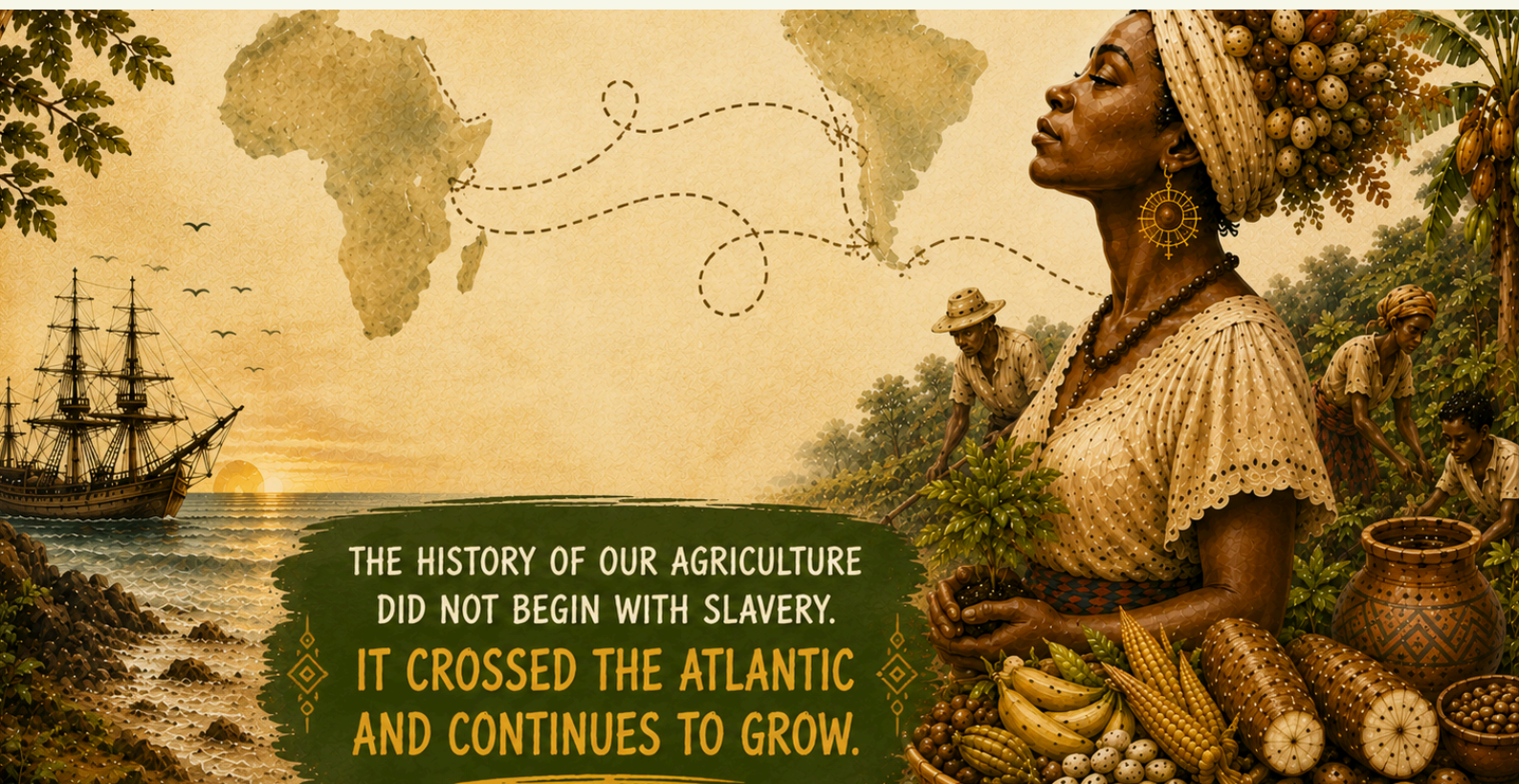


AFRO-DIASPORIC AGRICULTURAL SYSTEMS

*IF OUR STEPS COME FROM AFAR,
OUR AGRICULTURE DOES TOO*

Fran Paula | Ancestral Agriculture Platform



THE HISTORY OF OUR AGRICULTURE
DID NOT BEGIN WITH SLAVERY.
**IT CROSSED THE ATLANTIC
AND CONTINUES TO GROW.**

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Drawing on the experiences of Brazilian quilombos and in dialogue with other Afro-descendant territories across the Americas, this article proposes Afro-Diasporic Agricultural Systems (SAAFROs) as a political and civilizational category of the African diaspora.



