

Environmental History of African Populations in the Três Picos State Park in the State of Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract: During the colonial era in the Americas, Brazil received the largest contingent of enslaved Africans. These individuals' encountered landscapes distinct from their countries of origin, interacted with them, and transformed them. This study aims to describe and analyse the African influence on the Três Picos State Park, located in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The methodological approach involved qualitative research, focusing on Environmental History through bibliographic and documentary analysis. Black Environmental History studies remain scarce in Brazil, and this article may serve as a contribution to further research in protected areas of the Atlantic Forest. The study concludes that a significant part of the park's ecological reality bears a Black cultural heritage.

Keywords: African Cultures; Environmental History; Biocultural Landscapes; Três Picos State Park-RJ.

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Introduction

Environmental History is a field of knowledge that emerged in the 1970s, seeking to affirm nature as an important historical agent in the environmental analyses both the past and the present (Martins, 2007). It aims to understand the relationships between human societies and the biophysical world, which are in constant interaction over time and space (Pádua, 2002). Despite the growth of Environmental History, researchers of white ethnic background predominate, even in a country with a Black majority, such as Brazil (Dos Anjos, 1999).

Brazil received the largest contingent of Africans for enslavement in the Americas (Ferdinand, 2022), and since then, these Afro-diasporic populations and their descendants have constructed Black environmental histories across all the biomes and ecosystems of Brazil. The landscapes surrounding the territory of the Três Picos State Park (PETP), a special area of the Atlantic Forest in the State of Rio de Janeiro, preserve traces of the economic practices carried out by enslaved people who introduced plant species (Oliveira et al., 2021) into this tropical biophysical-cultural system and left legacies of Black culture in the region, once known as Sertões de Macacu (Drummond, 1997).

This article contributes to research on the influences of enslaved African peoples on the Atlantic Forest biome, which are currently preserved in conservation units, such as the PETP. The PETP is the largest conservation unit exclusively in the state of Rio de Janeiro, with 65,000 hectares distributed across five municipalities: Cachoeiras de Macacu, Guapimirim, Teresópolis, Nova Friburgo, and Silva Jardim (State Environmental Institute, 2009).

It is one of the largest centers of ecological, cultural, and geodiversity in Rio de Janeiro, housing numerous threatened and endemic species of flora and fauna, as well as natural attractions for ecotourism and its relevance for academic research (State Environmental Institute, 2009). The springs and preserved forests of the PETP are of utmost importance for a large part of the population of the Guanabara Bay Hinterland and the surrounding communities (Machado, 1997).

The research is based on two central questions: How was this landscape, now infused with African influences, shaped since the time of the Sertões de Macacu (18th Century)? What is the significance of this Black biocultural reality for the current configuration of the PETP?

In light of the proposed scope, which encompasses the history of African cultures and economic cycles—i.e., coffee, sugarcane—the article aims to describe and analyze the African influence on the PETP.

The African cultural influence on the landscapes of the state dates back to the colonial period and persists to this day, reflected in the descendants of the enslaved who inhabit both urban areas and quilombos in Rio de Janeiro (Correa, 2012). Pádua (2002) highlights that the relationship between enslavement and environmental degradation was already recognized in the 19th century by the patriarch of independence, José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva, who warned of the risk of the country turning into arid deserts. Bonifácio

pointed out that agricultural methods in Brazil, combined with the cruel African enslavement, were leading the country into social, environmental, and cultural impoverishment in relation to the rest of the world (Pádua, 2002).

At the same time, enslaved African peoples brought with them plants, food cooking methods, mining and blacksmithing techniques, as well as traditional knowledge, establishing biocultural exchanges with the colonizers and native Indigenous peoples. These exchanges resulted in new landscapes, where African plant species integrated into the native flora and fauna (Correa, 2012).

This study is a small contribution to ensure that Afro-diasporic perspectives in Environmental History reaffirm the importance of Black populations for the preservation of the Atlantic Forest biome in the State of Rio de Janeiro, particularly in its remnants such as those in conservation units.

