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Citation

Biesel, S. A. (2025). Cheia de axé (full of axé): spirituality, resistance, and repair in Pernambuco's Afro-Brazilian traditional communities. *Feminist Anthropology*. doi:10.1002/fea2.70028

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4284894>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cheia de axé (full of axé): Spirituality, resistance, and repair in Pernambuco's Afro-Brazilian traditional communities

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Abstract

This article explores how Afro-Brazilian communities in Pernambuco respond to state-led industrial development through culturally rooted practices of resistance and repair. Drawing on archival and ethnographic research in the coastal municipalities of Cabo de Santo Agostinho and Ipojuca, this study traces the effects of Brazil's large-scale economic development program, known as the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC, in Portuguese), which enabled the expansion of the Suape Port Industrial Complex (CIPS). Built on former plantation lands, CIPS has displaced over 26,000 residents and disrupted traditional livelihoods tied to mangroves, subsistence farming, and small-scale fishing. Yet rather than portraying Afro-Brazilian communities as passive victims of racial capitalism's extractive logics, the article foregrounds their strategies for sustaining life: syncretic spiritual practices, ancestral reverence, ecological care, and popular music. These embodied and relational practices are not only sources of individual resilience but also tools for collective healing and political engagement. By analyzing how residents cultivate joy, autonomy, and connection in the midst of systemic violence, the article contributes to broader anthropological debates on repair, development, and plantation afterlives. It calls for expanding coloniality frameworks to account for how racialized communities generate alternative

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futures through cultural creativity, environmental intimacy, and everyday acts of refusal.

INTRODUCTION

In the global struggle against climate change, mangroves are our allies. These coastal ecosystems filter pollutants, mitigate storm damage, sequester carbon, and support marine biodiversity. Brazil holds the world's second-largest mangrove system, stretching from Amapá in the north to Santa Catarina in the south (ICMBio, 2018). Mangroves are indispensable not only for environmental resilience but also for Brazil's many "traditional communities" (*povos tradicionais*¹), including Indigenous and Afro-descendent groups, whose livelihoods are deeply entwined with these ecosystems (ibid.). Yet these very communities are increasingly threatened by coastal development tied to maritime trade and industrial expansion (ibid.).

In the mid-2000s, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva launched the Growth Acceleration Program (*Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento*—PAC), a massive infrastructure initiative aimed at expanding Brazil's logistics sector, especially maritime commerce (Pereira, 2013; Saad-Filho, 2020; Welch, 2011). PAC has financed the creation or expansion of 37 industrial ports—nearly all sited within or adjacent to Brazil's mangrove forests (Ministério da Infraestrutura, 2016). Among them is the 13,500-hectare (52-square-mile) Suape Port Industrial Complex (*Complexo Industrial Portuário de Suape*—CIPS), which transformed a modest utility port between the Afro-Brazilian fishing communities of Cabo de Santo Agostinho (Cabo) and Ipojuca into one of Brazil's most powerful industrial zones. Today, CIPS hosts over 100 industries, including the Petrobras oil and gas refinery and multiple global enterprises (Santos et al., 2019; Biesel & Mendonça, 2025).²

CIPS's expansion is more than an economic project—it is a violent occupation of traditional territories. Over 26,000 residents—primarily Afro-Brazilians living on unregularized former plantation lands—have been displaced by its growth (DHESCA, 2018). Most have been forcibly relocated to urban housing zones, accelerating the *favelação*, or ghettoization, of rural Afro-Brazilian populations in Cabo and Ipojuca (Santos et al., 2019). Around 7000 residents remain inside the port's "security perimeter," where they endure threats and harassment from private guards (ibid.).

Though confronted with extractive and racialized violence, communities assert their refusal. During my first fieldwork visit in 2018, I mistakenly arrived at the wrong location and was welcomed by the staff of Fórum Suape, an Afro-Brazilian community organization fighting port expansion. They offered me coffee, pamphlets, and conversation. Their printed materials—designed in the cordel style of illustrated folk poetry—offered advice for what to do if your garden was razed, your roof stolen, or your home invaded by security forces. The encounter was unplanned, but powerful. It captured the heart of this paper: even in the shadow of state-sponsored extraction, Afro-Brazilian communities draw upon cultural, spiritual, and artistic tools to resist, heal, and imagine other futures.

Cabo and Ipojuca are located in Pernambuco's coastal *Zona da Mata*, a region shaped by over 5 centuries of sugarcane plantation agriculture (Andrade, 2001; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). When plantation land was privatized or abandoned, Afro-descendants often remained as *posseiros*—squatters without formal titles (Engle & Lixinski, 2021; Escallón, 2019). Over time, many became *povos do mar* ("people of the sea"), sustaining their livelihoods through fishing, shellfish harvesting, and mangrove-based economies (Ramalho, 2005). Today, these

same communities—descendants of enslaved peoples—are being expelled once again, not by planters but by state-backed port expansion.

To understand this continuity, we must recognize CIPS as a plantation in the now, not merely a relic of the past. CIPS reproduces what Black feminist geographers call “plantation logics”: racialized systems of land control, labor extraction, and state-sanctioned violence (McInnis, 2019; McKittrick, 2013). These logics are not metaphorical in Brazil; they are materially embedded in land regimes, port security, and housing policy. Anthropologists have long used the concept of coloniality to critique how development projects generate inequality and environmental harm in the Global South (Escobar, 1995; Mignolo, 2010; Mollett, 2017; Quijano, 2010). Yet recent critiques argue that exclusive focus on exploitation can render marginalized people as static victims—figures of grief, loss, and ruin (Drotbohm, 2022; Robbins, 2013; Thomas, 2022). In response, scholars are calling for frameworks that attend to both structural violence and creative resistance. McKittrick (2013) argues that “secretive histories”—of music, farming, and spiritual practice—reveal how racialized communities carve out life within plantation geographies. These practices do not erase violence, but offer alternative terms for survival and futurity (Scoones et al., 2018; Srinivas, 2018).

