

## Açaí in the life of the Amazonian Youth: Interculturality, Decoloniality, and Local Development in a rural riverside community in the Amazon region of Pará

O Açaí na vida da Juventude Amazônica: Interculturalidade, Decolonialidade e Desenvolvimento Local em uma comunidade rural-ribeirinha da Amazônia Paraense

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### Abstract

Brazil, especially its Northern region, is marked by pronounced heterogeneity in the living and working conditions of rural youth. Along the Amazonian riverbanks, this diversity appears in distinct forms of productive engagement, limited access to public services, and varied patterns of sociability. Scarce employment and income opportunities, alongside the lack of youth-specific public policies, restrict these young people's ability to plan and make their life projects come true. Açaí, a fruit of major economic and social importance to the region, demands a critical examination of its value chain. Growing demand for the product, divorced from effective attention to the safety and wellbeing of the communities involved, has produced significant adverse impacts. This study analyses the working conditions experienced by riverside youth in the açaí chain, addressing rural poverty, inadequate educational preparation, and the absence of opportunities for decent work. Exploitation of young labour, depressed wages, informality, and the lack of social dialogue undermine the full exercise of citizenship. Fieldwork in the Quianduba River community, municipality of Abaetetuba (Pará), shows that açaí extraction imposes risks and deprivations that violate fundamental rights, ignored by other actors in

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the chain and by the final consumer. This reality reproduces a hegemonic discourse about Amazonia that perpetuates inequalities and obstructs the construction of youth identity and the development of life projects that express their contemporary subjectivities.

**Keywords:** Açaí. Amazonian Riverside Communities. Decoloniality. Youth. Rural Labor.

### Resumo

O Brasil, especialmente a região Norte, caracteriza-se por uma acentuada heterogeneidade nas condições de vida e trabalho dos jovens rurais. Na Amazônia ribeirinha, essa diversidade manifesta-se por meio de distintas formas de inserção produtiva, acesso limitado a serviços públicos e padrões variados de sociabilidade. A escassez de oportunidades de emprego e renda, aliada à ausência de políticas públicas específicas para a juventude, restringe a capacidade desses jovens de planejar e concretizar projetos de vida. O açaí, fruto de relevância econômica e social para a região, demanda uma análise crítica de sua cadeia produtiva. A crescente demanda pelo produto, dissociada de uma atenção efetiva à segurança e à qualidade de vida das comunidades envolvidas, tem gerado impactos adversos significativos. Este estudo analisa as condições de trabalho vivenciadas por jovens ribeirinhos na cadeia produtiva do açaí, considerando aspectos como: pobreza rural, insuficiência da formação educacional e ausência de oportunidades para o exercício de um trabalho digno. A exploração da mão de obra juvenil, o aviltamento salarial, a informalidade e a carência de diálogo social comprometem o exercício pleno da cidadania. A pesquisa, realizada na comunidade do Rio Quianduba, município de Abaetetuba (PA), evidencia que a extração do açaí impõe riscos e privações que violam direitos fundamentais, os quais são negligenciados pelos demais atores da cadeia produtiva e pelo consumidor final. Essa realidade reflete um discurso hegemônico sobre a Amazônia, que perpetua desigualdades e compromete a construção da identidade juvenil e a elaboração de projetos de vida que expressem suas subjetividades na contemporaneidade.

**Palavras-chaves:** Açaí. Amazônia Ribeirinha. Decolonialidade. Juventudes. Trabalho rural.

## Introduction

Brazil, mainly its Northern region, is characterized by great heterogeneity in the life and work conditions of young individuals who live in rural areas. When analyzing this context in the Amazonian riverside communities, several forms of productive engagement are observed, among

which the açaí chain outstands. This is a fruit of great social and economic relevance for that region.

This fruit production expanded in the region in the 2000s, driven by powerful scientific marketing that emphasized its energizing and antioxidant properties. Such properties were widely publicized by research highlighting the health benefits of açaí consumption, due to its ability to provide energy and combat free radicals, thus contributing to disease prevention and increased well-being. This prominence sparked the interest of the food and supplement industries, which saw açaí as a lucrative business opportunity, both domestically and internationally<sup>1</sup>.

The expansion of açaí production in the Amazonian region of Pará is evidenced by data from the Federation of Industries of the State of Pará (FIEPA), which lists Pará as the leading national producer, accounting for 95.31% yield, and the largest exporter, primarily in the form of frozen pulp. According to FIEPA<sup>2</sup>, in the last ten years, açaí exports increased by almost 15 thousand per cent (14,380%), with a 51% increase only in 2020. To meet this growing demand, the planted area, in both dry land (irrigated cultivation) and floodplains (natural/organic cultivation), expanded from 77.6 thousand to 188 thousand hectares in one decade. The main producers are the municipalities of Igarapé-Miri, Cametá and Abaetetuba.

However, the fruit growing demand, without the necessary attention to issues such as workers' safety and quality of life, has generated significant problems for the riverside communities in that region, which very often have no access to proper public policies. Taking that into account, this study aimed to analyze life and work conditions of young individuals living in riverside communities in the first phase of the productive chain, mainly, fruit collection and management, characterized as rural and extraction work.

The relevance of this study is highlighted by the hazards faced by those young individuals in the fruit management and extraction, which is considered one of the riskier activities in Brazil, according to the Instituto Peabiru<sup>3</sup>. Despite its importance for regional development, the invisibility of the youth precarious work conditions in the açaí productive chain requires

<sup>1</sup> OLIVEIRA, Luciano Pereira de. *Programa de Desenvolvimento da Cadeia Produtiva do Açaí no Estado do Pará: PROAÇAÍ*. Belém: SEDAP, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Federação das Indústrias do Estado do Pará (FIEPA). Retrieved from: <https://www.fiepa.org.br>. Accessed on: Aug 01, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> INSTITUTO PEABIRU. "O Peconheiro": *Diagnóstico das condições de trabalho do extrativista de açaí*. Belém, Instituto Peabiru, 2016.

attention from the state. In addition, such invisibility hampers the awareness and implementation of measures that might eliminate risks and improve the work conditions of the young individuals involved in this activity.

To analyze this problem in a specific socio-spatial context, we opted for delimiting the Quianduba River community, in the municipality of Abaetetuba-PA as the study locus, for being one of the main producers of this fruit in the municipality. Quianduba River is a territorial space of floodplain, whose land is periodically flooded by tides, which guarantee soil fertility and vegetable recovery on riverbanks, which is essential to the açai production.

In this geographical and social context, the choice of methodological instruments was guided by epistemological principles that recognize the importance of the lived experience as a fundamental dimension of the social reality. We opted for a qualitative approach, as designed by authors such as Minayo<sup>4</sup> and Denzin and Lincoln<sup>5</sup>, whose perspective understands knowledge as social construction and values the meanings ascribed by subjects to their everyday practices. This approach was essential to capture the nuances of social interactions and individual trajectories of the young riverside dwellers, inserted in territorial and productive dynamics marked by historical inequalities.

Participant observation, as a central technique in ethnography<sup>6</sup>, enabled an immersion in the community everyday life, allowing us to observe and experience local work and sociability contexts. The bibliographic research was supported by critical views on youth, rural work and extractivism, thus contributing to the elaboration of a situated and theoretically informed analysis. Therefore, using such theoretical-methodological approach, we managed to build up an initial understanding of the live and work conditions of young individuals in the açai productive chain, respecting their voices, subjectivities, and the socio-territorial contexts they live in.

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<sup>4</sup> MINAYO, Maria Cecília de Souza. (Org.). *Pesquisa social: teoria, método e criatividade*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2001

<sup>5</sup> DENZIN, Norman K.; LINCOLN, Yvonna S. Introdução: a disciplina e a prática da pesquisa qualitativa. In: DENZIN, Norman K.; LINCOLN, Yvonna S. (Orgs.). *O planejamento da pesquisa qualitativa: teorias e abordagens*. 2. ed. Porto Alegre: Artmed, 2006. pp. 15-41.