Material and Methods

Study area

The PETP (Três Picos State Park), established by Decree-Law No. 31,343 on June 5, 2002, is the largest Strictly Protected Conservation Unit in the state of Rio de Janeiro. This area encompasses parts of the municipalities of Cachoeiras de Macacu (49.01%), Teresópolis (19.09%), Nova Friburgo (19.07%), Silva Jardim (7.01%), and Guapimirim (4%), totalling 65,113 hectares. Located in the central corridor of the Serra do Mar mountain range in Rio de Janeiro (Figure 1), PETP harbours significant remnants of the Atlantic Forest and exhibits a high level of biodiversity (Instituto Estadual do Ambiente, 2009).

Parque Estadual dos Três Picos

Map showing the location of the Parque Estadual dos Três Picos in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The map includes the state's outline, major cities, rivers, and roads. An inset map shows the location of the park within the state of Rio de Janeiro. The map is titled 'Parque Estadual dos Três Picos' and includes a scale bar and a north arrow.

Fonte de Dados

Hidrografia - Adaptado CEPERJ 1:450.000
 Vias - DER 1:450.000
 Área Urbana - INEA 1:100.000
 Limite Municipal - CEPERJ 1:25.000
 UCs Estaduais - INEA 1:50.000 e 1:25.000

Sistema de Coordenadas Geográficas SIRGAS 2000
Sistema Geodésico de Referência SIRGAS 2000

Elaborado por:
 COGET/DIBAIPE
 2019

Logos: Instituto Estadual do Ambiente (INEA), SEAS, and Prefeitura Municipal de Itaboraí.

Selection and Systematization of Sources

A qualitative research approach was adopted. The literature review followed the guidelines of Galvan (2006), while the documentary research was based on the four criteria—authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning—proposed by May (2004).

Scientific articles published between 2008 and 2023 were selected. The parameters used were Environmental History and the Capitalocene. Books were chosen using the snowball method, focusing on classic works in Brazilian Environmental History.

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Theoretical Framework

Environmental history and the black question

Environmental History is a scientific field aimed at incorporating the biophysical world, commonly referred to as nature, into the history of human societies (Martins, 2007). Through an analysis of historical documents, literary and artistic works, traveller accounts, landscape observations, and even oral histories from older residents, Environmental History extracts valuable insights into human-environment interactions, enabling a deeper understanding of past influences on present landscapes. In this context, African biocultural landscapes shaped during the colonial period represent enduring imprints of past economic, political, and cultural relations, still visible across Brazilian territory.

Approaching Environmental History from a Black perspective poses a significant epistemological challenge in Brazil due to the predominance of European cultural heritage over African heritage. Despite comprising the majority of the Brazilian population, Black cultural contributions remain understudied, particularly by Black researchers, who constitute a minority within the predominantly white academic sphere in this field (Dos Anjos, 1999).

Such studies are essential for analysing Black communities' environmental knowledge within the historical and geographical processes that shaped Afro-diasporic territories in protected areas, such as PETP. These insights are visible in home gardens, sacred spaces of Afro-Brazilian religions, cultural heritage constructed with enslaved labour, and small-scale local farming within the Atlantic Forest, where many African plants have been part of the landscape since biocultural exchanges (Ferdinand, 2022). The African ethnicities forcibly brought to Brazil resisted Portuguese colonisation, preserving their cultural identity through practices such as agriculture and gastronomy, which became integrated into Brazilian territories (Dos Anjos, 1999; Correa, 2012). Another significant legacy is the domestication of plants by African peoples. African plant species were brought to Brazil, while South American plants were introduced to the African continent (Fiuza, 2021). Examples of these include coffee, okra, yam, castor bean, and various grass species, which can still be found in home gardens, sacred spaces, and agricultural communities near PETP.

These biocultural exchanges between Africans and Brazilians fostered new life forms and identities within the Colonial Habitat—spaces constructed by Europeans under conditions of exploitation, domination, and the enslavement of Black Africans and the natural world in the Americas (Ferdinand, 2022). This colonial world, established in the state of Rio de Janeiro, represents one aspect of the Era of Capital (Serratos, 2021) in Brazil. The Colonial Habitat reflects how ecological and cultural domination commodified both ethnic groups and the environments they inhabited, fuelling capital accumulation worldwide.

Understanding the historical and geographical processes of the Era of Capital, or Capitalocene, is essential to recognising that current ecological crises originated in the development of capitalism in Europe following the so-called discovery of the Americas (Moore, 2017). The Capitalocene framework challenges the Anthropocene's assumption

of an ahistorical “Age of Humans,” which fails to identify the true causes of ecological crises. From a Capitalocene perspective, ecological crises result from economic activities, colonialism, and the historical exploitation of marginalised groups and nature (Iglesia-Rios, 2019).

