# MEMORIES AND IDENTITIES OF THE QUILOMBOLA COMMUNITY OF CUSCUZ – MARACÁS/BA

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**ABSTRACT:** The objective of this article was to explore the historical formation of the community known as Rua do Cuscuz in the municipality of Maracás/Ba, through the ancestral memories of its residents, focusing on the ethnic composition of the group and collective actions aimed at reaffirming the identity through festive cultural practices. The method used was Oral History, and the technique used for data collection was the semi-structured interview with audiovisual records. From this study, we infer that the Cuscuz community preserves its collective identity and undertakes struggles for (re)existence even before the abolition of slavery. Among the forms of resistance, the search for sustenance through the production and sale of couscous stands out, as well as Catholic festive practices in the post-abolition period; which we understand to be a means of establishing a border dialogue with the hegemonic society of Maracás. In addition to serving as a platform for demands for constitutional rights for the quilombola people.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity. Memory. Quilombola Community. Territory.

***RESUMO:*** *O objetivo deste artigo foi explorar a formação histórica da comunidade conhecida como Rua do Cuscuz no município de Maracás/Ba, por meio das memórias*

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*ancestrais de seus moradores, com foco na composição étnica do grupo e as ações coletivas voltadas para a reafirmação da identidade por meio das práticas culturais festivas. O método empregado foi o da História Oral e a técnica empregada para a coleta de dados, foi a entrevista semiestruturada com registros audiovisuais. A partir desse estudo inferimos que a comunidade do Cuscuz preserva sua identidade coletiva e empreende lutas de (re)existência mesmo antes da abolição da escravatura. Dentre as formas de resistência, destaca-se a busca do sustento a partir da produção e venda do cuscuz, como também as práticas festivas católicas no pós-abolição; que compreendemos ser um meio de estabelecer um diálogo fronteiriço com a sociedade hegemônica de Maracás. Além de servir como plataforma para reivindicações de direitos constitucionais para o povo quilombola.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE:*** *Identidade. Memória. Comunidade Quilombola. Território.*

***RESUMEN:*** *El objetivo de este artículo fue explorar la formación histórica de la comunidad conocida como Rua do Cuscuz en el municipio de Maracás/Ba, a través de las memorias ancestrales de sus habitantes, centrándose en la composición étnica del grupo y acciones colectivas encaminadas a reafirmando la identidad a través de prácticas culturales festivas. El método utilizado fue la Historia Oral y la técnica utilizada para la recolección de datos fue la entrevista semiestructurada con registros audiovisuales. De este estudio inferimos que la comunidad Cuscuz preserva su identidad colectiva y emprende luchas por (re)existencia incluso antes de la abolición de la esclavitud. Entre las formas de resistencia destaca la búsqueda de sustento a través de la producción y venta de cuscús, así como las prácticas festivas católicas en el periodo post-abolición; lo cual entendemos como un medio para establecer un diálogo fronterizo con la sociedad hegemónica de Maracás. Además de servir como plataforma de demanda de derechos constitucionales para el pueblo quilombola.*

***PALABRAS CLAVE:*** *Identidad; Memoria; Comunidad Quilombola; Territorio.*

## Introduction

The Cuscuz community, located in the municipality of Maracás, Bahia, is known for being home to a Black population descended from the first Africans who inhabited the city. It is situated on the banks of the Jiquiriçá River's source and has become a territory of resistance and identity for its residents over the years. The testimonies of residents Ana Luísa and Maria Senhora reveal not only the historical significance of the Cuscuz community as a support network for marginalized

Afro-descendants in the post-abolition period but also highlight its evolution into a center for cultural and communal preservation. Over the decades, this community has not only resisted socio-economic adversities but also cultivated traditions that affirm its quilombola identity, despite not yet being certified by the Palmares Cultural Foundation (FCP).