<sup>6</sup> GEERTZ, Clifford. Uma descrição densa: por uma teoria interpretativa da cultura. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *A interpretação das culturas*. Rio de Janeiro: LTC, 1989. pp. 13-41.

The analysis was based on authors of the post-colonial theory such as Walter Mignolo<sup>7</sup> and Edna Castro<sup>8</sup>, who address the domination imposed to original peoples after the European conquer and colonization, and Violeta Loureiro<sup>9</sup> and Ignacy Sachs<sup>10</sup>, who discuss sustainable development addressing the difference between development and economic growth.

The text is structured in three parts. In the first, we address the historical and social appearance of youth as a category with rights. The second part is dedicated to the analysis of the impacts of precarious work conditions in açaí production on the lifestyle of riverside young individuals. The third part presents a discussion about the hegemonic discourse on the Amazon region development and their implications in the construction of a youth identity marked by colonialism. The discussion is concluded in the section called final considerations.

## Youth as a social category

Ariès<sup>11</sup> explains that since the 19th century, the term “young” has been used in a generic way, without a clear concept, even by scholars and in political contexts. Originally, it was employed to contrast generations such as child versus adult, young versus old or young versus adult, according to Debert<sup>12</sup>. From the 1930s onwards, the debate about youth called attention with significant contributions by scholars such as Karl Manhein in Germany, Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Clifford Shaw in the United States and Marialice Forachi, Otávio Ianni and Elza Castro in the 1950s/60s in Brazil, thus becoming a relevant object of analysis in the psychology and social sciences areas<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> MIGNOLO, Walter D. A colonialidade de cabo a rabo: o hemisfério ocidental no horizonte conceitual da modernidade. In: LANDER, Edgardo (org.). *A colonialidade do saber: eurocentrismo e ciências sociais. Perspectivas latino-americanas*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Colección Sur Sur, CLACSO, 2005. pp.71-103.

<sup>8</sup> CASTRO, Edna. Razão decolonial, experiência social e fronteiras epistemológicas. In: CASTRO, Edna. *Pensamento crítico latino-americano*. São Paulo, Annablume/CLACSO, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> LOUREIRO, Violeta Refkalefsky. *Amazônia: Estado, homem, natureza*. 3. ed. Belém: Cultural Brasil, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> SACHS, Ignacy. *Desenvolvimento: includente, sustentável, sustentado*. Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> ARIÈS, Philippe. *História social da criança e da família*. Rio de Janeiro: LTC, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> DEBERT, Guita Grim. As classificações etárias e a juventude como estilo de vida. In: *A reinvenção da velhice: socialização e processos de reprivatização do envelhecimento*. São Paulo, Edusp, Fapesp, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> FERREIRA, Vitor Sérgio. *Pesquisar jovens. Caminhos e desafios metodológicos*. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2017.

The Chicago School<sup>14</sup>, in the United States, focused among other themes, on delinquency and criminality, with youngsters playing a central role in such discussions. These studies were fundamental for the development of urban sociology as a distinct academic field, for seeking not only identify patterns and causes of those phenomena, but also to understand the influence of the social context and urban environment on young individuals.

Research developed by Karl Mannheim<sup>15</sup> addressed the constitution of generations and the youngsters' role in society, focusing on how shared experiences shape attitudes and perspectives. Mannheim defended that young individuals are vital agents in social transformation, for being more susceptible to changes of norms and values because their positions are freer from the established social structures. His theory about youth is widely discussed in the context of his work "*Das Problem der Generationen*" (originally published in 1928).

As previously mentioned, such movements and manifestations were not unnoticed by the sociology being developed at that time in Brazil. Augusto<sup>16</sup>, refers to this pioneer movement as the construction of the social category "student" and the treatment given to the student movement carried out by the researcher Marialice Foracchi from USP. She is known as the representative of a critical phase in the sociology of youth in Brazil, mainly after 1965. She authored studies focusing on the role of students in the Brazilian reality and published *O estudante e a transformação da sociedade brasileira, A juventude na sociedade moderna* (The student and Brazilian society transformation, Youth in modern society) (theme of her free-teaching thesis) and *A participação social dos excluídos* (The social participation of the excluded), which was published postmortem. The social class notion is strongly used in Foracchi's work. The juvenile radicalism theme was addressed by Octavio Ianni<sup>17</sup> with the short, but significant article *O jovem radical* (The radical young individual) (from 1968) where he explains:

"the radical young individual is the symptom of a crisis and the announcement of a possibility" (p. 228), since "they reveal

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<sup>14</sup> COULON, A. *A Escola de Chicago*. Campinas: Papirus, 1995

<sup>15</sup> Mannheim, Karl. O problema sociológico das gerações. Tradução: Cláudio Marcondes. In: Marialice M. Foracchi (org). *Karl Mannheim: Sociologia*, São Paulo: Ática, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> AUGUSTO, Maria Helena Oliva. "Retomada de um legado intelectual. Marialice Foracchi e a sociologia da juventude". In: *Tempo Social: revista de sociologia da USP*, São Paulo, v. 17, n. 2, 2005,

<sup>17</sup> IANNI, Octavio. O jovem radical. In: BRITTO, Sulamita de (org.). *Sociologia da juventude, I: da Europa de Marx à América Latina de hoje*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores, 1968. p. 225-242.

society contradictions: exploitation, oppression, alienation” (p. 229), Thus assuming the condition of “critical social category” who “denounce, demand, protest, propose, act, and mobilize” (p. 227).

The context experienced by university students<sup>18</sup> in the 1960s was impregnated of the “student” identity, which conveyed multiple meanings, able to connect several ongoing projects. At a certain point, this identity was “updated”, thus crystallizing an emergent “generational style”, not inherent in other institutions, but dependent on the social learning process that occurred in various “recognition circles”, by means of dense and concentrated networks. This caused the radicalization of an identity which at the beginning of the decade was relatively restricted and limited. This phenomenon helps to explain the appearance of the students’ category as a distinct class in the public sphere, while young individuals in general, do not outstand in the same way. Similar phenomenon occurred in the 1990s, when the “cara-pintadas” (painted faces) were identified as citizens, not only as part of the youth group.

The emergent Youth Sociology in Brazil<sup>19</sup> appeared alongside the new Education Sociology, which had been growing since the 1950s in the country. From that period onwards, studies on youth in Brazil started to adopt several approaches to define this social category. Some interpretations are universalizing, based on physical or psychological elements, such as age group and biological changes; some use definitions based on nouns or adjectives, while others associate youth with sociological problems or social transformation agents. Revisiting more common definitions and the critique to those conceptions is an initial step to analyze such debate.

From the 1960s onwards, age became a central characteristic in the youth identification, very often limited as post-puberty period, usually between 15 and 17 years old, peaking with the transition to adult life<sup>20</sup>. With the International Conference on Youth held in Grenoble in 1964, this age group was extended between 15 and 24 years old, a definition adopted by international organizations such as WHO and UNESCO, summarizing a global perspective on the juvenile phase.

<sup>18</sup> MISCH, Ann. “De estudantes a cidadãos: redes de jovens e participação política”. In: *Revista Brasileira de Educação*, São Paulo, v. 5, n. 5, p. 1-14, mai./jun./jul./ago. 1997.

<sup>19</sup> SPOSITO, Marília Pontes. “Transversalidades no estudo sobre jovens no Brasil: educação, ação coletiva e cultural”. In: *Educação e Pesquisa*, São Paulo, vol. 36, 2010, pp. 93-104.