Within this historical context, Africans and nature were instrumentalised in the expansion of global capital. Carney (2011) highlights how slavery was intrinsically linked to environmental degradation in the Americas, driven by the colonial economic system. These processes led to veritable colonial holocausts (Davis, 2002), where numerous peoples and their ecological-cultural knowledge were lost.

Serratos (2021) documents historical events illustrating the unlimited accumulation of natural wealth through colonial systems, which relied heavily on enslaved Africans. These dynamics are tied to colonial narratives underpinning concepts like the Anthropocene (Moore, 2018), which attribute global ecological crises to human actions without contextualising the disproportionate role of capitalist economies and the Global North.

Consequently, African cultural influences within their historical and geographical interactions in what are now conservation units constitute an authentic Black Environmental History. PETP stands as a testament to slavery, the construction of Black territories, and the cultural legacy of these peoples embedded in its landscape.

Landscape and Environmental History

The concept of landscape is widely studied within the field of Environmental History, examining the imprints left on the planet as physical and cultural evidence of past human activities, as well as their ongoing influences and legacies. With its diverse approaches, the concept of landscape offers explanations for biocultural phenomena related to specific regions, such as those within the park’s territory. Human cultural and subjective relationships are expressed through the cultural marks and knowledge embedded in landscapes, evoking unique senses of belonging associated with these territories (Claval, 2007). The current landscapes of the park reflect the marks of African populations, both past and present, across its expanse.

Landscapes are shaped by fundamental premises such as the socio-economic dynamics of societies and the archaeological narratives that reveal past social logics, resulting in territorial constructions distinct from those we know today. These premises can be integrated and contextualised within the scope of Environmental History (Martins, 2007).

The landscape is intrinsically tied to the past, as human societies have continually interpreted and interacted with elements of the biophysical world in various ways throughout history. In the park area, for instance, enslaved Black populations left marks on the Atlantic Forest as historical testimony of their former uses of land and natural resources, evidenced through plants or the labour performed by these populations (Correa, 2012).

Environmental History is a field that analyses a variety of landscapes, including those within conservation units, and can establish parameters for understanding changes in these landscapes (Martins, 2007). Through the lens of a Black Environmental History,

this approach can contribute to constructing an analysis that honours the role enslaved populations have played—and continue to play—in the history of countries with a legacy of slavery, such as Brazil.

A particular form of biocultural landscape emerges, shaped by natural elements of the New World, such as the region now known as the Atlantic Forest within the PETP. These “Africanised” landscapes carry a rich Afro-descendant symbolic and cultural heritage, reflected in historical structures, agricultural practices, and the presence of native African plants (Correa, 2012). The analysis of these Africanised landscapes can also be better understood by reaffirming the importance of the epistemologies and knowledge of Black populations, who brought their culture along with their bodies during the era of enslavement (Ferdinand, 2022).

Traditional populations’ knowledge is also subject to privatisation, such as the pharmaceutical industry’s appropriation of plant knowledge (Shiva, 2001), threatening sacred rights to ancestral knowledge now commodified under patent laws driven by corporate interests. Africans have built new landscapes in Brazil and continue to face unrelenting struggles, like other traditional peoples, for territories that, though marked by their culture, are often not legitimised by the prevailing state power.

Result

The selected and retrieved sources from research databases include scientific articles, books, and official documents from public institutions, published between 2008 and 2023. Nine scientific articles (Table 1) were used for the discussion, sourced from the following journals: *Revista de História Econômica & Economia Regional Aplicada* (1), *Faces da História* (1), *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2), *Rede-A* (1), *Revista Territórios e Fronteiras* (1), *Historia Ambiental Latinoamericana-Halac Solcha* (2), and *Pesquisa e Ensino em Ciências Exatas e da Natureza* (1). Among these, two articles are in English, and seven are in Portuguese.

The themes addressed in these articles include Environmental History (2), the concept of the Capitalocene (3), and diverse issues related to Black populations, as well as the historical occupation of the study region in the PETP.