This article is an excerpt from a master's research project that aimed to explore the historical formation and ethnic identity of the Cuscuz community, analyzing how its cultural practices and collective memories perpetuate the ancestral heritage of resistance and social solidarity. Through interviews, participant observation, and historical records, we examine how the Cuscuz community transformed from a Black resistance territory against slavery into a symbol of pride and belonging for its inhabitants[1]. Moreover, we address the challenges faced by the community, including issues of legal recognition and government support, as they continue to fight for the preservation of their traditions and the recognition of their constitutional rights.

To achieve the proposed objectives of this research, we initially conducted a literature review of works focused on portraying the ethnic composition of Maracás's population, as well as the power dynamics among Indigenous, Black, and white populations. In doing so, we were able to understand the process of cultural hybridization that contributed to the construction of Cuscuz's collective identity through festive practices. We then proceeded with participant observation (Ingold, 2015) to understand how the residents of Cuscuz build relationships of alterity in relation to Maracás's hegemonic society. Lastly, to grasp the residents' collective memories and the identity built throughout this process, we relied on the Oral History method (Alberti, 2004), using interview techniques to highlight the community's individual and collective experiences.

Interviews were conducted with four collaborators. The first is Edi Wilkison dos Santos (30 years old), born on 13 de Maio Street and currently residing in the Pau Ferro neighborhood of Maracás. He is a Physical Education teacher at a private elementary school in the municipality. He is Catholic and practices Candomblé, initiated in the *Ilè Àlákétù Asé Ode Omí L'ódò* terreiro in Brumado. Ms. Ana Luísa dos Santos, 51 years old, Catholic, resident of 13 de Maio Street, works as a teacher at the Municipal Daycare Center Maria da Paixão. Ms. Maria Senhora dos Santos Nascimento (68 years old), a former resident of 13 de Maio Street, currently lives in the downtown area. She is a Catholic, a retired state school teacher, and the owner of Bar do Cafut on 13 de Maio Street. Ms. Luzia de Jesus (70 years old), also a former resident of 13 de Maio Street, now lives in the Morumbi neighborhood, located

[1] Currently, the residents of *Comunidade do Cuscuz*, through the *Associação Cultural Comunitária do Cuscuz*, founded in 2023, are seeking to formalize their status as a quilombo remnant community.

behind the Cuscuz community. She is Catholic and a Candomblé practitioner, having previously participated in the Umbanda terreiro of "Pai Astério," where she learned to play the atabaque drum – an instrument in which she actively participates during Cuscuz festivities. She worked for many years on coffee farms and collecting firewood and is currently retired.

Before conducting the interviews, exploratory visits and informal conversations were held in local businesses. This process was fundamental for understanding the local dynamics and the expectations of both men and women regarding the outcomes of a socio-historical research project within the community. Furthermore, the chosen methodology allowed us to gather additional information about the community's ethnic composition and the cultural practices that function as symbols of identity and cultural pride by highlighting the intangible boundaries between the community and Maracás's hegemonic society. This study not only documents the individual experiences of Cuscuz residents but also contributes to understanding how these personal narratives are woven into the broader social fabric.

## Memory of the Formation of the Cuscuz Community

> Memory, as the ability to preserve certain information, first refers us to a set of psychic functions through which human beings can recall past impressions or information, or represent them as such (Le Goff, 1990, p. 366, our translation).

According to the memories of Cuscuz residents, the community received its name because the artisanal production of cuscuz (a traditional dish made from corn) was the predominant activity among the inhabitants of this peripheral area of Maracás, Bahia[2]. The artisanal production and sale of cuscuz emerged as an alternative economic activity that, when combined with others, could offer the community's families better income and living conditions.

Demand for the product became so frequent among Maracás society – including the city's elite who lived on Rua da Praça – that the community became known as "Rua do Cuscuz," or simply "Cuscuz." One resident who narrates the story of the community's formation is Ms. Ana Luísa, a 50-year-old teacher who lives on 13 de Maio Street. She recounts that her great-grandmother was one of the first to arrive and settle in that area of Maracás.

