

FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: STUDY ABOUT FEMALE COCONUT LED BY DONA RAIMUNDA

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Abstract

This article provides is an analysis of female leadership in social vulnerability contexts based on Dona Raimunda Gomes da Silva case study . She was an outstanding leader in the babaçu coconut crackers movement in Northern Tocantins, Brazil. The research followed a qualitative and interpretative approach substantiated by bibliographic and documentary analysis aimed at connecting Dona Raimunda's life trajectory to Jacques Rancière's concept of "invention of the present" as the very means to understand how her actions reframe political practices and challenge gender-based domination structures. Furthermore, the study draws parallels between her activism and that of other remarkable national and international female characters by identifying common features in their leadership profiles. Despite their different contexts, these women join forces to fight oppressive structures marked by gender, racial and class inequalities; they challenge exclusionary systems from grassroots perspectives by engaging in collective actions and in defending human rights. Dona Raimunda embodied a unique form of feminine strength found in well-known activists, as well as in countless Brazilian women who daily strive to improve their families' living conditions and to foster prosperity within their communities.

KEYWORDS: Women extractivists, different strategies, social challenges, community leaders, babaçu coconut.

LIDERANÇA FEMININA EM MOVIMENTOS SOCIAIS: UM ESTUDO SOBRE AS MULHERES QUEBRADEIRAS DE COCO LIDERADAS POR DONA RAIMUNDA

Resumo

Este manuscrito analisa a liderança feminina em contextos de vulnerabilidade social a partir do estudo de caso de Dona Raimunda Gomes da Silva, referência feminina no movimento das quebradeiras de coco babaçu no norte do Tocantins. A investigação, de natureza qualitativa e abordagem interpretativa, usou análise bibliográfica e documental, associando o percurso articulando o percurso de vida de Dona Raimunda ao conceito de "invenção do presente", de Jacques Rancière, como forma de compreender de que maneira sua atuação ressignificou

práticas políticas e rompeu com estruturas de dominação de gênero. Além disso, o estudo estabelece conexões entre as atitudes de Dona Raimunda e algumas figuras femininas de destaque nacional e internacional, com o intuito de identificar fatores comuns do perfil dessas ativas personalidades pois são identificadas fortes correlações entre elas: mesmo em contextos distintos, compartilham o enfrentamento de estruturas opressoras marcadas por desigualdades de gênero, raça e classe; desafiam sistemas excludentes a partir de uma perspectiva de base, engajadas na luta coletiva e na defesa dos direitos humanos. Dona Raimunda carrega traços de uma força feminina singular, presente nas ativistas, mas também, na mulher brasileira que se desdobra na sua luta diária, com o objetivo de promover as melhores condições de vida à sua família e conferir prosperidade ao ambiente em que vive.

Palavras chave: Mulheres extrativistas, estratégias diversas, desafios sociais, líderes comunitárias, coco babaçu.

LIDERAZGO FEMENINO EN MOVIMIENTOS SOCIALES: UN ESTUDIO SOBRE LAS MUJERES QUEBRADEIRAS DE COCO LIDERADAS POR DONA RAIMUNDA

Resumen

Las mujeres que articulan movimientos y organizaciones, construyendo redes de solidaridad y apoyo mutuo, destacan en la sociedad contemporánea. Emplean diversas estrategias y formas de acción, como manifestaciones públicas, ocupación de espacios, producción de conocimiento, incidencia política, campañas de sensibilización y otras formas de movilización colectiva. Sin embargo, se enfrentan a importantes retos, como la falta de reconocimiento, la invisibilidad de sus agendas, la violencia física y simbólica, la persecución política y la marginación. Este estudio evaluó el perfil de las activistas sociales, con especial atención a las mujeres de gran influencia, teniendo como telón de fondo la vida y obra de Raimunda, la rompedora de cocos del estado de Maranhão. Los resultados indican que el movimiento de las quebradoras de coco tiene un impacto considerable en el mantenimiento del ecosistema local, así como en la promoción de la sostenibilidad, mientras que las participantes luchan por sus derechos y la preservación de sus culturas. Además, la fuerza femenina presente en este movimiento desafía las normas de género al participar en actividades polifacéticas, comprometiéndose con un amplio abanico de causas. Estas causas abarcan temas como los derechos reproductivos, la violencia de género, la igualdad salarial, la representación política, la inclusión social y la preservación de las culturas y tradiciones de su pueblo.

Palabras clave: Mujeres extractivistas, estrategias diversas, retos sociales, líderes comunitarias, coco babaçu.

1 Introduction

Community leaders play key role in the development of social movements. Their leadership influences organizations' profile and performance due to their straight impact on the achieved results and on paths taken to achieve their goals (DE ARAÚJO, 2021).

Social mobilizations account for great strides throughout the history of modern civilization, mainly the feminist movements. Despite the rise of strong and courageous women in this arena, gender inequalities remain in several sectors of contemporary Western society (SIQUEIRA; LAZARETTI, 2017; MARONEZE, 2021).

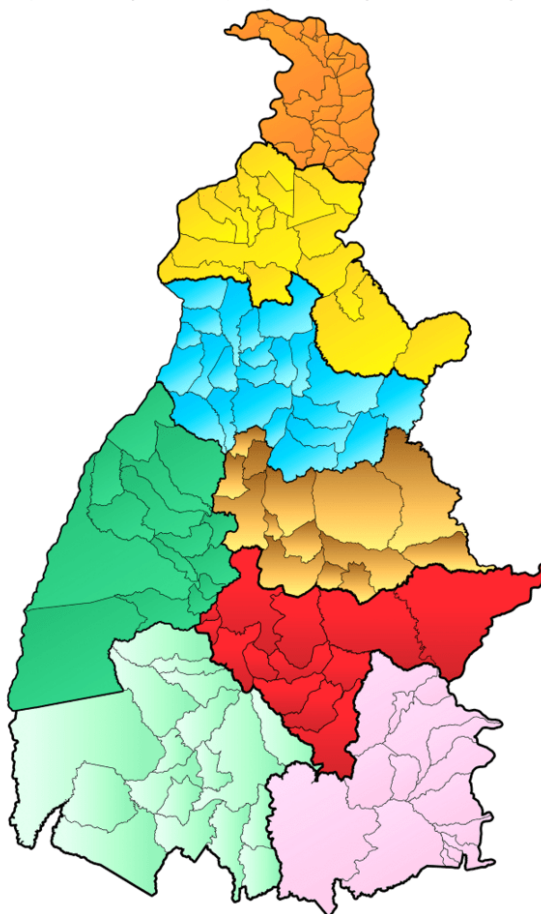
An understandable study about women's relevance as community leaders requires an in-depth review of classical interpretative theories on social movements