The selected bibliographic sources include four documents (Table 2) sourced from national public institutions, authored by INEA, Embrapa (*Soil Study of Brazil*), Instituto Baía de Guanabara, Universidade de Brasília, and IBGE. One document is dated 1948, and the others were published after 1997.

Books were chosen based on works such as Dean (1996), a cornerstone in Environmental History. A total of nineteen books were used, including two in English, one in Spanish, and sixteen in Portuguese. The themes range broadly, covering Environmental History, concepts of landscape and the Capitalocene, relationships between nature and society, plant studies, ecological imperialism, and the historical occupation of the study region, addressing issues such as local populations, enslaved Black populations, colonialism, and current ecological crises.

Table 1- Characterization of articles

Title of the Article	Authors	Journal and Year	Objectives and Theme
The Capitalocene Part 1: On the nature and origins of our ecological crisis	Moore, J.W.	The Journal of Peasant Studies (2017)	Establishes the origins of capitalism and current ecological crises.
The Capitalocene Part 2: accumulation by appropriation and the centrality of unpaid work/energy	Moore, J.W.	The Journal of Peasant Studies (2018)	Demonstrates that the Age of Capital is a new form of organising nature.
Palmeiras Africanas em solos Brasileiros: Transformação Socioecológica e a Construção de uma Paisagem Afro-Brasileira	Watkins, C.	Halac Solcha (2020)	Constructs a Black Environmental History in the landscapes of Southern Bahia.
Múltiplas alternativas: diversidade econômica da Vila de Santo Antônio de Sá de Macacu-século XVIII	Amantino; Cardoso.	Revista de História Econômica & Economia Regional Aplicada (2008)	Chronicles certain economic and historical processes of the old village of Santo Antônio de Sá.
Trabalhadores Rurais Africanos e de Origem Africana e a Africanização do Brasil Republicano	Fiuza, D.H.	Faces da História (2021)	Analyses Black peasant activity in Republican Brazil.
Estado de Ocupação das margens do Rio-Macacu-Rio de Janeiro (Brasil): Diagnóstico preliminar	Rodrigues, G.M.; Machado, G.E.M.	Pesquisa e Ensino em Ciências Exatas e da Natureza (2020)	Provides a preliminary view of the historical-geographical occupation of the Macacu River Basin.
A Fazenda do Colégio: Apontamentos acerca da comunidade escrava	Cardoso, V.M.	Rede-A (2012)	Studies the enslaved communities who lived on the old Fazenda do Colégio.
Pobres Rurais e desflorestamento no interior fluminense na segunda metade do século XIX	Da Rosa Júnior, A.F.; Cesco, S.	Revista Territórios e Fronteiras (2013)	Analyses economic and ecological peasant relations and the Atlantic Forest in the mid-19th century.

A História Ambiental e as Eras do Homem e do Capital	Da Silva, W.M.; Machado, C.J.S.; Vilani, R.M.	Halac Solcha (2023)	Discusses critical perspectives on the concepts of Capitalocene and Anthropocene in relation to Environmental History.
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Source: The Authors, 2024.

Table 2 - Characterization of Documents

Document	Authors	Publisher and Year	Objectives and Theme
Histórico do processo de ocupação das bacias hidrográficas dos rios Guapi-Macacu e Caceribu	Carneiro <i>et al.</i> , M.J.T.	Embrapa Solos (2012)	Describes the historical occupation of the Macacu and Caceribu Basins.
O Homem e a Guanabara	Lamego, A.R.	IBGE (1948)	Examines the relationship between society and nature in the Recôncavo of Guanabara.
Gente do Caceribu: sua geografia, sua história	Machado, L.O.	Instituto Baía de Guanabara (1997)	Documents the nature-society relationship in the Caceribu River Basin.
Plano de Manejo do PETP	Instituto Estadual do Ambiente	Inea (2009)	Official document detailing the physical, ecological, and social characteristics of the PETP.

Source: The Authors, 2024.

Based on the tables (Table 1 and Table 2), subthemes were defined to structure the discussion: (i) the historical occupation of the park region; (ii) the construction of Black peasantry in the PETP region; (iii) Black populations and their ecological relationships with the Atlantic Forest of the PETP; (iv) Black populations and current landscapes in the Três Picos region.