[2] This was one of many other activities carried out by the blacks freed by the Golden Law, because without any government aid to guarantee their livelihood, without the availability of jobs or properties for farming, they found means of subsistence in domestic activities in the homes of residents in the city center, washing clothes at the spring, carrying firewood to supply homes and commercial establishments or working on coffee, castor bean and tomato farms.

In the excerpt below, Ana Luísa recounts that her great-grandmother was expelled from Fazenda Laranjeiras along with her family. Her youngest grandfather, who passed away in 1997 at the age of 78, used to tell this story. According to estimates, Mr. Roque – known as "Roque Balinha," Ana Luísa's maternal grandfather – was born in the first or second decade of the 20th century, and his family was expelled from the Laranjeiras area sometime near the abolition of slavery in 1888.

> Grandpa used to say that they didn't live here – they lived on Fazenda Laranjeiras, in the municipality of Marcionílio. And at that time, they were, let's say, expelled. So, they left, right? Like nomads. They ended up coming here. Back then, they lived down below, built their houses down there, where the river's source was. Then, over time, during Dr. Bezerra's administration, they were removed from there and placed up here. So they built all their houses here, but they originally lived down there (Ana Luísa, interview given on 12/22/2022, our translation).

It is unclear whether the interviewee's grandfather actually remembered the expulsion period or whether he preserved this story from his mother's account. At another point in the interview, Ana Luísa states that when her family arrived in the area, there were already houses built by Black families near the river's source. This statement suggests that the Cuscuz community was established even before the abolition of slavery. Her family's arrival and integration into the community point to common elements – such as economic hardship and shared ethno-racial identity – that facilitated this incorporation.

According to Nascimento (1980), such associations among Black individuals in contexts of economic exclusion represent practices of Quilombismo. The welcoming of Ana Luísa's family by this group reinforces the idea that Quilombismo, as described by the author, transcends the historical concept of quilombos as mere spaces of resistance to slavery. It includes all forms of collective association that promote survival, dignity, and the strengthening of Black identity in the face of adversities imposed by racism:

> At that time, let's say during the slavery period, they worked on those farms. Then came what they called emancipation, right? But it wasn't really liberation – because true liberation would involve some form of compensation, even if they continued to work on the farms, at least they would be paid. But as you can see, they were expelled, ended up with no job, no work, and wandered around until they came here and settled here (Ana Luísa, interview given on 12/22/2022, our translation).

Ana Luísa's account highlights the strategies and actions adopted by her ancestors, who, facing a so-called liberation without the guarantee of means to sustain themselves, sought another space to survive. Upon arriving in this area, their main economic activity became the production and sale of cuscuz.

From the constructivist perspective brought by Pollak (1989), collective memory is a means to understand how social facts become tangible realities, rather than viewing them as fixed objects. By recovering and transmitting their experiences of exclusion and survival, this memory reinforces the community's collective identity, consolidates its history, and offers stability amid the adversities imposed by the dominant social order. This process not only preserves the trajectory of ancestral resistance but also imbues the community with a sense of belonging and continuity. Thus, these "subterranean memories"[3] become tools of cultural and political affirmation, enabling marginalized groups – like Ana Luísa's ancestors – to challenge hegemonic narratives and reaffirm their historical and cultural contributions in the collective space. In this way, collective memory not only resists oblivion but also plays a central role in building and maintaining community identity and in valuing its history.

Ana Luísa also reports that her great-grandmother was one of the women who worked in cuscuz production to sell at the town square. She cherishes a photo of Dona Maria Luísa and the traditional steamer (*cuscuzeiro*) used in cuscuz preparation.

**Figure 1 –** Photograph of Maria Luísa (one of the first residents of Rua do Cuscuz)

**Source:** Ana Luísa dos Santos' archive, 12/22/2022.

[3] Pollak (1989, p. 03) stresses the importance of analysing underground memories in order to privilege historical facts told from the perspective of those who were marginalized and oppressed, thus representing an opposition to the "Official Memory" which, although national, does not necessarily represent an opposition between the dominating state and civil society; the divide in this relationship is more often between "minority groups and the encompassing society".

