

## Understanding Quilombos - Background and definitions

Contributed by Versão Portugues

The development of slavery in Brazil is fundamental to understanding the Quilombos concept. It was the slaves' struggle for freedom that conferred a character of resistance to these communities.

The African descent population in the Americas today numbers over 140 million, one third of the continent's 450 million people. Slavery in the Americas saw 15 million slaves violently uprooted from their lands in Africa. Approximately 40% of all African slaves went to Brazil, to serve as a labour force in the colonial period.

In contrast to other countries in Latin America, slavery in Brazil was spread throughout the entire country and lasted without interruption for almost four centuries. Slaves were brought to Brazil to work on farms and plantations, in towns, mills and mines, contributing to economic and social development. They also contributed to many aspects of Brazilian social life, helping to weave Brazil's culture and national identity.

In the African language Iorubá, "quilombos" means "housing". The Brazilian concept of Quilombos has come to mean the communities that were constituted out of the struggle of rebel slaves during the centuries of slavery, as territories of housing, resistance and social organization. These communities represented the enjoyment of autonomy by rebel slaves, as a reaction to white domination. The slaves employed a number of resistance strategies against white domination, including destroying tools and plantations, murdering landowners and organising rebellions and mass escapes. This led, in some cases, to the establishment of the Quilombos communities. Despite this history, it is now hoped that the concept of Quilombos is not simply associated with the past experiences of rebel slaves; the African descent communities want to be seen in terms of their present reality.

The Quilombos adapted to the ecological and economic conditions of the regions where they settled, producing the food and materials they needed for survival in accordance with their traditions and the opportunities available to them. They practiced a community-based agriculture instead of the monoculture system and were also engaged in complementary activities to meet their needs. The largest and best-organised Quilombos communities had a complex relationship with society. They formed alliances with small landowners, peddlers and traders in order to barter their surplus production and obtain the goods they could not produce.

The Quilombos have experienced diverse forms of land management and ownership. Diverse forms of land usage led to different models of economic development, giving different Quilombos communities unique features. In Brazil we can identify the "lands of blacks" (terras de preto), which stem from the former communities of rebel slaves, lands where the slaves were fattened to be sold (eg. Marabaia Island), lands donated or abandoned by the former landlords, and lands bought by freed slaves.

The majority of the Quilombos' lands were occupied and managed collectively, based on a familiar structure of cultivation and exploitation of natural resources. Because of this, land rights are fundamental for the continuing survival of these peoples. The Quilombos' lands can be viewed as indivisible ethnic territories where the communities live, work and express their cultures and beliefs. Land and its natural resources are in fact the main source of livelihood, social and cultural cohesion, and spiritual welfare for many tribal peoples. Consequently, their rights must be safeguarded not just in relation to the land they exclusively occupy, but also the development of their traditional activities such as subsistence farming.