

Chapter 4

Defending What Is Ours

Asserting Land Rights through ‘Popular’ Catholicism in a Brazilian *Quilombo*

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Σὺν Ἀθηνᾶ καὶ χεῖρα κίνει

— Aesopic dictum¹

This chapter explores the dynamics of religious devotion and land occupation as they manifest in a black rural *quilombo* community² in the state of Maranhão, Brazil. Through an ethnographic analysis of current religious practices in the *quilombo* and adjacent areas, it will be argued that tensions over land occupation take shape as tensions over religious identity. With a particular focus on the annual religious festival of the community’s patron saint, Santa Teresa de Jesus, the chapter will delve into the ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott 1985, 1990) of Catholic peasant resistance against what is often experienced as an overwhelming growth of Pentecostalism in the region.

The chapter aims to show that through participation in the various ceremonies that comprise and surround this *feira* (feast), as well as through the circulation of ‘parables’, Catholic residents seek to reaffirm the religious affiliation of all residents of the ‘saint’s lands’ – the collective territory that belongs to Santa Teresa. As will be shown in the following pages, this endeavour manifests itself through three main grass-roots acts of ‘religious activism’: (a) oral accounts narrating Santa Teresa’s divine intervention to protect the residents and her lands; (b) physical mapping of the collective territory in outings to collect donations for the organization of the feast; and (c) the actual feast days (14, 15, 16

Notes for this chapter begin on page 86.

October) when Catholics from the forty villages that comprise the ‘lands of Santa Teresa’ and beyond gather together to celebrate their patron saint and their shared religious and land heritage. These acts aim to reinforce Catholicism vis-à-vis a growing Pentecostal presence in the area, which is often perceived by *quilombolas* (the residents of *quilombos*) to be at odds with their way of inhabiting their collective territory. Ultimately, this chapter wishes to contribute to anthropological discourses on place-making and Christianity by shifting the focus from questions of ‘capturing souls’ (through religious conversion) to an issue that has been given far less attention, that of ‘capturing land’ and the larger question of land antagonisms.

Itamatatiua, Alcântara and the *Quilombo* Clause

Slavery had always been accompanied by revolts and escapes of the enslaved that often led to the formation, lasting out different periods, of informal settlements called *quilombos* and *mocambos*³ (Arruti 2006; Leite 2015). In Alcântara, a municipality in the north-west of Maranhão state, *quilombos* started to proliferate, especially after the second half of the eighteenth century when, due to the region’s deep economic crisis, colonists were largely impelled to abandon their estates and seek more prosperous opportunities elsewhere (Viveiros 1999; Almeida 2006: 72; Sá 2007). The region’s distinctive economic and trade history created especially propitious conditions for the creation and growth of rural communities of formerly enslaved people (self-emancipated, freed and runaways), who were able to establish their presence in a nearly uninhibited way (Linhares 1999; Almeida 2006: 29–31; Andrade and Souza Filho 2006) several decades before the official abolition of slavery in 1888.⁴ In large part due to this remarkable history, Alcântara is currently the municipality with the greatest concentration of black rural *quilombo* communities in the country, numbering nearly two hundred (Mattos 2005; Gomes 2015: 154). Virtually all of them are certified ‘descendants of *quilombos*’ by the Palmares Foundation – the government institution entrusted with the task of issuing official certificates to *quilombo* remnant communities based on their self-identification as such – but none has effective title deeds.

The struggle for land is a continuous and arduous reality for hundreds of *quilombos* in Brazil, and one that is increasingly ensnared in the ongoing socio-political crisis in the country. Article 68 of the Temporary Constitutional Provisions Act (ADCT) of the 1988 Federal Constitution (the so-called ‘*Quilombo* Clause’) recognized, for the first time, *quilombo*

descendants' rights to land.⁵ Ever since, it has become the focal point of an array of social movements and political organizations working in defence of land and other human rights, and has given legal grounds to *quilombos'* struggles nationwide. However, while nearly 1,700 *quilombos* are requesting official titling of their communally inhabited lands, only 179 *quilombo* territories in the country have been given titles deeds.⁶ Contrary to constitutional provisions and facing strong opposition from parties averse to *quilombo* land regulation (Hatzikidi 2019), the process of land identification and the issuance of title deeds is a long and bumpy road for petitioning *quilombolas* (inhabitants of *quilombos*).

The formation of free peasantry in Alcântara since at least the eighteenth century, and the absolute lack of any legal documentation recognizing their effective land occupation created a 'lacuna between reality and legality' (Caires 2012: 157). This 'lacuna' enabled the invisibilization of Alcântara's peasant population, the non-acknowledgment of their land possession, and ultimately the selection of Alcântara during the years of the military dictatorship (1964–1985) for a military satellite-launch base, run by the Brazilian Air Force, leading to the construction of the Alcântara Launch Centre (Centro de Lançamento de Alcântara, henceforth CLA) in the early 1980s. Among the major arguments put forward by political and military officials in favour of Alcântara's selection was that the area presented a unique 'demographic void' (Almeida 2006: 56); a compelling premise for the realization of Brazil's space technology development plans (Braga 2011: 46). Its construction displaced twenty-three communities which were relocated in seven government-funded project communities (*agrovilas*). Both the occupation of *quilombo* land and the uprooting of the communities created a massive wave of reaction and protest by *quilombolas* and political activists who joined their cause (Andrade 2006; Pereira Junior 2009; Serejo Lopes 2012; Mitchell 2018). The CLA clearly holds a key place for Brazil's position as a global power, but at the same time it emblematically embodies land threats for most Alcântara's *quilombos*, as the possibility of further expansion of the space base, and therefore further evictions, continues to loom large.⁷

Alcântara's *quilombo* history of a long and nearly uninterrupted land occupation for many generations has instilled a deep-seated conviction of collective land ownership, despite the lack of official documentation of land possession. Well before, and independently from, the 1988 constitutional provisions that reinforced, and gave legal basis for, *quilombo* struggles for land across Brazil, *quilombos* in Alcântara had on several occasions successfully managed to maintain sovereignty over their lands against land grabbers. Such 'success stories' survive in narratives that circulate widely among *quilombolas* but they used to be less well known outside

the region and the state. As Mitchell noted, 'the planners of Brazil's space program could not have known in advance that they would attempt to build their equatorial spaceport in an area with deeply remembered traditions of winning and holding land from powerful adversaries through resistance and persistence' (Mitchell 2008: 39). *Quilombolas* in Alcântara – whether directly or indirectly affected by the CLA – united in a common struggle for visibility and defence of their land rights that also reinforced various individual communities' independent land struggles.

