by CONAMA (National Environment Council), which from the point of view of the NGOs makes the option of any action that brings the dispute into the legal arena legitimate.

3. The shell fisherwomen

The shell fishers catch various different types of crab, oysters and mussels. They live on the shoreline or in the town, and are generally women, although many men are also

involved in this activity. Janaína and her sister-in-law, Lourdes, lived for many years on a *roça* [small-holding], as they call the land their family occupies between the Caribê River and the Do Poço River, in the area known as Tapera. The wattle and daub houses were the ideal place to rest after an intense day, catching shellfish, crabs and fishing that started at 4:00 in the morning and ended at 3:00 in the afternoon. A year and a half ago, however, the crabs began to become scarce, until they disappeared altogether. Even now the reasons for this phenomenon are unclear. Some fishermen raise the hypothesis of contamination of the water table by agro-toxins from the eucalyptus plantations of Aracruz that are encroaching on the mangrove swamp. There are those that associate the *disappearance* of the crabs with the predatory collection of crustaceans, using cooking gas, which has poisoned the mangrove swamp. Some fisherwomen bet that the spread of disease in the crabs is related to the presence of shrimp farms in areas to the north of the state and the systematic use of *medication*, antibiotics to control epidemics that are common in crustaceans bred in captivity.

The shell fisherwomen put forward many hypotheses, but know that they change nothing in the current situation where there is a total absence of crabs. Some say that this is a sign that *the world is going to end*, indicating that the path to the destruction of nature being trod by man is a strong indication of the degeneration that will lead to the apocalypse. Others react and say that *who is going to come to an end is us* and with the reappearance of one or two baby crabs and the birth of yet another child they prefer to see a sign that, despite all the destructive actions of humans, life always regenerates itself.

During the period when the crabs were dying off, Janaína stopped receiving an income of approximately R\$600 per month. She *used to take home* R\$150 a week, selling her crab catch to middlemen. Because of this she was obliged to *undo* (literally demolish) her shoreline house, take the tiles to the town and rebuild it in the so-called Bairro Novo. This neighborhood is a recently occupied area of mangrove swamp on the banks of the Macacos River, where before the town ended. This area was occupied, divided up into plots and sold to many of those living in the shoreline area, who, like Janaína, had lost their main source of income and had gone to the town to try their luck. She became, therefore, a maid in the house of a well-off family and started earning half a minimum salary per month, almost what she *used to take from the mangrove swamp* per week.

Today, Janaína lives in an area that has no basic sanitation facilities and that is subject to constant flooding and illnesses. Her youngest son, who is 8 years old, contracted hepatitis B in mid-2005 and this means she spends a lot of money on medicine

and examinations. By insisting she managed to get the municipal Secretary of Health to personally pay for some of the medicine her son needs and she has been very grateful for this help. Janaína's husband, known as *pajé* or *pai de santo* [*father of the saint – elder of the African-origin candomble religion*] by those who live on the shoreline, also gave up catching crabs and went to work as a bricklayer in Barra, a coastal district where new buildings in the town are springing up. In the last few months of 2005, when the crabs and oysters reappeared, Janaína and her husband gave up their jobs and went back to the mangrove swamp. They actively took part in the mobilization against the arrival of the shrimp farms, but avoided making any public statements because they were afraid of retaliation from the town administration, because they depend on favors from the mayor and his secretaries to get medicine, paved streets and basic sanitation.²²

For the shell fisherwomen, however, the mangrove swamp is an open space where they have free access to the resources that guarantee their livelihood in an autonomous way and that allows them not to have to work for others. The mangrove swamp of the shell fisherwomen is also a place that has been made unstable, since it has been losing its capacity for self-reproduction because of what has been happening and over which they have no control. While the mangrove area allows people to live from its resources the shell fisherwomen will be there to remove them, but when it is no longer capable of guaranteeing their livelihood they will seek other alternatives, like domestic service or the extraction of seeds from the 'aroeira' [*Brazilian peppertree*], an activity that has been growing in the region. Despite the perception that they live in a threatened environment, the shell fisherwomen see the mangrove swamp as their means of living. In the words of Dona Maria, a shell fisherwoman who is 75 years old: *the mangrove swamp is our home, our employment and our street fair; it's how I brought up my 13 children.*

