

# The river and the *epoch: barranqueiro* *understandings* on water in the disturbed landscape of the São Francisco Valley

O rio e a *época: entendências* barranqueiras sobre a água  
na paisagem perturbada do Vale do São Francisco

Luiz Felipe Rocha Benites<sup>1</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2955-3066>

[felipebenites74@gmail.com](mailto:felipebenites74@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro – Nova Iguaçu, RJ, Brazil

## Abstract

This article seeks to expose the entanglement in the mode of inhabitation of the *ribeirinhos* from the Upper São Francisco Valley, also known as *barranqueiros*, with the waters and other-than-human beings that comprise the co-built landscape on the riverbanks. The starting point for critically describing this more-than-human sociality on the banks of the São Francisco River are the *entendências* [lit. understandings] of the inhabitants of the Ribanceira Community, in the municipality of São Romão, in Minas Gerais, concerning the pluvial and river flows of the waters. Immersed in the cyclical alternation between the *time of the waters* and the *time of the drought*, which guide their fishing and farming activities, the *barranqueiros* of Ribanceira have experienced increasingly less frequent and less intense pluvial flows, while also coexisting with a river that is worryingly not flowing that colours their narratives in disheartening tones regarding the proximity of the *epoch or end of times*.

**Keywords:** water; more-than-human sociality; São Francisco River Valley; climate change.

## Resumo

Este artigo tem por objetivo expor parte do emaranhamento que envolve o modo de habitar de ribeirinhos do Vale do Alto-Médio São Francisco, também chamados barranqueiros, com as águas e entes outros-que-humanos que compõem a paisagem coconstruída às margens do rio. O ponto de partida para descrever criticamente essa socialidade mais-que-humana às margens do Rio São Francisco são as *entendências* dos habitantes da comunidade de Ribanceira, no município de São Romão, em Minas Gerais, sobre as águas em seus fluxos pluviais e fluviais. Imersos na alternância cíclica entre o *tempo das águas* e o *tempo da seca*, que orientam suas atividades de pesca e de roça, os barranqueiros da Ribanceira tem vivenciado fluxos pluviais cada vez menos frequentes e intensos, bem como experimentado o convívio com um rio preocupantemente sem *corrida* que dá cores às narrativas em tons desalentadores sobre a proximidade da *época* ou *fim dos tempos*.

**Palavras-chave:** água; socialidade mais-que-humana; Rio São Francisco; mudança climática.

*Este é um rio cujos estragos compõem.*  
*[This is a river whose ravages compound]*  
(Manoel de Barros, "Um rio desbocado")

## Introduction

If the ravages of a river can compound, as the poet Manoel de Barros warns in the epigraph above, then the long process of degradation of that which has been hailed as the 'river of national integration' constitutes a privileged field for describing the differentiated composition of species and ecological conditions in landscapes disturbed by anthropic action (Tsing, 2021, p. 178). The composite life of humans and other-than-humans on the banks of the São Francisco River is not immune to the intentions of changes in the planet's geological and atmospheric system that are associated with the expected and unexpected effects of human interventions.

The São Francisco River has been given so many names. For many of the inhabitants of its surroundings, it is known as *Chicão* or *Velho Chico*. According to Brandão and Borges (2013), it was baptised *Opará* by Indigenous people in northern Minas Gerais, while in old cartographic records, it was called *Pirapitinga*. The historical multiplicity of river names does not appear to escape the confluence of its destiny, such that its 'end' has been diagnosed by scientists over the last decade.<sup>1</sup> The exercise I propose here is to offer a 'nonsecular description' of the San Francisco landscape and its 'hauntings' (Gan *et al.*, 2017, p. G2) based on the local perception of inhabitants of the upper-middle stretch of the San Francisco River.

This article is the product of the analysis of partial results of research<sup>2</sup> that is still ongoing. Here I seek to address how residents living on the banks of the São Francisco River, called *barranqueiros* [*lit.* riverbank dwellers], think about

---

1 A work that became an important reference in the field of conservation and natural history (Siqueira Filho *et al.*, 2012) announced 'the inexorable extinction of the São Francisco River'. Ever since then, concern over the river's agonising situation has reverberated in scientific and journalistic circles.

