

Peri-Urban Identity in Amazônia: Forgotten Component of Local Development

By Jennifer Lewis, joint MA-MEM 2008

Introduction

During my first day on the forested island of Combú, located in the Amazon delta region of Northern Brazil and 20 minutes by boat from the bustling metropolis of Belém, the local school teacher speaks of her challenge: “if he isn’t taught to value his space, he won’t value who he is.” She recognizes the dearth of local identity and its potential value for the development and ecological future of this island. She embodies one key link between generational identity formation and the growing schism between rural and urban spaces.

This research addresses the creation of complex identities in the peri-urban space. I draw on field work conducted in two such communities of Belém, Brazil during the summer of 2006. The findings reveal a multifaceted landscape of identity that accounts for culture, environment and economic productivity options along the rural-urban trajectory. This

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identity can be seen as fundamental to future education, development and conservation initiatives within this unique place.

Urbanization in Amazônia

Regional trends of urbanization in Amazônia reflect continual movement of people in response to economic, environmental, political and cultural stimuli. Work questioning the rural contextualization of the Amazon “last great frontier” myth highlights the underrepresented genesis of new urban centers (Godfrey and Browder 1996). The transition from rural frontiers to urban economies creates boom towns resulting from erratic resource cycles and adaptation as people seek opportunities in articulated market spaces. The largest two cities in the Amazon, Belém and Manaus, serve as commercial centers and export ports located on major waterways.

Urbanization trends are accompanied by growth in peri-urban environments with unique hybrid features. Job acquisition is often coupled with traditional rural practices: subsistence agriculture, forest extractivism and fisheries that provide staple foods and raw materials to cities. The city of Belém do Pará has a metropolitan population of over 2 million people and is surrounded by a convergence of asymmetrical peri-urban realities. The northern and eastern edges of the city are expanding to advance industrial development, while the western and southern edges, bounded by the Guamá River, are typified by forested island communities linked by daily economic and cultural interactions with Belém.

Peri-urban interface

The complex interconnections between cities and their surroundings are not typically reflected by the dichotomy of “urban” and “rural” environments. The evolving definition of the peri-urban interface reflects the complexity of factors contributing to this intermediate landscape, including access to resources, daily economic dependence on urban centers and consequences of industrial expansion. One prevailing definition classifies them as “areas located at the urban/rural interface, on or near the periphery of a defined urban administrative or legal boundary, either inside or outside of a designated general plan area, and often, characterized by informal settlement, with uncertain tenure and minimal if any servicing” (Smit et al. 1996: 6). Alternatively, Stoian (2005) describes the “peri-urban nexus” and the underlying flexibility, adaptability and viability of these spaces as unique yet integrated systems. Recent work further rejects clear-cut divisions within the theoretical “notion of an approximate continuum” (Simon et al. 2006: 10). The gradient is thus dynamic and capable of shifts, revealing a diversity of asymmetrical patterns and processes.

Currently, the literature does not consider creation of identity in places neither urban nor rural. The study of the unique peri-urban interface becomes pertinent as large cities face development challenges in response to growing urban populations and as communities within these locales address increasing cultural diversity.

Identity can be defined as the personal and collective self-perceptions that create a “place in the world” (Kearns and Gesler 1998: 4). A geographical concept of place in conjunction with perceptions of experienced place creates the self-ascribed personal and community identity. Place is itself a social relationship, always in what Hugh Raffles (2002) refers to as

the “flow of becoming.” Amazon rivers can be seen as a symbolic representation of this journey of identity, as people move through space, channeling past practices, imaginations and belief systems into new locales.

Methods

Two peri-urban communities were chosen for this qualitative ethnographic research: Combú and Boa Vista. Criteria used for study site selection were relative distance from Belém, exclusive use of the port “Porto da Palha” for sales, comparable community size and dependence on açaí as a principal crop. In each community a formal questionnaire was completed by 50% of the households selected randomly, which corresponded to 35 interviews in Combú and 72 in Boa Vista. This methodology also included open-ended interviews and participant observation. Additionally, purposive interviews were conducted with community leaders and secondary sources in Belém.

Identity and the peri-urban environment of Belém

This section examines identity construction in the peri-urban interface and identifies four categories that emerged through this research for conceptualizing space: a destination point for migrants, a jumping point for residents, a dynamic intermediate space and an economic opportunity. There is often significant overlap, variation and double meaning found within and between households, indicating rich heterogeneity of perspective when defining identity of place.

Destination point for migrants

The peri-urban interface is a destination for many rural migrants that journey in search of work opportunities. The majority come from rural communities in the Pará state or

from northeastern Brazil, a region associated with poverty, lack of arable land and significant out-migration. Family connections often provide the initial contact for migrants to the peri-urban zone. This was particularly apparent in the remote properties of Combú, where significant in-migration had occurred for at least two generations from the community of São Sebastião de Boa Vista, located in the interior of the Marajó Island. One interviewee stated that “Marajó does not have anything to offer people and I came to Combú because I had family members living on the island,” thus creating a family network between rural and peri-urban communities.

Land availability and urban market access provide economic incentives for rural migration. Oftentimes wealthy landowners are responsible for “bringing the parents” to Combú and Boa Vista in order to work the land. Specific work offers included gardening projects, heart-of-palm and açai harvesting, ceramic tile craftwork

and construction. Alternatively, independent migration was stimulated by a lack of production opportunities in interior communities. These migrants equate migration with survival, envisioning subsistence forest practices unavailable farther inland away from markets and cities.