<sup>20</sup> FLITNER, A. Os problemas sociológicos nas primeiras pesquisas sobre a juventude. In: BRITO, S. (org.). *Sociologia da juventude*, I. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1968. p. 37-68.

Studies<sup>21</sup> deepen the youth analysis in Brazil, highlighting its complex relationships with themes such as violence, citizenship and education. In such perspective, youth is understood as a social construction marked by characteristics such as absence of responsibilities and exemption of the job market. This situation, often associated with the conditions imposed to the working classes, might result in significant exclusions, thus restricting the opportunities of socio-economic development of many young individuals. Therefore, understanding youth goes beyond age group, it involves cultural, social and structural factors that shape their living and participating in society.

In the following years, this age classification was widely criticized<sup>22</sup>. It was argued that this definition ignores the complexity and diversity of youth experiences, reducing youth to a delimited period. Another argument was that the use of age as a criterion is transitory and requires further analysis within a specific historical context<sup>23</sup>. Such critique led the academia to adopt new epistemological and methodological approaches, which resulted in a significant transformation of the youth debate in the 1980s and 1990s, with a perspective founded on diversity as an analysis category.

Therefore, the social category “youths” is consolidated by authors of the Post-Critique School of Sociology and Youth Anthropology<sup>24</sup>. Those scholars propose a more flexible approach to age groups understanding that youth is not a fixed stage, but rather a sign of lifestyle and a way of being that builds up sociabilities. This perspective opposes the Critical School approach, which focuses on generation and social class categories, and that of the Structural-Functionalist School, which conceives youth as a social construction resulting from the society’s industrialization process.

Another highlight<sup>25</sup> is that this critical view emphasized the active role of young individuals in the construction of their social and cultural networks,

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<sup>21</sup> ABRAMO, Helena W. *Cenas juvenis: punks e darks no espetáculo urbano*. São Paulo: Editora Terceiro Nome, 2007

<sup>22</sup> WEISHEIMER, Nilson. *Agricultores familiares e novo ethos profissional: estudo sobre projetos profissionais de jovens agricultores do Alto Uruguai/RS*. 2004. Dissertação (Mestrado em Desenvolvimento Rural) - Programa de Pós-Graduação em Desenvolvimento Rural, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> LEVI, Giovanni; Schmitt. Jean-Claude. *História dos Jovens: Da Antiguidade a Era Moderna*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> GROppo, Luís Antonio. A. *Juventude: ensaios sobre sociologia e história das juventudes modernas*. Rio de Janeiro: Difel, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_, Luís Antonio. *Introdução à Sociologia da Juventude*. Jundiaí: Paco Editorial, 2017

<sup>25</sup> PAIS, José Machado. *Culturas juvenis*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 1993.



challenging homogeneous conceptions of youth. In this perspective, youth started to be understood as a symbol of lifestyle, which can be adopted by individuals of different ages, thus revealing the complexity and fluidity of juvenile experiences.

In the following decades, critical theories by authors such as Pierre Bourdieu, Antony Giddens, Edgar Morin and Boaventura de Sousa Santos contributed significantly to the creation of a definition of youth within a broader context of social, cultural and economic structures. Bourdieu<sup>26</sup> analyzed youth as a period of socialization and reproduction of social inequalities. Giddens<sup>27</sup> highlighted young individuals' reflection and search for identity in a globalized society. Morin<sup>28</sup> enabled the analysis of the juvenile complexity, considering it a moment of transition crossed by uncertainties and paradoxes. Boaventura de Sousa Santos<sup>29</sup> emphasized the importance of political participation and knowledge construction by young individuals as essential elements in social transformation. This theoretical background enriched the understanding of youth as a socially built phenomenon, influenced by several factors in constant evolution.

The critical theories of these renowned scholars were crucial for the definition of a broad concept of youth<sup>30</sup>, which considers its historical, social, complex, symbolic and culturally variable nature. Any definition that neglects the diversity of juvenile cultures and identities does not fully capture the real meaning of youth<sup>31</sup>. Contemporary political manifestations evidence the persistence of this multifaceted character of modern youths, reinforcing the importance of a broader and more contextualized understanding of this social phenomenon.

The Sociology of Youth<sup>32</sup> was consolidated when focusing on the construction of theories that approach social differentiations. This critical

<sup>26</sup> BOURDIEU, P. *A juventude é apenas uma palavra. Questões de sociologia*. Brasília: MDA/Nead, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> GIDDENS, Anthony. *Modernidade e identidade*. Tradução: Plínio Dentzien. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editora, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> MORIN, Edgar. *Introdução ao pensamento complexo*. Porto Alegre: Sulina, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> SANTOS, Boaventura Sousa. Para uma Pedagogia do Conflito; In: SILVA, Luis Heron da (org.) *Novos mapas culturais, novas perspectivas educacionais*. Porto Alegre: Sulina, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> GROppo, Luís Antonio. *Introdução à Sociologia da Juventude*. Jundiaí: Paco Editorial, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> GROppo, Luís Antonio. "Dialética das juventudes modernas e contemporâneas". In: *Revista de Educação do COGEIME*, Planalto Paulista, ano 13, nº 25, dez. 2004.

<sup>32</sup> GROppo, Luís Antonio. A. *Juventude: ensaios sobre sociologia e história das juventudes modernas*. Rio de Janeiro: Difel, 2000.

theoretical approach<sup>33</sup> is not limited to analyzing such differentiations, but it rather proposes changes in the juvenile reality, both in Brazil and worldwide, from the recognition of the real needs of that population.

Studies based on a critical view of youth in Brazil emphasize this demand in society for a social category that goes beyond a transitional phase in human life, which emerges as a social and symbolic construction deeply influenced by historical, cultural and economic contexts. This broader and better contextualized definition of youth enriches the debate about this social category, thus providing a more dynamic understanding of this phase of life in several contexts, including the rural context as approached in this study.

Rural Sociology explores different conceptions of youth in the rural environment<sup>34</sup>. For example, Brazilian official statistical data divided young individuals into age groups, separating those aged 15 to 19 years and those in the 20 to 24 age group. The union movement, in turn, includes in its departments, youngsters, farmers, and workers up to 32 years old<sup>35</sup>. Research in rural areas shows that, for field dwellers, the number of years lived is not the only criterion to define youth. Being single, not having children, and living with one's parents might be more significant reference than chronological age.

For the purpose of reflection, we consider young individuals those who are still of school age, understood here as the period corresponding to the elementary and high school, that is, between 6 and 17 years old, as provided for in the Brazilian law. According to the Statute of Children and Adolescents<sup>36</sup> (Law n.º 8.069/1990, art. 54, I-II), the state must guarantee the mandatory and free offer of elementary school and the progressive extension of mandatory high school, thus including children from 6 to 17 years old. The National Common Curriculum Base (Base Nacional Comum Curricular)<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> PAIS, José Machado. "A construção sociológica da juventude – alguns contributos". In: *Análise Social*, Lisboa, v. 25, n. 105-106, p. 139-165, 1990.

----- José Machado. *Culturas juvenis*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 1993

<sup>34</sup> WANDERLEY, Maria de Nazareth Baudel. "A Sociologia rural na América Latina: produção de conhecimento e compromisso com a sociedade". In: *Conferência de Abertura do VIII Congresso Latino-Americano de Sociologia Rural – Alasru*. Pernambuco: Alasru, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> CARNEIRO, Maria José. Juventude rural: projetos e valores. In: ABRAMO, Helena Wendel; BRANCO, Pedro Paulo Martim (Org.). *Retratos da juventude brasileira: análise de uma perspectiva nacional*. São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo/Instituto Cidadania, p. 243-261, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> BRASIL. *Lei n.º 8.069, de 13 de julho de 1990*. Dispõe sobre o Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente e dá outras providências. *Diário Oficial da União*: Seção 1, Brasília, DF, 16 jul. 1990.