For decades, May 13 has been organized as a date to remember the false abolition and denounce the ongoing racial violence in Brasil. And we still have reasons to do so. Because, 138 years after the signing of the *Lei Áurea*, the black people continue being the precarious base of agricultural labor, the majority among Sem-terra, the incarcerated, the murdered, and those who continue fighting for the right to fully exist on Brazilian territories.

But today we are going to take an inverse movement. We won't just look at what colonialism and racism tried to destroy, but at what they hadn't been able to interrupt.

Because there is a form of violence even more profound than the exploitation of our bodies: the systematic erasure of our continuity as peoples of the African diaspora, which they have tried so hard to eradicate.

And one of the greatest silences surrounding the Black people in the Americas is in our relationship with the land. Not just in agricultural labor, but in the agricultural and food systems that we carry on supporting.

Systems that articulate biodiversity, food, spirituality, ecological management, memory, collectivity, territoriality, and historical continuity. This is where categories such as "traditional agricultural systems" need to be tensioned



Traditional for whom? Defined by which references? And, above all, from where?

Why is it that when our systems appear just as “traditional”, many times they are pushed into a place of the past, as if they were surviving static of another era? And along with that, there is also an erasure of our origins and specificities.

After all, what is this “traditional” category communicating and, above all, whom does it nominate or silence?

Many times, by labeling our systems just as “traditional,” we also erase their African matrices, their historical displacements, and their Afro-diasporic dimension. It is as if we were speaking only of isolated cultural permanencies, and not of alive systems that crossed oceans, reorganized themselves under colonial violence, and kept on producing existence in the Americas.

And that’s why, when I arrived in *Palenque de San Basilio*, Colômbia, in 2024, I didn’t feel like a stranger. There was something about that place that crossed me even before the word.

Food being circulated among the houses, broth shared at the *kuagro*, women making candy while telling stories, children playing drums, small animals wandering through the backyards, the polyculture farm clearing in the middle of the bush, and cattle being herded collectively through the streets.

A deep sensation of recognition, as if I already knew that territory, as if my body recognized something that coloniality tried to disrupt, but never managed to erase completely.

The food was constantly circulating, bananas, corn, cheese, arepas and joy. And there I realized, once again, that it wasn't just about food.

“La comida para los palenqueros tiene un significado mágico, espiritual y ante todo protector” (CASSIANI et al., 2019).

And it is precisely here that the limitations of colonial analyses about our agriculture and feeding begin. Because what I found in Palenque is not an exception, it is continuity. A continuity that crosses the quilombos in Brasil, the palenques in Colômbia, and other Afro-diasporic territories in the Americas.

In this way, it is impossible to understand this continuity without going back to the African Bantu matrices that crossed the Atlantic not as isolated cultural fragments, but as alive systems of land organization, feeding, spirituality and collective life.



The Bantu women opened the soil with a small cut made by a stone blade. There, in the tiny slit of earth, they planted the yam seedling and closed the soil again with their hands.. In this way, they protected the soil from erosion. In this way, they ensured the harvest. The yam did not grow in a straight line. Its roots spread out in multiple directions, going deeper, dodging and overcoming obstacles, connecting that which does not appear on the surface.

Quilombos: afrodescendant communities historically constituted by confronting slavery and coloniality, which maintain collective forms of territorial organization, strong ancestral ties to Africa and their own systems for managing land, biodiversity and community life.



The Afro-Diasporic Agricultural Systems themselves are like the ancestral African yam. They also have spread, crossed oceans, evaded colonial violence, and taken root in other territories. And kept connecting worlds that are seemingly separates and incomprehensible to colonized eyes and minds.