Discussion

Historical occupation of the park’s region

The area now occupied by the PETP began to be settled in the 16th century by the Portuguese, who encountered dense tropical forests and swampy zones along the banks of major rivers such as the Macacu and Caceribu (Da Rosa Junior & Cesco, 2013). This region became known as the Sertões de Macacu (Lamego, 1948) and remained isolated

due to the inaccessibility of these forests, as well as colonial Portuguese laws that restricted access to this territory during the mining era in Minas Gerais.

Following the occupation of the swamps and plains along the major local rivers, this part of the Guanabara Recôncavo was integrated into economic activities such as logging and wood extraction for the state capital, as well as large-scale sugarcane plantations. These plantations established numerous sugar mills, which dominated the local landscape while sparing the higher elevations and ridges, which still featured extensive forests (Drummond, 1997). During this period, several African ethnic groups were brought to the region as enslaved labourers to support local economic activities (Fiuza, 2021).

After the decline of the local sugar mills, sugarcane cultivation migrated to other areas of the state, such as the Baixadas Campistas in the northern and northwestern regions (Lamego, 1948). This period marked the rise of a crop of African origin—coffee—that was soon cultivated in the state capital. It quickly expanded into previously unexploited areas, penetrating the mountain ranges along the Paraíba do Sul River Valley (Martins, 2012). With coffee cultivation came an intensification of slavery, leading to an increase in African populations in the Guanabara Recôncavo, where they worked on large estates such as Fazenda do Colégio (Cardoso, 2012). The “Age of Capital” (Iglesia-Rios, 2019) did not truly begin in the park region until this period, but coffee cultivation brought about the most dramatic changes to local landscapes, once covered by dense Atlantic Forest (Dean, 1996).

These shifts in economic activity in the former Sertões de Macacu led to a mixing of local populations, as Indigenous peoples fleeing coastal colonization sought refuge in the state’s higher, more inaccessible regions (Drummond, 1997). While enslaved Black individuals primarily worked on large coffee plantations, many managed to escape enslavement by purchasing their freedom or establishing resistance communities in the surrounding forests through uprisings and quilombos. These significant African influences, in conjunction with the Atlantic Forest, fostered the emergence of peasant lifestyles alongside these acts of resistance. Consequently, the economic activities of the Guanabara Recôncavo became increasingly diverse and complex (Amantino & Cardoso, 2008).

The formation of a black peasantry in the PETP region

The current PETP region was part of the former Backlands of Macacu, which included the old village of Santo Antônio de Sá, located between the municipalities of Cachoeiras De Macacu and Itaboraí, extending up the mountains to the current municipality of Cantagalo (Botelho, 2024). During the colonial period until the end of the nineteenth century, the local population was composed of small producers, landowners, slaves, as well as free men and women of various social strata. (Da Rosa Junior; Cesco, 2013).

For a long time, the history of the poorest peoples of the region linked was to the period of enslavement with many people working as slaves, while few achieved their

freedom through the few official means of the time, apart from slave revolts. These populations that owned small pieces of land, lived through small economic activities different from the colonial agriculture system (Ferdinand, 2022) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After the liberation process in the late nineteenth century, these mixed populations began to establish clearer forms of a type of peasantry in the region of the current park.

However, these people did not precisely fit into the category of enslaved or masters of enslaved people, since they were mainly on the margins of colonial agriculture, cultivating for subsistence or carrying out small commercial exchanges (Machado, 1997) and establishing a small local internal market (Da Rosa Junior; Cesco, 2013). These small local producers even settled in a region marked by the colonial slave system, where Cardoso (2012) speaks of three hundred enslaved only in the farm College, and the largest slave property in the region at the time.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Recôncavo Da Guanabara affected was by processes of economic stagnation caused by land fatigue during the heyday of the Capital Era (Serratos, 2021) and by the now known Macacu fevers. These diseases increased because of local environmental destruction with many places of standing water and proliferation of disease vectors such as mosquitoes (Machado, 1997) due to the siltation of the Macacu-Guapiaçu Rivers.

Although proposals made were to avoid this accumulation of water, they soon overcome were by the need to build large railways for the flow of coffee to Cantagalo, in the former hinterlands of Macacu. These events led to a population emptying around the PETP and the decline of coffee cultivation in the region (Carneiro *et al.*, 2012).