2 The research on which this text is based is funded by an Edital Universal of the CNPq.

the place of water in the 'more-than-human sociality' (Tsing, 2013) that emerges along the banks of the river. The ethnographic research on which this reflection is based has been taking place in the *Quilombola* and riverside community of Ribanceira, located in the municipality of São Romão, in the northern region of Minas Gerais. In this research, I invested in monitoring and recording the practices and narratives of my interlocutors while they exercised their fishing and agriculture activities.

This reflection focuses on the ethnographic description of the *entendências* [*lit.* understandings] of riverside dwellers regarding the landscape in which they are immersed and in which they are also active agents of construction. *Entendência* is a notion often evoked by one of my best interlocutors, Juca, a farmer, a reveller guide and healer, resident of Buritizinho, a town close to Ribanceira, but which constitutes the same '*campo negro*',<sup>3</sup> to use the concept of historian Flávio Gomes (2015, p. 108), of which Ribanceira is also a part. *Entendência* is an expression that corresponds to a mode of analysis in which a person is able to perceive the implications of the actions that they take. Thus, it implies more than experiencing or knowing how to do something. Once, Juca showed me in a practical manner what it means to *have* *entendência* when he commented on a car accident caused by a driver who lived in Ribanceira, who had abused the speed the car was capable of. He said: 'You can know how to drive a car and *not have an* *entendência* of the violence it is capable of causing'.

Thus, I use the notion of *entendência* to name the practices of meaning that involve the reflective activity of my interlocutors, not merely to describe their knowledge and practical skills with regard to their inhabited surroundings, but also to include the implications they draw regarding their actions on the world they compose. I use a *mode of analysis* like that operationalised by Stuart Kirsch (2006, p. 1), inspired by Marilyn Strathern, by taking the exchanges carried out by the Yonggom as practices capable of functioning as a 'form of social

---

3 Flávio Gomes uses the term '*campo negro*' for his thinking concerning the field of social relations of the *Quilombolas* of the Recôncavo da Guanabara in the nineteenth century. He defines it as: 'a complex social network, the scene of struggles and solidarity between communities of fugitives, captives on plantations and even in neighbouring urban areas, freedmen, farmers and ranchers' (Gomes, 2015, p. 108). I believe that such a term may be appropriate for reflection on Black socialities from the post-abolition period up to the present, so as not to isolate Black Brazilian communities and think of them relationally based on incessant movements in the constitution of connections and solidarity.

analysis' insofar as they reveal its composition through 'other persons or social relations'. In their own way, I think that the narratives<sup>4</sup> and actions of my interlocutors can operate as *modes of analysis* due to their capacity to reveal not only relationships of meaning, but also as practices to draw implications concerning what is said and done. As modes of analysis, the *barranqueiro entendências* drawn from my field experience focus on the movements of river waters and rainfall and their effects.

Here I also perform an exercise in dialoguing with the idea of *landscape*, through what it instigates me to think. Thus, I seek to echo the *barranqueiro entendências* concerning the notion of landscape. It is true that this term has recognised importance in disciplines like geography and archaeology, but since the publication of *The Anthropology of Landscape* (Hirsch; O'Hanlon, 1995), the notion of landscape has gained greater prominence in the field of anthropology, as one of the axes from which the Western antagonism between nature and culture/society has been problematised. What the body of work accumulated since the beginning of the twentieth century seems to indicate is that the idea of landscape is no longer considered to be an inert scenario or mere physical-material support for human practices, rather it gives rise to studies in which the classifications, relationships and meanings of the entities that compose the worlds under study are ethnographically situated.

In this work, I seek to combine the perspectives of, on the one hand, Tim Ingold (2011), in which landscapes emerge from human and more-than-human practices immersed in weather-worlds,<sup>5</sup> that is, involved in the entanglement between surface and fluid media, and on the other, Anna Tsing, in which these same landscapes constructed through more-than-human 'liveability' practices (Tsing, 2015) narrate stories that coexist in 'co-temporalities' (Tsing, 2021). As I seek to clarify, the notion of landscape is not used by my research interlocutors

- 
- 4 Regarding the textual transposition of the discourses in which many *entendências* [lit. understandings] are raised, I made very few corrections regarding the cultural norm, since I feel that maintaining certain grammatical disagreements, hesitations and repetitions of expressions seeks to preserve the characteristic poetics of *barranqueiro* prose. The translation sought to follow very similar lines in English, and uses contractions and other elements common/natural to speech.
  - 5 Tim Ingold's (2011) text "Landscape or weather-world?" criticises his previous formulation elaborated in "Temporality of landscape" (Ingold, 2000) and includes fluid media (light, sounds, winds, etc.) in the conformation of surfaces.