in order to observe the changes brought about by contemporary times through focus on their struggles (ALONSO, 2009). At first, one can witness the rise of a dramatic scenario because affirmative-action policies set for women emerged as the very response to the recognition of this social group's discriminatory and violent suffering over time. This violence is substantiated by a gender hierarchy shaped by patriarchal patterns that have historically put women in the culturally constructed position of weakness and dependence on men, which often results in physical and psychological violence conditions (VIGANO; LAFFIN, 2019; GALVÃO, 2021).

The current study was conducted in Tocantins State, Northern Brazil. The region known as 'Bico do Papagaio' (Figure 1) is located far Northern Tocantins State, in a meeting point between Maranhão and Pará states, Brazil. Its morphoclimatic domain is featured by a transition area between *Cerrado* (Brazilian Savannah) and the Amazon Rainforest, whose conditions are classified as suitable for agriculture (SOUSA; DA SILVA, 2021).

Several issues affect rural areas in this region due to internal and external factors like expansion of agricultural frontiers, conflicts over land ownership, governmental plans and projects, and other obstacles for progress. Bico do Papagaio lays on a border zone, which gives it a unique profile stressed by complex social, economic and political processes (LENA, 2021).

Figure 1 – Map of Tocantins' health regions. Bico do Papagaio is located Northern Tocantins State (it is highlighted in orange).



Source: Health Department of the State of Tocantins (GOVERNO DO TOCANTINS, 2015)

Female rural workers in Bico do Papagaio region have been mobilizing themselves for decades in order to fight for changing their local social reality. Most recently, many of them have dedicated themselves to extractivism, agroecology and community organizations as the path to reach interesting results and to gain recognition from society and the government. Babaçu coconut crackers (Figure 2) are among these women extractivists who play key historical, economic and sociocultural role, in addition to their political, environmental and cultural activism. Babaçu coconut is the fruit of babaçu palm (*Attalea speciosa*), which is native to Brazil and seen by these women as the means for their communities' progress.

Despite lack of specific data in the last census about the number of women working in babaçu extraction, MIQCB (Interstate Movement of Babaçu Coconut crackers), which is an NGO representing these women's interests, estimates that currently more than 400.000 women work in this sector, not only in Tocantins, but also in Maranhão, Pará and Piauí states. However, this activity faces constant threats such as women's limited access to babaçu palms, the agribusiness expansion (which finds resistance in areas dominated by babaçu palms) and hard time trading their products. Threats to this activity range from simple land fencing off by farmers and by land grabbers - aimed at criminal acts like poisoning babaçu palm trees - to, not rarely, violence against the female workers (MIQCB, 2025).

Figure 2 – Women from Bico do Papagaio community working in coconut cracking and in producing raw material for their hand crafted goods.



Source: Picture taken by Carolina Motoki. (REPÓRTER BRASIL, 2018).

It is worth noting that some collection areas set by babaçu coconut crackers lay on farms; therefore, their biggest challenge lies in having their right to access these fields respected. Preserving babaçu palm groves became more difficult for women who depend on these coconuts for their livelihood after the agribusiness expansion in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Unlike other rural workers who need land to plant crops and breed animals, babaçu grows freely. It is a large palm tree that adapts to regional weather conditions and requires large territorial areas to its development (REPÓRTER BRASIL, 2018).

A cultural issue is also observed. Babaçu palm tree conservation creates a symbolic connection to the territory, even when coconut crackers do not live where the babaçu groves are located in. It is impossible for these women to provide for their families when they lack access to the babaçu groves. Many of these women are unemployed single mothers often marginalized by both the government and society. Whenever they lose their primary income source, they face severe attacks ranging from threats and intimidation by farmers to assassination commissioned by squatters (REPÓRTER BRASIL, 2018). This scenario explains the problem complexity and severity of the herein addressed.

Furthermore, women activists often show empathy and solidarity with the communities they operate in, since they understand their residents' needs and demands. Therefore, they work toward collective well-being. Dona Raimunda, the core character in this study, is known for her constant struggle to strengthen and unite her community, and it built her positive image among the local population. Her history shines light on another notable aspect, namely: these women's leadership skills. Women activists often take on leadership roles in social movements and organizations in order to mobilize people and drive collective efforts (CARVALHO; MACEDO, 2023).

Assessing these women's extraordinary ability to overcome adversity and to create significant change is of great scientific interest. According to the Ministry of Health, the concept of psychosocial development refers to humans' progressive capacity to interact with their environment. This evolution is influenced by both society and its experiences, culture, social beliefs and family relationships. Based on Erikson's theory of identity development, identity comes from solving conflicts faced in the social environment, which means that the environment we live in leads us to our choices. Yet, paths arising from conflicts that can be observed in women's activism rise from conflicts faced on their daily lives (SOUTO; MOREIRA, 2021).

The current study is an analysis of the role played by female community leaders in babaçu coconut crackers' social movements by taking Dona Raimunda as its main reference. The study shows how her trajectory as leader connects to broader female leadership dynamics observed in social movements throughout history. Based on the theoretical category of "invention of the present", the authors sought to interpret how her leadership interacts with other important female characters in recent history and helps redefining the engagement forms led by women living under adverse contexts.