One interviewee recognizes his need to migrate from the northeast, but rejected Belém as his possible destination in search of work. After rubber production diminished in the Ceará state, migration was necessary, yet he states “the city does not have work for me, given my lack of formal education.” Several respondents concur that moving from farther interior to a similar rural area required less adaptation than making a transition to the city. Individuals that historically relied on extractivism and hunting find it is easier to procure food in the peri-urban forested area surrounding Belém. A sense of security prior to arrival facilitates cultural association of previous home and future destination (Photograph 1).

Photograph 1. Typical households on the forested banks of Combú Island.

Photo J. Lewis



Jumping off place for future city residents

The peri-urban identity is also conceptualized locally as a space with nothing positive to offer, a perspective essentially defined by a rejection of place. This valuation of the city over the peri-urban reality is centered on jobs and education and the simultaneous socio-cultural hierarchy which equates future with the city. Urban-based jobs are valued more than rural labor as indicated by one interviewee: “working with açai doesn’t have a future, the future is in Belém. Looking for work means going to Belém.” One young parent defined moving out of Boa Vista as moving forward with his life, indicating the space as one which held little opportunity for him and a community from which he was seeking to escape.

Most families with young children actively encourage them to study in Belém to “choose a better future” as insurance for future economic security. One respondent hopes that his three children will finish university and become professionals: “if it were up to me, they would definitely not stay on the island.” The upcoming generation views peri-urban communities as places to leave behind, articulated by one respondent, “those that live in the rural areas do not have the conditions to go to the city and

those that have been able to leave have a little more studies.” The types of education young people are choosing has an impact on this evolving conceptualization of the region. One university accounting student suggested that after she graduates, it will be imperative to move to the city because “it would not be logical to invest so much time and money into my studies and then afterwards not use that information in a job.”

Dynamic intermediate space

The peri-urban interface is also envisioned as an intermediate space with urban-rural articulations, actively maintained by its inhabitants. This view combines a symbolic “home” or valued living site with a daily dependence on the urban center. Twenty one percent of households across both communities indicate daily travel to and from Belém and 59% indicate traveling to the city up to six times per week. Households relying on supplemental income from the city often report daily travel by one of their members for jobs such as manual labor, construction or domestic work (Photograph 2).

Many current students traveling daily to Belém for education stated their preference to live in Combú and Boa Vista in the future.



Photograph 2. Daily commute to Belém from peri-urban islands for agricultural sales or work opportunities is common for many families.
Photo J. Lewis

One respondent studying health administration in Belém suggested that even though his studies might prevent him from obtaining a job in Combú, there is a good chance that he will elect to live at home and travel daily to work in the city. Another student and nurse technician strongly prefers to live with his family on the island, even if this means leaving Combú at 6:30 am in a family boat and returning at 11 pm. The dual identity of home and future maintains associations across peri-urban and urban geographies.

Economic opportunity

Increasingly the peri-urban identity is defined as an investment both in terms of subsistence and future income generation. Production in peri-urban regions can increase household resilience as forest product-based income provides the “seed” for future generations to access education (Stoian 2005). The principal product currently being exploited in northern Amazônia is the açai (*Euterpe oleracea*) palm berry. This case study provides interesting insight into the belief that the peri-urban zone will provide household economic sustenance.

During the last 25 years, regional urban market demands have led to local land use intensification and increasing importance of açai agroforestry (Brondizio et al. 2002). Since 1990, açai has become popular nationally and internationally as a fashion health food, and as the market continues to grow it affects production decisions within the Amazon region (ibid).

The two study sites exhibit significant variation with regard to açai investment, yet both currently supply açai to the regional urban market. The trends in both communities are to continue planting and implement management strategies, like clearing old palms and removing brush that inhibits açai growth. Historical reliance on subsistence açai extraction in Combú has resulted in a matrix forest system. Most new planting is currently occurring in Boa Vista, where land has traditionally been used

for slash-and-burn manioc production. Across both communities, açai planting by residents and new migrants illustrates the shifting texture of the landscape as a result of increased dependence on the fruit.

Currently, 48% of respondents in Combú suggest that açai provides enough income to sustain household quality of life without need to consider migration, compared to 16% in Boa Vista. This discrepancy between communities can be partly explained by the relatively recent insertion of Boa Vista producers to the regional markets. Even so, there is hope in both of these communities that sales and income will continue to increase. One can surmise that the quick economic return afforded by açai investment is the principal reason for residents and migrants to continue investing in the land and remain in the peri-urban zone. In this sense, connection to place is strongly related to short-term productivity and increase in land value associated with açai production.

Connection to the land is embedded within this peri-urban identity. One recent migrant to Boa Vista indicated that he views açai production as a fun sport at which he is particularly skillful. He appears torn between knowing that açai can provide him money for the future, wanting to teach his young son a skill he holds as essential to his identity, and, on the other hand, wanting his son to study and prepare for a life beyond manual labor. A consciousness is thus created within the adult generation that the security currently provided by açai might make possible significantly different futures for the upcoming generations. Planting represents insurance and patrimony for the future because açai increasingly provides a stable family income. Much of this açai production is strongly correlated with reinvesting in education.

Conclusion

This research highlights the disconnect that exists between respondents own preferen-

ces and their hopes for future generations. While there was uncontested preference to live in the peri-urban communities coupled with a common sentiment among adults that the city is hard to adjust to, the overwhelming majority of parents say that they want their kids to go to the city in the future.

The local teacher's commentary reflects a fundamental goal of linking experiences and perspectives across geographies and generations as she couples community history with future vision. Increasingly, local and regional leaders are also recognizing the need to emphasize local identity and associated community values as underlying goals for development and ecological conservation within this peri-urban zone. Ultimately, recognizing the heterogeneity of the peri-urban interface is critical to a future in which the rich cultural and environmental heritage of these islands is preserved by the local families and future generations that recognize and actively live these identities.

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