<sup>37</sup> BRASIL. Ministério da Educação. Conselho Nacional de Educação. *Resolução CNE/CP n.º 2, de 22 de dezembro*

(Resolution CNE/CP n.º 2/2017, Introduction, pp. 36-37) confirms this age limit by affirming that mandatory basic education starts when children are 6 years old (start of elementary school) and goes on up to the time they are 17 years old (high school conclusion).

However, considering the specificities of the Amazonian reality – marked by interrupted education trajectories, great geographical distances, school evasion, and early entry in work-, such age delimitation requires certain flexibilization. Thus, we understand “school age” not only as a normative age group, but as a condition of potential or effective link with school, even if this link is established later or an intermittent or irregular way, as frequently occurs in riverside and rural contexts in the Brazilian Amazonia. This broader perspective enables the capture of youth in its concrete, relational, and situated dimensions, a fundamental aspect for the objectives of this study.

## **A rural, territorial and interrelational world**

The issues below touch the field of meanings given to juvenile experiences in the rural riverside territories. Before any analyses about the experiences with young individuals in the Quianduba community, three issues must be clarified: what is understood as rural world, the territorial approach to be adopted, and how gender issues are defined in that social space.

According to the 2022 Census by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics)<sup>38</sup> around 8 million young individuals live in rural areas throughout the country. This number reveals the complexity of the juvenile dynamics in the rural environment as a place of life, that is, the place where they live (particularities of their way of life and identity references) and where they see and experience the world – the citizenship of rural youngsters and their insertion in national society<sup>39</sup>.

This life, full of everyday plots and dramas, relationship networks, conflicts, possibilities, departures and permanence, is marked by young faces, both male and female. The IBGE<sup>40</sup> data show some balance between male

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de 2017. Institui e orienta a implementação da Base Nacional Comum Curricular. *Diário Oficial da União*: Seção 1, Brasília, DF, 22 dez. 2017, p. 115-120.

<sup>38</sup> IBGE. *Censo Demográfico 2022: população e domicílios: primeiros resultados*. IBGE, Coordenação Técnica do Censo Demográfico, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> WANDERLEY, Maria de Nazareth Baudel. *Juventude Rural: vida no campo e projeto para o futuro*. Recife: Editora da UFPE, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem.

and female youngsters in the rural area, in the 15-29 age group (53.2% and 46,8%, respectively), and an unbalance in the 15-17 age group (55% men e 45% women).

In the Brazilian Amazonia, most field dwellers are individuals and communities who keep a specific link with land, forest, and water<sup>41</sup>. By means of their work, they guarantee their current survival and future reproduction. These are farmer families, extraction workers, fishermen, indigenous individuals, riverside dwellers, and *quilombolas*. These individuals' and their families' lives is marked by rich social, cultural, religious and economic diversity. The understanding of such complexity and the subjects (men and women) requires a particular reading, which is connected with broader themes in the Brazilian rural context.

This leads us to believe that Amazonia, as a rural space is not

[...] an isolated (rural) world, which can be understood as an autonomous reality. Conversely, one of the relevant dimensions to be considered is, precisely, the processes of integration to the dynamics of the national economy and society to the extent that it results from the way society is organized, its contradictions, and ongoing development processes (Wanderley, 2010, p. 4).

The Amazonian integration to the national economic project occurred historically in “cyclic” manner, marked by the overlap of powers, where its populations were frequently marginalized in central decisions<sup>42</sup>. Although we are not focusing on detailing historical moments, it seems relevant to highlight that the Amazonian integration to the national economy involved the peoples of the field, who resisted and developed local economic strategies when the state developmental programs collapsed in the Brazilian Amazonia<sup>43</sup>.

The rural world development project remains an agenda in the Brazilian state<sup>44</sup>. Since the time of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government (1988-2002), throughout the two governments by Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (2002/2006 and 2006/2010) and Dilma Rousseff's office (2011-2016), government programs

<sup>41</sup> FRAXE, T. de J. P.; WITKOSKI, A. C.; PEREIRA, H. dos S. (org.). *Comunidades ribeirinhas amazônicas: memórias, ethos e identidade*. Manaus: EDUA, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> LOUREIRO, Violeta Refkalefsky. *Amazônia: Estado, homem, natureza*. 3. ed. Belém: Cultural Brasil, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> LOUREIRO, Violeta Refkalefsky. *A Amazônia no Século XXI: novas formas de desenvolvimento*. São Paulo: Editora Empório do Livro, 2009

<sup>44</sup> DELGADO, Nelson Gimenez; ZIMMERMANN, Sílvia Aparecida. “Políticas públicas de desenvolvimento rural no Brasil: o Programa Territórios da Cidadania”. In: *Revista de Economia e Sociologia Rural*, Brasília, v. 52, p. 83-100, 2014.

emerged that sought to overcome economic and social hurdles in the Brazilian rural space. One of these programs is the Rural Territory Sustainable Development Program (PDSTR - Programa de Desenvolvimento Sustentável dos Territórios Rurais), linked to the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA - Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário) and the Territory Development Secretariat (SDT - Secretaria de Desenvolvimento Territorial).

The main aim of the PDSTR is to reduce social and spatial inequalities in the Brazilian rural space. The program focuses on rural populations such as family farmers, agrarian reform settlers, extraction workers, *quilombolas*, riverside dwellers, and indigenous peoples. More than talking about the program, we are interested in revealing the conception of territorial approach adopted since it provides clues for the reflection proposed in this text.

The territorial approach reappears in the Brazilian agrarian context aiming at facing the classical obstacles to the access to public policies for the field<sup>45</sup>. From the exchange of experiences and debates during the Lula government's transition, the PDSTR was implemented as one of the outstanding territorial programs in the current agrarian context of the country.

The category territory has the perspective that in every geographic space constituted there are identities being forged and social relationships built. This requires differentiated treatment for the identities experienced in the environment, economy, and culture, for example, since they are locally organized in specific projects, thus revealing a specific identity and a collective image in progress<sup>46</sup>.

Within such territorial discussion, the territorialization process outstands, which has influenced the creation of public policies at the federal level. This influence results<sup>47</sup> from a

[...] conjunction of factors that involves a mobilizing capability around an identity policy and a certain game of forces in which social agents, through their organized expressions, fight and claim rights from the State (Almeida 2008, p. 118).

Conceiving the constitution of a territory as a process implies the consideration of political instruments of mobilization between social agents

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<sup>45</sup> Idem.

<sup>46</sup> BHABHA, Homi K. *O local da cultura*. Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 1998.

<sup>47</sup> ALMEIDA, Alfredo Wagner Berno de. *Terras de quilombo, terras indígenas. "babuçais livres", "castanhais do povo", faxinais e fundos de pastos: Terras tradicionalmente ocupadas*. 2. ed. Manaus: PGSCA-Ufam, 2008.

and the state. The relationship between those agents is built up and marked by conflicts, advancements, drawbacks and cooptation.

In the last few decades, we observed construction being developed in different geographical spaces in the country. Territory is a category that claims:

The creation of a collective identity policy, aligned with the perception of social agents that it is possible to guarantee, in a stable manner, access to basic resources. This, in turn, results in a specific territoriality, which is the product of claims and fights. This territoriality consists in a type of interlocution with opposers and the state power (Almeida, 2008, p. 119).

The rural Amazonia, considering its physical and social aspects, became a territorial mosaic due to the different territorialization processes. This shows that its subjects have provoked a spatial and identity redefinition that is not usually conceived by the Brazilian state. Its merit in this case, is the possibility of conceiving “other” spatial forms and “other” public policies according to the identities and specificities demanded by Amazonian subjects. Such spatial characteristic of collectivities<sup>48</sup>, forces us to consider Amazonia, and mainly Pará, as a rural territory mobilizing a specific discussion, as well as peculiar research and theoretical inquiry.