This research was conducted as an outsider—a US-based white anthropologist conducting research in predominantly Black and mixed-race communities. My positionality shaped what I could see, what people shared, and how I interpret their stories. Being called “gringa” was often playful, but also a reminder of difference. I was granted hospitality and generosity, but I also encountered silences, refusals, and necessary boundaries. I do not claim insider status. Instead, I aim to highlight the voices, aesthetics, and cosmologies of those who fight for life under systemic racial inequalities. This article investigates how Afro-Brazilian traditional communities in Cabo and Ipojuca respond to the violence of development not only with protest, but with spirituality, joy, and care. While previous studies have focused on male-led agrarian movements like the Landless Workers’ Movement (Rogers, 2010; Wolford, 2010), this work centers the creative, everyday acts of women, spiritual leaders, and fisherfolk. Based on ethnographic and archival research—including 40 interviews and participant observation—it examines the multiple forms of resistance rooted in Afro-Brazilian cosmologies.

The article proceeds in five parts. First, it situates the critique of coloniality within debates on plantation geographies. Second, it explores how Candomblé’s ritual practices—centered on music, dance, and axé—evolved as embodied resistance to enslavement and exploitation. Third, it examines how axé circulates today in public culture, especially through music and popular dance. Fourth, it turns to feminist and environmental justice organizations, showing how creative activism draws from spiritual and ecological worldviews. Finally, it explores how caring for plants, animals, and the land allows community members to heal intergenerational trauma and reaffirm ancestral ties. Together, these practices reveal not just survival, but *refusal*—a refusal to be defined by loss, and a determination to cultivate new possibilities.

FROM PLANTATION AFTERLIVES TO PLANTATION FUTURES

Anthropological post-development critiques continue to shape theoretical engagements with capitalist economic expansion, particularly in the Global South (Cesarino, 2017; Crewe & Axelby, 2013; Grillo & Stirrat, 2020; Mollett, 2017). Escobar’s (1995) *Encountering Development* was foundational in exposing development as a historically produced discourse that systematically reorganized the Global South according to European constructs. Rather than a universal path to progress, development was revealed as a veiled project of power. Later critiques extended this analysis through the lens of coloniality—a concept that illuminates how logics of oppression and exploitation persist within the rhetoric of modernity (Escobar, 2007;

Mignolo, 2010; Quijano, 2010). Coloniality continues to inform how Western nations maintain hegemonic control over global development agendas and financial institutions (*ibid.*).

While coloniality frameworks have proven essential for understanding afterlives of colonialism, scholars increasingly critique their limitations. They note that such frameworks can portray a narrow and often deficit-based view of marginalized communities (Drotbohm, 2022; Freeman, 2022; Thomas, 2020, 2022). Drotbohm (2022), for instance, warns that overemphasizing the “phantom pains of colonialism” risks painting Caribbean societies as haunted by violence, slavery, and extinction—without acknowledging how people engage in acts of meaning-making and repair (433). Similarly, Thomas (2022) argues that an exclusive focus on structural harm is “not capacious enough,” and positions the transnational sphere primarily as a space of racialized poverty rather than a realm of resilience and transformation (242–243). This raises a critical question: Can anthropology account for the material harms of capitalist development while also attending to the creative, life-affirming practices through which communities pursue repair?

Black feminist geographies offer crucial guidance for navigating this tension. They conceptualize postcolonial contexts not only as sites of enduring violence but also as spaces of resistance, healing, and epistemological innovation. Central to this framework is the plantation—not just as a historical site of forced labor, but as a contemporary logic that shapes racialized geographies (McInnis, 2019; McKittrick, 2013; Wynter, 1971). McKittrick (2013), building on Beckford’s (1972) “plantation thesis,” argues that plantations instituted a racialized economy whose effects lingered well beyond emancipation. This protracted logic defines many aspects of post-slavery life, including uneven access to land, labor, safety, and visibility. Anti-Black violence, racial surveillance, and economic precarity are key features of what McKittrick terms plantation logics—systems of control that normalize racial inequality across time and space (McKittrick, 2013, 9–10).

Yet McKittrick also emphasizes the plantation as a site of creative resistance. Within and against its constraints, Black communities cultivated what she calls “secretive histories”—acts of refusal and renewal that challenged the plantation’s dehumanizing systems. These included maroon societies, blues music, and subsistence garden plots. Drawing on Wynter’s (1971) foundational essay, McKittrick explores how enslaved people’s garden plots—small parcels used for growing food—were more than economic resources; they were generative sites where narratives, values, and cosmologies rooted in more-than-human relations could take hold (2013, 10). These practices materially and symbolically undermined the plantation system, offering glimpses of alternate ways of being in the world. As such, plantation geographies are inseparable from geographies of creative deviance (*ibid.*).

