Chapter 13 In Brief

African Presence in the Amazon: A Glance
African presence in the Amazon: A glance

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Key Messages & Recommendations

1) African enslaved people arrived in the Americas from tropical regions where, for millennia, they managed ecosystems and engaged in agriculture and the domestication of species, which contributed to positive transformations of tropical landscapes in the Americas.

2) Presently, the genetic resources, knowledge, and management practices of African peoples are central to the cuisine, agricultural production, and economies of American societies.

3) African presence in the Amazon is influenced by ports of arrival for slave ships. As opposed to northwestern slave ports, ports in the eastern region have direct access to the Amazon. This influenced both the size of the African population in the Brazilian and Surinamese Amazon, and their relationship with science and mainstream society. In the countries of western South America, most people associate coastal regions with African descendants, and the Amazon with Indigenous people.

4) People of African descent have implemented production strategies, particularly in the tropical rainforest. These unique management systems use cycles of nature, and deeply rely on maintaining biodiversity. They should be considered an efficient forest management alternative.

5) Academics and decision makers should understand, recognize, and value peoples of African origin as key actors in the design of context-specific conservation strategies, learning from ongoing collaborative processes between communities and NGOs.

6) African descendants face critical situations of violence and forced displacement from territories they have inhabited for centuries, which not only violates fundamental rights, but also ruptures sustainable tropical forest management systems.

Abstract This chapter provides evidence on the importance of African descendants in the construction of the Amazon and other tropical areas in the Americas, and highlights their importance for long-lasting sustainable development strategies in the region. It looks at both the cultural exchange and socio-historic perspectives, emphasizing land settlement patterns, natural resources use, and management practices. It focuses mostly on Brazil, Suriname, and Colombia, and emphasizes the importance of involving African descendant peoples in Amazonian academic research and policy.

Introduction The presence of peoples of African descent in the Amazon is constantly overlooked. Africans often came from rainforest regions and, like Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, had long-standing knowledge and profound experiences in tropical environments. Today, these can contribute to sustainable practices. Promoting inclusive environmental governance in terms of sustainable management of ancestral territories and strategic economic well-being is crucial.

Most studies of African descendants in the Amazon are from non-Spanish speaking countries, which can be explained – among other things – by the places and ports enslaved peoples disembarked. Another explanation for the invisibility of Afro-descendants’ role in shaping the Amazon are the deterministic constructs and stereotypes that revolve around African presence in the Americas, including the fallacy that Afro-descendant peoples have only contributed unskilled labor. Another construct involves the relationship between urban Latin American societies and nature, which was customarily considered unproductive. In this...
sense, forest inhabitants were deemed as savages, lazy, and unable to convert forests into productive developed areas. Finally, both Afro-descendant and Indigenous peoples in the Americas are erroneously portrayed as peoples without their own history and capacity for action.

**Slave traffic, ports of arrival, and Amazonian entry**

It is estimated that, over the course of the four hundred year history of the African slave trade, 80,000 trips were made and approximately 12.5 million people were transported across the Atlantic. By the time surviving slaves arrived at their final destination, they had already faced abuses of all kinds.

Europeans, mostly from Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands, kidnapped their human merchandise from West Africa, along what they called “the Slave Coast.” Ports were mostly located in modern-day Guinea, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, and Angola. The main purpose of slavery was to drive the economy of the New World by transporting different ethnic groups with specific knowledge, culture, and spirituality to the Americas. Slave ships were also provisioned along the West Coast of Africa, which featured a wide diversity of plants and animal species, including rice, coffee, okra, sesame, and kola nut.

**Advancing within South America**

The Spanish crown advanced along the North-Western and Western regions of South America, but its advance towards the Amazon was not as decisive and direct as the advance made by the Portuguese in Brazil (see Chapter 9).

**Colombia and Panama: Indirect arrival in the Amazon**

Although very vaguely, African descendants are mentioned as part of expeditions aimed at conquering the region to the east of the Andes mountains in the 16th century, to open the forest to exploitation, including gold exploration. One important route for the transport of enslaved Africans and merchandise to South America was from the ports of Cartagena de Indias, Portobello, Guayaquil, and Lima. By mid-17th century, Cartagena de Indias was the main slave port for all of Hispanic America, receiving slaves that belonged to the Ararats, Lucumí, Zape, Angola, Congo, Viafara, Cambindo, Matambas, Carabali, and Popó ethnic groups. According to Romero (2017), Africans kept the names of their ethnic groups and places of origin as surnames. Many enslaved people established Maroon societies in the Amazon, but first, they had to cross the Andes mountains.