As a result of this mobilization, several social movements emerged (many of which aligned with regional and national *quilombo* and black social movements) and an even stronger awareness of land rights was consolidated in the rural population. United they have achieved some important, albeit 'fragile', wins such as the (unofficial) demarcation of 78,105 hectares as 'unified *quilombo* territory', one of the three zones in which Alcântara's territory is informally divided. Nevertheless, the long wait for land titles (due to the extremely slow-moving process of *quilombo* land regulation), together with the various challenges *quilombolas* are faced with on a regular basis, exacerbate land insecurity in the area and urge residents to seek alternative ways of asserting their land rights and protecting their communal territories.

This discussion grounds the larger question of *quilombo* land struggle in the context of Itamatatua, one of Alcântara's villages situated within a second municipal zone (called 'lands of Santa Teresa') and outside the area directly affected by the CLA. I will try to show that in this particular case, and unlike the 'unified *quilombo* territory', land tensions are primarily articulated as religious tensions, namely between Catholics (historically being the single major religious group in the area) and the growing Pentecostal minority. I will do this by discussing grass-roots actions that residents take in defence of the collective territory against those they perceive as religious antagonists. More specifically, I will seek to explore some of the ways Catholic residents reinforce Catholicism and religious ties amongst *quilombolas* in order to counter the emergence and influence of Pentecostal churches, whose approach to land property is perceived to be incompatible to their own. It will be argued that the community's major religious feast, Festa de Santa Teresa, is the culmination of a compound of elements that articulate the 'Catholic social' and help establish a robust opposition to Pentecostal expansion and concomitant land threats. In defending and maintaining a Catholic identity, residents are simultaneously defending their communal territory, regarded as intrinsically Catholic since its foundation as Itamatatua.⁸

Children of the Saint and Children of the Land

Itamatatiua, officially within the administrative borders of Alcântara, is part of an informal zone denominated 'lands of Santa Teresa', a geographic association that resonates strongly with the history of the community, as many residents perceive it. The over 50,000 hectares of the lands of Santa Teresa encompass approximately forty *quilombos*, with Itamatatiua being the zone's symbolic and administrative centre. This area largely corresponds to the *fazenda* Tamatatiua, former property of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Carmelites) in Alcântara, dating back to 1745. Today, it remains the property of the state of Maranhão while in the process of land regulation as *quilombo* territory. Despite several mentions of the existence of *quilombos* in the vicinities of the Carmelite *fazenda* in colonial archives,⁹ tracing the exact period of foundation of the *quilombo* that is today Itamatatiua is virtually impossible. However, since collective memory 'always supposes an authoritarian beginning' (Fernández Bravo 2008: 161), Itamatatiua's foundation narratives place its own not at a specific point in time but at a specific event: a holy agreement between residents and their patron saint, Santa Teresa de Jesus.

According to those narratives, Santa Teresa invited the 'Black people of Itamatatiua' to live on her lands and promised to protect them. In exchange, the people – who hence became 'the saint's children' – promised to revere her and take care of her land. To concretize this pact for future generations and make their kin relation with the saint explicit, residents adopted her religious name, Santa Teresa de Jesus, as their own last name. 'Everyone who is a child of the land (*filho da terra*) is "de Jesus"', Dona Irene, one of the residents, told me; she continued: 'When you see that someone has a different last name, then you know they are from someplace else'.

An essential part of the agreement between Santa Teresa and her children was the establishment of the role of the land custodian (*encarregadola da terra*). The role, passed on from one generation to the next to this day, is the most important administrative role within the saint's territory since it carries the responsibility to keep the agreement made with the saint and administer the communal lands. There are three main elements that distinguish Itamatatiua from the rest of the *quilombos* within the saint's lands: (1) the existence of the church (where Santa Teresa herself is believed to reside) and the main cemetery; (2) the fact that the land custodians are always drawn from the same Itamatatiua-based extended family; and (3) the adoption of the saint's name by Itamatatiua's residents. While the church, the cemetery, and the figurine of Santa Teresa serve

as convergent points and poles of attraction for all Catholic residents of the saint's lands, the institution of the land custodian and the adoption of the saint's name, refer to aspects of the relation with the patron saint exclusively enjoyed by Itamatatiuenses. This distinction underpins Itamatatiua's key administrative role within the shared territory.

Itamatatiua residents' territorial awareness is especially pronounced and directly associated with their own religious and onomastic identity. As Pereira Junior has observed, the adoption of the saint's religious name 'needs to be seen as a means to reinforce social links with the Saint and the land' (Pereira Junior 2011: 96). It was precisely through the establishment of kinship ties with Santa Teresa that the people of Itamatatiua became, and continue to be, the legitimate heirs and custodians of her lands. Since this putative inheritance was not accompanied by legal papers (legally a saint cannot own anything, let alone transfer property rights) it remained a holy verbal pact between the people and the saint. Hence, from the saint's children's point of view, assuming the responsibility to live on, and take care of, the lands Santa Teresa bestowed upon them, constitutes a very real and binding pact that justifies them – both in the literal and the theological sense of the word 'justify'¹⁰ – as lawful occupiers of those territories under the saint's divine protection. It is this firm belief of legitimate land occupation that compels them to defend their communally owned lands from alleged predators. Having the saint as their strongest and most faithful ally,¹¹ has provided Itamatatiuenses with courage, determination and faith in their overt and covert confrontations with land antagonists ever since the community's foundation.