From territorialization processes, this analysis will highlight fundamental aspects of gender relationships in the rural world. Rural territory is a space in continuous construction, where identities and social relations are coined and shaped by the possibilities and limitations of the whole social process. It is a place of specificities, but, at the same time, it is linked to other spaces equally complex and specific. In other words, collectivity is made up by subjects – men and women – who build their identities daily.

Although Brazilian rural areas have a variety of families, ethnic groups, and individuals, we will focus here on the experiences of young people. We know that these different groups share common bonds and, at the same time, are embedded in a peasant social structure marked by land concentration and a development model that is the conservative modernization of agriculture.<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> ESTERCI, Neide; SCHWEICKARDT, Kátia Helena Serafina Cruz. “Territórios de reforma agrária e de conservação da natureza”. In: *Boletim do Museu. Paraense Emílio Goeldi. Ciências Humanas*. Belém: Museu Emílio Goeldi, vol. 5, nº I, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> WANDERLEY, Maria de Nazareth Baudel. *Juventude Rural: vida no campo e projeto para o futuro*. Recife: Editora da UFPE, 2013.

However, this structure is not definitive; we perceive other possibilities for agriculture within it, such as family farming, which points to a different conception of rural development. It is within this framework that young people establish themselves as a group with specific needs, requiring the State to consider a differentiated and feasible form of rural development<sup>50</sup>. In other words,

Processes that affect gender relations, generation and families in rural context, require specific attention that enables the clarification of a rurality more and more entangled in complex webs of power and meanings (Scott; Cordeiro, 2010, p. 17).

Gender conceptions convey a broad and historical debate. In this study, when analyzing gender relations in an inter-relational way, focusing on the female juvenile protagonism in the rural riverside territory, a context that is not separated from those conceptions, which can be unveiled by means of the social use of that category. We highlight here the experience of young female riverside dwellers as active participants in the family survival production.

In such analytical perspective, it is possible to identify that those young women interact actively with the globalized world, at the same time that they reaffirm their identity as workers in açaí collection. This dynamics challenges the predominant image of youngsters' lack of interest in the rural environment. However, this "new social actor" is still widely unknown and under-investigated in rural youth research<sup>51</sup>.

### **Work and education in the açaí agriculture in Quianduba River: two ends and knot**

In this study, we focus on the life trajectory of a specific group of young individuals residing in the Quianduba river community, situated in the Rural Riverside Territory of the municipality of Abaetetuba, in Região das Ilhas (Island Region), in the state of Pará. That region is mainly composed of floodplain communities, whose lifestyle is profoundly marked by the tides, the presence of rivers, streams and the forest. The Quianduba river community is organized in family groups distributed along the riverbanks, with fluvial

<sup>50</sup> SCOTT, Parry; CORDEIRO, Rosineide (org.). *Agricultura familiar e gênero: práticas, movimentos e políticas públicas*. Recife: Editora Universitária da UFPE, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> CASTRO et al, Elisa Guaraná de. *Os jovens estão indo embora? Juventude rural e a construção de um ator político*. Rio de Janeiro: Maud X; Seropédica, Rio de Janeiro: EDUR, 2009.

access, which regulates the dwellers' mobility and the agricultural production flow, mainly that of açai.

The Community economic base is centered on family agriculture and vegetable and animal extraction, mainly the açai cultivation. Those areas are mainly of common use or belong to small farmers, who use traditional management techniques, handed down from generation to generation. The territory organization is marked by neighborhood relationships, reciprocity and kinship, which support everyday life and cooperation in productive activities. However, there are inequalities in the access to natural resources, such as the most productive açai palm areas, which impacts directly young individuals' work conditions and opportunities.

The focus of our analysis is on two central aspects: work and education, which together represent fundamental dimensions of the same reality experienced in the açai agriculture and reveal the tensions and challenges faced by those youngsters who seek autonomy and permanence in the territory.

### **The first end: youth and the work in the açai agriculture**

It seems relevant to highlight that the young individuals investigated are of school age (6-17 years old), but had an early entry, between 7 and 8 years old, in the açai agro-extractive chain in the Quianduba river community. The intergenerational transmission of knowledge, skills and values that support such traditional practice transforms the family and at the same time in an affective center, space of formation of one's personality, and technical learning workshop. However, the access to açai palm areas – regulated by family possession, leasing, or production contracts – creates work relationships marked by the sexual division of tasks, informality, and quite often the economic exploitation of children and adolescents, either in a family co-work, or as workforce paid “per piece” or “daily wage”. In such conditions, remuneration is usually degraded, occupational risks are neglected, and there are not formal mechanisms of social protection or collective negotiation, which limits their exercise of rights and compromises the elaboration of life projects able to express their juvenile subjectivities.

These early experiences, therefore, do not configure only an economic dynamics: they are transformed into mnemonic marks that entangle the singular experience of each young individual to the community collective history. Therefore, there is an intrinsic relationship between individual and



collective memories<sup>52</sup> since individuals carry the experiences of the group they belong to, as highlighted by Halbwachs

The individual memory, built from the references and memories belonging to a specific group refer to a point of view of the collective memory. Such view must be always analyzed considering the place occupied by the subject inside the group and the relationships kept with other environments (Halbwachs, 2004, p. 55).

Based on this conception, it is possible to affirm that the sociocultural relationships of riverside young individuals in the açaí agriculture make up a memory body woven along their trajectories. The knowledge transmitted informally by means of everyday practices, rituals and oral narratives, not only preserve the traditional cultivation techniques, but also strengthen the community cultural identity and social cohesion.

In the field research, we observed that young individuals of both sexes take part in the açaí collection, in both their own piece of land and in third parties' land. However, we noticed that women predominantly dedicate to the collection phase, mainly the threshing process, which involves the removal of fruits from the branch, while men are mostly involved in tasks related to management and harvest, thus evidencing a greater versatility in their tasks. This differentiation of roles reveals gender dynamics that are influenced by cultural and social norms.

Identities, behaviors, and work activities in rural communities are shaped by the social organization of sexual differences. Gender relationships are socially built and reveal unequal power and resource distribution between men and women. Gender norms, internalized since their childhood and reinforced by social institutions, prescribe different roles and responsibilities, thus impacting education, occupational and domestic trajectories.

In the açaí production context, these norms are often based on cultural expectations about suitable abilities and attributions to each sex, in addition to being related to power structures that ascribe greater value to activities associated with manhood. The differentiation of roles in the açaí production reveals gender relationships and cultural norms that shape the social interactions and opportunities of each group.

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<sup>52</sup> HALBWACHS, M. *Memória coletiva*. São Paulo: Vértice, 2004.

In the community investigated, only male youngsters have the possibility of getting involved in other activities in the açaí agriculture, such as the production management, while women are limited to fruit collection. Such diversity of functions offers the young individuals the possibility of deciding whether they want to continue in family farming with their parents since the work outside the family production unit provides them with the chance of exploring activities that are not related to field work.

This choice usually occurs when these young individuals migrate to urban areas seeking better education opportunities, often motivated by the precarious local education, which does not provide them with suitable conditions of education and work in the municipality. This forces them to move to seek better quality education as well as better professional perspectives.

In the juvenile phase, it is common to face the dilemma of choices and life project, which involves decisions about one's profession, permanence or not in the place of origin, and whether to continue the activities developed by their parents and grandparents<sup>53</sup>. Recognizing such dilemma is important since it reveals a reality that requires reflection. The central issue is to what extent are those youngsters supported by their parents and the state in this crucial moment of their lives, and to what extent the family unit collective project of production and the primary sector influence their decisions and commit them with such reality.