**Figure 2 –** Utensils used in the preparation of cuscus

**Source:** Author's photo. Ana Luísa dos Santos' archive, 12/22/2022.

**Figure 3 –** Mortar used in the preparation of cuscus

**Source:** Ana Luísa dos Santos' archive, 09/09/2023.

In Figure 2, from right to left, we see the cuscuzeira (cuscuz steamer), the gamela (wooden bowl), and the **pot**, respectively. In Figure 3, we see the mortar, which was used to grind corn, the essential raw material for making cuscuz. Based on Ana Luísa's account, we can infer that the production and sale of cuscuz was one of the earliest economic survival strategies adopted by Black people in the post-abolition period. Due to limited employment opportunities and the fact that the community was located in the urban area of Maracás, cuscuz production emerged as a way to circumvent exclusion from the political and economic macrostructure of the time. Maria Senhora – a retired teacher and former resident of the Cuscuz community – recalls:

> This cuscuz was also made from corn. You would remove the kernels, soak them – it was an entire process, truly handcrafted. You'd take out the eye of the corn; once it softened, you'd rub it to remove the eye, soak it again to strain it the next day, let it drain and dry, and only then would it go to the mortar. Back then, the cornmeal was made in the mortar – you'd pound it, sift it, and leave it ready for the next day. So it took about three days of work to get the cuscuz to the right poin (Maria Senhora, interview given on 05/09/2022, our translation).

Maria Senhora states that the production and sale of cuscuz were carried out by women. They were responsible for planting the cornfields, harvesting, and pounding the material for cuscuz production. She also mentions that the production and sale of cuscuz as a source of income is an old practice, though she cannot say whether this memory comes from her childhood or was passed down by elders, as she herself did not work in cuscuz production. Nevertheless, whether it is a personal memory or one inherited from previous generations, it is a fact that cuscuz production and sale were intensive economic activities during the first half of the 20th century in Maracás.

On December 16, 2020, cuscuz was declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity – not only the dish itself but also all the traditional knowledge associated with its preparation and consumption. Its origin traces back to North Africa, to countries such as Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, where ingredients like wheat and semolina were commonly used. The countries that participated in the committee to approve cuscuz as intangible heritage argued: "*Couscous is much more than a dish; it is a moment, memories, traditions, gestures passed down from generation to generation*[4]".

Nascimento (2022), drawing from the history of Maria Jacaré (a Nagô who lived in the area even before it received its current name), states that cuscuz in the Maracás community was influenced by Indigenous culture, particularly through the incorporation of corn as an essential raw material. This established a connection between Yoruba African culture and the Maraká Indigenous people.

Oliveira (2011) argues that while culture functions as a symbol of identity, it does not necessarily entail a direct causal link to identity itself, meaning cultural changes do not automatically lead to identity changes within a group. From this perspective, the assimilation of Indigenous cultural elements by the Cuscuz community did not result in the loss or distortion of African ancestral identity markers. On the contrary, this integration with Indigenous knowledge strengthened the community's interethnic boundaries, reinforcing its collective identity. Thus, cultural interaction

[4] UNESCO declares couscous Intangible Heritage of Humanity. CNN Brazil, 2020. Available at: https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/estilo/unesco-declara-cuscuz-como-patrimonio-imaterial-da-humanidade/. Accessed on: 13/01/2023.

is not seen as a form of identity dilution, but rather as a reinforcement of the group's distinctiveness, through the adaptation and reinterpretation of cultural elements over time – without abandoning its African identity base.

Still on the origins of the Cuscuz community, residents of Maracás explain that in the post-abolition period, newly freed individuals – especially women – began to survive by washing clothes and supplying water from the spring to the estates of the Maracás elite. Thus, these water resources became an important source of income, leading to an increase in the number of houses. Fearing contamination of the spring, the local elite demanded that the government remove residents living near the water source and reforest the area.