4. The children

The children's opinion about the arrival of shrimp farming in the town emerged many times during the mobilization activities. The presence of children in the meetings arranged by the shrimp farming resistance Coalition was very common and in one of them, a girl of 12 publicly announced that *in school the teachers said nothing to us about the shrimp farms*. From this girl's statement it was possible to understand that in fact there was a strategy on the part of the entrepreneur (in this case, the town administration) in the sense of silencing any possible debate in the schools about the undertaking. The mayor of

the town summoned a meeting of the Education Council to present the shrimp farming project to the school directors, defending it enthusiastically and suggesting that he would not tolerate any manifestations that were contrary to the undertaking. All requests by the Coalition against shrimp farming for space in the town's schools were denied by the directors and the only way found of *informing* the students was the direct intervention mentioned above in the debate "Environmental Education in Caravelas", in which the topic of shrimp farming was not on the agenda.

On the other hand the children who live on the outskirts of town, in the part known as Avenida, relate with the mangrove swamp on a daily basis. The land adjoining the headquarters of the Cultural Movement is a smallholding, which is bordered both by Avenida and the mangrove swamp.²³ The children I am talking about are between 5 and 14 years old and they usually play together, either in the streets of Avenida, in the Cultural Movement's headquarters or in the fields, forests and mangrove swamp areas that go to make up the smallholding, which is situated in an area that is both rural and urban. The news that a shrimp farm could come to pollute the Macacos River worried the children an enormous amount and raised questions and concerns. *Didn't you know that these streams that flow through the smallholding come from the Macacos River?*, one of them asked me. *I once hid from my mother and followed the stream and came out in Bairro Novo, which is where the Macacos River runs*, confirmed another.

The empirical knowledge of the children about the surprising connection between the many rivers, streams and inlets of the sea in the region led them to conclude immediately that pollution of an upstream point of a distant river will pollute its nearby tributaries, since as one of the children said, *the river flows and so does the pollution*. For this reason the children have become very interested in knowing how the licensing process works. Rui was delighted when he heard from a neighbor that the NGOs, fishermen and shell fisherwomen had acted energetically in the Public Hearing, in such a way as to set out their arguments against the shrimp farms in a consistent way. *So, did we win?*, he wanted to know, imagining a public hearing as a mechanism of direct democracy, in which decisions are agreed upon following a free confrontation of opinions. He was disappointed to know that the final decision about the installation of the farms would depend on the State Environment Council and his question was: *if they are the ones that decide why have a hearing?*

In the mangrove swamp Guto is used to catching 'guaiamum', a crustacean he either eats, gives to his parents and grandparents, or sells to earn money with which he

helps his family pay for their cooking gas, or buys candy for himself and his brothers. It was his uncle who taught him how to make the traps out of cans – *mouse-traps* – to catch the ‘guaiamum’ in the dry mangrove area. Guto spends whole mornings building traps and going into the mangrove swamp after the coveted crustaceans. This is a reason for pride on the part of his mother who happily counts how many ‘guaiamuns’ her son catches per day and invites her friends to eat the delicacy.

The children know they cannot go too far or be away too long because, although they have a lot of independence and freedom, especially when compared with children who live in big cities, their parents are really worried to know where they are. But now and again they like to *escape*, to get into adventures and to take a risk in the unknown. The mangrove swamp is one of the places chosen for these escapes, because it is an open area that *has no owner*, as they say, and is still close. They know that at the back of the smallholding there are flooded areas, streams and mangrove swamps, areas inhabited by snakes and alligators, which they learn early on to identify and to relate to. The mangrove swamp is a place for games, for knowledge, for reflections on political participation, for tasty food, for presents for relatives and for *escapes* that allow the children to be alone with each other and to reflect on themselves and on the world.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The *mangrove swamp* is synonymous with an *economic resource* for the entrepreneur, an *ecosystem* for the NGOs, *home* for the shell fisherwomen and *adventure* for the children. Through their relationship with the mangrove swamp these subjects constitute the world in which they live and, reciprocally, constitute themselves.