Besides Santa Teresa herself, the Catholic Church has also built a strong relationship with Itamatatiua, and neighbouring *quilombos* over the years. From the mid-1950s, and particularly during the years of the military dictatorship, sectors of the Catholic Church in Brazil were instrumental in the dissemination, especially in rural areas and the north-eastern Brazilian states, of what Michael Löwy (1996) has called 'liberationist Christianity'; a socio-religious movement deeply influenced by egalitarian and socialist ideas and values that later informed the body of writings called liberation theology. Among other things, it contributed to the emergence of a strong Catholic black consciousness movement (Burdick 1993; French 2007). The then formed Ecclesiastic Base Communities (CEBs) embraced critical pedagogical and Marxist theories, and worked hand in hand with underprivileged groups across the country, contributing to the consolidation of a liberal political education, especially among the rural poor in Brazil (Dullo 2013). They also importantly provided practical knowledge for political mobilization, having a strong influence on the ways *quilombolas*

and other peasants voiced their concerns and organized themselves in defence of their rights (Montero 2012: 171).

In Alcântara, pastoral agents took an active role in the struggle of *quilombolas* against the CLA, defending residents' land claims and spreading awareness of their cause. From the early 1980s to this day, clergy and lay advisers in Alcântara have, by and large, joined forces with the *quilombolas* in the articulation of their positions. *Quilombola* and black movement activists have built a tight relationship of collaboration with Catholic missionaries and priests in Alcântara, something that has not happened with Pentecostal pastors and their churches more broadly. The work of the Catholic Church influenced by liberationist Christianity has gradually built a profile of a church of acceptance, of the poor and marginal, and of all those less privileged in general. Löwy importantly underpins that this was not a uniquely Brazilian phenomenon but was widespread across Latin America where the 'Church of the Poor is the inheritor of the ethical rejection of capitalism by Catholicism' – a product of 'negative affinity', in Weberian terms, between the two (Löwy 1996: 30).

This is especially important when contrasted with the 'dominant conservative political/religious culture of most Evangelical churches' that 'often turns them into passive or ardent supporters of the status quo and sometimes even of sinister military dictatorships, like those of Brazil, Chile and Guatemala' (Löwy 1996: 113). Known for their powerful political alliances and rapidly accumulated wealth (Siepierski 1997; Cunha 1999; Campos 2011; Machado and Burity 2014), this side of Evangelical churches is strongly reflected in popular perceptions in Alcântara about the recent 'infiltration' of Pentecostal churches in their communities.

For many *quilombolas*, an identity of 'poor' (*pobre*) imbued with dignity and pride is perhaps one of the most impactful residues of the work of liberationist Christianity. Also, importantly, the political alliance between members of the Catholic Church and Afro-Brazilian movements in Alcântara (especially in the 1990s) further contributed to the creation of an imaginary whereby the Catholic Church is defending and wishes to empower *quilombolas* and their cultural traditions.

There are several ethnographic cases where Catholicism has emerged as a religion that respects and even protects local cultures against a competing power or other religion. For example, Sarró makes a compelling argument about the 'alliance between Christianity and "custom"' (Sarró 2009: 81) in his discussion of the Baga in Guinea. Facing increasing rates of conversion to Islam, many Baga opted for conversion to Catholicism as they felt that in this way they could better protect their religious and ethnic traditions against what they saw as Islam's sweeping, modernizing force (ibid.: 78). All things considered, Catholic Christianity, as practised

in places like Itamatatiua, similarly transpires as a church that allows relative freedom of religious and cultural expression in comparison to the strict prohibitions and rigid rules of many Pentecostal churches.

Furthermore, many of the current *quilombo* leaders have collaborated with local CEBs and pastoral agents, usually alongside civil political activists. Several priests have spent spells in Itamatatiua contributing not only to residents' religious education but also to political and human rights. Father Haroldo, for instance, first went to Itamatatiua in 1958 and has since worked closely with Neide, the land custodian and community leader. He has overtly embraced the community's struggle for land rights. In a conversation I had with him he expressed his vehement position with regards to the presence of an Evangelical pastor in Itamatatiua. He said: 'Who has entered there now is a Protestant, isn't that right? And he shouldn't have. Because this colony is of the *quilombolas*. Not his. This is wrong, it is just wrong. It's like me arriving there and building a house. No. This is a *quilombo*. A *quilombo*. A *quilombo*', he repeated firmly.

Evangelicals in the Lands of Santa Teresa

The presence of Pentecostal churches has been growing significantly in rural Alcântara over the past decade, especially of the Assemblies of God,¹² reshaping and reconfiguring the religious map of the area. Although no Protestant church has been built in Itamatatiua so far, other communities that are part of the saint's lands have already seen an *Assembleia de Deus* being constructed in their *quilombo*. A pastor of the Assembly of God has been established in Itamatatiua with his family in the past few years, with the overt plan to erect a church in the centre of the *quilombo*. Similar to Father Haroldo's account, the arrival of *crentes* in Itamatatiua has been seen by many Catholic residents as an intrusion into the territory of the saint and a direct violation of their territorial rights. While Father Haroldo's justification for the repudiation of the Evangelical presence in the community was made on ethno-legal grounds (Itamatatiua having the legally protected status of *quilombo*), many residents articulate their objection to the pastor's establishment in their community on entirely religious grounds, Itamatatiua being land of Santa Teresa, and hence, by definition, Catholic only. 'These are the lands of Santa Teresa,' Nazaré, a resident of Itamatatiua told me, 'because ever since I became aware of myself everyone was saying that this land is the saint's – and I continue to believe the same'.

One of the main reasons the Protestant presence has been experienced as invasive by many Catholics is the curtailment, or outright repudiation,

of local rules of land use and management, and, by consequence, the role of land custodian. According to the pact made with the saint, and which the land custodian is in charge of applying, all residents of the saint's territory have free and equal access to land. It is the land custodian's role, however, to administer the 50,000 hectares of land and to allocate plots for use and appropriation by residents, according to their needs. No one is allowed to do so without consulting the land custodian, nor to fence out, or otherwise demarcate, land for private use or sale.¹³ Despite these regulations, the illicit demarcation of plots of land has become an increasingly frequent phenomenon in recent years. Seu Chico, a resident of Itamatatiua, illustrates a common objection to any land appropriation by 'outsiders' and/or non-Catholics that takes place in the lands of Santa Teresa:

And when they [arrived] ... they started ... each one grabs a small piece of land. But this land is one only, a single unit. *Nobody can say 'I am the owner' because it is Santa Teresa's*, it was donated to Santa Teresa. The Carmelites donated it because they didn't find who to sell it to at the time, so they donated it to Santa Teresa. Because *she* is the owner. I mean, they didn't donate it to me, or to Neide or to Luisa, or even to the elders. No. It was donated to Santa Teresa. (Emphasis added)

Even though Evangelical Christians (whether 'outsiders' who moved to the saint's lands or the very 'children' who converted) are *not* the only ones who show 'disrespect' of local land regulations and curb the role of the land custodian when deciding to build their houses or cultivate land, they are identified by the majority of Catholic residents as the main (and often only) transgressors. Their presence is largely seen as an intrusion and a direct violation of their collective land rights.