All this enslaved population that had already had contact with the local indigenous peoples, had relations with immigrants such as the Swiss and Germans from Nova Friburgo or the Japanese from Cachoeiras De Macacu, in addition to the Portuguese. This amalgamation of distinct social groups, with the majority of the enslaved population of the recôncavo becoming free until the apogee of abolition, led to a small peasantry composed of black majority that entered the twentieth century.

Black populations and their ecological relationships with the Atlantic Forest of PETP

Amidst the conditions of enslavement, Black ethnic groups developed extensive relationships with the Atlantic Forest in the mountainous region of Rio de Janeiro State. These interactions were tied to various economic activities in which Black populations were involved, such as working on sugar mills and coffee plantations, land clearing, and river management. These activities had disastrous effects on the dense forests that once thrived in the region (Drummond, 1997).

Timber exploitation in the valleys' forests required a substantial enslaved workforce. A significant portion of Rio de Janeiro's timber trade originated from forests along the

Guanabara Bay Recôncavo, including areas that now comprise PETP. The use of wood for multiple purposes during the colonial economy continued to reshape the landscape, transforming the lush Atlantic Forest into biocultural forests (Amantino & Cardoso, 2008).

Oliveira (2021) examines how biocultural forests emerge within tropical biomes like PETP's Atlantic Forest. These forests were managed by hunter-gatherers and Indigenous peoples before European arrival (Dean, 1996) and were later shaped by Africans and other ethnic groups. These groups introduced their own plants, animals, and techniques, creating new landscapes grounded in the local environment.

These ecological relationships fostered biocultural exchanges—defined as ongoing exchanges of plants, animals, and knowledge between human populations and the biotas of the African and American continents since the era of global maritime explorations (Crosby, 2011). Such biocultural exchanges between Brazil and Africa intensified over time, based on three primary propositions highlighted by Fiuza (2021): the transfer of techniques, Indigenous knowledge, and the role of African cultures in Brazil's culinary history.

These exchanges brought emblematic trees, such as the baobab, flamboyant, and castor bean (Figure 2), all interwoven with Brazilian nature and cultural and religious connections to Candomblé, as well as medicinal herbs and African grasses (Figure 3). The latter, used for livestock feed, now dominate expansive pastures and deforested hillsides within the PETP territory.

Figure 2- Castor bean (*Ricinus Communis*)



Source: John, 2016.

Figure 3- African grasses in pastureland near the Park



Source: O Globo, 2013.

With the expansion of coffee cultivation and timber extraction in the valleys of major rivers, such as the Macacu, Caceribu, and Guapiaçu, the landscapes began to exhibit distinct cultural characteristics, marked by the replacement of ancient forests with plants of diverse origins, including African species. Consequently, the Atlantic Forest in the region came to host plant species from other continents, integrating them into its native biota within the context of the colonial economy. It is important to note that this process of Africanisation of the landscape was also carried out by natives, mixed-race individuals, immigrants, and other groups not necessarily of African origin (Correa, 2012).

The Macacu-Guapiaçu river valley region served as a stage for resistance spaces in the form of quilombos during the 18th and early 19th centuries. Several expeditions were conducted by colonial authorities to suppress and destroy these Black territories, which were largely formed from estates in the Recôncavo da Guanabara region (Lamego, 1948). These quilombola communities were embedded within the forest landscapes of the region, maintaining small-scale commerce at the margins of the colonial economy. Carney (2011) demonstrated that one of the primary reasons for the establishment of these Afro-diasporic territories in Brazil and other parts of the Americas was the abundance of lands not yet subjected to the European colonial logics of the Capitalist Era (Moore, 2017; 2018). Accordingly, many enslaved people opted to flee to more remote areas, subsisting through hunting, fishing, and the cultivation of plants familiar from their places of origin in Africa.

According to Carney (2011), survivors of the African diaspora exhibited remarkable adaptability by incorporating many plants used as food by Indigenous peoples, alongside cultivating African plants introduced to this continent. This resulted in the creation of unique food systems in response to the new realities imposed upon the enslaved, who domesticated landscapes already modified over millennia by Indigenous peoples, thereby enriching the dietary habits of Europeans. The botanical legacy present in the landscapes of the Três Picos State Park (PETP) underscores the successful domestication of plants by Africans.