2 Methodology

The first stage of the study consisted of collecting and organizing information about the herein assessed female agro-extravist. Qualitative data were collected through exploratory descriptive research, as recommended for this investigation type by Batista et al. (2023), Da Silva et al. (2021), and Toledo and De Farias Shiaishi (2009). A bibliographic and documental search was conducted and it led to books, scientific articles, theses, dissertations, news reports and to a documentary about this or associated topics, such as rural feminism, women's empowerment and social movements. Raimunda Gomes da Silva community leadership trajectory was the core element and reference for the discussions.

The information sources were subjected to interpretative reading in order to help identifying the main elements featuring women's actions. This analytical procedure allowed drawing women's profile based on the challenges they have faced in fighting for their rights on several fronts, mainly at social, territorial and gender spheres.

The study's time frame covered the main historical milestones in Dona Raimunda's trajectory. However, the 1980s - 2010s-time lapse was the target of closer attention, because this was the time when the most significant events of her leadership performance in Bico do Papagaio's political-social scenario was recorded.

Data analysis carried out through an interpretative approach was based on thematic content assessment, as recommended by Bardin (2011). Its aim was to identify the most relevant categories related to the herein addressed topic. Theoretical reflection, which was a fundamental step of the present study, was supported by references from the Sociology of Social Movements field, mainly from the concepts by Rancière (2000, 2004, 2010) and from discussions in relevant works of interest, such as those by Silva, Cotanda and Pereira (2017), Siqueira and Lazaretti (2017), and De Araújo (2021). Ultimately, the current authors have sought to highlight coconut crackers' voices as active subjects of social transformation, as well as to disclose the processes leading them to outstanding achievements for their communities.

3 Results and discussions

Research results are introduced based on a logical and interpretative organization. Initially, the current section provides an analysis of the very genesis and consolidation of social movements, with emphasis on women's participation in historical resistance and transformation processes. Subsequently, it highlights relevant actions taken by women whose trajectories have become benchmarks in female empowerment and social rights' struggles. Then, it introduces community leader Dona Raimunda Gomes da Silva by highlighting her life story and achievements. Finally, it proposes a connection between Dona Raimunda's experience and the dynamics of other female leaders in social movements throughout history. Thus, this section is the attempt to better understand how Raimunda's work, which is rooted in her territory's realities and on Bico do Papagaio extractive communities, reflects and echoes on the principles, strategies and impacts characteristic of female leaders who have marked different times and sociopolitical contexts.

3.1 Political action and inventiveness: analysis of female leadership

Women and feminist movements are part of the generically known social movements. Actually, they are a branch that takes collective action to pursue political women's rights demands. Like other social movements, feminist movements often aim at bringing about changes in social institutions known for maintaining normative patterns based on patriarchy, at seeking to create a new social order to break with the prejudice and inequality that have historically affected women. Furthermore, the formulation of these movements' objectives tends to be largely altruistic. It seeks not

to promote women's personal interests but rather to achieve collective well-being. In other words, the goals of these women's actions are defined based on benefits to society as a whole rather than on focusing their individual interests as a specific group (SOUTO; MOREIRA, 2021).

Women's movements are acknowledged for a long history that dates back to Classical Ancient times and extends to days prior to the feminist movement. These movements have been a significant part of history and emerged at different periods. Outhwaite and Bottomore (1996) highlight three analytical issues linked to the best understanding of women's movements nature and diversity. Their nature regards the need for differentiating collective social action levels, so that the movements would represent both qualitative and quantitative advancements over solidarity or association forms that can be small-scaled, dispersed and relatively influent. The aforementioned authors exemplify this distinction by mentioning a movement based on a "women's culture", which includes communication networks, clubs and literary circles. This diversity of actions and associations highlight a wide range of women's movements expressions throughout history (OUTHWAITE; BOTTOMORE, 1996).

The second proposition sheds light on whether feminism can or should have universal goals, or on whether these goals change depending on the context. This is exemplified by the several critiques by Black and Third World feminists about the hegemony of a discourse, according to which, "women of all social classes and religions necessarily shared interests and solidarity bonds". These groups proposed a different view of women's interests by taking factors such as social class and ethnicity as elements influencing domination and subordination relationships among women. Although collective action and common goals have united the activists, solidarity among women was not only based on gender but rather on other social aspects (OUTHWAITE; BOTTOMORE, 1996).

The third analytical question highlights the difference between women's and feminist movements when it comes to the goals they seek to achieve. Historically, women's movements emerged from the traditional roles played by women in their families. This scenario implies fighting for providing basic needs and for exercising citizenship rights. These movements are featured by their link to specific social femininity and motherhood constructs, although they consider women's political involvement as the natural extension of their roles in their families as the very expression of their intrinsically feminine feelings (OUTHWAITE; BOTTOMORE, 1996; MILLER, 2021).

The expression "invention of the present" is associated with the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who is known for his contributions to political theory and aesthetics. He developed this theory as part of his reflections on emancipation and political participation policies. This idea highlights the ability of political subjects to actively redefine current conditions rather than to simply react to existing circumstances. The "invention of the present" implies a creative action that transcends established normative structures, and enables the transformation and reinvention of social and political relationships (VELOSO, 2018).

From Rancière's (2000, 2004, 2010) theoretical and methodological perspective, political production is not limited to social movements; actually, it involves different groups and individuals. According to Him, this political production is not intrinsically linked to the prior existence of rational and calculating subjects

who process contextual opportunities in order to develop effective strategies for collective action. From his viewpoint, politics acquires power when those socially labeled as slaves, freaks, monsters or "madmen" emerge into an interactional scene and disclose the vulnerabilities and violence they are subjected to. These subjects question the supposed equality expected to be guaranteed by democracy when they challenge the aesthetic regimes confining them to specific spaces, times and social functions. The very exposure of the fundamental "damage" to the principle of equality is staged within these controversial scenes and it disrupts the aesthetic regimes established in society. These scenes not only cause a fracture, although minimal, in power regimes, but they also set whether, or not, the condition of the subject can "become" a political existence (VELOSO, 2018). Thus, if Rancière's propositions are accepted, sociological concepts and methodological perspectives fundamental to social movement theories, such as agency, subject and politics, would require significant problematizing scenarios. This process would include broadening their heuristic scopes (problem-solving strategies based on experience and intuition) and revising the researcher's position regarding these specific phenomena.