To meet the interests of Maracás's elite, the city administration relocated this population to a nearby area approximately 300 meters from the reforested spring region. It was in this territory that the formation of André Magalhães Street began – later known as Rua do Cuscuz. As the population grew, other streets emerged, such as 13 de Maio and Amélia Mariniello Avenue. However, Cuscuz residents do not have accurate records regarding the exact period of this relocation, although evidence suggests it occurred in the early 20th century. An inscription dated 1925 at the so-called "government spring," built during the administration of Intendant André Magalhães Júnior, supports this timeline. The structure was designed for storing spring water, serving both to supply household reservoirs and to provide a workspace for local washerwomen. The "government spring" not only met the basic needs of the population but also played a central role in the community's social and economic organization.

**Figure 4 –** Government Spring – Source of the Jiquiriçá River

**Source:** Author's photo, 01/11/2023.

The area historically known as Rua do Cuscuz is officially designated by public authorities as the Jiquiriçá neighborhood, due to its location near the source of the river bearing the same name. What the local population refers to as Rua do Cuscuz encompasses a network of streets whose residents are connected by kinship ties and a shared collective history. It is precisely this sense of reciprocity among the

people living in the area – marked by familial bonds, whether by blood or not – that gives the name "Rua do Cuscuz" its symbolic significance, representing a sense of belonging to this social and physical space. This is how the territory is identified by both its residents and the broader population of Maracás.

**Figure 5 –** Cuscuz Community (13 de Maio Street, André Magalhães Street, and Amélia Mariniello Avenue)


**Source:** Author's photo.

**Figure 6 –** Ricardo Ribeiro de Novaes Street, Padre A. Plamário Street, Cel. José Medrado Street


**Source:** Author's photo.

In Figure 5, the area referred to as *Rua do Cuscuz* is identified as a "proto-street" (*proto-rua*) (Guimarães, 2003, p. 40), which at the time of the referenced study included 13 de Maio Street, André Magalhães Street, and Amélia Mariniello Avenue. Today, the territory of Cuscuz has expanded, as shown in Figure 6, where three additional streets are marked as part of the area known as Rua do Cuscuz. Currently, the territory includes André Magalhães Street, 13 de Maio Street, Amélia

Mariniello Avenue, Ricardo Ribeiro de Novaes Street, Padre A. Plamário Street, and Cel. José Medrado Street.

The first streets mentioned (13 de Maio, André Magalhães, and Amélia Mariniello) were where the first families displaced from the spring area by the municipal government settled. That is, in the early 20th century, these were the streets where cuscuz was produced and sold within the community. The other streets are also referred to by residents as part of Rua do Cuscuz due to the existing kinship ties with those original families. According to Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart (1998), territoriality in itself is not an ethnic attribute; however, once members of a group claim a shared origin and use it – along with customs and language – as elements of distinction, it becomes a marker of belonging that defines an ethnic boundary (Poutignat & Streiff-Fenart apud Guimarães, 2003, p. 36).

Due to its location near the center of Maracás, in an urban area, Rua do Cuscuz became a point of reference for Black people living in rural communities in the municipality. It is common for residents of Cuscuz to report kinship and reciprocity ties between their community and those of rural communities. Some women from Cuscuz recount that when Black rural populations were expelled from their lands by landowners, they often migrated to the Cuscuz community – either because of family ties, friendships, solidarity, or because its urban location facilitated access to employment opportunities for their families' survival.

By articulating Halbwachs' (1990) ideas with the history of Rua do Cuscuz, we can highlight the essential relationship between collective memory and space, as the author argues that collective memory is inseparable from space, where the past materializes and persists, allowing it to be reconstructed and remembered by individuals and social groups. In the case of Rua do Cuscuz, its proximity to the center of Maracás not only facilitated the migration of expelled rural Black populations, but also consolidated the area as a symbol of refuge, resistance, and solidarity. This space became a point of convergence for collective memory, where stories of struggle and community bonds are constantly reinforced. Thus, Rua do Cuscuz exemplifies how a physical space can serve as a durable support for preserving a group's memory and identity.

