Chapter 8
Agriculture Intensification, Economic Identity, and Shared Invisibility in Amazonian Peasantry: Caboclos and Colonists in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract The main focus of this contribution is to demonstrate the erroneous interpretation that has been carried out around the agricultural production systems of small-scale Amazonian rural producers, especially when analysed under the light of intensification. This mistaken judgement supports a depre- ciative vision of these social groups and their contributions to the regional economy. Both land use patterns, caboclo and colono, are often based on the co-existence of intensive and extensive activities that, simultaneously, minimise risk and guarantee the consolidation of rural property, as well as the expansion (or retraction) of activities geared towards the market. The author suggests the adoption of the term ‘small-scale producers’ to refer to these populations, which would contribute, in Brondizio’s opinion, to the creation of a more positive socio-economic identity for these populations within the region’s agricultural and resource economy. The author closes his analysis as he concludes that the redefinition of these populations’ identity as small-scale rural producers would provide a great step ahead in the sense of overcoming prejudices incorporated by regional and national societies.

Keywords Economic identity · Rural development · Açaí palm · Land use · Agriculture intensification

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Introduction: Views of Agriculture Intensification and Shared Invisibility in Amazonian Peasantry

Obvious differences between Amazonian caboclos\(^1\) and recent colonists\(^2\) render unnecessary any elaboration of their socio-cultural and historical particularities.\(^3\) At the same time, these diverse groups share striking similarities as they are lumped together under the rubric of ‘Amazonian peasantry.’ Regionally, both terms (but particularly caboclo) carry several distinct, usually derogatory meanings. Whereas academic definitions take into account variation in historical context, ethnic background, geographic, and contemporary socioeconomic identity, the colloquial usage of the terms caboclo and colonist\(^4\) share similar socio-cultural and economic prejudices. In essence, as small-scale rural producers, whether caboclo or colonist, they share a lack of economic, political, and infrastructure support. This chapter aims to discuss the existence of commonalities underlying their condition of ‘invisibility.’ While trying to value their historical and socio-cultural particularities, I attempt to discuss, particularly, the implications of misinterpreting their agricultural systems for the construction of an economic and social identity of these rural Amazonians. I attempt to show that the so-called ‘invisibility’ of Amazonian peasantry (whether economic, political, technological, or social) is in part a result of the dominant views of what is considered an agricultural system as it relates to its agronomic, aesthetic, economic, technological, and social efficiency and characteristics. A core element in this equation is how the ‘process of intensification’ of agricultural production is defined, particularly given its comparative nature and its implications for understanding social and socioeconomic changes throughout the contemporary history of the region. Although for different reasons – and that I will attempt to illustrate by means of field data and examples – both caboclo and colonist production systems tend to be disregarded in terms of

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\(^1\) Particularly, in this paper, the term Caboclo refers mostly to the riverine and inter-fluvial rural populations of the Amazon estuary represented by the study case discussed here.

\(^2\) The term colonist is used in this paper to refer to the families arriving in the region since the late 1960s through government-sponsored and spontaneous migration to areas previously occupied by Indigenous groups or Caboclo settlements. In particular, in this paper I concentrate on colonists settled as small farmers (that is, in lots varying from 50 to 150 hectares) during the last 3 decades as a result of government incentives for colonization. Whereas clear differences exist between these more recent migrants and caboclos, one may find it difficult to distinguish between communities occupying areas of century old colonization, like the Bragança region, and “caboclo” communities interwoven within and around them.

\(^3\) As noted by Pace “In all these definitions [n.a.: pointing to the same citations used in this paper to refer to Caboclo studies] it is acknowledge that caboclos are nontribal – not Native American – and non-settlers – not migrants who have come to Amazônia since the 1950s...”(1997:82).

\(^4\) In the colonist case, examples of terms with derogatory connotations include “Arigó” (particularly for those of Northeastern origin) and “Quíçassa,” (a term also used for abandoned areas in Western Amazônia), among others.