Adopting the "invention of the present" theory as theoretical fundamental in the current study broadens the understanding of strategies applied by female activists and highlights their role in actively building the social fabric. The 'invention of the present' provides a particularly timely theoretical lens to assess these movements' dynamics, as it recognizes the ability of social agents to react to preexisting contexts and to forge innovative narratives and practices. Accordingly, female activists emerge as key agents to redefine gender standards and to create alternatives to challenge entrenched power structures. Applying this perspective highlights these activists' resilience in the face of adversity, as well as their intrinsic ability to bring about substantial changes in society. The 'invention of the present' provides a valuable conceptual framework to interpret these women's actions not as merely reactive, but, basically, as active builders of a transformative present and as catalysts for more inclusive and equitable futures (MIZOGUCHI, 2016).

Social movements have adopted strategies to broaden their messages and agendas through the media, mainly on social media, in recent years. The feminist movement has also embraced these spaces and have been outspreading its ability to interact with, and reach, a wider audience, including the previously unreached ones. Examples like the SlutWalk (2015) and #EleNão (2018) have shown that the feminist movement is not limited to social media in Brazil, but it also enables the articulation and organization of demonstrations and protests in the streets. These events open room for issues that go beyond the experience of being a woman in Brazilian society. Cyberfeminism presents itself as feminist activism strategy based on using fast information outspread on the internet to raise women's awareness of their condition, rights and duties (PIRES; CASTRO, 2020).

Women's-led movements were typically attentive to political discussions in past decades, but seeking representation and formal political participation or positions were not a priority for their coordinators and members. On the contrary, they focused relevant issues like income generation, health and domestic violence. Promoting debates on women's empowerment and autonomy at political and power-holding spheres was not seen as significant. These movement leaders'

political trajectory and their accumulated social capital were issues to be taken into consideration. Time dedicated to domestic work often limited their political involvement outside their homes. Membership in political parties was not necessarily seen as important and there were doubts about the transition between movement leaders and their interest in running for office when they were affiliated with a party. Electoral competition motivations and discussions on their ability to approve public policies for women at all levels were also addressed, but with some reservations regarding policies capable of only promoting the "policy of presence" (ALVAREZ, 1988; COSTA; SARDENBERG, 1994; COSTA, 2005).

Several notable achievements have been made for women in the legislative arena in the 21st-century Brazil, and they stemmed from struggles of the first and second feminist movements. These achievements include women suffrage, maternity leave, criminalization of sexual harassment in the workplace and changes to the Civil Code to ensure equal legal rights and land ownership in both urban and rural areas. Furthermore, Maria da Penha Act (highlighted below), Feminicide Act, and abortion legalization in anencephaly cases are among these movements' conquests. However, culturally moored oppression, such as wage inequality, low representativeness in political power spheres, abortion criminalization, and symbolic, domestic and public violence, remains in women's daily lives (SOARES; CHARLES; CERQUEIRA, 2019). In short, as emphasized by Luis Miguel and Flávia Biroli (2014), feminism opposes the social disparities that particularly oppress women and seeks to claim their rights through several confrontations driven by priorities and assumed positions both in the theoretical field and in the practical sphere of activism.

The current study addresses feminist activism based on the character 'Dona Raimunda', as well as on institutionalized violence against women and the need for affirmative actions over time. Therefore, despite the achievements made, violence against women remains rooted in culture and observed at significant numbers (VASCONCELOS et al., 2024). Affirmative action arises from the recognition of violations experienced by women who have historically been unprivileged and discriminated against (CARVALHO; LAGUARDIA; DESLANDES, 2022).

3.2 Women and their contributions to social actions

The further one goes back in time, the more difficult it is to observe women acting in social resistance scenarios since they only started gaining room and voice when prejudice against female leaders began to fade. According to the article by Adriana Alves da Silva and collaborators (SILVA et al., 2019) [Fight like a girl! The verb 'to fight' since birth in the lives of girls and women], "fight like a girl" is the perfect translation of a moment in Rosa Luxemburg's history and of the relevance of her ideas taken to our time. Rosa Luxemburg was a revolutionary activist in Poland and Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She took the growing insecurity of living under capitalism, the autonomous action of the masses and the historical needs driving them to self-organization, and the central commitment that, in the beginning, was action, as her starting points.

Her unique view of Christianity shown in her 1905 pamphlet "Socialism and the Churches" is an interesting moment in Rosa's life. Despite being an atheist, Rosa did not attack religion itself so much as the reactionary policies of the Church. She argued

that socialists were more faithful to the original principles of Christianity than the conservative clergy of her time (1871 to 1919). It is so, because socialists fought for a social order based on equality, liberty and fraternity, which are values complying with the Christian idea of "loving others as yourself", as described in Matthew 22:39. Thus, Rosa stated that priests should support socialism if they truly wanted to apply this Christian belief (OUVIÑA, 2021).

Rosa Luxemburg criticized the clergy fraction that was allied with the rich, that exploited and sometimes oppressed the poor. She argued that such clergy fully contradicted the Christian teachings by serving money rather than Christ. According to Rosa, early Christians were enthusiastic supporters of communism and reported social injustice. She did not seek a philosophical battle in the name of materialism. On the contrary, she sought to preserve the social dimension of the Christian tradition and to transmit it to the workers' movement. Rosa knew the relevance of Christianity for the struggle for rights and social justice, but she also criticized those who used religion to justify oppression and exploitation (OUVIÑA, 2021).

In recent years, Angela Yvonne Davis, who is an American philosopher, political activist and writer born in 1944, has been one of the world's leading advocates for human rights, social justice and racial equality (without religious bias, like Rosa's) (DIAS, 2020). Back in the 1960s, Angela joined several social movements like the Communist Party of the United States and the Black Panthers. She is known for her criticism of U.S. government's policies on civil and human rights, as well as on the country's prison system, which she sees as racist and oppressive. In 1970, Angela was charged with conspiracy and involvement in a California courthouse shooting. She became the target of an intense police and media manhunt and was arrested in New York, NY. However, Angela managed to escape and became a 'wanted man' by the FBI. She was on the 'ten most wanted' list for over two months until her capture in NY (DIAS, 2020).