## Cuscuz community: memory as a strategy for reinventing Quilombola identity

When considering ethno-racial identity as a unifying factor among individuals, it is important to highlight that ethnicity cannot be understood as a substitute for the concept of race, although race is indeed one of the markers of ethnic identity. According to Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart (1998, p. 34, our translation), "race (hered-

itary heritage) should not, in Weber, be placed on the same level as the ethnic group, but on the same level as custom (cultural heritage), as one of the possible forces in the formation of communities."

From the literature review, it is evident that researchers and scholars in Maracás consistently identify the Cuscuz Community as an urban quilombo. However, interviews conducted within the community revealed tensions around the crystallization and resemantization of the quilombo category. These tensions echo the divergence between the formal discourse in Article 68 of the Brazilian Constitution, which refers to *remnant quilombo communities*, and anthropological studies that point to an emerging identity consciousness that rejects the notion of *remnants* and instead asserts that quilombos continue to exist and are not just relics of the past.

Conceição (2016) provides a solid synthesis of this discussion, aligning with authors such as Almeida (2002) and Arruti (2006), and argues that "the inclusion of the term (remnant) in Article 68 of the Federal Constitution opened a powerful legal loophole for those seeking to restrict land rights of these communities to a specific historical timeframe" (Conceição, 2016, p. 141–142, our translation). According to the author, the best approach would be to resemantize the quilombo category to better address the demands of quilombola communities. The term *remnant* presents conceptual and legal challenges for identifying the subjects of rights defined in Article 68, as it implies something left over, a residue, rather than a living, active collective.

According to Abdias Nascimento (1980), quilombos emerged from the vital need of Africans and their descendants to create, outside of captivity, a living space – a society where they could exist with freedom and dignity. Thus, after abolition, the quilombo did not cease to exist; rather, it continued as a space of resistance, solidarity, fraternity, and preservation of African ancestry and cultural practices. Beatriz Nascimento (1985) argued that after the 19th century, the institution of the quilombo began to "serve as an ideological instrument against forms of oppression" (Nascimento, 1985, p. 289, our translation).

The Cuscuz community is predominantly Black and is depicted by professor and novelist Clóves da Fonseca as a people belonging to an ethnic group of "Nagô Blacks" who settled in the area near the Jiquiriçá River:

> When the Nagôs arrived here, before the great dispersal, they came to live on this street. They built a row of houses, about fifty or so […] the Nagôs who came here mostly engaged in agricultural and domestic activities. That's why they scattered across the fields, mills, cattle pens of the many farms, and the kitchens of the wealthier households in the region. (Nagô here is generalized to all Africans) (Fonseca, 2006, p. 28, our translation).

This narrative is reinforced by community residents, who affirm they are descendants of enslaved Africans who fled their oppressors in the Chapada Diamantina region and surrounding farms. Certainly, the mention of the Nagô ethnic group refers generically to the enslaved African collective who inhabited the region, potentially originating from diverse nations or ethnic groups. The Nagô identity functioned as a sort of "identity umbrella", encompassing Africans from different ethnic backgrounds who shared elements such as language, culture, beliefs, and origin myths rooted in Yoruba traditions (Reis apud Borges, 2021, p. 85).

Professor Clóves da Fonseca also described the Cuscuz community as a kind of support base – a "guard post of the stronghold" (Fonseca, 2006, p. 29) – used to relay information to the Quilombo da Estiva, which was not far from the area. Given Cuscuz's location on the urban periphery of Maracás, it brought together Black individuals bound by solidarity and a shared history of struggle and resistance dating back to the period of slavery.