McInnis (2019) extends these insights by examining how Black women artists engage in processes of reterritorialization—reimagining and reclaiming connections to land, agriculture, and the environment outside the frameworks of racial capitalism. Through music, performance, visual art, and literature, these artists transform spaces historically marked by violence into grounds for political subjectivity and futurity. Reterritorialization is thus not only a spatial process, but a symbolic and epistemic one: a refusal of plantation temporality and a commitment to alternate world-making practices (*ibid.*).

While McKittrick and McInnis offer critical conceptual tools, their work reflects a primarily North American and Caribbean context where plantations are often viewed as institutions of the past. In contrast, plantations in Brazil remain active and visible economic systems. Since the 16th century, plantation agriculture has structured Brazilian labor regimes, and today still represents one of the few formal employment opportunities for many racialized workers (Sullivan, 2021; Ulrich, 2023). In Pernambuco’s coastal Zona da Mata, the sugar economy continues to shape land access and labor hierarchies (Andrade, 2001; Thomas, 2010). Within this context, the CIPS does not merely echo plantation logics metaphorically.

Much of the port's infrastructure sits on former sugarcane plantation lands, where generations of Afro-descendant families once lived and worked. Today, these same communities are being displaced from their ancestral territories as CIPS imposes spatial control through private security forces. The logics of extraction, forced relocation, and dispossession persist—repackaged in the language of economic development.

If the plantation is alive in Pernambuco, what futures remain possible? Afro-Brazilian feminist and diaspora scholars offer a powerful rejoinder by turning toward spiritual cosmologies and cultural practices as epistemological resources. Thinkers like Cardoso (2016), Carneiro (2016), and Gonzalez (2020) show how Afro-Brazilian religions—especially Candomblé and its syncretic expressions—embody political critiques of racial capitalism and envision alternate futures. Diaspora scholars (Hucks, 2022; Oliveira, 2006; Prandi, 2004) similarly highlight the spiritual and cosmological foundations of Black life-making across the Americas. These traditions are not only legacies of the past but also dynamic, evolving practices through which communities reimagine their relationships to land, time, and one another.

In Pernambuco, Afro-Brazilian spiritualities center *axé*—a vital life force activated through dance, music, ritual, and more-than-human care. As Escallón (2019), Hartikainen (2019), and Perry (2020) have shown, these spiritual orientations inform how people respond to dispossession—not only through protest, but also through practices of healing, mutuality, and joy. These are not apolitical expressions; they are strategies of survival and refusal, grounded in cosmological understandings of justice, ancestry, and place. In what follows, I explore how Afro-Brazilian spiritual practices in Cabo and Ipojuca challenge plantation logics and materialize alternative futures. While the plantation may persist, it is never unchallenged.

SPIRITUAL COSMOLOGIES AS CREATIVE SUBTERFUGE IN NORTHEAST BRAZIL

The forced transplanting of over 12.5 million people during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade generated complex cultural mixtures across the Americas. Among the most enduring contributions of the African diaspora were spiritual beliefs and practices that reshaped new socioecological contexts (Cardoso, 2016). Though African cosmologies varied widely, they shared common understandings about humanity's relationship with the broader universe (Harding, 2000; Hucks, 2022; Oliveira, 2006). As Harding (2000, 19) explains, these “shared orientations” functioned as cosmological systems that explained the workings of the universe and gave moral and social order to institutions and human life. Over 2.6³ million enslaved Africans arrived in Northeast Brazil, bringing with them richly developed Fon and Yoruba spiritual systems (Oliveira, 2006). These cosmologies profoundly shaped the formation of Northeastern Brazilian culture and continue to exert significant influence (Góes Jr., 2013; Johnson, 2002; Selka, 2021). Today, the most widely practiced Afro-Brazilian religions in coastal Pernambuco—where 70%–100% of the population identifies as Black (*negro/negra*) or Brown (*pardo/parda*)—are Candomblé and Umbanda⁴ (IBGE, 2010a, 2010b).

Candomblé emerged under slavery as a spiritual response to profound social and existential rupture, offering practitioners a framework for healing and restoring balance (Harding, 2000). At its core is the cultivation of *axé*—the vital force that sustains life—through ritual practices aimed at renewing right relationships between humans, spirits, nature, and ancestors (Pagnocca et al., 2020). The Orixás, deities linked to elemental forces like thunder (Xangô) and freshwater (Oxún), serve as emissaries of a Supreme Being and are accessed through music and dance ceremonies (Daniel, 2005; Oliveira, 2006). During rituals, spirit mediums are “mounted” by Orixás, allowing *axé* to circulate and energize the community (Cole, 1994;

Daniel, 2005). These performances are not just spiritual expressions but acts of collective healing and mutual aid within the terreiro (Voeks, 1997).

Terreiros are vital social institutions, especially for Black women and other marginalized people (Hartikainen, 2019; Landes, 1947). They offer structures of mutual support, material care, and spiritual healing—or “social medicine” (Daniel, 2005, 61). Ritual performance, through music and dance, produces joy, catharsis, and transcendence (Daniel, 2005). In this way, Candomblé acted as a form of *embodied resistance*, in which Afro-descendant peoples reclaim dignity and wellbeing through collective spiritual labor (Voeks, 1997).