On the one hand, alluding to the classic Weberian thesis, the Protestant ethic has been tightly connected to capitalism and private property, while Catholicism, in the 'true' Christian spirit and to a large extent due to the legacy of liberationist Christianity, has popularly been associated with an economic ethic of sharing – especially in Brazil. On the other hand, one needs to acknowledge that Protestant churches have also historically been on the side of the poor and the marginal – from their role in the US civil rights movement (see e.g. Taylor 2002) to their contemporary growing popularity among working- and lower-middle-class Afro-Brazilians (Burdick 1999; Jacob et al. 2003) – while the Catholic Church has expressed competing views on private property and free enterprise (as prominently expressed in *Centesimus annus*), also spurring some highly controversial works in defence of a capitalist Catholicism (Novak 1982, 1993; Neuhaus 1992).

A critical anthropological discussion of the study of *quilombo* as a utopian socialist community (cf. Andrade 2006; Souza Filho and Andrade 2012) against the background of views on land and property rights that the churches embraced by *quilombolas* espouse and the ways these materialize in specific contexts, would shed much-needed light on the intricacies of the *quilombo* religious landscape and its closely knit relationship with land. Such an exercise might serve to show the diversity of the different case studies, and warn against categorical associations between religious affiliation and perception of property rights. However, this or a comparative analysis between Pentecostal and Catholic approaches to land and property in time and space clearly go beyond the scope of the present chapter. A question that seems central to our discussion is why do Evangelicals stand out as the ones mainly responsible for the current land crisis in the lands of Santa Teresa?

For most Catholic *quilombolas*, the answer is obvious: Evangelicals have a different approach to land than they do. While they have a collective understanding of land use, Evangelicals tend to appropriate land privately and for their exclusive use. Similarly, Boyer observed that the main conflicts between Catholics and Evangelical converts in the Amazonian *quilombo* Silêncio do Matá were due to the ‘collective ownership of land that the [residents’] association wanted to impose’ on Pentecostal residents (Boyer 2002: 170). As my field data suggest, however, in the case of Itamatatua the problem of private land appropriation acquires a different dimension: not only does it go against an established ethic of sharing, but it contradicts the axiom that the land belongs to Santa Teresa (hence it already has an owner) and that her children are there to inhabit it collectively and not to appropriate it individually. In other words, the problem lying at the heart of this religious tension has to do with the nature of land occupation; not only in terms of individual versus collective ownership but also importantly between *using* and *appropriating* (someone else’s) land.

Affirming ‘Radical Breaks’

Connecting present-day Pentecostal Christianity to its historical roots, Roberta Campos discusses Pentecostalism as a movement that carries with it its Reformation mark of ‘dissolution’ – of breaking any interference in the devout’s relationship with God (Campos 2011: 1014). Amongst other anthropologists of Christianity, Joel Robbins has argued that Pentecostalism ‘avails itself of meaningful idioms for talking about the past and about current social problems’ and broader concerns (Robbins

2004: 129). Within a context of radical land insecurity, and tapping into culturally meaningful modalities of the social, Pentecostals make use of available 'mechanisms of producing consensus' (Montero, Arruti and Pompa 2011: 154) to adopt a new theological model, which effectively becomes an evocative channel for the dissemination of new ideas, the aggregation of new members, and the legitimization of their opposition.

Drawing on Campos's notion of 'dissolution', on the notion of a 'radical break' with the past as introduced by the anthropology of Christianity (Meyer 1998; Robbins 2003; Engelke 2004; Cannell 2006; Marshall 2008), and on field observations, I suggest that for the 'dissidents' of the saint's lands – those who for whatever reasons oppose or disapprove of the hereditary role of the land custodian (currently in the hands of a woman who is also the elected community president in Itamatatiua) – Pentecostalism provides an idiom that enables radical breaks with established regimes and relationships. Evangelical converts do not see the 'children of the saint' as any more legitimate heirs to the land than themselves. Indeed, they do not see any 'children of the saint' for that matter. They do not believe in the existence of saints and, by consequence, they do not acknowledge land possession by one. By breaking with the figure of the saint they also render the role of the land custodian redundant: if there is no saint, there are no saint's lands, and no need for an administrator of those lands. What is in place after conversion is the convert's direct relationship with God and his/her direct (individualized and no longer collective) access to land.

For some *quilombolas*, such is the impact of land grabbing and the 'infiltration' of Evangelicals and 'outsiders' (usually from nearby towns/villages), with their concomitant modifications to the way land used to be acquired, that they no longer see all lands of Santa Teresa as hers anymore. Dona Maria de Jesus, one of Itamatatiua's eldest residents at the time of writing, contemplated: 'This land used to be enormous. Santa Teresa used to have so much [land]. But not anymore, only this little bit here [Itamatatiua]'. Restricting the limits of the lands of Santa Teresa to Itamatatiua, one of the few communities without a Pentecostal church, Dona Maria is making an implicit connection between religious affiliation and land denomination. As would become clear in the course of my fieldwork in Itamatatiua, Dona Maria and others no longer consider as saint's lands those areas with a conspicuous Pentecostal presence. Put differently, the very use of land by non-Catholics, and, perhaps especially, Evangelical Protestants, has a direct implication on the ownership of land, which the saint is being denied. In that case, the land itself ceases to be property of the saint and turns into just any (free) land. Zé Roxo, a resident of Itamatatiua in his sixties, remembers:

At the time I became aware myself, it [the saint's territory] stretched far away on that side ... all of that was hers; all, all, all, all of it. And today, not even half of it is left. But at that time, as I say, [there were] few people, everyone believed [in the saint], everyone... 'she is the owner, she is the patron saint, she is the owner' ... and then, with this story ... how many *crentes* don't they live here? And they go around saying '[a] *saint does not own land. This is just scrubland*'. (Emphasis added)

When land ownership is intrinsically attached to the observance of a specific religion by its residents (in this case, Catholicism), then the maintenance of religious faith becomes imperative to the safeguarding of territory. In order to protect the inherent mono-religiosity of, and preserve their sovereignty over, the more than 50,000 hectares of the lands of Santa Teresa, while they await formal attribution of their communal land titles, Itamatatiuenses are actively involved in actions that help to reinforce Catholicism in the saint's lands and reassert their territorial rights. 'We need to defend what's ours, otherwise all will be lost', said Marinete, a resident of Itamatatiua and a former city councillor candidate. Many other residents share Marinete's resolve and feel that the community 'as a family' – as Ribinha, Itamatatiua's resident and current city councillor emphasized in a community meeting – 'needs to work together' to resolve land tensions.

But exactly how big is the family of Itamatatiua? Or, inverting the question, who is not part of this family? For the Catholic residents of the lands of Santa Teresa, the family of Itamatatiua is composed of all the saint's children: the descendants of the founding family and, by extension, all Catholics who inhabit the saint's land and abide by her rules. However, religious affiliation, as an acknowledgement of one's attachment to a religious community, is 'simultaneously [an] articulatory and marginalising' (Burdick 1998: 7) practice that aggregates some while alienating others. Similarly, the right to property can also be defined 'as the right to exclude – the ability to determine who does and does not belong in a particular space' (Staeheli and Mitchell 2008: 32). For many Itamatatiuenses and other residents of the saint's lands, inclusion in and exclusion from the family of Santa Teresa's children is circumscribed by religious affiliation, which in turn determines, and is determined by, land use. If one lives in the lands of Santa Teresa then one is necessarily a Catholic (or, at least, a Catholic sympathiser and respectful of the role of the saint's land custodian) by virtue of the agreement between the saint and first residents. Conversely, if one is not a Catholic (or does not observe land rules) then one has no place in those lands.

Boyer has argued that the close relationship between the black movement and the Catholic Church has created a religious discourse that

leaves little room for Evangelicals. Even as a minority group within the predominately Catholic *quilombo*, she argues, 'a religious group that rejects the cult of saints appears as a threat when the legitimacy of political engagement (the Black cause) is constructed through the participation in the Catholic feasts' (Boyer 2002: 170). Although this view may exaggerate the influence of national *quilombo* and black movement politics on religious life in the *quilombo*, it makes an important point by stressing the 'incompatibility' of *quilombola* and Evangelical identity as many (within and outside the *quilombo*) perceive it.

While some would welcome a harmonious coexistence of Catholics and Pentecostals, for many such a scenario is not viable. Benedita, a devotee of Santa Teresa from Itamatatuiua, talks about the need for mutual respect: 'We respect their law and they need to respect ours'. Dona Maria dos Santos, another resident of Itamatatuiua, similarly says: 'We need to celebrate the Saints' feast days, you know? They [Evangelicals] don't accept these things. But everyone does what he wants, right? What he likes. For me this is how it goes. You like your community? Then you stay there, and we stay in ours, right? This is how it is'. In this case then, respect also entails the acknowledgement of the impossibility of coexistence, since one 'law' overlaps or clashes with the other. In discussing cohabitation, Bruno Latour heralded the replacement of time with space as 'the main ordering principle', arguing:

The questions are no longer: 'Are you going to disappear soon?' ... An entirely new set of questions has now emerged: 'Can we cohabitate with you?' 'Is there a way for all of us to survive together while none of our contradictory claims, interests and passions can be eliminated?' Revolutionary time, the great Simplificator, has been replaced by cohabitation time, the great Complicator'. (Latour 2004: 30)

A specific religious identity is firmly ingrained in the shared territory of the saint's land. Throughout the history of the Catholic Church, patron saints have been entrusted with the protection of lands under their patronage (Christian 1972: 11–12, 181). Santa Teresa's offer of land and protection to the people of Itamatatuiua is the foundation of a widespread conviction, amongst Catholics, about the inherent religiosity of those lands. Conversion to a Pentecostal church would equal repudiation of the pact; cessation of devotion to the saint and, consequently, disregard of the land regulations as implemented by Santa Teresa and carried out by the land custodian. Itamatatuiua's distinctive land identification is pointed to by Catholic residents as being the main reason why Pentecostal conversion has largely failed in their community. It is also why they argue that the coexistence of Pentecostals and Catholics is unattainable in the saint's

lands. For them, there is little room for plurality in the lands of Santa Teresa, which need to remain hegemonically Catholic. Hence, many feel impelled to join forces and reassert sovereignty over their legitimately occupied territory.

It is in this spirit that the ‘Catholic family’ of the lands of Santa Teresa comes together to reinforce its ties and manifest its presence on a territory that becomes evermore polarized. As we will see next, through stories that narrate the saint’s divine intervention in defence of her children and her land while punishing wrongdoers, and through participation in the annual feast in honour of the patron saint, Catholics seek to manifest their presence against religious and land antagonists. ‘The so-called religious “circumscriptions” allow for an alternative mapping’ of *quilombos*, argues Almeida (2006: 170). In those instances, the ‘Catholic social’ cogently emerges and places itself (mainly) against the ‘Pentecostal social’ and everything it represents.

Reassembling the Catholic Social: The Stories, the *Joia*, the *Festa*

In the introduction to this chapter, I argued that there are three main streams of ‘religious activism’ that aim at maintaining and renewing the historical and religious ties amongst Catholics who inhabit the lands of Santa Teresa. In what follows, I will attempt to show how these grass-roots actions materialize.



Figure 4.1 A house visit during the outings for the collection of *joia*. Photograph by the author, 2015.