Angela Davis' trial became a milestone in the fight for civil rights in the United States and called the attention of both the media and human rights organizations worldwide. She became a symbol of the fight against oppression and racial discrimination, and her arrest mobilized thousands of people around the globe. Angela Davis was acquitted of the charges in 1972 and kept on dedicating herself to fight for human rights and racial equality on the planet. Her written works include "Women, Race and Class" (DAVIS, 2016), "An Autobiography" (DAVIS, 2019) and "Freedom Is a Constant Struggle" (DAVIS, 2018). Angela Davis is also a leading advocate for the Black Lives Matter movement, which fights against police violence and racial discrimination in the United States (DIAS, 2020).

Many women followed Rosa Luxemburg's footsteps in Brazil and were also inspired by Angela Davis in the fight for their ideals and beliefs. The literature highlights Dandara, whose birth date is unknown (? – 1694), but who made her mark on history through struggling for Blacks' emancipation in Brazil. Dandara was 'Zumbi dos Palmares' companion in the largest *quilombo* of the colonial time. She fought bravely against oppression (SILVA; SILVA; DOS SANTOS LIMA, 2021) and led the resistance against the proposed agreement with the Portuguese Crown, which was her biggest legacy. This agreement aimed at offering land in exchange for fugitives. After her death, her head was displayed in a public square, which was a negative

landmark, but, after all, it was also an even more striking symbol of Blacks' struggle against the Portuguese royalty.

Maria Quitéria (1792-1853) is another example of female determination for social causes. She was a Bahia State soldier who fought in the 1822 Brazilian War of Independence against Portuguese troops and became a national female icon for freedom and equality. She was even decorated by Dom Pedro I as heroine. Her face started to be used by the Brazilian Army as symbol of women's organizations for amnesty during the Military Regime (1964-1985), from the 1950s onward (GOMES, 2019).

Ana Néri (1814-1888) is another example of female courage and its impact on society. This Brazilian woman stood out for fighting for nursing recognition and appreciation in Brazil (GRISARD; VIEIRA, 2009). She was the first Brazilian nurse to voluntarily enlist to care for wounded soldiers during the Paraguayan War. At the end of the war, in 1870, she returned to Brazil with four war orphans whom she rescued for herself and decided to raise, and it was another milestone in her life. The first awarded Humanitarian Gold Medal was granted to Ana Néri for her war services. She also founded the Free School of Nursing in Salvador, in 1890, which was later named after her. Decree by Emperor Dom Pedro II provided Ana with a lifetime pension, which she used to raise her family (VIVIAN; FLECK, 2021).

Carolina Maria de Jesus (1914-1977) legacy lies in her courage in writing about her reality and the social injustices she faced at a time when only few Black women had a voice in the Brazilian society and in the literature. Her first book, "*Quarto de Despejo*" (Dump Room), from 1960, had a huge impact back then. Carolina, who is a Black, migrant, single mother living in Favela Canindé, São Paulo, gained national and international recognition for documenting the daily poverty and exclusion she experienced. Her book is the result of an initiative by journalist Audálio Dantas; it broke with the literary and cultural standards of its time by giving voice to a socially marginalized character. However, its success was short-lived and limited to this single book. Later on, Carolina was largely forgotten by literary criticism at the time. According to Meihy (1998), Caroline was "deleted" by the elitism of literary criticism, by veiled censorship (mainly after the 1964 military coup), by class and racial prejudice, and by lack of recognition by the feminist and Black movements of the time. Despite the significant sales and translations into several languages, Carolina was not embraced by these social movements' as a symbol. Her debut book was published, despite of her large amount of unpublished materials (novels, plays, short stories and poems) that remained ignored by publishers and critics. Carolina's case discloses the Brazilian structural failure in recognizing and valuing the intellectual production of popular classes (TOLEDO, 2010).

Marielle Franco deserves special mention among Brazil's current leading female social activists. She deserves special mention for had been a politician and human rights activist who fought against police violence and racial discrimination. Sadly, she was murdered in 2018, but her legacy and struggle keeps on inspiring many. Marielle was born and raised in Maré neighborhood, which is one of the largest communities in Rio de Janeiro City. She became a mother at the age of 19 and broke social barriers throughout her life, mainly after achieving a solid academic background with a Major degree in Sociology and a Master's degree in Public Administration. Her political activism was driven by struggles focused on peripheral

populations, Black women, the LGBT community and police violence victims (DE MATTOS ROCHA, 2018).

Marielle occupied a historically denied place to Black women in Brazil, since she was elected as councilwoman by the PSOL political party with over 46.000 votes. Her presence in Rio de Janeiro City Council was a sign of resistance and of likely social transformation. Marielle systematically reported abuses by public security forces, which is a major and persistent problem for the State. She questioned security militarization and the high police lethality rates in favelas. Her journey of courage is interpreted in light of the biopolitics and necropolitics concepts by Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe, and by authors like MALLMANN and RODRIGUES (2018). According to them, Marielle's life and political activity symbolize the deep resistance to the logic of power that decides who lives and who dies. It highlights how the Brazilian State is selective in guaranteeing the right to life, mainly when it comes to Black and peripheral bodies (MALLMANN; RODRIGUES, 2018).

Marielle's execution on March 14, 2018 had international repercussion and reached The New York Times, The Guardian and the ABC News, in addition to trigger demonstrations by artists, intellectuals and social leaders. However, her death also triggered a wave of misinformation and falsehood on social media through the circulation of news attempting to destroy her image (MALLMANN; RODRIGUES, 2018). Nevertheless, Marielle's life and death remain a reference for new Black female leaders in Brazil.