In general, young individuals who get involved in production management tend to abandon collection and agricultural management activities, which demand great physical effort and involve high risks. The process of climbing the palm trees to fill up 10 *rasas* (baskets) – from 50 to 60 palm trees – using a *peconha* (some rudimentary climbing equipment) and a machete attached to the belt, without any kind of protection, reveals the intensity of the physical effort required. When the açaí area is “low”, the number of trees to be climbed is 50 or 60. For 20 *rasas*, they have to climb twice this number of trees, which emphasizes the impact of this type of work on the life of the young individuals involved.

In addition to physical effort, these youngsters face risks associated with the tools and techniques used, such as machetes, brush cutters and chainsaws, which expose them to diverse hazards. They are also exposed to sunburn and being stung by venomous animals, such as snakes, spiders, and scorpions.

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<sup>53</sup> DAYRELL, Juarez. “A escola “faz” as juventudes? Reflexões em torno da socialização juvenil”. In: *Educação & Sociedade*, Campinas, v. 28, n. 100 - Especial, p. 1105-1128, out. 2007.

Accidents are frequent and might result in lesions of different nature such as muscle, shoulder displacement, bone fracture, cuts, and punctures.

Despite the risks inherent in the work and the importance of the açaí chain to the economic and social development of the region, there is no state regulation to guarantee the safety of these young individuals. The state concern is limited mainly to the quality of the product for consumption, neglecting the problems associated with the first phase of the productive chain.

The Peabiru Institute<sup>54</sup> identified that the açaí extraction is one of the most dangerous activities in Brazil, which provokes deep changes in the social tissue of the communities involved. The invisibility of their work conditions contributes to the exemption from responsibility for workers' safety by the stronger links in the value chain, thus perpetuating the lack of protection and exposure to risks in the productive process.

The Institute highlights the total invisibility of the work conditions to the final consumer, which results in the absence of responsibility by the stronger links in the value chain, namely, industries, wholesalers and retailers for the workers' safety. Decree nº 326, of January 20, 2012<sup>55</sup>, provides exclusively for the quality of the product for consumption, without any concern with the safety of the workers involved in the açaí productive chain.

In addition, there are no specific public policies to guarantee the safety of the açaí extraction activity in floodplains, at the federal, state and municipal levels. This gap represents a problem that requires deep studies and reflection by the academia and society. Therefore, the absence of safety measures in the açaí production makes this activity particularly dangerous for the riverside youth, who face significant physical risks without due attention and protection.

## The second end: youth and education

The life of an açaí harvester is shared with school life. Currently, both parents and children recognize education as an essential tool for accessing better living conditions. A son's or daughter's attendance at school is no longer questioned; on the contrary, school absence can generate significant

<sup>54</sup> INSTITUTO PEABIRU. "*O Peconheiro*": *Diagnóstico das condições de trabalho do extrativista de açaí*. Belém, Instituto Peabiru, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> PARÁ. *Decreto nº 326, de 20 de janeiro de 2012*. Estabelece requisitos higiênico-sanitários para a manipulação do açaí [...]. Retrieved from: <https://www.legisweb.com.br/legislacao/?id=148207>

disruption and questioning. Whether hoping to find jobs in urban areas or to remain in the countryside, young people are engaged in formal education. While the previous generation (parents and grandparents) lacked access to or valued formal education less, today's generation of children and grandchildren sees education as a significant achievement and something that cannot be rejected.

Despite the recognition of the importance of education, formal education in rural riverside communities remains precarious. Although access to school has been facilitated, allowing everyone to attend the classroom, there is some concern about the type of education offered. The quality of education in rural areas is a central issue, especially regarding its ability to meet the specific needs of rural life. Young riverside residents face challenges related to long geographic distances and complex water cycles, which limit movement and hinder access to school. As noted above, in riverside regions, the hydrological calendar varies throughout the year<sup>56</sup>, which directly impacts everyday life and education conditions.

At the Quianduba community, we observed that the açaí production work significantly harms young people's academic performance, resulting in low school attendance and, in many cases, dropout. This phenomenon is directly related to the time those youngsters dedicate to work, whether on their family plots or on third-party properties. Of the 10 young people interviewed, 6 reported having completed only the sixth grade of elementary school. Some testimonials from these young people are presented below:

*"Look, I even tried to study more, but it didn't work. I've been working picking açaí since I was a child, helping my family and also working for others. The problem was that school was far away, and I'd leave home very early to go to the field. When I returned, it was already late. The rabeteiro (boat that crossed the river) had already passed. So, there was no way out. I fell behind in my studies. It wasn't for lack of will; it was the situation, the necessity that made me stop studying and just work." (17 years old).*

*"You know, I even tried to continue studying, but it wasn't easy. I'd come back from the forest so tired that when I went to school, I had no energy for anything. People who work in the forest, picking açaí, need to rest in the afternoon, because if they don't, they can't go back the next day. It takes a lot of energy to pick açaí. So, when I got to school, I couldn't study. I ended up getting discouraged and stopped going. It*

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<sup>56</sup> FRAXE, T. de J. P.; WITKOSKI, A. C.; PEREIRA, H. dos S. (org.). *Comunidades ribeirinhas amazônicas: memórias, ethos e identidade*. Manaus: EDUA, 2007.

*was a difficult decision, but it was what my body was asking for at the time.” (18 years old).*

A study carried out at Ilha do Marajó<sup>57</sup> on child labor in açaí harvesting, reported that the participation of children and adolescents in the fruit harvest negatively impacts school attendance and academic performance, especially during the harvest season, when families are widely mobilized. This participation is due, among other factors, to the physical ability of young people to climb tall, thin trees that cannot support the weight of adults.

When addressing juvenile work in Brazil<sup>58</sup>, what is observed is that it often forces early school dropouts and, in some cases, prevents school attendance. That author emphasizes that schools must be capable of embracing diverse sociocultural subjects, articulating their Political Pedagogical Project with students' life plans. In this context, it is crucial to rethink school education from a postcolonial perspective, taking into account students' cultural and socioeconomic differences and valuing the particularities of their experiences.

Authors such as Walter Mignolo and Edna Castro have contributed to the questioning of ways of knowledge production based on the Eurocentric and colonizing thought. Mignolo<sup>59</sup> points out that the way we produce knowledge is rooted in the European culture, and perpetuates discriminatory and subjugating practices. According to Castro<sup>60</sup>, the Eurocentric thought makes other cultures invisibile and strengthens hegemonic representations that support exclusive power relationships.

Postcolonial studies demonstrate how colonial thinking infiltrates schools through the organization of knowledge in school curricula, where certain types of knowledge are chosen as worthy of teaching, while others are silenced. It is noteworthy that this selection is not a neutral epistemological process, but a way of legitimizing and perpetuating purposes of domination linked to the ruling classes<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> KOURY, Suzy Elizabeth Cavalcante. O trabalho infantil na colheita do açaí na Ilha do Marajó. In: FARIAS, James Magno Araujo Farias (org.). *Trabalho decente*. São Paulo: LTr, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> DAYRELL, Juarez. A escola como espaço sociocultural. In: DAYRELL, J. T (org.). *Múltiplos olhares sobre educação e cultura*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 1996.

<sup>59</sup> MIGNOLO, Walter D. A colonialidade de cabo a rabo: o hemisfério ocidental no horizonte conceitual da modernidade. In: LANDER, Edgardo (org.). *A colonialidade do saber: eurocentrismo e ciências sociais. Perspectivas latino-americanas*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Colección Sur Sur, CLACSO, 2005. pp.71-103.