That is why, what I propose here is not a vision of agriculture from the modern categories of sustainability, nor an attempt to fit our systems into already existing alternative models. It is about starting from our own systems of life to produce a vision, interpretation and theory.

It is from this understanding that I propose thinking about Afro-diasporic Agricultural Systems - the SAAFROs, as an exercise in countercoloniality. Not because they deny the contemporary debate on alternatives agricultures, but because they displace its fundamentals.

A political definition that repositions Afrodescendants peoples not as objects of the ecological transition, but as historical subjects who have long sustained complex forms of relationship between agriculture, biodiversity and the continuity of life, long before the climate crisis became a global concern.



Mainly because much of the external analysis insists on looking at our practices as isolated fragments: cultivation, cuisine, biodiversity, religiosity, social organization. When what exists in Afrodescendants territories are not separate practices, but systems.

Living systems that articulate land, memory, spirituality, feeding, collectivity, ecological management, economic circulation, and historical continuity.

The SAAFROs are presented here not as a neutral category, nor as a mere agronomic classification, but as a political, territorial and civilizational category of the African diaspora in the Americas.

Above all, because there is a profound violence in the way the history of Brazilian agriculture has been told. When the relationship of Black people with the land appears, it is almost always mediated exclusively by slavery, forced labor and exploitation

As if our agricultural presence had begun there, but it did not. And this is one of the greatest erasures of coloniality. Black agricultural history was not born on slave ships. It crosses the Atlantic, coming from millenary agricultural systems developed on the African continent.



But, as Walter Rodney points out, colonialism not only exploited Africa, but also actively produced the image of a continent without science, without technology and without development. And this image continues to shape perceptions today.

Because even today, Black ingenuity in agriculture is constantly displaced, appropriated or rebranded. And this is precisely why what we are proposing here will hardly be found in the agricultural manuals that have shaped agrarian formation in Brasil.

These manuals were, in large parts, produced from the perspective of Casa-grande and the colonial plantation. On them, slavery appears as an organization of labor, but not as an erasure of knowledge, nor as epistemological violence.

This is the phenomenon I have been calling the Science of Captivity. A scientific tradition built on colonial and racist foundations, which transformed Black peoples into a productive force while simultaneously erasing their agricultural ingenuity, their management technologies, their forms of collective organization and their systems of knowledge.



Therefore, we will not find in these manuals the profundity of Black agricultural systems, neither the Bantu contribution in agriculture. We will have to look for them elsewhere: in the quilombola farms, in the backyards, in the ritual spaces, in the modes of planting, harvesting, cooking and sharing food. We must listen to what coloniality tried to transform into silence.

They study creole seeds, but not the people who preserve them.

They catalog varieties, but not the relationships that sustain them.

They describe techniques, but not the worlds that produced them.

As Grada Kilomba reminds us:

“It’s not that we haven’t spoken out, the fact is that our voices, thanks to a racist system, have been systematically disqualified” (KILOMBA, 2019).

That is why quilombola agriculture continues to be viewed as backward whenever it rejects the productivist, linear and industrial logic imposed by agribusiness. But the correct question is not why we did not fully embrace the agricultural modernization imposed by the Green Revolution. But which modernization project were we being called upon to embrace?

Because our systems have never been unsustainable. They have always been sustained from diversity, collective work, the circulation of knowledge between generations, the integration of production and care and the relationship between food, land and the continuity of life.



If they were not sustainable, there would not be thousands of quilombola communities today that have crossed centuries of racial violence, territorial expropriation and a lack of public policies. The problem is that modern sustainability parameters keep being organized around metrics of capital and coloniality. Meanwhile, our systems keep asking something else:

How to sustain lives? How to sustain territories? How to sustain bonds? How to sustain belongings?

And that is where the SAAFROs gain centrality in the present. Because we are not talking only about agriculture; we are talking about systems capable of keeping alive worlds that colonialism tried to destroy. Systems that connect the diaspora to its African matrices not through the intact reproduction of practices, but through the continuity of civilizational principles that have continued to be reinvented in the Americas.