**Brazil and Suriname: Direct arrival in the Amazon**

Africans destined for Brazil came from several regions of the West Coast of Africa including Senegambia, West-Central Africa, Bahia Santa Helena, and the Gulf of Benin; as well as Southeast Africa, especially Mozambique. The ports of Benguela and Luanda extended the Angola route, and were created explicitly for the sale of Africans sent to America. During the colonial period, slave ships arrived at the ports of Bahia and Pernambuco, far from the Amazon. Some arrivals were destined for work on coastal sugar plantations, while others were transported to the interior; escaped slaves from both areas often took refuge in the heart of the jungle. Although extractive activities were of minor importance to the national economy, they were the basis of the Amazonian economy, and African slaves were fundamental for these operations. In Brazil, the Portuguese Overseas Council officially defined the settlements of fugitive enslaved Africans as Quilombos. The Quilombos established local relationships with Indigenous peoples, local communities, and merchants, and eventually became home to Indigenous individuals, mulattoes, caboclos, run-away soldiers, and other marginalized groups. In the mid-19th century, the rubber boom (see Chapter 11) increased the need for slave labor, but in 1869, the Brazilian state of Pará demanded the emancipation of all people from servile work. Finally, in 1888 the Golden Law was issued, which abolished slavery in Brazil.

By the mid-1600s, the Dutch established their colony in the northeast area of South America. Betwe-
en 1668 and 1823, an estimated 300,000 Africans arrived in Suriname as slaves, from the region between southern Gabon and northern Angola, including Ghana and Benin. It is said that the limitless cruelty of the Dutch slave masters caused many slaves to escape and take refuge in the dense Amazon forest, establishing Maroon communities along the region’s rivers.

In 1863, Suriname abolished slavery, after which former slaves from coastal plantations settled mostly in the capital Paramaribo. Today, over 72,000 descendants inhabit 6 semi-independent Maroon communities. Suriname is considered one of the world’s most ethnically and culturally diverse places.

The importance of tropical origin to adaptation in the Americas When the Portuguese arrived in West Africa in 1443, the Indigenous peoples they encountered had, over millennia, developed complex cultural and agricultural structures. They had domesticated many species known to the world today, and had livelihoods and extractive systems based on the diversity of Africa’s tropical ecosystems. Coming from a tropical zone was a great advantage for Africans’ adaptation and resilience in the American tropics, supporting both enslaved people and the thousands who fled and formed settlements deep in the forest.

Many contemporary economic activities in the American tropics are foreign to this continent, including livestock operations originally from Europe, Africa, and Asia. Africans not only domesticated plants, but have traditionally been pastoralists. African knowledge of tropical ecosystems management would have been crucial to adapting imported plant and animal species to South America, refuting the widespread belief that European ingenuity developed these techniques.

Agro-ecosystems of Maroon and plantation slaves: The transformation of rainforests into food forests The African legacy in the Americas can be traced to agro-biodiversity, agricultural techniques including seed management and species’ adaptation to new environments, and culinary practices. West African food staples brought on slave ships became the basis of Maroon subsistence agriculture in the New World, and the survival
Both plantation slaves and run-away Maroons depended on their own botanical knowledge of medicinal, religious, and nutritional plants to obtain food from new environments.21,39
survive\textsuperscript{40,41}, and this heritage is reflected in the subsistence practices of the groups that still inhabit tropical forests\textsuperscript{17}. The multi-cropping systems of many communities from the African tropical belt have transformed the rainforest into a food forest, incorporating Amerindian staples such as corn, sweet potatoes, cassava, and peanuts\textsuperscript{14} with adapted African seeds.

Colombian Afro-Pacific agriculture differs from Amerindian and peasant systems\textsuperscript{33}, as the diversity of the first is highly related to their adaptation to a new environment. The inherited production systems of freed African peoples use space in ways that combine various livelihood strategies and trade with local towns\textsuperscript{42,43}.