Afro-Brazilian spiritual knowledge is also deeply more-than-human, encompassing relational ontologies that integrate ecological knowledge—especially plant-based healing (Harding, 2000; Pagnocca et al., 2020; Voeks, 1997). Originally rooted in African ecosystems, this knowledge evolved as priests adapted to the ethnobotanical conditions of Brazil’s Atlantic forest and mangrove ecosystems—areas transformed by plantation agriculture and extractive industry (Voeks, 1997). Over time, Candomblé healers integrated Indigenous plant uses and Iberian remedies, forming a rich and dynamic pharmacopeia (Pagnocca et al., 2020). Because most enslaved people were illiterate, spiritual and medicinal knowledge was passed orally—through ceremonies, stories, recipes, and intergenerational mentorship (Voeks, 1997, xv). Today, many Afro-Brazilians continue to regard plants, animals, and natural phenomena as repositories of *axé*—living agents of balance and repair (Pagnocca et al., 2020).

These cosmologies are not static. Afro-Brazilian spirituality is continuously evolving, shaped by generations of struggle for political, religious, and racial freedom (Escallón, 2019; Hartikainen, 2019; Oliveira, 2006; Selka, 2021). For many, adopting an African-derived religion is both a spiritual and political praxis. During the 1970s and 80s, Brazil’s Unified Black Movement (*Movimento Negro Unificado*) explicitly promoted Candomblé as a radical assertion of Black identity and resistance to cultural erasure (Burdick, 1998; Selka, 2008). Contemporary Black feminist scholars likewise view Afro-Brazilian cosmologies as epistemological alternatives to hegemonic whiteness and Euro-Christian ontologies (Cardoso, 2016; Carneiro, 2016).

At the same time, scholars caution against romanticizing African cosmologies as “pure” traditions untouched by outside influence (Burdick, 1998; Daniel, 2005; Selka, 2008). Afro-Brazilian religions are profoundly syncretic—their survival is, in part, due to their flexibility and adaptability (Cole, 1994; Harding, 2000; Voeks, 1997). In much of the Northeast, Orixás were strategically aligned with Catholic saints, allowing practitioners to maintain ritual life under the guise of Catholic orthodoxy (Cole, 1994). The Iberian Catholic Church’s elaborate liturgical processions and Marian devotions mirrored African ritual forms, easing their integration (ibid.). Over time, this blending became a hallmark of Afro-Brazilian religious practice.

Among the most vibrant expressions of this syncretism were the Black Catholic brotherhoods, particularly in Pernambuco and Bahia (Harding, 2000; Voeks, 1997). Founded by the Portuguese in the 13th century and expanded during the colonial period, irmandades were lay religious associations, often segregated by race, that offered mutual aid, funeral assistance, and spaces for cultural continuity (ibid.). Afro-Brazilians—both enslaved and free—used these organizations to sustain African languages, ancestral knowledge, and community ties, while outwardly conforming to Catholic practices (Voeks, 1997).

One such institution was the *Irmadade do Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Homens Pretos* (The Black Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary), established in Pernambuco by the early 1600s. By 1630, members had erected a cathedral near Recife and organized events including coronation ceremonies for African kings (Vainsencher, 2009). These coronations drew on African protocols and included *maracatu*, a rhythmic procession and dance performance that remains central to Recife’s carnival celebrations today (ibid.). Contemporary maracatu “nations” across Pernambuco continue this tradition, preparing elaborate costumes and choreographies for street parades that reassert Black sovereignty and Afro-diasporic



FIGURE 1 Maracatu performers from Araújoia, Pernambuco, performing at Carnival in February 2020. This maracatu “nation” was founded in 1914. Photo by author.

identity (see Figure 1). In this way, Afro-Brazilian spiritual cosmologies are infrastructures of survival, animating practices of care, protest, and creativity that contest coloniality and offer routes toward collective repair. Through axé, dance, performance, and more-than-human care, communities create meaning, joy, and resistance in the face of dispossession.

THE PURSUIT OF JOY AS RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

Candomblé is deeply entangled with Northeast Brazilian popular culture—what Johnson (2002) refers to as “public candomblé,” or “Candomblé’s expansion beyond the ethnic markers and the bounds of traditional sites of ritual practice” (151). In Pernambuco, Candomblé manifests in axé music—a popular musical genre outside the religious spaces of the terreiros. Axé music—also called brega—refers to the “low class or tacky” music of the popular classes (Góes Jr., 2013, 37). Brega funk is a hip-hop-esque, more recent style. In the sacred spaces of the terreiros, Candomblé participants dance as part of a ritual possession caused by a deity or Orixá (ibid.). Popular axé music and ritual dancing can serve a similar purpose in “uniting the body and spirit through rhythm, chants, a physical activity meant to create an agitation through the celebration of life, sexuality and the mystical” (Góes Jr., 2013, 42).

Despite this depth, axé and brega music are frequently marginalized by Brazil’s elite classes, partly because they draw massive crowds that disrupt urban order. Their lyrics—focused on pleasure, sexuality, and love—are often misread as shallow. Yet these genres offer critical modes of racial and social affirmation (Burdick, 2013; Moehn, 2007; Pardue, 2008; Reiter & Mitchell, 2008). Moehn (2007) and Kun (2005) describe music as audiotopias, or ‘alternative countries’ to which “one has the right to ‘exile’ for a few transcendent minutes” (Moehn, 2007, 183). For many Afro-Brazilians, music is not an escape from reality but a way

of transforming it. As Moehn notes, music is often mobilized for “radical change in a society of extreme social stratification” (185).