Faced with the impossibility of returning to the land of origin, it was and still is through the ways we manage and care for the land, cultivate crops, preserve seeds, tend our backyards, share food, organize collective labor and sustain community life that our connection with ancestry has remained alive.

That is why, the SAAFROs are not “copies of African agricultural systems”, they are unique systems of the diaspora, produced in the tensions between displacement and belonging, between violence and continuity, between rupture and reinvention.



And it is precisely here that their political power resides. Because the SAAFROs reveal that the African diaspora did not produce only suffering: it also produced quilombos, it produced palenques and it produced territorial and social continuity. Worlds capable of surviving colonial violence without completely breaking away from their civilizational matrices.

This discussion also forces us to look at the deep asymmetries present within the debates on historical recognition, heritage and migration. While different white migrant groups have had their agricultural contributions widely recognized, institutionalized, and celebrated as part of nation-building, Black agricultural systems have continued to be reduced to labor force, rural poverty, or backwardness.

Little is said about the continuity of Afrodescendant agricultural systems in the Americas, even though these systems have sustained biodiversity, ecological management and food production for centuries under extreme conditions of racial violence and territorial expropriation.

And that is why Afro-diasporic Agricultural Systems transcend Brazil. They connect different Afrodescendant peoples of the diaspora through common historical experiences of displacement, territorial reconstruction, and civilizational continuity.

Above all, in contexts of the continuous advance of capital over land, the permanence of colonial violence, and the intensification of global debates on historical reparations and crimes against humanity, affirming the continuity of SAAFROs is also affirming the right of our peoples to continue existing.



LIKE THE POEM
THAT TELLS OF
AFRICAN WOMEN
WHO HID SEEDS
IN THEIR HAIR
DURING ESCAPES
FROM THE
PLANTATIONS,
SEEDS
IN THEIR HAIR
DURING ESCAPES
FROM THE
PLANTATIONS.

THE HISTORY OF
AFRO-DIASPORIC AGRICULTURE
MAY ALSO BE READ THIS WAY:

**AS CONTINUITY
CARRIED IN THE BODY.**

WOMEN WHO, UPON
REACHING FREE LAND,
SHOOK THEIR HEADS
AND SEEDED THE EARTH
ONCE AGAIN.

It was never only about survival, but about the reconstruction of worlds. In light of this, biocultural reparations become an unavoidable agenda.

Because we are not talking only about symbolic recognition of Black contributions to agriculture. We are talking about repairing violently interrupted systems of life, expropriated territories, appropriated knowledge and historical continuities attacked by coloniality.

In this sense, reparations are not merely about compensating for past wrongs. They are about ensuring the continued existence of agricultural systems that are food-producing, ecological and community-based, and which black people continue to sustain despite historical violence.

It also produced continuity. It produced agriculture. It produced food systems. It produced biodiversity. It produced technologies. It produced worlds.

And yes, it's comprehensible why this still bothers people so much. As Nego Bispo puts it: "It was us who invented this. Then the universities change the name and later go on to sell it back to us."

We are not talking, therefore, of reviving a frozen static past, but of recognizing living systems. Systems that keep producing knowledge, feeding, territory and existence despite coloniality, and not because of it.

First of all, we would like to emphasize that we are not reacting to external readings or merely trying to respond to categories produced by colonial science. We are speaking from our own systems, from our fields, from our backyards, and from our modes of producing life.

And even so, it is an invitation!

That, by the end of this text, outside views about our Afrodiasporic farms can cross coloniality and see something beyond their own reflection. Because the colonial hunger for our modes of life no longer serves us. Or better, it never did.

What Luiz Rufino's pedagogy of the crossroads proposes to us is precisely that it is in the cracks that the possibility resides of recovering what coloniality tried to bury. And as Wanderson Flor do Nascimento writes:



“It is up to us to rescue, like Exu’s hornets, the potential of what was once seen as little, to set fire to the colonial arsenal, which not only feeds Casa-grande, but also throws our people into ancestral hunger.”

It is this what Afro-diasporic Agricultural Systems continue to do: recovering power, sustaining continuities and keeping alive worlds that have insisted on surviving. Because if our steps come from afar, our agriculture does too.

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