

14. Minisymposium des Zentrums für Umweltgeschichte:

Environmental History, agriculture and traditional populations in the Brazilian Atlantic Coastal Forest

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The Brazilian Atlantic Coastal Forest is one out of five Brazilian biomes. As much as 110 millions of inhabitants live inside its borders and due to its historical occupation, about 93% of the forest have been destroyed. In spite of this, the remaining 7% play a crucial role in the ecological situation of huge regions – both cities and farmlands - due to the environmental services provided by the native forest.

Besides urbanization and industrial processes the region, the Brazilian Atlantic Coastal Forest is also important to the survival of traditional populations like Indians, *caiçaras* (fishermen and small farmers that employ slash-and-burn agriculture) and *quilombolas* (descendants of slaves). In spite of the growing general interest in environmental questions, the importance of human influences on the natural environment is not always fully taken into consideration and the evolutionary trajectory of the Brazilian landscape is often disassociated from the anthropogenic interventions that have occurred there over wide scales of space and time.

As a consequence of the ecological characteristics of tropical forests (and specifically the Atlantic Coastal forest), populations that have persisted for hundreds or thousands of years within the same ecosystem have consolidated a vast repertoire of knowledge concerning its management, independent of the human cultural diversity otherwise observed. Perhaps the best example is slash-and-burn agriculture, which has essentially been performed in an identical manner for a very long time in all of Brazil. The success of this method is obviously due to its solution of the problem of the lack of forest soil fertility in those areas. The secondary forests generated as a result of these agricultural practices may constitute the single most important ecological factor responsible for the present physiognomy of the Atlantic Coastal Forest. In order to understand the complexity of the processes between these populations and the environment it is necessary to use geographical concepts like the notion of territory, culture and the symbolic appropriation of nature.

Within this framework, the present minisymposium attempts to capture an historical view of the ecological consequences of the use of the forest environment by traditional populations and compare this with other agricultural techniques.

Place: IFF, Schottenfeldgasse 29, Seminarroom 6, 6th floor

Time: Thu, Feb 15th, 2007, 18-20h