<sup>60</sup> CASTRO, Edna. Razão decolonial, experiência social e fronteiras epistemológicas. In: CASTRO, Edna. *Pensamento crítico latino-americano*. São Paulo, Annablume/CLACSO, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> GOMES, Nilma Lino. “Relações Étnico-Raciais, Educação e Descolonização dos Currículos”. In: *Currículo Sem Fronteiras*, Rio de Janeiro, v.12, n.1, p. 98-109, jan/abr 2012

This dynamics prevent interaction between formal and informal knowledge, reinforcing social inequalities, especially when it comes to job market preparation. By disregarding informal knowledge, schools have devalued traditional economic activities, discouraging rural youth from staying in school, resulting in them abandoning their studies in favor of work.

An approach that breaks with the positivist paradigm proposes a school as a space for shared knowledge, enriched by diverse knowledge based on students' daily experiences, and fostering the collective construction of knowledge. This presupposes that human beings, as historical beings in interaction with the social world, produce values, beliefs, and knowledge about their context, which are essential for the exercise of citizenship.

By recognizing ordinary people as producers of knowledge and valuing other voices, it will be possible to problematize everyday life and abandon ethnocentrism, adopting a more pluralistic vision of education. This new understanding requires interdisciplinary epistemological action that connects existing knowledge with the reality of those willing to uncover reality and position themselves within it.

From this perspective, various domains and instances, previously sedimented and hierarchized in the knowledge production process over time, will be respected and valued, such as religions, everyday life, power relations, ways of life, among others. This will contribute to the understanding of nonlinearity, discontinuity, and difference as operational dimensions in the construction of knowledge. This new understanding demands an epistemological approach of interdisciplinarity, requiring an attitude of dialogue with what already exists and of articulation with those willing to unveil reality and position themselves within it<sup>62</sup>, creating the possibility of a decolonial turn.

The “decolonial turn” concept in the Latin American context reflects upon the Western reasoning proposing transmodernity as an epistemological displacement<sup>63</sup>. That author analyzes how decolonial thought challenges the structures of power and knowledge established by modernity, which marginalize the knowledge and cultures of the “Other.” In this sense,

<sup>62</sup> CASTRO, Edna. Razão decolonial, experiência social e fronteiras epistemológicas. In: CASTRO, Edna. **Pensamento crítico latino-americano**. São Paulo, Annablume/CLACSO, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> MIGLIEVITH-RIBEIRO, Adélia. O “giro decolonial” latino-americano e a razão do Outro: a transmodernidade como deslocamento epistemológico. In: CASTRO, Edna. *Pensamento crítico latino-americano*. São Paulo, Annablume/CLACSO, 2019.

transmodernity is presented as a way of reconfiguring thought, which values the diversity of perspectives and experiences, especially those from peoples who have been historically made subalterns in Latin America. That author proposes a break with Eurocentric paradigms, seeking a new understanding of the world and knowledge that is more inclusive and plural.

Through this new approach, schools can break with the culture of exclusion, which, in its colonialist conception, is the force of oppressive power, driven by imported ideologies that render education inadequate to the reality of students and, therefore, ineffective, incapable of fostering necessary social transformations. Therefore, only by breaking with this culture of exclusion can schools, as guardians of the structuring of knowledge, fulfill their role as an environment for the exercise of social life, through awareness of the civilizing project and, thus, building a new society.

### **Intercultural dialogue as a possibility to connect youth, work and education in the açaí agriculture**

In conversations with the parents of the young people interviewed, we did not observe significant concerns regarding the implications of their children's work in açaí harvesting and cultivation. On the contrary, this practice is often viewed with pride, seen as an indicator that their children are hardworking. Parents report that their children can harvest between 10 and 20 *rasas* of açaí per day, contributing to the family's livelihood.

This pride, combined with a lack of concern about the risks young people face, highlights that açaí extraction is a deeply rooted cultural practice in riverside communities. It is a traditional knowledge, passed down from generation to generation and legitimized as part of the collective identity<sup>64</sup>. Therefore, it is essential to understand that, as several authors in cultural anthropology have pointed out, culture is essential in people's lives, as it is through it that individuals recognize themselves as part of a group, reaffirm their belonging, and construct meaning for their experiences. For individuals, recognition by others is crucial to their development, and this cultural construction is directly linked to their membership in the group. Thus, the concept of justice or injustice is relative and depends on the group's shared vision of what is considered fair or unfair.

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<sup>64</sup> BHABHA, Homi K. *O local da cultura*. Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 1998.

The research confronts us with a complex dilemma. On the one hand, the risk to which young people are exposed during açai extraction, calling for protection; on the other, the cultural manifestation of a traditional community that develops its main economic activity as a subsistence strategy and an affirmation of cultural resistance.

When problematizing this situation, highly complex theoretical challenges emerge. Some examples include the universalist view of human rights, which rejects adaptations to cultural specificities as opposed to the contextualist perspective, which advocates assessment according to the peculiarities of each sociocultural group. The confrontation between these approaches highlights the potential of intercultural dialogue as a promising avenue, configuring itself as a fertile strategy for safeguarding the dignity of social subjects<sup>65</sup>.

Intercultural dialogue is based on the premise that diverse interpretative currents coexist within cultures, some more conducive to emancipation than others. Identifying and exploring progressive cultural trends is a strategy that grants greater social legitimacy on rights, enhancing the possibilities of gaining authentic and conscious adherence from individuals.

It is crucial to emphasize that intercultural dialogue seeks to understand the phenomenon in its universality without resorting to epistemological violence that disqualifies or subordinates the cultures of each community. Openness to this dialogical perspective enables the broadening of interpretative horizons and the very repertoire of behaviors of the investigated community, which begins to recognize itself more critically and reflectively, challenging its practices and generating solutions based on new knowledge and multiple views.

Reflecting on intercultural dialogue requires critical reflection on the normative and axiological implications of human rights. After all, culture manifests itself as an expression of the development of individual rights, whose subjects enjoy protection in fundamental dimensions, such as life and freedom. Thus, protecting young people against all forms of violation, safeguarding their unique status as developing individuals, is an unequivocal expression of respect for their human rights.

In this context, Boaventura argues that human rights policies essentially constitute cultural policies. He questions the supposed universality

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<sup>65</sup> SARMENTO, Daniel. *Dignidade da pessoa humana: conteúdo, trajetórias e metodologia*. Belo Horizonte: Fórum, 2016.



of human rights, arguing that it is impossible to conceive of a universal when there are local particularities irreducible to global standardization. He also proposes multiculturalism<sup>66</sup> as a pre-condition for a dialogical relationship between global competence and local legitimacy, elements that configure the fundamental attributes of a counter-hegemonic policy of human rights.

Multiculturalism<sup>67</sup> enables an analytical view of certain society's specificities, thus enabling an understanding of the mechanisms that guarantee that community's basic rights, without practicing mere acritical reproduction of rights legitimated by the hegemonic culture.

This task demands a complex dialogical exercise, requiring sensitive listening skills and openness to being transformed by encounters with other cultural frameworks. It is crucial to abandon the stance of holding a supposedly superior truth, which has historically characterized the Western approach to human rights. Instead, it is essential to problematize the issue without a priori assumptions and values, building an environment for dialogue that allows for the development of a normative system that is not only declarative but also equipped with effective enforcement mechanisms for cases of violation.

For Boaventura, cultures interpenetrate, and values can become globalized; however, they cannot be imposed arrogantly, as if they were intrinsically superior to those accepted by other communities. Value substitution, based on dialogue and consensus-building, represents the only legitimate way to structure a human rights system with a truly universal claim<sup>68</sup>.

In short, the legitimate formation of a universal system of human rights will be ensured through intercultural dialogue, in which each community can offer its unique contribution, with its values fully respected. When cultural practices require redefinition, persuasion through rational arguments is the most appropriate methodological approach.

Within this interpretative framework, it becomes possible to understand that conducting intercultural dialogue enables the community to critically analyze the use of youth labor in açaí extraction and identify the multidimensional consequences of this activity.