The entrepreneurs conceive of the mangrove swamp as an *economic resource*, a means by which, at no cost whatsoever, they can remove the water resources they need to produce shrimps in captivity. The final cost of the shrimps will be more competitive the lower their production costs are. Taking advantage of free access to a raw material that is available in abundance and externalizing the production costs to the mangrove swamp and the population that live by extracting its resources, the entrepreneurs hope to obtain growing profits and to increase the taxes collected by the town. Ignoring the mangrove swamp as a source of work and income, they publicize their activity as the creator of *employment* and *quality of life* for a town that is described as deprived of economic alternatives.

The mangrove swamp of the environmental NGOs is a *natural ecosystem* interlinked by an estuarine complex that has a direct importance for the ecological balance of the Abrolhos Bank, a region that has the greatest marine biodiversity in the South Atlantic. This is a network of complex ecological inter-relationships to be protected as a place for the reproduction of the life of the marine animals and populations that live there. If, on the one hand, they depend on the mangrove swamp for their livelihood, on the other, the exercise of professions is intensely linked to the existence of preserved ecosystems. Their relationship with the mangrove swamp is scientific and supposes therefore an external posture as far as this natural base is concerned. Nevertheless, after the meeting with the fishermen and the shell fisherwomen who live there, in some of them emerged a new sensitivity that allowed for a more intense dialogue with these groups, communication that is understood, at one and the same time, as *difficult, turbulent* and *enriching*.

The mangrove swamp of the fishermen and the shell fisherwomen is the place where they were born and grew up, the mud with which they built their houses, the trees they used as fuel, and for building furniture and canoes, and the food with which they brought up and still bring up their children. The shell fisherwoman conceives of the mangrove swamp as the continuation of her home. When the mangrove swamp changes she also moves home, taking it with her to the other bank of the river, to the town. In this movement she reveals to the ethnograph what her mangrove swamp-*home* is, a world that, if preserved, guarantees her livelihood and independence, but which if contaminated becomes unstable and the creator of a vulnerability that did not previously exist in this form. Every time the shell fisherwoman walks through the mangrove swamp she traces her own personal cartography, made up of the qualities, powers and happenings, in a constant process in which she confronts her own conditions of existence and remodels her subjectivity and her own future.

The mangrove swamp of the children is an area that is open as far as the eye can see, where they normally play and have adventures. It is a succession of flooded areas, small streams, islands and pieces of firm land, inhabited by animals that they capture and sell or offer as presents to members of their families and colleagues. The mangrove swamp of the children is the *area outside their home*, where they form relationships between themselves and with the animal and vegetable life they find there and with which they learn to live and deal. From their relationship with the mangrove swamp the children meet with the outside world, and at the same time, with the inside world, a process of subjectivization and the constitution of their own cartographies. The mangrove swamp of

the children is an open frontier, a space of virtually infinite exploration, the source of games and of danger, a place where they learn to deal with the unknown, by familiarizing themselves with their ghosts and overcoming them, and with their parents, sometimes giving them presents and sometimes escaping from their presence.

From a geo-physical point of view, we can say that we are talking of the same place, in other words, of a piece of natural land in the municipality. However, from an anthropological point of view does it make sense to state that we are dealing with the same place? A provisional solution would be to state that all are talking about the *environment*. The notion of environment, as Ingold (2000, p.20) defines it, is interesting because it is a relative term, i.e. the environment is the 'milieu' of someone, forged by the activities of the beings who live in it; it is always being transformed and is never complete or finite.

However, *environment*, as a notion that allows a varied range of meanings, operates only up to a certain point. In the first place it is worth discussing the issue of perceptual relativism that is found in the idea that there is a given natural basis on which the different representations, which are going to vary according to the social agents in question, are constructed. The same object is perceived in different forms, according to the points of view of the different subjects that construct it in different ways. That is why it seems that we are referring to various different objects when in fact we are referring to only one, given a priori.

Based on the ethnographic data I collected I want to propose an alternative to the current conception that there is only one *environment* and various ways of conceiving of it or representing it socially. To do so I have tried to outline the perspectives of the different social agents in their relationship with the *mangrove swamp*. I should like to propose that certain ways of the subjectoivization-objectivization are processed as the agents establish what is known as a mangrove swamp. In other words, the environment is not previously given, nor is it constructed; rather it is the points of view that constitute the objects and at the same time the subjects, themselves.