and there is no 'native equivalent' in any other expression. However, in the terms of Lévi-Strauss, this notion is *bon à penser*, at least as a starting point. It is good for thinking about the production of the world we live in. An unfinished world, in perpetual movement, in a constant process of transformation, even on an infinitesimal scale. And it is good for thinking about the relational understanding of subjects researched in their surroundings, based on the overlapping actions in relationships between humans and other-than-human beings, between forces and materials.

Thus, the *entendências* presented here are concerned with the composite landscape in which my interlocutors are simultaneously immersed and active in its processes of change. The composite world I speak of is located on the left bank of the São Francisco River, the course within Minas Gerais. The inhabitants of Ribanceira live in a village in a rural area on the banks of *Velho Chico*, approximately 15 km (10 mi) south of the centre of the municipality of São Romão. The village dates back to 1979 when a major flood caused by the combination of intense rains and the unannounced outflow of the Três Marias dam displaced all the residents of Ilha da Martinha and other marginal areas of the São Francisco, close to where what is now Ribanceira. At the time, the then mayor of São Romão bought an area near the island on top of a large ravine from a landowner, which was subdivided to house those displaced. This is how the name Ribanceira was forged for the community. Even after resettling, the residents still maintain connections with the neighbouring areas they came from and where many of their relatives and friends still remain.

Nowadays, even if the younger generations are not very involved, a significant portion of the Ribanceira population still '*mexe* (mix, stir) in farming and fishing', especially the older folks. This expression designates the dimension of the work present in the daily lives of these interlocutors. The category *mexer* is relatively synonymous with working, but it often functions as a broader idea of dealing with something. Agricultural activity, carried out on Ilha da Martinha and on the bank of the São Francisco opposite the community, tends to alternate with fishing for many of my interlocutors.

Water is a crucial component of the social life of the inhabitants of Ribanceira. The activities in small-scale farming and fishing are intrinsically linked to the two climatic cycles in northern Minas Gerais: the *time of the waters* and the *time of the drought*, or simply, the *waters* and the *drought*. The *time of the*

*waters* oscillates more or less between October and March, corresponding to the period in which the rains are more frequent and intense. At this time, the water level of the São Francisco and its tributaries rises. When the rivers are full, the water overflows and forms lakes that become natural fish farms. The wetlands located on the banks of rivers, streams, paths or any watercourse, constitute fertile land for what is known as *ebb* agriculture, practiced at the beginning of the *drought*, which runs from April to September.

## Life, the river and its movements

As I mentioned, from the *barranqueiro* perspective, water is conceived of in temporal categories, the *time of the waters* and the *time of the drought* – the two climatic cycles marked by the presence or absence of rain –, and the intensity of the river's waters and the waters that fall from the sky in the form of rain. Thus, *ribeirinho* [riverside] life is aligned with the temporality of the waters, whose rhythms, flows and intensities produce responses from the living beings along the course and on the banks of *Chicão*. What I defend here is the co-constitutive character of water in *ribeirinho* sociality. This implies both the ubiquity of water in *barranqueiro* social life and how the configuration of such social relations (intra and alter-human) shapes what water becomes, as addressed in a set of recent works (Ballesterio, 2019; Hastrup; Hastrup, 2017; Helmreich, 2009; Krause; Harris, 2021; Krause; Strang, 2016; Strang, 2004, 2014).

In *barranqueiro entendências*, attention to the movements of the waters provides an idea of how their co-constitution of *ribeirinho* social life is configured. According to the words of my interlocutors, the river *rises* and *ebbs*. The movement of *rising* is intrinsically linked to the rains, with the greatest flow occurring during the *time of the waters*, although today there is a widespread perception that these have become less frequent and less intense during the period referred to. Although the great floods are events that remain only in memory, the floods of the river caused by rain during the *time of the waters* continue to be important to ensure the strength of the river's waters. The rains make the river run, *flow* or *have a current*. The *flow* of the river is something that is evaluated not only during the *time of the waters*, but throughout the year, especially when the period of rains comes to an end. The *current* carries sand,

earth, *slats* and *sticks*, pieces of branches and tree trunks that fall into the river. Therefore, during the rainy season, the water in the river becomes *murky* or *dirty*, that is, it has a darker colour, turbid and brown tones. Above all, a *flowing* river is a strong river, according to my interlocutors.