Black Populations and Contemporary Landscapes in the Três Picos Region

The landscapes that now comprise this conservation unit can be divided into two specific regions: the large, well-preserved forests of the higher elevations, such as the Macaé de Cima region, located between Nova Friburgo and Silva Jardim, which have become exuberant once again following extensive exploitation in the past; and the anthropised forests and ecosystems in the lower sections of the park, which are situated near urban centres such as Guapimirim and Cachoeiras de Macacu.

The inaccessible areas of the park were those most influenced by quilombos and Black uprisings between the 18th and 19th centuries. To this day, in the Macaé de Cima area, marks and traces of former quilombos can be found in local toponyms. Swiss immigrants experienced some conflicts with quilombolas in this area, still characterised by luxuriant vegetation, which can be linked to former Black refuges of the past.

The lower sections of the valleys of major rivers, such as the Macacu, are dominated by various species of African grasses, including *capim-gordura* and *capim-massai*, due to the environmental impacts on local forests that persist to this day. This is particularly evident in the border region between the municipalities of Cachoeiras de Macacu and Itaboraí. These low-lying grass species, utilised in livestock farming, have adapted to local soils and climates, coming to dominate vast landscapes that often resemble African savannas (Rodrigues; Machado, 2020). African grasses have played a significant role in this narrative of plant introductions to Brazil, being essential to the establishment of livestock farming not only near major rivers but also in other areas of the Recôncavo da Guanabara.

The gardens of small farmers and the *terreiros* of Afro-Brazilian religions are spaces filled with native and African plants cultivated for various purposes. These Black territories preserve African culture in the PETP region and stand as historical testimonies to Black cultural influence (Correa, 2012). These small landscape features illustrate the survival and cultural resistance of the Afro-diasporic communities (Carney, 2021; Ferdinand, 2022), which endured under the Luso-Brazilian colonial system.

With the arrival of these African peoples in the Atlantic Forest, a rich diversity of plant species and new ways of life contributed to the formation of novel cultural and ecological landscapes in the PETP. This Africanised new world did not align with the colonial system of the Capitalist Era (Da Silva, Machado; Vilani, 2023; Machado, 2024a, 2024b) and continues to challenge Eurocentric values to this day (Oliveira, 2021).

Watkins (2020) corroborates these themes by emphasising that the new cultural and ecological forms of Black populations were enriched by extensive African ethno-botanical knowledge. The home gardens, pastures with their grass species, agricultural practices, and African plants created landscapes of profound Black influence. These small territories were vital to the memories of these peoples, who encountered ecosystems such as forests and mangroves reminiscent of African landscapes, providing them with a sense of belonging in unfamiliar lands.

Enslaved Africans left an indelible mark on the PETP landscape, both by contributing to the destruction of forests under the pressures of enslavement and by creating new small Black territories. Martins (2012, p. 96) describes the relentless devastation of native forests, accompanied by the massive utilisation of enslaved Africans in the cultivation of a plant originating from their homeland, ironically enriching their oppressors: “Everything began with relentless destruction. *Perobas*, *canelas*, cedars, *sapucaias*, and *imbuías* were felled, destroyed with voracious zeal.”

Coffee plantations represented a microcosm of colonial production modes, as noted by Martins (2012), wherein the territorial space was entirely dedicated to cultivating this African plant. The enslaved population was always associated with these landscapes, as evidenced by numerous paintings by contemporary travellers. Coffee shaped a colonial landscape essentially African in character due to the presence of the enslaved and the coffee culture itself, both of which were subordinated to the European colonial economy within a global system that exhaustively exploited both African plants and peoples.

Following the decline of large sugar mills and coffee plantations, the native Indigenous population practically disappeared from the former Sertões de Macacu. However, within the slave system, Black populations left a lasting legacy, contributing to landscapes that persisted beyond the depopulation of these lands due to the collapse of monocultures and the fevers that emerged from the ecological destruction of the Atlantic Forest during the Capitalist Era.

The forest rebounded as abandoned lands were reclaimed, particularly in higher elevations, alongside the reaffirmation of Black cultures during and after the abolition of slavery. Small-scale farmers and impoverished rural populations now inhabit the municipalities comprising the present-day PETP. African plant species are still found throughout the various landscapes of this conservation unit, as well as within the small Afro-diasporic Black territories of *terreiros* and gardens. These communities now face threats from new vectors of destruction, such as luxury condominiums, mineral water companies, industrial activities from the Comperj complex, and unregulated tourism. These pressures jeopardise not only the Atlantic Forest but also the rural populations, who are increasingly vulnerable to land speculation and urban sprawl.