My fieldwork confirms these insights. Across Cabo and Ipojuca, brega and brega funk were invoked not just as sources of entertainment but as tools for autonomy, self-worth, and social navigation. In a widely circulated interview, brega funk artist Tássia Seabra described the genre as “an essential tool for the construction and development of young people of the periphery’s autonomy and self-esteem... and an alternative path...to stay far away from violence” (Seabra, 2022). Despite legal crackdowns and cultural stigma, the genre’s digital success on streaming platforms has offered both economic and emotional possibilities for communities facing systemic marginalization.

Whether spiritual or secular, music and dance are essential dimensions of how Afro-Brazilian interlocutors pursue joy, endure hardship, and assert dignity. Pernambuco’s rich musical traditions—axé, brega, maracatu, frevo—are not just art forms but strategies for resilience. Music is omnipresent in people’s daily lives: played on radios while working, sung aloud in the mangroves, or danced to during festivals. The rhythms of joy are not separate from structural critique—they are part of how communities reclaim the self amid dispossession. One interlocutor, Nadia,⁵ described dance as essential to her capacity to experience joy in a life shadowed by state violence:

I like to dance, I like to have a beer... I like to enjoy myself... and still, today, dancing is everything to me.

(Nadia, interview, 11-25-2020)

Another, Júlia, lit up during our conversation when music was brought up:

Interviewer: What do you like to hear?

Júlia: The old music.

Interviewer: Those *bregas antigas*?

Júlia: Yes. *Axé, bregas antigas*.

Interviewer: Do you like to dance?

Júlia: I love it!

Interviewer: And what do you dance?

Júlia: Oh! I dance to everything. *Frevo, maracatu, reggae—whatever you have, I am dancing*.

(Júlia, interview, 02-25-2021)

For many women, music provides rare moments of self-possession in highly gendered and exhausting labor conditions. Many work grueling jobs—domestic labor, caregiving, sugarcane harvesting—before coming home to begin a “second shift” of reproductive labor. Yet music offers reprieve. One woman told me she wakes at 4:30 a.m. just to walk and listen to music before beginning the day’s cooking and cleaning. In the mangroves, where *marisqueiras*

(female shellfish gatherers) cannot carry radios, many sing to themselves, their voices echoing across the tidal flats. Music is not simply a distraction; it's a form of personal grounding amid environmental and social precarity.

Public celebrations are also critical joy-making spaces. Religious festivals like São João, part of the Festa Junina, honor St. John the Baptist and feature all-night dancing and community gatherings. Carnaval *blocos* (neighborhood block parties) provide space for dancing, cooking, and laughing together. These celebrations offer moments to reweave the social fabric worn thin by everyday struggle. Finally, healing circles, or *rodas*, extend the logic of Candomblé's sacred spaces into informal therapeutic gatherings (Oliveira et al., 2016). Traditionally, *rodas* involve participants standing in a circle that expands and contracts in rhythmic unison, leaving space for the energetic presence of axé (Daniel, 2005). In Cabo and Ipojuca, *rodas* have become spaces of community healing—where people process grief, exhaustion, and marginalization together. As in the *terreiro*, each participant contributes their energy, voice, and body to a collective regenerative act (Oliveira et al., 2016). In all these ways, joy is not a retreat from violence—it is a form of resistance to it. Through music, dance, and ritual, communities craft spaces of reprieve, reimagination, and resilience. These expressive acts are, fundamentally, practices of survival.

PEOPLE IN MOVEMENT: FEMINIST AND ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZING

Women's radio and the Women's Center of Cabo

Much like the *terreiro* or the *irmandade*, the *Centro das Mulheres do Cabo* (CMC) is a vital site for cultivating race and gender consciousness in Cabo de Santo Agostinho (Freire & Tauk, 2009; Oliveira et al., 2016). Through workshops, education, and political action, CMC fosters critical reflection, mutual support, and the assertion of rights among Afro-Brazilian women. One of its most powerful platforms is the *Rádio Mulher* (Women's Radio) program, whose tagline—"cheia de axé" (full of axé)—captures the show's unapologetic embrace of Afro-Brazilian spirituality, cultural pride, and gendered resistance. Streaming both on local radio and Facebook Live, *Rádio Mulher* bridges digital and analog worlds to reach women across rural and peri-urban Pernambuco. In addition to reinforcing cultural identity through music, remedies, and storytelling, the program candidly addresses taboo issues such as sexual health, contraception, and reproductive rights. One of its core strengths lies in making structural violence visible, particularly the gendered impacts of CIPS.

In episodes like "*Mulheres, Corpos e Resistência contra os Megaprojetos em seus Territórios*" (Women, Bodies, and Resistance Against Megaprojects in their Territories), hosts and invited speakers counter the dominant narrative that Suape Port is an economic boon. Instead, they reveal how traditional gendered labor patterns in fishing communities expose women disproportionately to environmental harm. Men, often in boats, catch finfish farther offshore; women, by contrast, wade barefoot through mangroves to collect shellfish—placing them in direct contact with waters polluted by Suape's effluents. In this way, CIPS's territorial expansion and environmental toxicity become embodied threats, disproportionately borne by Black women.

Rádio Mulher not only identifies structural injustices—it empowers listeners with practical tools, from accessing legal protections to demanding safer work conditions. Its format combines political education, cultural affirmation, and health literacy, crafting a media space where Afro-Brazilian women narrate their lives on their own terms. CMC's feminist media activism

extends into physical and digital organizing. One of the most powerful expressions of this was the International Women's Day parade (*Dia Internacional das Mulheres*), which I joined during fieldwork. From afternoon to night, women marched through Cabo's streets chanting, dancing, and demanding justice. Signs demanded LGBTQ+ rights, the end of domestic violence, and environmental protections. Many women wore shirts or held signs reading "*Eu Voto Em Negro*"—"I Vote Black"—a statement against systemic racial exclusion in Brazil's political system. Despite Brazil having the world's largest African diaspora, Black women remain severely underrepresented in elected office (Carneiro, 2016).