The rains that make the river *flow* create extremely favourable conditions for fishing activity. This is apparent in this conversation I had with Sabino, a former fisherman from Ribanceira, when he defended the suspension of fishing in the São Francisco for a long period, together with compensation for the fishermen paid by the government:

- [...] When it rains, the river rises and changes a lot, fishing improves, [...] the movement of the fish is different, the fish with the water, the fish is more likely to yield.
- *What do you mean, yield?*
- To produce.
- *Ah, for them to reproduce more.*
- More fish, right? Like it is here, for example, what do you have? For almost ten years, for about ten years it seems there has been no big flood, I mean, it just keeps decreasing. The waters are decreasing and the fish are decreasing, right? [...] With no one fishing for anything, so I'm going to put guards to watch the river, so no one can fish for anything, and God help us that there's a lot of rain, a lot of rain, then the waters will yield [...] in five years, if you stop fishing, Felipe, and there is enough rain for the water to yield, if you come here in five years, you'll be surprised by the fish, because fish yield quickly. Like, so the fish yield quickly, but it depends on the water, because the fish, for example: the river fish don't produce in the river, the lake fish don't produce in the lake [...], for example: the lake fish come to the river, they produce in the river, from the lake; and those from the river go to the lake, they produce in the lake, when the flooding comes, they go back and forth, right? But if there is no flooding, the fish won't produce. You go to the lake this year, catch a *curimba*,<sup>6</sup> it's spawned.

In Sabino's narrative concerning the reproduction of fish there is something that is important to highlight: the drastic reduction in rainfall over the last

---

6 A fish also known as *curimatá*, *curimatã* or *curimbatá* (*Prochilodus lineatus*).



decade. The volume and intensity of the rains are indicative of the strength of the rains that not only ensure the river *has a flow*, but it makes the land on which the *barranqueiros* farm fertile, both in the high areas and in the *ebb* areas.

Memories of old floods, especially that of 1979, a milestone in the emergence of the village of Ribanceira, indicate the losses, and the gains after the river waters *ebb*, that is, they create the return movement from the flooded areas to the riverbed after the end of the rainy season. In the words of Pedro, whose farm is located on Ilha da Martinha, 1979 was both a good and a bad year:

Such loss, so much was lost, so much! There was cassava, there was corn, beans planted, at the time the loss was pretty big. But in return, it was a year of much loss, right? Such loss, but... When the floods passed, it was a year of great abundance too, because after the floods had passed, everything you sowed you reaped. It was really good [...].

The ambivalent meaning of large floods does not erase their desirable character for the *barranqueiros*. Floods are the product of intense, long-lasting rains, whose force ‘carries everything forward’ and sets the river in motion, causing it to *have flow*, to overflow, to flood areas that become lakes and, therefore, breeding grounds for fish, as well as fertilising the land, making it suitable for agriculture when the waters *ebb*. Life and sociality are entangled in the midst of the fluidity and intensity of water movements.

## **On the *drought* and the stagnant river or how the *epoch* emerges**

Climate change, felt in rainfall reduction and the consequent increase in dry periods, is one of the effects most reported by my interlocutors, and involves the movement of land advancing over the river. It is clear that the relationship between the land and the river is also perceived by other dynamics that are beneath or beyond that which the intensification of droughts has brought about. Ever since my first visit to the field, I was impressed by the descriptions of one of my interlocutors, Vital, on the formation of the islands in the São Francisco. More than 10 years ago, while we were sailing along river, Vital drew my attention to some branches surrounded by a small amount of earth in the

middle of the river. 'The sticks remain during the flood and collect earth around them. The waters bring the sticks. So, islands begin to form, they being to amass', he said, alerting me to the simple movements of organic materials (sticks and other forms of vegetation), minerals (earth and water) and atmospheric materials (wind) that produced infinitesimal, but significant, changes in the relief of the river with the different climatic cycles.