The three days of celebration of Itamatatiua's patron saint constitute the first of these actions. While preparations for the *feira* begin months in advance, and involve a great number of people and activities that are central to the celebrations, the actual feast days (14, 15 and 16 October) are in many respects the culmination of Itamatatiua's religious life. On the feast days, people from all across the towns and villages of the Baixada Maranhense region visit Itamatatiua either to redeem a promise to Santa Teresa or just to partake in the religious ceremonies. For many years, this *feira* has been an important event in the festive calendar of the area, and an occasion for important encounters within the Baixada. As Borges, one of the founding members and leading figures of the *movimento negro* in Alcântara told me in an interview, it was during the *feira* of Santa Teresa in October 1993 that one of the first meetings of the still unborn black movement took place:

We participated in the *feira* of Santa Teresa, in Itamatatiua. The black people of the *quilombo* of Frechal, from Mirinzal, because they had received in 1992 the title of their area, which is an 'extractive reserve' (*reserva extrativista*), came with the *Dança do Congo*, which is a black dance, to redeem a promise to Santa Teresa. The group of the CCN-MA¹⁴ came, people from the SMDH,¹⁵ they all came so we could have a meeting ... so we had our first meeting during the *feira*. I met the people of Frechal, and from then on ... in January of 1994, we had the first meeting of the black movement in Alcântara.

The case of the people of Frechal (the first *quilombo* in Maranhão, and one of the first in Brazil, to have its communal territory demarcated), departing from Mirinzal, a municipality about 200 km away from Alcântara, to redeem a promise to Santa Teresa, is by no means unique. In the two annual feasts I attended in Itamatatiua, I spoke to dozens of people who had come to 'pay their promises' (*pagar promessa*) from places that far exceeded the limits of the saint's lands. Two women from Palmerandia, a municipality in the Baixada Maranhense, told me that they had been going to the *feira* every year for decades: 'Back in the day, the *feira* of Santa Teresa in Itamatatiua was an important pilgrimage for the entire Baixada and beyond. It was our Círio [de Nazaré]',¹⁶ said one of them, emphasizing the importance of the feast as a religious reference in the region, even though the saint had no bearing on land issues for those communities outside her lands. As Hertz observed in his pioneering essay on pilgrimage, for the Catholics participating in the Alpine rite, '[t]he greater the gathering of pilgrims, the "finer" the festival is judged to be and the more the saint is honoured' (Hertz 1983: 60). The use of the past tense when talking about the 'grandiosity' of the *feira*, however, underlines that today things have changed. 'The *feira* is no longer what it

used to be', said Zé Roxo as we were walking in the fields near his house outside Itamatatua. '[As] I remember [it], there was not a single *crente* on this land', he told me pointing across the vast open area of the *campo* that was stretching in front of us; 'can you imagine that?'

What for several generations used to be an 'unmitigated' Catholic territory, where nearly everyone identified and fostered strong ties with Santa Teresa, whom they acknowledged as 'owner of the lands' (*dona das terras*), is now in many ways a 'divided' territory between Catholics and Pentecostals. Counterpublics, argues Warner (2002: 63), 'are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment'. The counterpublic's 'cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one' (ibid.: 119). In this sense, Pentecostals are the arguably smaller in size 'counterpublic' to Catholics, since they have created 'alternative spheres' of public action (Staeheli and Mitchell 2008: 142) – even though not particularly strong in Itamatatua so far. Yet, it is always by comparison with other competing ties that any group tie is emphasized, and the children of Santa Teresa are precisely struggling to reinforce existing connections among them and defend their lands from Evangelicals who stand against their religious and territorial affiliations.

Despite waning number of attendees, as my interlocutors noted, the *feira* continues to mark an important symbolic event in the local Catholic religious calendar, and offers a major opportunity for Catholics from within and outside the saint's lands to celebrate Santa Teresa and honour their relationship with her land. In a similar way to Leal's description of the Holy Ghost *feitas* in North America, '[t]he relationships between the people involved may be loose or sporadic; however, there is a sense of being part of a collective, which the *feira* itself helps to create' (Leal 2015: 7).

The second form of 'religious activism' in defence of the shared territory consists of the countless stories narrating the punishment of arrogant and doubtful people (usually *crentes*) who have overtly defied Santa Teresa's land regulations and/or threatened her children. There was the man who 'wanted to show' that Santa Teresa was neither alive nor owned land, but he fell off a boat on his way to Itamatatua and his body was never found; and the land grabber who illicitly demarcated land but then fell inside a water well he was building; and the aspiring thief who confessed to not being able to overcome an invisible barrier that was preventing him from getting anywhere near the church, despite his willingness to enter and steal the saint's figurine – the stories never end.

These narratives, that circulate widely well beyond the limits of the saint's lands, demonstrate both the vitality of Santa Teresa and her

willingness to protect her children at any cost. Consciously breaching the customary law dictated by Santa Teresa, wrongdoers, according to these accounts, find themselves in dreadful situations as a result of the saint's intervention aimed at protecting her territory and her children. In the words of Pereira Junior, 'the Saint is alive, and frequently walks through the limits of her lands, defending them from invaders and personally protecting the people' (2011: 95). As Alessiane, a schoolteacher from Itamatatiua, told me, these stories are so well known and commonly narrated that even those who do not believe in Santa Teresa, nor identify as Catholics, are 'afraid to doubt. Because there have been people who doubted ... they doubted, and then something bad happened to them'. The stories continue to be retold by young and old, and by doing so they contribute to the dissemination and crystallization of the knowledge of the qualities and power of Itamatatiua's patron saint. They make clear the relation that Santa Teresa maintains with her children and, as Zé Rodrigues, resident of another community on the saint's lands, mentioned when concluding one such story, they instruct and 'remind everyone to let go of the things of others'. They thus ultimately create a cloak of protection above the saint's lands by educating a subtle sense of awe and fear, even for those who may otherwise question the existence of Santa Teresa – such as Pentecostals. Anyone breaching her rules needs to know they are not (only) challenging the Catholic residents, but the saint herself.