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<sup>66</sup> SANTOS, Boaventura de Souza. *Uma concepção multicultural de direitos humanos*. São Paulo: Annablume, 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>68</sup> SANTOS, Boaventura de Sousa. **A gramática do tempo**: Para uma nova cultura política. São Paulo: Cortez, 2006.

We believe that an intermediate interpretation, constructed dialogically, capable of reconciling cultural reproduction by teaching young people about family farming methods while simultaneously ensuring the observance of fundamental rights, can significantly contribute to the understanding that young individuals need to invest in educational development to achieve better living conditions.

### **Development and colonialism in the açaí productive chain: a portrait of the current Amazonia**

The growing demand for açaí in national and international markets reveals a productive activity with significant potential for local and regional development. However, research in the Quianduba community shows that the lives of young people directly involved in that fruit harvesting have been profoundly redefined, resulting in transformations such as the exponential increase in the number of açaí palm trees, their incorporation as key agents in the composition of family income, and the compromised educational trajectory. In this context, their youth is captured and instrumentalized by a mode of production that disregards them as individuals in development.

In this paradoxical scenario, which intertwines economic growth and the reconfiguration of ways of life, it becomes imperative to critically challenge development policies for the Amazon region. Such policies are inherently contradictory, as they strengthen the circuits of international capital while simultaneously weakening local social reality, producing processes of impoverishment, increasing deforestation, and threatening the existence of traditional peoples. The discussion begins from a decolonizing perspective of development, which must be conceived based on local specificities and its complex relationship with nature and the surrounding universe.

Among the various approaches to development, we are interested in an analysis that considers development as a process that alters not only economic and productive structures, but also social, institutional, and political ones. In other words, increased production must be accompanied by increased income and the population's economic capacity.

Perroux, based on interdisciplinarity and his conception of development as structural transformation, argues that true development is the one which promotes qualitative and quantitative improvements in the lives of the population. For him, development implies a combination of mental and social changes that enables a population to cumulatively and sustainably increase

its gross real product. That author emphasizes that a simple increase in income, generated by productive activities, does not constitute development unless accompanied by reforms that fight poverty, marginalization, and misery. Without this qualitative transformation in people's well-being, the phenomenon should be understood solely as economic growth.

Sachs aligned with Perroux's thought, differentiates development from economic growth<sup>69</sup>, by highlighting that the development targets go beyond the simple accumulation of material wealth. He emphasizes that although economic growth is a necessary condition, it is not enough to guarantee better life to everyone.

Perroux and Sachs's ideas converge in their analysis of underdeveloped economies, proposing development strategies tailored to their particularities, breaking with the view of development as a universal model applied indiscriminately from North to South. In this context, it is essential that the directly impacted population act as protagonists in the study and implementation of public policies aimed at improving their quality of life.

In Amazonia, the lack of local population involvement in problem-solving is often ascribed to an exogenous conception of development, planned from "the outside" and disregarding the participation of local communities. Violeta Loureiro points out that a striking characteristic of the social development process in the Brazilian Amazon is the implementation of government policies based on development models that neglect the lives and future of local populations. These models, developed by groups or elites focused exclusively on the economic growth of their companies, exploit natural resources for the benefit of big businesses, without prioritizing the well-being of Amazonian communities.

Edna Castro adds that the relationship of subordination between those who plan and those who execute has always been observed in Amazonia, reflecting the permanence of the colonizing process, still alive, but adapted to new forms<sup>70</sup>. According to that author, the end of the Colonial Period in Brazil did not mean the end of a colonized mentality, but merely the replacement of the forms of colonization. This colonial mentality continues to subjugate local populations, ignoring and devaluing the region's cultural, social, and environmental diversity.

<sup>69</sup> SACHS, Ignacy. *Desenvolvimento: incluyente, sustentável, sustentado*. Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2008.

<sup>70</sup> CASTRO, Edna. Razão decolonial, experiência social e fronteiras epistemológicas. In: CASTRO, Edna. *Pensamento crítico latino-americano*. São Paulo, Annablume/CLACSO, 2019.

Castro also emphasizes that the global role played by Amazonia over the centuries has generated significant impacts on different areas, such as the opening of new frontiers aimed at the production of commodities for the global market and the legacy of income concentration, social exclusion and environmental degradation resulting from the so-called “modernization” of the region<sup>71</sup>. According to that author, regional development was shaped by characteristics such as direct or indirect state intervention to promote the occupation of Amazonia; the adoption of a specific economic function; official development programs that favored big businesses; and the view of the region as a supplier of raw materials and a generator of foreign exchange. This model reinforces Amazonia’s peripheral position in the international market, in her words:

Development is, above all, a political and ideological construct, and therefore a produced discourse, a discourse of power and symbolic legitimacy that carries with it an arbitrary, intrinsic, and historically elaborated formulation. In the play of images, development requires recognition by the undeveloped, and because it is the other, necessarily inferior in the displaced assessment of its reality, this is a paradigm of colonial thought (Castro, 2015, p. 243).

That author emphasizes that the prevailing development model marginalizes local populations, excluding them from the policymaking process aimed at improving their living conditions. For Edna Castro, true development must go beyond purely economic logic, prioritizing actions aimed at reducing poverty, misery, and marginalization, rather than focusing exclusively on increasing Gross Domestic Product and enriching a minority<sup>72</sup>.

In such context, Violeta Loureiro places Amazonia as the global system semi-periphery, marked by exploitation and marginalization of the global economic dynamics<sup>73</sup>. Historically, the region has been subjected to neocolonial practices, in which the Brazilian government implements policies that prioritize the extraction of natural resources over local needs. This

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<sup>71</sup> CASTRO, Edna. Campo do desenvolvimento, racionalidade, ciência e poder. In: FERNANDES, Ana Cristina; LACERDA, Norma; PONTUAL, Virgínia (org.). *Desenvolvimento, planejamento e governança: o debate contemporâneo*. Rio de Janeiro: Letra Capital, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>73</sup> LOUREIRO, Violeta Refkalefsky. *Caminhos e descaminhos da Amazônia em busca do desenvolvimento - acertos, erros e possibilidades*. Vol. 1. Manaus: Editora Valer, 2023.

scenario reveals a transition from external colonial domination to a form of internal domination.

Research conducted with the community under study reveals that, despite the growing appreciation of açaí, the returns generated throughout the production chain do not result in significant improvements in the quality of life of the local population and its youth, perpetuating structural inequalities.

## **Final consideration**

Youth is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon, whose understanding requires a careful approach to its historical, cultural, and social dimensions. Its definition is not uniform, as it is shaped by specific contexts and individual experiences. To analyze the impact of precarious working conditions in açaí production on the life of young riverside residents of the Quianduba River community, it was essential to describe and examine these conditions, particularly in the initial stage of the production chain, which involves growing and harvesting the fruit.

This study is grounded in postcolonial theory, which questions the Eurocentric model and proposes the appreciation of local knowledge, such as that of the riverside community analyzed. The research revealed that the açaí production chain in the region contributes little to local development, particularly in terms of improving the young individuals' quality of life. To transform this reality, it is essential to include the affected communities in the public policymaking process, respecting their identities, cultures, and aspirations, and promoting intercultural dialogue. However, this process faces challenges, as local traditional values may diverge from Western concepts of human rights and decent work, requiring the creation of alternatives more aligned with local needs.

In conclusion, we believe that it is essential to consider the voices and experiences of young people when developing public policies, recognizing the diversity of their realities and addressing the violence and inequalities that affect them. The youth's richness lies in their plurality and uniqueness, and it is essential to provide spaces for them to express their subjectivities. Reflecting on the youth's emerging values, especially in the diverse realities of Amazonia, includes recognizing a silent but profoundly significant movement of transformation.

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