Froes (2022), who studied the historical formation of the Quilombo da Estiva, observed that the Black population that settled in that community was resisting the oppression of the slave system, fleeing from different regions of Bahia, including "Cruz das Almas, located 220 km from Maracás" (Froes, 2022, p. 225, our translation). Therefore, the formation of Black communities in Maracás predates abolition, as was the case with many other quilombos throughout Brazil.

Regarding quilombola identity, there is a generational conflict within the Cuscuz Community. The younger generation identifies and claims quilombola status, whereas the older generation often retains a crystallized notion of the quilombo as something linked to slavery – associated with inhumanity, suffering, pain, and violence – which they seek to detach from. Even with all the characteristics that point to quilombola belonging, both the Estiva and Cuscuz communities are not officially recognized by the Fundação Cultural Palmares (FCP) as Quilombola Communities:

> The reasons are varied, but the main one lies in the fact that racism experienced by this population led them to reject any association with their enslaved past. Thus, the people who inhabit these places stand out and take pride in expressing their festivities as a symbol of identity and pride, and this is how they wish to be remembered – as a supportive, joyful, and festive people (Edi Wilkson, interview, 04/21/2022).

Despite these differing conceptions of collective identity within the community, it is important to recognize that residents of Cuscuz preserve in their memory the notion of the quilombo as an institution of resistance, and they perceive the territory they inhabit as a space that has historically resisted dominant, colonial, Eurocentric, and white structures in Maracás. In some ways, this rejection of an

enslaved past reflects how collective memory functions to mitigate the violence and pain endured, aligning with Halbwachs's (1990) observations on how social groups shape the remembrance of their past. This dynamic reveals a tutelary relationship between memory and identity, as "in defining what is common to a group and what differentiates it from others, [memory] supports and reinforces the sense of belonging and sociocultural boundaries" (Pollak, 1989, p. 03, our translation).

The testimony of Edi Wilkson and the ideas of Halbwachs (1990) and Pollak (1989) converge in viewing collective memory as essential to constructing and affirming group identity. Wilkson highlights how the denial of the enslaved past – driven by racism – led to a reconfiguration of identity, in which festivities became expressions of cultural pride and resistance. This process, as Pollak (1989) explains, reflects the tutelary role of memory in defining shared elements of a group, shaping sociocultural boundaries that reinforce social cohesion and the collective sense of belonging.

In this context, the festivities mentioned by Wilkson become fundamental practices for reaffirming a collective identity rooted in the recovery and appreciation of ancestral heritage. They function as a space of resistance, where memories suppressed by racism, violence, and historical marginalization are re-signified and transformed into symbols of pride and resistance. Thus, collective memory, by aligning past and present, not only preserves traditions but also strengthens group identity, reinforcing the bonds among its members. In this sense, the festivities referenced by Wilkson can be interpreted as expressions of a collective memory that not only preserves history but also re-signifies it, emphasizing values of solidarity, joy, and collective identity.

Stuart Hall's (2006) reflections on collective identity as a dynamic process – shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors – directly dialogue with Edi Wilkson's account. Hall (2006) argues that identity is not fixed but constantly negotiated and reconstructed in response to social transformations. This perspective applies to the experience of the Cuscuz Community as described by Wilkson, where racism led many to reject ties to their enslaved past. In this identity-building process, festivities emerge as cultural practices that incorporate values of solidarity and Afrocentric ancestry, serving as symbols of resistance and collective identity.

This dynamic illustrates Hall's (2006) notion that identity is continuously rearticulated in response to specific historical and cultural conditions, highlighting how communities transform experiences of oppression into narratives of belonging and the affirmation of their traditions. In this way, even painful memories of the past are re-signified to strengthen the identity of a people who choose to be remembered through their festive cultural expressions. By turning adversity into elements of cohesion and celebration, these communities reaffirm their place in history and society, challenging narratives of erasure, denial, and exclusion.