**African culinary and livelihood practices in tropical areas in the Americas** African foods and ingredients remain vital to the diaspora’s culinary practices and American recipes. In tropical areas of the Americas, there is a strong relationship between Indigenous women, agriculture, food parcels, livelihood activities, ecosystems, and cooking\textsuperscript{38,44}, which may have preserved and passed down African culinary practices.

Culinary practices of African people in the diaspora led to the preservation of dishes from Africa in the Amazon. As suggested by Zabala Gómez (2017)\textsuperscript{38}, the Amazon is a social, cultural, symbolic, physical, and geographical space that, unlike others, was not persecuted by slave owners. These spaces of freedom played an important role in preserving recipes, knowledge, and beliefs, which are linked to biodiversity and the ecosystems in which ingredients are produced or collected. Therefore, these cultures and traditions are also linked to the management practices of these groups.

**The Afro-Latin American contribution to Africa** In addition to African contributions to the Americas, the Americas have also contributed to contemporary Africa. Over centuries people, merchandise, culture, genetic material, and ideas traveled back and forth on ships between the Slave Coast and Brazil\textsuperscript{25,49,46}. Crops domesticated in the Americas, including cassava and maize, were brought to Africa and became staples of African diets. After slavery was abolished, the Brazilian diaspora emerged in Africa, mainly Angola, with a cultural exchange led by hundreds of freed slaves who remained commercially, culturally, and intellectually connected to relatives and acquaintances who stayed in Brazil. It is reported that some sent money back to Brazil to purchase their children’s freedom.

**Post-abolition positive transformations of tropical landscapes** During the period of slavery, agrobiodiversity and multilayer systems were characteristic of resilience strategies, either by working on plantations or fleeing as maroons. After the abolition of slavery in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, African descendants carried out positive transformations and changes to the territories and ecosystems they have ancestrally inhabited, with minimal adverse consequences on the environment\textsuperscript{22,33,43,47}. The abolition of slavery introduced Afro-descendant people into a market economy without the just and necessary means to navigate the new system. So, forests and ecosystems helped Afro-descendant people once again, providing these populations with the alternative of making a living and supporting families based on the management of natural resources. This contrasts with the extensive plantation and livestock systems implemented by European descendants and Criollo people to boost economic interests at the expense of ecosystems, with immense consequences\textsuperscript{49}.

Currently, Afro-descendant communities in countries such as Brazil and Colombia have made significant progress in titling lands they have ancestrally inhabited. This is a significant step, especially given the economic difficulties faced by Afro-communities in the post-abolition period.

Nevertheless, these groups still face tremendous difficulties. In Colombia, for example, the incursion of armed groups and related clashes over the drug trade has generated massive forced displacement, conscription of youth, violence, and anxiety\textsuperscript{48–50}. In addition, oil palm plantations are expan-
After the signing of the peace accords in 2016, there was a period of relative tranquility in Colombia that lasted about a year. However, cessation of the armed conflict resulted in the incursion of extractive interests into the Amazon, which led to deforestation, land grabbing, unsustainable resource
ding at the expense of Colombian Pacific forests.33

Figure 13.3 Afro-descendant communities legally recognized in Colombia. Source: ANT 2021 (Afro-descendant communities); RAISG (reference boundaries; cities); WCS (Amazon basin limit)
use and continued violence towards Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.

Conclusions A commonly neglected topic has been the fact that African enslaved people arrived in the Americas from tropical regions where domestication of species, agriculture, and management of ecosystems had already taken place for millennia. This is reflected in the large number of species of flora and fauna that can be found today in the gastronomy, culture, and economy of Latin America. Prominent academics draw attention to the importance of human adaptation strategies of Afro-descendants to tropical rainforest in the positive transformation of such landscapes in the Americas. However, there are complex agronomic arrangements in both domestic and agricultural systems; agrobiodiversity and plant management practices that support polyculture food crops are gradually being replaced by new waves of monoculture plantations. The history of African descent in tropical and subtropical rainforests of the Americas provide clues to navigate uncertainties and strengthen resilience. It simultaneously shows possible paths to ensure the well-being and conservation of nature while at the same time working towards the establishment of a new development model in the Amazon based on a potent bioeconomy.

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