As the *drought* extends and intensifies, after the cessation of the time of the waters, the river begins to be described as *stagnant*. Although the *stagnant* condition is acceptable, especially at the height of the dry periods, the river has suffered this situation for a long time, according to my interlocutors. Year after year, the river has remained worryingly *stagnant*, with *no flow*, thus shallow and weakened. The situation became even more serious in the 2000s, when the region faced the worst drought recorded until 2020, when the February and March rains, the volume of which was the highest recorded in the previous eight years, brought back memories of ancient times. To this reduction in the volume of annual rainfall, the accumulation of sand and *sticks* must be added, since they cause the river to progressively stop *flowing* or become *stagnant*, increasing the areas of the islands and creating new ones. In this context, fish look for areas of deeper water where they hide in places formed by sticks and stones at the bottom of rivers, making it more difficult to catch them. In much the same way the areas available to practice *ebb* agriculture are dwindling.

Although my interlocutors include God's designs in their explanations regarding the transformations in the world they live in, they certainly do not ignore the role of human agency in this scenario, as can be inferred from this long dialogue I had with two interlocutors, Vital and Pedro:

– *And what do you think is happening to make it rain less?*

– [Pedro] Young man, here's the thing. For myself, I don't know what it's about it, but I've heard more, this part is straight from people's mouths. Some say it's the deforestation, others say it's the epoch, right?

– *The epoch?*

– [Pedro] Yeah, well, the times are coming, right?

– *The times? What do you mean?*

– [Pedro] The times, like, because it says that when the end of times comes, you know, the end of eras, everything will change, right? And so today I'm a little

worried about it, because I think it's really changing, I don't know if the end is coming, I don't know, right? But whether it's changing, it is. What's happened, from 2000 to now, a lot has changed, the fish have gone, they're running out, the water is drying up, right? People, some say [...] that it's the deforestation, others say it's the burnings, I don't doubt anything either [...], because all of this can really help, right? Because in the old days, in our parents' and grandparents' days, they planted a swidden right there, they burned everything, in the first year the yield was very good on that land, but in the second year, the land died, right? You set fire to a pile of sticks there, it burns like embers, it remains there for the rest of its life, burnt there, that land never returns to normal. Unless a flood comes and carries it out there and more comes and causes *remonte*.<sup>7</sup> [...] But you see today, the river has narrowed and the fish are gone, right? And the river no longer flows, right? [...] this Island here, as we know it [referring to Ilha da Martinha]. As we know it, here's the thing, this Island here grew, there's a place here where it grew to almost half the width.

– *Has it increased?*

– [Pedro] It's increased. There Felipe, that Island over there, if you go there, I'll show you where the tip of the Island was, where the Island ended, where is the river today, there are few people who believe it, aren't there, *compadre*? Few people believe it.

– [Vital] Who's going to say, today, that between the two islands, there was the river? [...] In the middle of the two islands, there was a river, at that time it was still flowing. [...] That other river that passed through the Island, at a time like that, I got bored of throwing nets there, catching fish.

– [Pedro] There was more water than this one here [pointing to the stretch of water between the left bank and Ilha da Martinha], in the dry season now, and there was more water than this here; the river dried up, connecting the islands.

– [Vital] The river rises, the river ebbs and it's there, you can't catch a fish anymore, I mean, coming from the lakes. Because nowadays farmers fill it with earth, to close off that water there.

---

7 *Remonte* are irregular changes in relief caused by the flooding of land areas affected by the rising river. Such areas generally correspond to lowlands or *ebb* land located on the banks of the river or on islands. According to my interlocutors, the mounds renew the soil's fertility due to the organic materials brought and impregnated in the earth by the water.

– *Oh, they're land filling too?*

– [Pedro] Filling the mouth of the [...] Here we're dealing with a *sangradouro* [overflow channel], the entrance of a *sangradouro*. [...] It comes from the river, forms that stream and throws it into the lakes, outside of those beaches, right?

– *And the farmers are land filling?*

– [Pedro] Here, there, they're filling the land. [...] Here too, this lake here in Bonfim, they filled the land there.

– *But why did they do that? What did they say?*

– [Pedro] Argh! The wickedness of man, lad. [...] They dried it to make pasture, right?