Djamila Ribeiro, who is a black feminist philosopher, writer and activist must also be mentioned for her work in promoting gender and racial equality in the country. She wrote several books, including "Pequeno Manual Antirracista" (Little Anti-Racist Manual) (RIBEIRO, 2019). Djamila sees Black feminism as theoretical, political and existential instrument to break with the historical silence imposed on Black women. According to her, this is an essential reflection for a new civilizing framework capable of making deep changes in the Brazilian social structure. According to Djamila, only an intersectional perspective can fully grasp the reality of Black women in Brazil. Yet, she states that there is no true emancipation without the simultaneous confrontation of racism, sexism and socioeconomic inequalities (RIBEIRO, 2018).

Other women deserve to be mentioned. Sônia Guajajara is an Indigenous leader who developed her career defending Indigenous rights and protecting the environment. She coordinates the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) and is the current Minister of Indigenous Peoples. Preta Ferreira is one of the main social activists fighting for both decent housing and women's rights. She is the leader of the Homeless Movement of the Center (MSTC). Luana Génot is a lawyer and activist for the rights of transgender people in Brazil. She plays an important and official role as the founder of the National Network of LGBTQIA+ Popular Lawyers (RODRIGUES; FREITAS, 2021; TONELLI; CARVALHO; TEIXEIRA, 2023).

Sueli Carneiro is one of the most influential characters in Brazil's current intellectual field. She is often compared to Angela Davis. Sueli is a renowned author who has published books like "Writings of a Life", from 2018 (CARNEIRO, 2018). She is also the founder of Geledés – Instituto da Mulher Negra (Black Women's Institute), which has been a leading institution aimed at fighting and making research on racism for over three decades. In July 2020, Sueli turned 70 and her presence remains

increasingly needed in academic circles. Her legacy includes activism for Black women's rights, fight against racism and racial discrimination in Brazil, and a significant role in producing knowledge about Afro-Brazilian history and culture (CARNEIRO, 2023). Sueli Carneiro advocates in her writings and speeches that the anti-racist fight is a struggle for freedom and social justice, and that it is necessary to fight the historical and structural inequalities affecting the Black population in the country. Her legacy inspires activists and researchers to keep on fighting for a fairer and more equal world (RODRIGUES; FREITAS, 2021).

Maria da Penha Maia Fernandes is a pharmacist and biochemist who has become a symbol of the fight against domestic violence in Brazil. In 1983, she was the victim of two attempted murders by her then-husband that have left her paraplegic. Maria da Penha faced a long legal process during her fight for justice, despite the several attempts to dismiss the case, the impunity for the perpetrator and negligence by the Brazilian State. In 2006, the government enacted Act n. 11.340, known as Maria da Penha Act, which is one of the most advanced pieces of legislation in the world when it comes to fighting violence against women. It provides for on victim protection measures, prevention mechanisms and public policies to address feminicide, in particular (DIAS, 2015).

Carmen Barroso, who is a renowned Brazilian social scientist, should be introduced from a different perspective than those presented so far. She dedicated much of her career to fight for women's sexual and reproductive rights (BARROSO; BRUSCHINI, 1990). She is considered one of the world's leading figures in sexual and reproductive health and rights because of the permanent challenges she set for herself. She was the executive director of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, 2025), one of the world's largest non-governmental organizations in the sexual and reproductive health field. Carmen Barroso has a significant legacy in defending women's rights. She advocated for abortion legalization as public health issue and human right, and has led efforts to improve the quality and accessibility of sexual and reproductive health services in developing countries. Carmen is one of the founders of the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network. She wrote several articles and publications as main author (among them BARROSO, 1982; BARROSO, 2004; DE OLIVEIRA COSTA et al., 2019) and was granted with awards, including the United Nations International Prize for Human Rights, and recognitions throughout her career (DE OLIVEIRA COSTA et al., 2019).

Defending Indigenous peoples is one of Eliane Potiguara's life mottos. She is a Brazilian writer, activist and Indigenous leader of the Potiguara ethnic group. Her family's history is marked by violence; her great-grandfather was murdered by agents of an English company interested in their lands, which forced her family to migrate to a safer place: Pernambuco State. Potiguara found in the literature her weapon for a social battle after much efforts and decades of struggle. Eliane presents her biography and work on her website (POTIGUARA, 2025). She has written eight books for adults, and four for children and young adults. The book "Metade cara, meia máscara" (Meta Face, Half Mask) (POTIGUARA, 2004) is part of the "Visões Indígenas" (Indigenous Visions) series, which was organized by Daniel Munduruku. This series reflects the search for reinforcing the Indigenous identity in contemporary literature. It mixes mythical accounts, poems and personal memories, besides describing a journey through elements of her own genealogy.

The Universal Ambassador of Peace stands out among all Eliane Potiguara's titles and awards, since it is an honor awarded by the Universal Circle of Ambassadors of Peace, which is an UN affiliated organization. In addition to this highly symbolic achievement, she founded the first indigenous women organization in Brazil, in 1987, the so-called Indigenous Women's Network. She is also a co-founder of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB), which is one of the main organizations representing indigenous peoples in the country. Her legacy has been fundamental to promote intercultural dialogue and to deconstruct stereotypes and prejudice toward indigenous peoples (FIGUEIREDO, 2018).

Preta Rara is a Black activist rapper born in Baixada Santista region, São Paulo State. She has dedicated herself to fight racism and to outspread the appreciation of the Afro-Brazilian culture. Preta created the "Empowerment of the Periphery" project, which provides professional training for youngsters. She deserves to be mentioned because, in addition to her expressiveness and easy-to-understand language, Preta Rara has been disseminating campaigns against police violence. The title of her 2020 book, alone, suggests her anguish, "Eu, empregada doméstica: a senzala moderna é o quartinho da passer" [I, domestic worker: the modern slave quarters are the maid's little room] (RARA, 2020).