CMC supports Black women candidates through electoral training, candidate forums, and digital outreach. Through *Rádio Mulher* and its social media campaigns, it amplifies the voices of Black female candidates, educates rural voters, and counters the underfunding and stereotyping that undermine Black women's political participation. These efforts turn both airwaves and sidewalks into political battlegrounds, where race, gender, and class inequalities are directly named and contested. CMC also invests in political futures through its *Meninas em Movimento* (Girls in Movement) program, which trains girls in critical thinking, dialogue, and civic engagement. Activities such as mock elections, self-defense training, and group discussions offer participants practical tools for asserting their rights and navigating structural oppression. In a region shaped by intergenerational inequities, *Meninas em Movimento* prepares young girls to become politically aware, agentive community member, and future leaders.

Fórum Suape: Art-based activism against environmental racism

I first encountered Fórum Suape by accident in 2018. Hoping to attend an event at the Women's Center, I arrived to find it empty. A member of Fórum Suape, located next door, noticed my confusion and invited me inside, offering *cafezinho* and cookies in the typical Brazilian spirit of warmth. As we talked, they shared stories of CIPS's ongoing violence and handed me one of their signature informational pamphlets. What struck me immediately was its form: a cordel folheto, a popular print medium in Northeast Brazil, known for its poetic, woodcut-illustrated storytelling. But instead of folktales, this pamphlet outlined practical steps for what to do if CIPS destroyed your house, threatened your family, or stole building materials—common experiences in communities under threat. The cover asked bluntly: "*O que fazer em caso de violência praticada por Suape?*" (What to do if Suape commits violence?).

These pamphlets are part of Fórum Suape's commitment to culturally grounded, accessible activism—especially for racialized women who, due to systemic barriers, have historically had limited access to formal education. While many may not engage with written texts in conventional ways, they are highly literate in oral, digital, ecological, and spiritual practices. By combining traditional aesthetics with political messaging, the pamphlets show that poetry and folk art can function as tools for survival and resistance. In the digital sphere, Fórum Suape also uses YouTube as a platform for oral, visual, and community-driven counter-narratives. Their two major projects—*Rios Livres, Mangues Vivos* (Free Rivers, Living Mangroves) and *Projeto Mangue Mulher* (Women Mangrove Project)—document the environmental destruction of CIPS and the community responses it has provoked. *Rios Livres* centers on the damming of the Rio Tatuoca, a culturally and ecologically vital river that once nourished the Quilombola community of Ilha de Mercês. The videos, composed of interviews and on-site footage, show how river blockage degraded fish biodiversity, undermined subsistence practices, and symbolically severed the community's ancestral ties to water. In the absence of

mainstream media coverage, these videos circulate widely on social media and WhatsApp, becoming vital forms of environmental witnessing and testimony.

Projeto Mangue Mulher extends this work by documenting the labor, knowledge, and creativity of Afro-Brazilian fisherwomen and shellfish gatherers. One standout video is set to Elza Soares' anthem 'Banho'⁶ with lyrics like "*acordo maré/durmo cachoeira*" ("I wake to the tide/I sleep to the waterfall") that resonate deeply with marisqueiras' rhythms of life. The footage traces women's routes through mangrove and shoreline, highlighting both the grace of their work and the dangers they face. The video closes with a simple but powerful statement over images of Suape's industrial sprawl: "As mulheres pescadoras existem, resistem, e exigem respeito" (Women fishers exist, resist, and demand respect). The text lingers while a clip of CIPS's oversized industrial facilities looms in the background, clarifying who should be offering respect. In both analog and digital spaces, Fórum Suape and CMC remind us that resistance is not just political—it is aesthetic, relational, and deeply embodied. Whether through cordel pamphlets, radio shows, music videos, or feminist parades, Afro-Brazilian women in Cabo and Ipojuca make their struggles visible—and their futures imaginable.

REPAIR THROUGH CARE: ANCESTORS AND THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

For many Afro-Brazilian community members, relationships with land, water, animals, and plants are more than practical—they are ancestral. People often described themselves as part of a continuous web of more-than-human relations, where the earth (*terra*), tides (*maré*), forests, and domestic animals are active participants in well-being and healing. These connections are not new; they reflect knowledge passed down through generations. Tending to the land is not just subsistence—it is care work, spiritual grounding, and a way to honor ancestral presence. In these communities, gardens, beaches, mangrove forests, and even household animals are central to everyday life. Engaging these more-than-human networks helps residents cultivate what many call "right relationships"—ways of living rooted in care, respect, and reciprocity, even as state-led development projects disregard such forms of life. As Augusto, a small farmer, explains:

What brings me happiness, I am content when I am in the garden and see my crops looking so pretty. And when, especially when there are those little dolls (a nickname for ears of corn), I take lots of photos and send them to others on Facebook, and that there gives me happiness—of the things I do. And there I am, in the middle of the corn, and I think: soon, soon I am going to see those dolls. If God wills it, those little dolls will come.