– *Ah, because of pasture for cattle...*

– [Pedro] Because the edge of the lake is always, it's good for pasture, right? And when it dries up, it makes the land larger. Nowadays what happens? Men did that, a number of them did that, filled the land, set down the dredger in what was a lake, set the dredger down inside the lakes, planted it all, planted other types of grass, today there's land, but where's the water? And what did they do once to dry up a spring that was over there, today they're crying, right? For example, right there at X<sup>8</sup> [nearby farmer], they had to open an artesian well, right? A place rich in water like they had, right?

Nowadays, fishermen and women complain that farmers in the region, whose lakes were formed on their properties, have closed the *mouths* of the lakes, that is, the entrance to the *sangradouros*. These natural channels guide the entrance and exit of the waters of the river and were closed to prevent the areas from flooding that were transformed into pasture for raising cattle, an activity that has expanded in the region. On the other hand, the control practices of environmental agencies are also mentioned to diagnose excess land that reduces river *flow*. Pedro and Vital explained it to me this way:

– [Pedro] Now, Felipe, there is something that [...] I don't know if you'll agree or disagree with the idea, but one thing is, I am not against IBAMA, Forestry [agents], I am not against them, they've helped a lot. But if there's one thing that I reckon, in my opinion, what they don't want to accept, for example, from here

---

8 Name omitted to avoid inconvenience to my interlocutors.

on down it's a river, the river has ebbed, a whole bunch of weeds has grown inside the river, you can't cut those weeds.

– [Vital] All that sand that can't be removed.

– [Pedro] Those weeds, if Forestry or IBAMA passes by and see you cutting those weeds inside the river, they'll even arrest you, they think it's bad. And [...] here's the thing, we've seen it... we live here on the riverbank with nature, we've seen a lot of things happen, you shove a stick in here and another there, here you put, tie some sticks to it, leave it there. When the river rises, so it gets to here, over there it makes a *murundu*, do you know what a *murundu* is?

– *What is a murundu?*

– [Pedro] A *murundu* is a mound of earth. You form that mound of earth, even if you take that mound [...] when the river ebbed, you went there, untied it, but that earth doesn't go down anymore, that's what's happening with the river.

– [Vital] The river weakened the flow, right?

– [Pedro] The river weakened the flow.

– *Then it flows less, is that it?*

– [Vital] It flows less, because everything that would be here, it... the flow decreases. And the weeds in the river, what's happening is, the weeds grow in the river, if you cut them and they see, you can't cut them, and they should be cut. I'll put it like this, on the banks it's fine, but inside the river it should be cut, because every year the river comes and floods, it passes and raises the land, just raises it, then it just fills the land. Then, on the other river from there, where our ebb flow is, there, our swidden there, there it must have grown a hundred meters [300ft] or more from where the river bank was over there, right? So, from these weeds, grass begins to grow, grass grows, it grows swampy and is just suspends. Every time the flood comes, it just forms more *remontes*, it just keeps forming and it just keeps moving upstream. The river there, in the course of the drought, doesn't come back too often, it will stay there. [...]

– [Pedro] Well, right here, if you set up a dredger there, at the tip of the island there, to remove sand and throw it away, if it's not registered [with IBAMA or Forestry Agents<sup>9</sup>], you can't touch it.

---

9 Federal environmental agencies.

Thus, from the *barranqueiro* perspective, both the actions of environmental agencies and that of landowners have created more obstacles to the already weakened *flow* of the São Francisco, due to the decreasing rainfall. However, there is yet another product of human action that has contributed to the *stagnant* condition of the São Francisco River: the dams. The continuation of the conversation with Vital and Pedro reveals this:

– [Pedro] And another thing that I think greatly weakened the flow of the river from then until now, was that landfills in the river came together with the dams.

– *The dams?*

– [Vital] The dams, I think, you know why? [...] the dam, it's [...] from Sobradinho, [...] It's from the Sobradinho dam, ah, but from here to Sobradinho is who knows how many thousands of kilometres away. Yeah, that's right, okay, but [the dam] there, that land there, moves the sand in the river, which would go to the sea, right? But they built the dam there, it arrives there, it accumulates, do you understand? [...] So when you compare the river, it's the same thing. It's a long way from here to Sobradinho, but there, it begins to stagnate there, so the other [sand] also stagnates around here, obviously, it's the same thing. Or else, the force of... the water doesn't flow anymore, it used to flow, and the sand also just keeps rising, it keeps rising here, it keeps rising all the way back. [...]

– [Pedro] So that, I think so, sometimes it may not be, like I told you, it may really be the epoch, the end of times is really coming. But all this can help.