On May 13, 2023, Edi Wilkson dos Santos, along with other leaders of the Cuscuz community – such as Dona Maria Senhora dos Santos Nascimento and Ana Luísa dos Santos – organized an event on Rua 13 de Maio to launch the Cuscuz Cultural and Community Association (ACCC). This initiative, created by the residents themselves, aimed to formalize an institution with a political scope to continue the fight for rights in relation to public authorities, given that most of the community's cultural expressions lack financial and technical support from the local government. This grassroots movement marks a political stance by the residents – a concrete action grounded in collective awareness of the value and preservation of the community's cultural activities. It represents the first step toward the recognition of the Cuscuz Festivities and the Clube 13 de Maio – which is currently closed by the city government – as cultural heritage.

According to Banton, in the shift from racial to ethnic identification, the markers that previously carried stigma become positively re-signified, coming to "assume meanings of solidarity and identification" (Banton apud Arruti, 1997, p. 25, our translation). In this regard, recognizing the Cuscuz Community, its festivities, and its Club as tangible and intangible cultural heritage is an important step to pressuring public authorities to create policies that support the preservation of this community's festive traditions. These practices are part of the residents' ancestral memory and are maintained to this day in honor of their ancestors, who created and re-invented this centuries-old tradition. On these actions, Arruti (1997) infers that "a racial group becomes an ethnic group at the moment when, accepting the distinction imposed by the majority, it begins to use it politically to form autonomous groupings or to articulate shared interests and demands" (Arruti, 1997, p. 25, our translation).

The actions toward forming the Association began with meetings involving community leaders who outlined the Association's initial action plans. The main agenda was to reactivate the 13 de Maio Festivity Club, which would serve as the Association's headquarters, house an iconographic archive for the preservation of community memory, host cultural events, and serve as the rehearsal space for the traditional Cuscuz square dance group (*quadrilha*).

Another key initiative of the Association will be to seek official recognition from the Fundação Cultural Palmares for the Cuscuz community as a quilombola community, enabling its members to access constitutionally guaranteed rights. In its bylaws, the community has explicitly stated its commitment to pursuing recognition as a quilombola community, which is a strong indicator that ethnicity is now being mobilized by this collective as a strategy to access public policies promoted by federal, state, and municipal governments – recognition by the FCP being the gateway.

## Final considerations

The concluding reflections on the Cuscuz Community in Maracás reveal a complex and dynamic scenario in which quilombola identity is intertwined with narratives of resistance, the struggle for recognition, and cultural preservation. Based on the data presented, it is evident that there is a significant dissonance between the internal perception of the community and the formal criteria for quilombola recognition established by the Brazilian State.

Initially, the very categorization of quilombo is a subject of debate within the Cuscuz Community. While some members recognize and value the historical and cultural quilombola heritage as a symbol of resistance and community cohesion, others reject the crystallization of this identity in terms historically stigmatized by the experience of enslavement. This divergence reflects an ongoing effort to re-signify the concept of quilombo, adapting it to contemporary realities and to current political and social representational needs.

Historically, quilombos emerged as spaces of resistance, freedom, and dignity for Africans and their descendants, confronting the oppressive structures of the slave system. In the current context, the Cuscuz Community is committed not only to preserving its cultural traditions but also to asserting its legal recognition as a quilombola community. This movement includes the creation of the Cuscuz Cultural and Community Association, which reflects a collective effort to consolidate the community's ethnic and cultural identity, turning it into a center for political mobilization and identity strengthening.

In addition to reinforcing community bonds and residents' self-esteem, this mobilization also confronts structural racism, which has historically marginalized, violated, and erased the contributions of Black communities to local history and culture. Therefore, the actions of the Cuscuz Community in Maracás represent a living example of how collective memory and cultural identity can be used as tools of resistance and empowerment. The pursuit of valorizing their cultural practices not only places the Cuscuz Community within the official historical narrative as agents of their own story, but also underscores the importance of inclusive public policies that are responsive to the needs of this historically marginalized community.

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