The third stream of grass-roots 'religious activism' consists of the visits that Santa Teresa and her *batuque* (an itinerant group from Itamatatiua) make to all the villages within (and usually also some beyond) the limits of her territory in order to collect donations for the organization of her annual feast. Santa Teresa participates in the visits in the form of a small figurine that is considered to be the saint herself. Although there are other statuettes in the church of Itamatatiua, only the one participating in these outings is regarded as the 'real' one.¹⁷ In this touring that lasts for weeks, the saint 'physically' visits the people's houses and gives them her blessing. Walking through plains and babaçu palm forests, the saint with the *caixeiras* (women playing the drums of Santa Teresa) map the shared territory, delimit the area under her sovereignty, and manifest their presence everywhere within it.

While Itamatatiua organizes and hosts the *feira* for their patron saint, it is with the help and material and immaterial contributions of all Catholic devotees (or 'children') who inhabit the saint's lands that the *feira* comes into being every year. These individual or household contributions are called *joia*. The first outings for the collection of donations usually begin in July, and are destined to those communities that are on the outer limits

of the saint's lands and hence the furthest away from Itamatatiua, which is both geographically and symbolically located at the centre. As the weeks go by and the visits are getting closer, they gradually end up in Itamatatiua, where the last collection of *joia* is carried out on the eve of the *fiesta*. In these centrifugal expeditions (and centripetal returns home), the sum of miles walked under the equatorial sun increases as the radius covered by the saint and her group shortens. '*Joia*', commonly translated as 'jewel', also has the meaning of 'fee' or amount paid upon admittance as a member of an association, club or society.

Dona Heloisa, a resident of Itamatatiua, explained to me how *joia* offerings emerged: 'We never had to pay taxes [for land tenure] because this land belongs to the saint. So instead of paying taxes (*foro*) we give the *joia* to the saint'. By using the word '*foro*', which also translates as 'pension' or the 'fee' a tenant pays to the rightful owner for the use of a building or property, Dona Heloisa directly linked the offering of donations for the organization of the *fiesta* of Santa Teresa to the obligation of a land tenant. Since there was no other form of taxation (the saint being the only owner) the *joia* has been a form of fee in exchange for the free tenancy the saint offers to all inhabitants of her lands. It seems then, that '*joia*' in the context of the *fiesta* is used to designate the symbolic contribution of the inhabitants. I use the word 'symbolic' here in the sense used by Lefebvre: 'The Greek word: *συμβάλλεσθαι*, which gives us that word so characteristic of our religions and ideologies, "symbol", means initially "to pay one's share"' (Lefebvre 2014: 224). Each household contributes with anything it can offer, such as flour, rice, fruits, eggs, an animal or money. Although most devotees who offer their *joia* may not make the explicit association



Figure 4.2 Receiving Santa Teresa's visit. Photograph by the author, 2016.

that Dona Heloisa made, they do think of their donation as a way of contributing to the organization of the *feira* of their beloved saint, or as 'payment' for a promise they have made. These associations are intrinsic to the offering of the *joia*. Put differently, once a year, the saint, in her capacity as landowner, physically visits all occupiers of her land and collects their contribution, given as a token of gratitude for the land and the protection she is offering.

The change in religious demographics in the lands of Santa Teresa in recent years has gradually created two competing social spheres as the decision by, especially, most Pentecostals to *not* give *joia* is not a passive one but a clear stance against the saint, her *feira* and everything that is associated with it. In the words of Lefebvre: '[T]he "sacrifices" which everyone had to make for the festival – gifts, contributions from each family and each household – appeared as a down payment for the future. To refuse to participate would have been to set oneself apart from the community' (Lefebvre 2014: 224).

If, paraphrasing Latour, we see the social as a movement of associations, then the refusal to give *joia* equals a failure to renew a previously existing connection (Latour 2005: 8–9). It is precisely this renewal and reinforcement of religious and, by consequence, territorial ties that the stories of Santa Teresa's divine intervention and continuous presence, together with the *joia* outings and the *feira*, are aiming at. The saint's visits to each and every household that is willing to open its door, as well as the actual feast days when hundreds of Catholics from different *quilombos*



Figure 4.3 The *batuque* walking through the scrublands of Alcântara. Photograph by the author, 2016.

and towns gather together in Itamatatiua to celebrate Santa Teresa, are based on a shared religious and territorial history, and they help to maintain and strengthen existing ties amongst residents of the saint's territory against religious and land antagonists.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to convey the conviction of the Catholic majority of *quilombolas* in the lands of Santa Teresa that 'community and Catholicism are inextricable' (Boyer 2016: 29). I have argued that having exhausted all legal channels for the final emission of collective land titles, Catholic residents resort to 'popular' religious practices, which they use to reinforce Catholicism and to counteract the spread and influence of Pentecostal churches.

I have sought to show that two socio-religious regimes (Catholic and Pentecostal Christian) are competing with one another on religious and territorial grounds. Both Catholics and Evangelicals set out their limits, and often make explicit that they see no common ground between them, nor wish for any. However, disregard for customary land rules by (mainly) Evangelicals transforms a tension that is primarily about land into a religious one.

A large proportion of the local population feel threatened to that they might lose control over an essentially religious territory, and, together with parallel efforts to attain official land titles, strive to maintain the saint's territory as strictly Catholic. The saint's presence is always relevant and 'felt', especially through the widely circulated and well-known stories of her divine intervention, and through the affectionate relationship between her and her devotees. What happens during the *feira* is 'the explosion of forces which had been slowly accumulated in and via everyday life itself' (Lefebvre 2014: 222).

In the limited space of a single chapter, I have only focused on some of the main forms that *quilombolas* use to aggregate the 'Catholic social', without exploring the forms in which the 'Pentecostal social' is manifested. I have not suggested that all residents involved in the festivities around the *feira* of Santa Teresa are also consciously mapping out territorial claims or manifesting their conviction of their legal land occupation to Pentecostals. After all, '[a]ction is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled' (Latour 2005: 44). Instead, I have tried to show that in a rapidly shifting religious world, such as that of Itamatatiua, 'religious actors'

are immersed in a tense socio-political landscape (with each side largely positioning itself in opposition to the other) and, to a lesser or greater extent, through their actions they are 'capable of reconfiguring the scene of public debates' (Claverie 2008: 8).