This is an ongoing reflection and undoubtedly subject to the risk that it will be never-ending. The process of constituting the mangrove swamp as a *resource*, *ecosystem*, *home* or *adventure*, briefly described here, is being done along with the processes of subjectivization – from themselves to themselves and from themselves to the world – as lived by the social agents. What these different social agents present to us are not only different subjective ways of “representing the world”, but also particular ways of relating to

that which is the mangrove swamp, from their point of view. From the perspectives of the entrepreneurs, the shell fisherwomen, the NGOs and the children that, which at first sight seems to be just an environment, transforms itself and multiplies into many different worlds. The intention of this study is above all , and starting with ethnography, to proliferate the various heteronyms of the words *politics* and *mangrove swamp* in such a way as to present to the reader not one, but many concepts of what politics is, and not a single environment, but lots of mangrove swamps and the ways of life associated with them.

NOTES

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² For an analysis of the native meanings of the “time of politics” and its role in the constitution and reorganization of social ties see PALMEIRA, M.; HEREDIA, B. *Le Temps de la Politique. Études Rurales*. Paris, 131-132 p. 73-88, 1993.

³ The words in italics are native terms.

⁴ The Cultural Movement was founded by and, still today, is led by young people and adults who define themselves as Afro-indigenous, because they are the descendants of the blacks and indians who lived in the region in the north of Espírito Santo State and the south of Bahia, converted into rural workers, and who in the 70s and 80s sold or lost their land and went to the small and medium size cities in the region due to the expansion of the large logging and livestock operations. Today the Afro-indigenous people live in *Avenida*, a once stigmatized region on the outskirts of Caravelas. For a more in-depth study of this topic see MELLO, 2003.

⁵ FOUCAULT, 1994 [1973], p. 467.

⁶ Today the Aracruz and Bahia Sul pulp companies are the owners of 43% of the land in the municipality of Caravelas (KOOPMANS, 1995, p. 74).

⁷ Inspiration came from the amateur rearing of shrimp, according to a model widely spread through Asia, using the construction of small bamboo enclosures on the edges of mangrove swamps where the shrimp are retained because of the variation in the tides. This, however, is a distant inspiration in view of the fact that the model that is being implemented today throughout the world is nothing more than an intensive production system, sold to medium size and large capitalists, who came to be called the blue revolution, an expression coined by technicians of the FAO (United Nations Organization for Agriculture and Food), which until the 90s publicized shrimp farms as a safe food strategy to guarantee “proteins for the poor” (FAHN, 2003, p.182). Shrimp farms need clean water sources, given that a fundamental resource in the production process is the availability of water in abundance and free from pollution. In the water sources that bathe the mangrove swamps it is normal to find the proportion of fresh and salt water that is ideal for the growing shrimp larvae.

⁸ Governments and multilateral bodies invested heavily in the shrimp agrindustry in the 80s and 90s and its expansion started in Southeast Asia and spread to the Pacific coast of South America, Central America and to Brazil’s northeast region. In Brazil, the setting up of the Department of Fishing and Aquiculture (DPA) within the Ministry of Agriculture in 1998, exponentially increased the

productivity of shrimp farming that was focused on exports. In 1997, before the DPA was created, annual production of this sector was 3,600 tons. In 2001, annual production was 40,000 tons and in 2004 production reached its peak of 76,000 tons, astonishing growth of 2,110%, levered by public investments from the BNDES, Banco do Nordeste and SUDENE. As from 2005, however, because of the spread of epidemics in the shrimp farms production fell to 65,000 tons. The total value of farmed shrimp exports was US\$111 million in 2002, US\$170 million in 2003, US\$151 million in 2004 and US\$129 million in 2005. Just in the first half of 2006, farmed shrimp exports have already reached US\$72 million. (Brazilian Association of Shrimp Farmers, 2006.)

⁹ International NGOs, like Environmental Justice Foundation and Greenpeace have produced detailed reports on the destruction of ecosystems and human rights violations practiced by the farmed shrimp agrindustry (SHANAHAN, M. et al., 2003 e HAGLER et al., 1997)

¹⁰ The mission of the NGO, Conservation International, Brasil, points to combined objectives to preserve global biodiversity and show that human societies can live in harmony with nature. By involving human societies in its objectives CI recognizes that its work involves the world of social and political realities in those places where it operates.