The present study also regards other women whose struggles and commitment are comparable to those introduced above, whether fighting for their own values, protecting their families or even fighting for the ideals of their entire communities. Bico do Papagaio coconut crackers face difficulties related to lack of infrastructure, exploitation and discrimination, and to environmental issues like deforestation and environmental degradation caused by farmers and land grabbers. Therefore, they have organized themselves into associations and cooperatives seeking to improve their working and living conditions. However, this fight requires the participation of leaders who take responsibility for their actions and tasks, who organize agendas, embrace their mottos and raise the flag for their daily struggles.

Francisca Pinto da Silva, known as Chica Queiroz, is a leader in Piauí State. She is the founder of the Association of Female Babaçu Coconut Crackers (AMQCB) and has dedicated herself to fight for preserving the culture of traditional communities and to improve nutcrackers' living (CARVALHO; MACEDO, 2023).

Dona Raimunda Gomes da Silva is the leadership reference among babaçu coconut crackers in Tocantins State. She is a core character for her community, besides being the subject of this work.

3.3 About Dona Raimunda: Tocantins nutcracker

Vera Lúcia Caixeta, PhD in History and professor at Federal University of Northern Tocantins, has recently published a paper (CAIXETA, 2023) on Dona Raimunda aimed at the documentary "Dona Raimunda, the nutcracker". The documentary was directed by Marcelo Silva and released in 2007. According to Caixeta, the documentary addresses the life story of "the most important Catholic female leader in the rural region of far Northern Goiás State in the late 20th and early 21st centuries". In a previous work, Milena Botelho de Azevedo 'Lena', a coauthor of the current article, analyzed the struggles and achievements of Bico do Papagaio

coconut crackers based on the literature and on "Dona Raimunda, the Nutcracker". The analysis focused babaçu extraction and female participation in it, with emphasis on Dona Raimunda (LENA, 2021). The aforementioned documentary was the most important source of information and data for the present study.

Figure 3 – Picture of Dona Raimunda, the coconut cracker.



Source: G1 Tocantins / CPT Araguaia-Tocantins / MIQCB. Picture: Thomas Bauer - CPT Bahia. (CPT, 2018).

The relevance given to the legacy of a simple, but empowered, woman is not random. Raimunda Gomes da Silva (Figure 3) was a woman, mother, Catholic, peasant, coconut cracker and feminist activist who lived, mobilized, expressed opinions, reacted, discussed and proposed alternatives in defense of both life and the environment. She gained national and international prominence due to her struggles. Dona Raimunda had striking physical features and vigorous temperament forged by deep psychosocial processes. She was known for her negotiation skills and diplomatic tone. She could move easily in any setting, whether in union meetings or in meetings with the State governor. Unfortunately, she passed away in 2018.

Dona Raimunda was the daughter of farmers from Maranhão State. She was part of a large family with 10 siblings and married at the age of 18. However, she decided to leave her husband after 14 years due to difficulties in her marriage, and raised her six children alone, working as farmhand. Dona Raimunda migrated many

times in search for better work conditions. She got to Bico do Papagaio region in 1979, where she found 52 resident families. She started mobilizing her peers after settling in the area and observing the problems faced by the village. Her aim was to form rural unions to fight for the rights of the people and to achieve prosperity. Her goal was to promote community work in the region and to protect residents from land grabbers who illegally invaded the land (LENA, 2021).

She became a community advocate and catechist in the early 1980s, which was an important platform to express her voice. In 1983, Father Josimo Tavares arrived in São Miguel do Tocantins region, currently known as Bico do Papagaio region (Figure 1) and it further strengthened Raimunda's activism. However, the priest was murdered three years later by ranchers and local authorities, precisely because of his staunch advocacy for squatters and small farmers (SILVA; DE OLIVEIRA, 2019).

Dona Raimunda started defending women after the crime. She played key role in creating the Association of Rural Female Workers of Bico do Papagaio (ASMUBIP), the Federation of Agricultural Workers of the State of Tocantins (FETAET) and the Secretariat for Women Extractivists of the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS), where she held a position for one decade. In 2008, the nutcracker women secured the approval of the "Free Babaçu Act", which prohibited farmers from felling babaçu palms and allowed women to collect babaçu coconuts in private properties. The aforementioned documentary portrays these women's work; they enter the forests and farms to collect babaçu coconuts (PÔRTO JÚNIOR; LENA, 2020).

In 2003, Dona Raimunda was granted with the Bertha Luz Award by the Federal Senate to women who have made significant contributions to the defense of women's rights and gender issues in Brazil. In 2005, she was named to the worldwide list of 1.000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Due to this international recognition, in 2009 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Federal University of Tocantins (UFT), and in 2013, she received the Guilhermina Ribeiro da Silva Woman-Citizen Diploma from Tocantins State Legislative Assembly. These distinctions are a sign of recognition for Dona Raimunda's work and for her dedication to promote the rights of female coconut crackers (DE BRITO; DE ALMEIDA, 2017).

3.4 Between struggles and legacies: Dona Raimunda talks to great female voices

Dona Raimunda's life story is part of a broader stage of resistance led by women who have challenged oppression structures and transformed their local, regional and even international realities, and who are symbols of struggle throughout history. Alongside Angela Davis, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Marielle Franco, Eliane Potiguar, Maria da Penha, Sueli Carneiro and so many other herein mentioned leaders, Dona Raimunda is part of a mosaic of female voices who, in their own ways, were the leaders of transformative actions. For now, it is interesting building a bridge among these experiences by assessing their intersections, identifying convergence points among their struggles, strategies and legacies, and considering each context. It is not enough to simply compare trajectories. It is essential, recognizing a symbolic dialogue between these great leaders and Dona Raimunda's life by highlighting how

her local actions have echoed universal values of justice, equality, solidarity and social emancipation.

Dona Raimunda's trajectory closely matches that of Angela Davis, mainly when it comes to fighting power structures known for marginalizing poor Black women. Although Davis reports class and racial oppression in the United States and Dona Raimunda fought land grabbing, political violence and the exploitation of rural workers in Northern Brazil, comparisons are plausible: they ultimately acted in social inequality contexts, faced persecution and threats, but remained unwavering in their struggles. Angela and her critical thinking, and Dona Raimunda, although far from the academic world, developed a popular and practical social thought, and achieved concrete rights, such as the Free Babaçu Act. Both women have proven that Black women's political activism can be exercised forcefully.