Since many identify strongly as 'children of the saint', it is through this identification that they claim membership in their social world and position themselves in relation to other groups. Practices linked to religious festivities that take place in public spaces evoke memories and conceptions of a shared heritage, renewing (or failing to renew) social ties and associations between different actors. Even to those who choose to no longer acknowledge those ties, the *feira* of Santa Teresa serves as a visible reminder of both the Catholic presence and their assertion of territorial rights. By its very occurrence on the communal lands of the saint's children, the *feira* invites residents to participate in it and reinforces the links that comprise the Catholic social world.

The physical mapping of the shared territory, by the saint and her *batuque*, delimit the area under Catholic sovereignty. Momentarily, Santa Teresa reoccupies the contested space and asserts her dominion over it. She reunites her children and reminds them that they are but one big family, sharing one territory and one religious faith. What happens during the *feira*, hence, is a commemoration of those links, which represent the reasons they are tied together. In that sense, not unlike what Hertz (1983) has argued about St Besse's pilgrimage, which brings together villagers of the valleys of Piedmont once a year, the *feira*, if not 'the last vestige of those links' (MacClancy 1994: 36), it is certainly the most evocative one.

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Notes

1. In Latin: ‘Minerva auxiliante, manum etiam admove’. In English, commonly as: ‘God helps those who help themselves’.
2. Black rural *quilombo* communities (*comunidades negras rurais quilombolas*) is the name commonly given to contemporary *quilombos* and *mocambos* (both historically denoting maroon settlements) in Brazil. It mainly emerged from its use by political activists of the black movement in Brazil – especially from national black rural community meetings in the early 1980s in the states of Maranhão and Pará (Arruti 2016; Oliveira and Müller 2016) – and was largely established after the organization of the first National Meeting of Black Rural *Quilombo* Communities in Brasília, in 1995, and the creation, in 1996, of the National Coordination of Black Rural *Quilombo* Communities (CONAQ). See indicatively: O’Dwyer 2002; Costa 2008.
3. These are essentially synonymous terms. For a discussion of definitions and different appropriations, see especially: Almeida 1996; Leite 2008, 2012; Arruti 2009; Gomes 2015.
4. Starting in 1755, and for twenty years, the General Commerce Company of Grão-Pará and Maranhão had the ‘exclusive right to supply slaves to the eastern Amazon region’ (Carreira 1988; Carney 2004: 13–14) connecting Maranhão directly with the ports of West Africa, and decisively shaping Alcântara’s landscape and economy due to the proliferation of plantation sites (predominantly cotton fields). By the end of the eighteenth century, however, trade had entered an insurmountable economic crisis that persuaded white colonists to seek profit elsewhere, leaving their estates behind. Eventually, these estates were taken over by the non-white population, which had significantly grown in numbers over the decades.
5. Art. 68 states that ‘final ownership shall be recognised for the remaining members of the ancient runaway slave communities who are occupying their lands, and the State shall grant them the respective title deeds’. Further to federal constitutional land provisions for *quilombos*, Art. 229 of the 1989 Maranhão’s State Constitution affirms that ‘the state will recognise and legalise, in the form of law, the lands occupied by remaining *quilombo* communities’. The two are the main juridical instruments for the recognition of *quilombola* collective rights in Maranhão and have greatly reinforced local struggles.
6. The figures are based on data published by the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), which, since 2003, is the federal institution responsible for the emission of land titles to *quilombo* communities. See the webpage of Comissão Pró-Índio: <http://cpisp.org.br/direitosquilombolas/>, last accessed on 27 December 2018.
7. In June 2015, the Secretary for Racial Equality (SEIR) in Alcântara announced the state government’s plans for the ‘return’ of 42,000 hectares of land to the state (to be deduced from the area already recognized as ‘unified *quilombo* territory’, thus causing further displacements). The news created an immediate wave of reactions from *quilombolas*, who gathered public support from different social movements and organizations, including the Brazilian Anthropology Association (ABA), which urged immediate land titling. At the time of writing, meetings of *quilombolas* with state representatives

- and political movements continue to take place in Alcântara, and the issue remains unsettled.
8. Some of the ideas around this argument were first presented in Hatzikidi 2018.
 9. See *Repertório de documentos para a história da escravidão no Maranhão, 1754–1840* (Vol. I) and 1818–1852 (Vol. II) in the Public Archives of the State of Maranhão (APEM).
 10. The Oxford English Dictionary describes the theological (Christian) meaning of the verb as: 'To declare or make righteous in the sight of God; to confer or assure righteousness'. OED online: entry 102230.
 11. It is perhaps worth mentioning that it is the very same Santa Teresa de Jesús (also known as Santa Teresa d'Ávila) who came close to becoming Spain's co-patron saint (alongside Santiago el Mayor) in the long debate over co-patronage (1617–30). Among the main arguments put forward by the supporters of Santa Teresa was their desire for 'the saint's aid in interceding to combat Protestantism in Europe' (Row 2005: 7).
 12. There are a few other Pentecostal churches in Alcântara, such as the First Baptist Church Alcântara and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, but their presence in the interior remains virtually non-existent, especially in comparison to the, by now, ubiquitous presence of the Assemblies of God. At the time of writing, no so-called neo-Pentecostal, or neo-charismatic, churches (such as the nationally powerful Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – UCKG) are found in Alcântara.
 13. According to a 1978 land demarcation act (Ação Discriminatória de Terras Devolutas), which first gave legal shape to locally established land rules, within the area of 50,000 hectares denominated 'Itamatatua' and corresponding to the 'lands of Santa Teresa', no resident can sell, buy or demarcate land for private use (Process n. 20003700000079-1).
 14. Centro de Cultura Negra do Maranhão (Centre for Black Culture in Maranhão).
 15. Sociedade Maranhense de Direitos Humanos (Human Rights Society of Maranhão).
 16. Círio de Nazaré (The Taper of Our Lady of Nazareth) is one of the largest Catholic celebrations in Brazil, and takes place in the city of Belém, in Pará state. Celebrations start in August and the main procession concludes the festivities on the second Sunday of October (the time frame largely coincides with that of Itamatatua's *feira*).
 17. On the agency of objects, see: Berliner 2007; Blanes and Sarró 2015.

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