—Augusto, interview, March 9, 2021

In uncertain times, tending gardens and raising animals gives people a sense of control and autonomy over their lives. However, the continued expansion of the CIPS increasingly encroaches on traditional land use. Raising pigs, donkeys, chickens, cattle, and cultivating small home gardens (*terrenos* or *roças*) are fundamental aspects of daily life, especially for women. These practices provide food, healing herbs, and a sense of routine. Despite land pressures, many women "guerilla garden" small plots or grow vegetables in containers, finding creative ways to nourish their families. Through gardening, women can exercise agency, improve and heal the land, beautify their home spaces, and provide necessary plants for medicinal and household purposes. Gardening becomes not just an act of survival, but a

form of care—for the land, for themselves, and for their kin. Laís demonstrates a general enthusiasm for cultivation:

I like to plant. (Pointing in different directions) I plant there, I plant here, I plant there and there... in front of the house, I have cassava planted... There's no life without planting, understand?

—Laís, interview, October 3, 2021

Even amid displacement and ecological loss, people find gratitude in small moments of connection with nature. Vivian expressed this clearly:

The tree, my plants, the birds singing, the garden is what makes me happy. It has already given me happiness. Another day with health, and I am grateful.

—Vivian, interview, November 25, 2020

As CIPS continues to dislodge families from their traditional territories, those who lost access to the lands they have historically planted now travel long distances to still-accessible beaches and mangroves to fish and collect, or simply be. These places offer more than food—they are spaces for reflection, connection to the ancestors, and emotional release. As Luana describes:

Interviewer: What brings you happiness?

Luana: *"The mangroves do the most. Because with the mangroves, I am super heavy, as I did today. If you go you see the aratu (type of crab), and I become lighter and healthier. Because I go there a little tired, you know? The mountain of stuff you carry with you, the industry, the sadness, you leave it there. And then, I am at peace to breathe—"*

—Luana, interview, February 3, 2021

For those still living on ancestral lands, cultivating and caring for the earth remains a vital act of resistance. Small-scale farmers often learn to plant at a young age—beginning around age 9 or 10—and continuing that work becomes a way to honor family heritage. Rita, whose land is now surrounded by CIPS on three sides, articulated this powerfully:

Interviewer: In difficult moments, what brings you hope?

Rita: *"Eita (expression). This question is... (laughs) it's why I resist, you know? This is why I resist. What brings (hope) is this here. The first thing that brings me hope is my relationship with land (terra). This relationship with the land brings me hope, and I have hope in it. All of my ancestry (ancestralidade), my experience with the earth make me hope for better days, for better moments. And for regularizing these lands, seeing people at peace, planting, and cultivating their areas. This gives me a certain sustenance and strengthens me to go before the context of struggle and conflict. I am always searching for this mentality: it is possible, that we will advance over this territory, move forward with the regularization of territory, move forward with our permanence in the earth, what we know how to do. These are our ways of life, and I will not go outside of this territory, like*

the people of Tatuoca who lived in Tatuoca and were put in that Vila Tatuoca (urbanized community where CIPS relocated Tatuoca residents). That there is no relationship with territory. That is Apartheid. Because you are separated from what is yours, you know? From your land, from your birthplace. That was yours."

—Rita, interview, March 25, 2021

Without formal land rights, *posseiro* communities remain at risk of removal. But working the land sustains people like Rita—emotionally, spiritually, and politically. The land reminds her that her people were there before CIPS, and that ancestral presence continues. In continuing to plant, care, and resist, Rita honors her *ancestralidade* and fortifies herself to keep fighting for land regularization and community survival. By remaining on the land, Cabo and Ipójucans carry forward the teachings, rhythms, and responsibilities of those who came before them. Many of them live on or near the land their grandparents and great-grandparents once cultivated. Their practices are inherited forms of relational knowledge that extend beyond memory into lived spiritual lineage.

What the Cabo and Ipojuca residents reveal is that care for the more-than-human world is inseparable from care for ancestral worlds. Working the land, fishing the tides, or tending a backyard garden are not just acts of sustenance—they are methods of remembering, honoring, and continuing. In a context where industrial development seeks to erase these attachments, such care work becomes a powerful means of repair. Through these ancestral and ecological relationships, people generate not only food but healing and hope. Their resistance is not merely a fight against displacement—it is a fight for the right to remain in relationship—to land, to memory, and to those who came before.

CONCLUSION

Colonial legacies remain central to understanding the present, especially in places like Pernambuco, where nearly 5 centuries of sugarcane plantation agriculture have created enduring racial, economic, and ecological inequalities. The spatial, spiritual, and material logics of the plantation have never fully disappeared. Rather, they have been reconfigured through neo-colonial development strategies—like those embodied in the expansion of the CIPS—which continue to reproduce structures of extraction, dispossession, and environmental violence. In these contexts, Black feminist geographies offer critical epistemological tools for tracing plantation afterlives while also foregrounding the creative practices of resistance, care, and survival that emerge from them (McKittrick, 2013; McInnis, 2019; Wynter, 1971). To focus solely on violence, as several scholars have warned, is to risk erasing the dynamic strategies Afro-Brazilians have long used to persist, subvert, and remake the world around them (Thomas, 2020; Drotbohm, 2022; Freeman, 2022).