The "resistance" in Carolina de Jesus' "Quarto de Despejo" [Dump Room] (1960) was the echo of Dona Raimunda's voice. Although without formal writing productions, Raimunda led speeches, meetings and assemblies as instruments of awareness and whistleblowing. Assumingly, perhaps her courage was proven to a higher degree in these particular acts. Sueli Carneiro built a trajectory of intellectual and institutional articulation in fighting against racism and for Black feminism. Dona Raimunda, in her turn, worked in creating rural-based associations and federations with the same purpose, namely: giving voice to women marginalized by the system.

Marielle Franco and Djamila Ribeiro form a link among different expressions of Black female activism in Brazil. Marielle reported state violence against Black, poor and LGBTQIA+ populations and dared to occupy a space historically denied to women like her, just as Dona Raimunda through her surveillance. Furthermore, Dona Raimunda came from a rural area and organized the coconut-cracker community in Tocantins, which was based on strong associations that have faced the landowning power with boldness and courage. Djamila Ribeiro contributed to the theoretical and critical development of a new feminism that finds concrete expression in the lives of coconut crackers. Dona Raimunda's strength emerged from poverty, from the solitary care given to her children and from experiencing institutional exclusion firsthand. Therefore, if Djamila offers the theoretical language to name these oppressions, Dona Raimunda would be the body that fought them on a daily basis. Together, these three women, in their different activity fields: the parliament, the academia and the land, disclosed the plurality and power of black female leaders in environments where it is difficult to emerge from given their real conditions.

The reflection exercise developed throughout the current study has shed light on Northeastern female characters whose actions have deeply shaped Brazilian history, both in the past and in present times. There is a line of continuity in their life stories that link resistance, resilience and commitment to social transformation generated by the peripheral margins of society that form a three-pronged foundation for this historical line. Dona Raimunda embodied the strength of the Northeastern woman who, just like Maria da Penha, experienced domestic violence firsthand and faced impunity with courage and persistence. She turned her pain into protective legislation. Maria Quitéria and Ana Néri, in a more distant past, challenged the gender roles imposed in their historical contexts also from the suffering of Brazilian Northeastern women. Similarly, Dona Raimunda subverted social expectations by

embodying political leadership in the countryside. Yet, Dandara dos Palmares is worthy recalling based on what is known about her, which should endure throughout history. Dandara, the quilombola, echoes Raimunda through her bravery in facing oppression. Both women defended territories, whether quilombos, forests or babaçu groves, as spaces of autonomy and collective survival. Even Carolina Maria de Jesus, with her sharp writing in accessible words, who was born in a favela, represents an ancestry shared by Raimunda, whose expression and strength lied in migrant and Northeastern women. Dona Raimunda carried this entire heritage within herself. Her value intertwined that of Northeastern women who, in different times and contexts, stood up to shout to the world that things would be different with their presence.

Based on the work of female activists and, more specifically, on Dona Raimunda's influence, one can observe the relevance of considering the 'invention of the present'. Dona Raimunda could shape and change current situations through her innovative practices and strategies (SILVA et al., 2017). She challenged cultural and social conventions, and illustrated innovation in seeking change. Dona Raimunda is an example of redefining gender standards and of the ability of female activists to deeply influence social structures by occupying historically marginalized spaces, such as coconut-cracking related activities (BAGAGLI, 2017). Her struggle transcended into engaged action in a whole variety of causes; she addressed much more than the right to work in coconut cracking, but also reproductive rights, gender violence, wage equity, political representation, and the preservation of cultures and traditions.

With respect to female coconut-crackers, in particular, the battle for free access to babaçu can be understood as a territorial dispute, since it is a natural agro-ecologically exploited resource that causes no harm to the environment. Territorial conflicts deprive women who depend on babaçu to access the coconut trees besides interfering with their way of life. According to Ferreira (2017, p. 8), the threat to babaçu plantations compromises families' food, territorial and environmental security, since everything, from the palm trees to their fruits, is used by them. However, the very focus of the current study is the symbolic representation of female coconut-cracker leaders. Dona Raimunda lives in different spheres of society, from local communities to non-governmental organizations, political parties, and educational and research institutions (SALES et al., 2019). Any mother who values caring for their homes and children, and who often has a job, is a Dona Raimunda.

Final Considerations

This study highlighted the relevance of female leadership within impairing contexts and situations, with emphasis on the social dimension. It took Dona Raimunda Gomes da Silva, an emblematic coconut-cracking character as reference. According to the analysis, Dona Raimunda's actions resisted traditional gender domination structures and reinvented political leadership forms starting from social margins that likely redefine the meaning of both collective action and female activism in agro-extractive communities.

The theoretical category "invention of the present" showed that Dona Raimunda disrupted everyday life by proposing alternatives to realities experienced by her community in Bico do Papagaio, Tocantins State. Her leadership was grounded

in life experience, attentive listening to her peers and on articulating solidarity networks by turning universal social justice, emancipation and gender equality values into the very core of her actions. The investigation involving historically significant women, such as Angela Davis, Marielle Franco and Carolina Maria de Jesus, to mention a few who were herein assessed, allowed concluding that Dona Raimunda held many skills and featured many attributes that mark this constellation of female voices known for their transformative potential.

Dona Raimunda and other coconut crackers' (from Bico do Papagaio) deep sense of cultural identity and pride of their heritage are notable features. They value and preserve their traditions, even amidst the many difficulties for establishing themselves as legal and charitable workers. Other points worth highlighting include race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation, and other dimensions that disclose the relevance of intersectionality in coconut crackers' practices. They mainly give voice to those who face more than one form of exclusion. Another emphasis should be placed on their organization form, as it involves collective work toward shared goals, and their resilient capacity to protect themselves from prejudice and violence.

By shining light on Dona Raimunda's trajectory, the current study also recognized and valued all "Dona Raimundas" who are often invisible, but who bravely sustain their families and communities' pillars with resilience and creativity.

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