Conclusions

Colonialism has left a devastating legacy of body and cultural appropriation, marked by the inhumane exploitation of enslaved individuals. Millions of Africans were forcibly

brought to the Americas and inserted into an economic system that not only devastated the natural environment of these territories but also desecrated their cultures and ways of life.

Within this colonial context, enslaved Black populations developed resistance strategies against the abuses of colonizers. These included the formation of quilombos and mocambos, as well as agricultural practices distinct from the large colonial monocultures. This African cultural diversity challenged the homogenization imposed by colonialism, particularly in regions like the Atlantic Forest, where introduced plants became integrated into the native biota.

The descendants of these enslaved populations continue to resist today, whether in quilombos that have withstood changes in land use, industrialization, and urbanization, or in urban communities such as favelas. These communities hold vast ancestral knowledge of plants, animals, and agricultural techniques, passed down through generations via oral traditions and ecological relationships with nature. This knowledge is fundamental to understanding and preserving diverse forms of territorial organization, including conservation units like the PETP, which reflect the rich cultural and environmental heritage of these populations.

The lush landscapes of the Atlantic Forest are gradually being destroyed by economic activities that have historically relied on significant Black labor. This influence is evident in the presence of African plants that continue to play essential roles in various economic aspects, from grasses used for livestock feed to fruits like melon and watermelon, as well as species such as *espada-de-são-jorge* (Saint George's sword), associated with Afro-Brazilian religious practices.

The Atlantic Forest has been shaped and transformed throughout the slavery era, resisting the systematic destruction of many of its areas and the communities that once inhabited it. Today, this African influence is manifested both in cultural expressions and within the PETP forest itself, which struggles to survive under the pressure of old and new agents of capital in the era of the Capitalocene. Territories valued for their natural and cultural wealth are targeted by these economic forces, threatening not only the Atlantic Forest but also poor populations, many of them of Black descent, as in the past.

The African legacy in the Atlantic Forest continues to suggest possible pathways for ecological and cultural integration between contemporary Black populations and conservation units such as the PETP. This integration is crucial not only to preserve the biodiversity of the Atlantic Forest but also to safeguard its rich African cultural heritage within an authentic Black Environmental History.

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História ambiental das populações africanas no Parque Estadual dos Três Picos, Rio de Janeiro

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Resumo: Durante a era colonial nas Américas, o Brasil recebeu o maior contingente de escravizados africanos. Os africanos encontraram paisagens distintas de seus países de origem, interagiram com elas e as modificaram. Este estudo visa descrever e analisar a influência africana no Parque Estadual dos Três Picos, localizado no Estado do Rio de Janeiro. A opção metodológica foi por uma pesquisa qualitativa, com foco na História Ambiental, a partir de levantamento bibliográfico e documental. Os trabalhos de História Ambiental negra ainda são escassos no Brasil e este artigo pode se tornar uma contribuição para outros estudos em áreas protegidas da Mata Atlântica. Concluiu-se que boa parte da realidade ecológica do parque possui uma herança cultural negra.

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Palavras-chave: Culturas Africanas; História Ambiental; Paisagens bioculturais; Parque Estadual dos Três Picos-RJ.

Historia ambiental de las poblaciones africanas en el Parque Estatal Tres Picos, en el estado de Río de Janeiro

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Rodrigo Machado Vilani

Resumen: Durante la era colonial en las Américas, Brasil recibió el mayor contingente de africanos esclavizados. Los africanos se encontraron con paisajes distintos de los de sus países de origen, interactuaron con ellos y los modificaron. Este estudio tiene como objetivo describir y analizar la influencia africana en el Parque Estatal de Tres Picos, ubicado en el estado de Río de Janeiro. La opción metodológica fue por una investigación cualitativa, con foco en la historia Ambiental, a partir de levantamiento bibliográfico y documental. Los trabajos sobre la Historia Ambiental negra siguen siendo escasos en Brasil, y este artículo puede convertirse en una contribución para otros estudios en áreas protegidas de la Mata Atlántica. Se concluyó que gran parte de la realidad ecológica del parque tiene una herencia cultural negra.

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