¹¹ The Integrated Management and Monitoring Project for the Sustainable Use by the Shoreline Population living in the Mangrove Swamps of Caravelas – Bahia, was developed by the CEPENE (Center for Research and Management of Fishing Resources of the Northeast Coast), IBAMA's research center, as a means of *encouraging associativism and adding value to the environmental resources* of the mangrove swamp. The Social Center was developed with resources from Aracruz Celulose, as one of the conditions for the installation of the port of Aracruz on the Caravelas River that was introduced in 2002. For an in-depth analysis of the Mangrove Swamp Project see NICOLAU, 2006.

¹² Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources.

¹³ The Humpback Whale Institute was responsible for giving sex and environmental education lessons to workers building the port (ethnographed by me in MELLO, 2006) and IBAMA received sums of money that financed the construction of a Visitor Center for the Abrolhos National Marine Park and for implementing the Mangrove Swamp Project, by CEPENE. At the time, when defining conditional and compensatory measures, CI adopted a clear position of not accepting any resources from Aracruz Celulose (even though coming from environmental compensation), but this position was not fully publicized in the town, which leads today to many inhabitants believing that CI accepted resources from Aracruz.

¹⁴ The company managed to overcome the initial opposition of some NGOs and IBAMA by the liberation of the environmental compensation resources implemented by these institutions. Furthermore, the company offered additional resources to the Humpback Whale Institute in the form of *sponsorship*, which guarantees that its logo mark is on the t-shirts, printed material and entity's automobile. According to those living in the town the *presents* or *sweeteners*, in the case brand new Fiat automobiles, were distributed by the company to the town's municipal councilors and secretaries, who had at first opposed the construction of the port.

¹⁵ In fact the independent Technical Report was the technical instrument that underpinned the legal arguments that were the basis of the Public Civil Action proposed by the Federal Attorney General's office against the State of Bahia, the CRA and CEPRAM, with its injunction application for suspending the process for the environmental permit process of the undertaking. The injunction, granted by a decision by the judge of the judicial district of Caravelas, suspended the process in March, 2006, but it was immediately overthrown by a decision of the Court of Appeals of the State of Bahia.

¹⁶ Some examples of the issue of the contamination of the water table contained in the EIA-RIMA: "The extreme vulnerability of aquifers free from pollution favors contamination of the underground water resources by anthropic activities".(PLAMA, 2005, vol. II, p. 39). "The water of the tanks, besides being relatively salty (14 to 20 pp), will contain organic waste coming from shrimp food and their excreta. Although the soil where the tanks are built is compacted infiltration of this water into the soil may occur, thereby altering the physical-chemical properties of the same, in addition to offering the risk of contamination of the water table." (PLAMA, 2005, vol. III, p. 27)

¹⁷ Public declaration of one of the investors from COOPEX in the COMDEMA meeting held on 09/14/05, APUD MOURA et al., 2005, p 17.

¹⁸ PLAMA, 2005, vol. II, p.146.

¹⁹¹ The consultancy company states that “in the community close to the undertaking, there exists practically no economic activity, fishing and shell fishing are not very representative, in the orchards we see some fruit trees (mango, cashew), some pigs, chicken and cows, all created loose” (PLAMA, 2005, vol II, p.151)

²⁰¹ It is important to observe, however, that after this initial hesitation the IBJ started to act in press campaigns and in their articulation with the group that led the process of political mobilization, then called SOS Abrolhos Coalition.

²¹ The information below is based on MOURA et al., 2005, p.47-48.

²² In the public audience, Lourdes formulated in writing the question that synthesizes all the skepticism of their group in relation to the supposed social and environmental benefits of the shrimp farms: “There is something I don’t understand. If you [entrepreneurs] want shrimp so badly, if you want to create employment and still preserve the mangrove swamp, wouldn’t it be easier to easier to buy the local shrimps from the fishermen from around here?”

²³ During the field work I lived for six months in this smallholding where the house of one of the members of the Cultural Movement is situated.

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