This ethnography has explored how Afro-Brazilian community members in Cabo and Ipojuca mobilize a wide range of embodied, cultural, and spiritual practices to enact both resistance and repair. Whether cultivating garden plots in tiny front yards, invoking ancestral guidance through ritual, singing while gathering aratu in the mangroves, or dancing in healing circles, these are not merely symbolic gestures. They are daily acts of care and autonomy—tools for surviving both structural violence and personal hardship. In terreiro ceremonies and rodas, participants generate axé not only as a spiritual life force, but as a shared energy of community strength. In household gardens, women grow cassava, beans, and medicinal herbs while affirming their ancestral connections to land and place. For many, especially women, caring for the land or sea is a way of remembering, resisting, and envisioning

continuity in the face of displacement. These practices are not relics of tradition; they are evolving, living modes of repair that engage the past without being bound by it.

Cabo and Ipojuicans sustain syncretic healing cosmologies that offer alternative understandings of the human, the sacred, and the ecological. These belief systems, ever-evolving, refuse the binary logics of modernity versus tradition. They affirm instead a world in which joy, pleasure, and aesthetic expression are vital forces of resilience. As discussed, popular music—whether sacred or secular—plays a critical role. From ritual drumming to brega funk beats played through cell phone speakers, music offers what Moehn (2007) called an “alternative country”—a space of mental escape, emotional relief, and embodied power. When women blast *axé* from radios while cleaning, or when young people post dance videos online, they aren’t simply seeking distraction. They are creating meaning, claiming visibility, and cultivating life in a landscape of erasure.

Digital storytelling amplifies these practices of refusal. Organizations like the Women’s Center of Cabo and Fórum Suape use platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp not just to document harm but to circulate alternative histories and vernacular knowledges. Fórum Suape’s use of cordel aesthetics and audio-visual media challenges dominant literacies and embraces multimodal forms of communication more aligned with community realities. These are not passive adaptations to marginalization; they are deliberate, creative interventions. Whether offering illustrated guides to land defense or music videos that elevate the voices of *marisqueiras*, Fórum Suape’s work demonstrates that digital literacy itself can be a tool for resistance and repair—one that is culturally resonant, accessible, and powerful.

As one *marisqueira* explained, “You leave the sadness there” in the mangroves—a reminder that the more-than-human world does not only offer solace, but actively participates in healing. The tides, trees, birds, fish, and crustaceans are part of a complex web of relationships that sustain life. Ancestors, too, are not abstract figures of the past but active presences that inhabit the land, the body, and the spirit. Whether named explicitly or felt through embodied ritual, *ancestralidade* informs how people make decisions, navigate hardship, and draw strength. Interviewees like Rita, who continue to cultivate their land despite encroachment, embody this inheritance—she sees her gardening as both a mode of subsistence and an act of honoring her ancestors and claiming her rightful place in the world.

Anthropologists must pay close attention to how global infrastructure projects, like maritime ports, reproduce the material and symbolic violences of racial capitalism and environmental injustice under the guise of “development.” But we must also attend with equal rigor to the practices through which people contest, survive, and transform those conditions. The communities described here do not offer a “hopeful message” in the abstract. They offer something more grounded and instructive: a set of practices, relations, and cosmologies that sustain life—sometimes in quiet, everyday gestures, sometimes in collective mobilizations, always in conversation with the past and future. Whether through ancestral connection, embodied joy, ecological care, or collective mobilization, these practices are grounded strategies of refusal and repair. These practices are historically rooted, spiritually informed, and socially generative. For Cabo and Ipojuicans, joy, pleasure, and more-than-human care are not distractions from struggle; they are central to its endurance and transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my community collaborators, especially my research assistant Elaine Cristina Salgado Mendonça and transcription assistant Glaubberthy Rusman da Silva. Thank you to the Centro das Mulheres, Fórum Suape, and all interlocutors who offered their time and energy to the project. Thanks to Russell Parry Scott and Christine Dabat at Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, and the many people who offered feedback on the drafts, including Drs.

Lisa Markowitz, Don Nelson, Nik Heynen, Patricia Richards, and Bram Tucker. Finally, I thank Fulbright Hays for funding the project, and the Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship for providing the time and support to complete the article.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In Brazil, the state defines traditional communities as “culturally differentiated groups that recognize themselves as such, that have their own form of social organization, that occupy and use territories and natural resources as a condition for their cultural social, religious, and ancestral reproduction, using knowledge, innovations, and practices generated and transmitted by tradition” (Ministério do Meio Ambiente, [n.d.](#))
- ² These industries include Toyota, Coca-Cola, Unilever, Bunge, and Shineray, among other petrochemical, construction, thermoelectric energy, preform plastic, and pharmaceutical industries (Suape, [2020](#)).
- ³ This number is from Slave Voyages, widely considered the most accurate database. Of the 5.8 million enslaved people transported to Brazil, 824,313 arrived in Pernambuco, while 1,545,007 landed in Bahia. Accessed from: <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>.
- ⁴ Umbanda evolved from Candomblé in the 19th century, syncretizing Candomblé elements with Indigenous and Iberian spiritism (Prandi, [2004](#)).
- ⁵ All interlocutors have been given pseudonyms.
- ⁶ Many Afro-Brazilian women of Cabo and Ipojuca consider Elza Soares, an octogenarian Afro-Brazilian musician, a hero. Her song, “Banho,” (shower)—with its thematic focus on the cleansing power of water and confronting discrimination—was frequently described as a *gift* to Afro-Brazilian women fishers and collectors. Soares gave permission to Fórum Suape to use her song before she died in 2022.

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How to cite this article: Biesel, Shelly Annette. 2025. "Cheia de axé (full of axé): Spirituality, resistance, and repair in Pernambuco's Afro-Brazilian traditional communities." *Feminist Anthropology* e70028. <https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.70028>