– [Vital] But it could also be a Human thing, [since] Humans have a lot of wisdom, and we're ending things.

## Ends and resurgences

The past is often insinuated into academic and native perceptions of the São Francisco, mainly to contrast with a disheartening present. The 'inexorable extinction of the São Francisco River' has been widely publicised not only in academic circles, but also in the media in recent years. The debate concerning the decades of human intervention in the *Velho Chico* basin has produced an often pessimistic awareness concerning the serious effects of the creation of

dams, the progressive destruction of native vegetation on its slopes, as well as the continuous and intense release of industrial, sanitary and pesticide residues, applied on a large scale to monocultures, on the riverbed and its tributaries. The silting up and pollution of the river, and the impairment of fish reproduction due to the dams, in addition to the impact of long periods of drought that follow one another due to climate change, are some of the effects that the *barranqueiros* have been handling with difficulty, but with incredible lucidity. The perception of those who live on the banks of the São Francisco is no less severe than that of scientists, although their daily practices related to fishing and agriculture are poignant and resilient affirmations of life that is constantly remade. If the times of drought have become cyclically more intense and longer than those of the waters, facilitating the advance of the land that makes the river *narrow, stagnant* and without *flow*, human agency in different registers is one of the important vectors of the degrading transformation of the São Franciscan landscape. The actions of the fishermen and women themselves, of the public agents who construct dams and supervise their activities, but are permissive regarding the degradation perpetrated by the farmers who close the *mouths* of the lakes to plant pasture for cattle and whose use of pesticides on a large scale contaminates the river seem to provide the colours for the *epoch* that the *barranqueiros* talk about in an apocalyptic biblical tone, at least those who identify as Catholics.

If, as Vital stated, what is happening in the São Francisco Valley 'could be a Human thing, [since] Humans have a lot of wisdom, and we're ending things', this *entendência* leads us to the problem of the dualism between worldliness and humanity present in several narratives of the 'end of the world' (Danowski; Viveiros de Castro, 2014, p. 33), not only in Christian eschatology. Thus, the *barranqueiro* problem formulated as the *epoch* or *end of times* has a correspondence with the 'disappearance of one of the poles of the duality between the world and its Inhabitant, the being whose world is the world' (Danowski; Viveiros de Castro, 2014, p. 33), according to the Western perspective of human exceptionality. The anthropic action that can lead to a 'world without us', referring only to an original moment of creation that preceded the emergence of Humans in Christian cosmology, is considered by the *barranqueiros* to be a kind of 'unrequited reciprocity' (Kirsch, 2006, p. 95-98) by Humans.

It is worth remembering Sabino's words when he suggested the temporary suspension of fishing outside regulated periods, like the close season.<sup>10</sup> By playing their part in the mutual game of gifts and counter-gifts that also involves God, the rain, the river, the lakes and fish, humans (fishermen and women and state inspection agents) can provide the conditions for rebalancing and rethinking the activity of fishing. It is also true that the 'Human wisdom' evoked by the *barranqueiros* hierarchises human actions and exposes their inequalities. In their narratives, the practices of landowners, the construction of dam infrastructure and state inspection (IBAMA and Forestry agents) have a greater impact on the anthropic disturbance of the San Francisco landscape, as well as causing the 'feral proliferations' (Tsing, 2021, p. 177) of the same.

However, life seems to reappear every time the movements of humans and other-than-humans – which here include not only the so-called biotic forms of existence, but also the waters, the sun, the clouds, the earth, the winds – intertwine to *ebb*, overflow or exceed a biological idea of life, immersed in the *carbon imaginary*, discussed by Elizabeth Povinelli (2016). My interlocutors have a trajectory marked by small and large itinerancies, as I have previously explained in (Benites, 2018, p. 5): 'hunting for a better life' from farm to farm, in which they were aggregated, due to often violent disagreements with the owners; in the rituals that involve revelry tours between houses in the community and beyond; in long-term or temporary displacements to work in other locations, particularly in large cities.

Living makes sense for my interlocutors through verbs and expressions associated with movements that designate certain practices and relationships, for example, *mexer* with something (farming, fishing, the river, etc.) or someone (farmers, cattle, fish, saints, etc), as I explained in Benites (2015b). The São Francisco River demonstrates its vital strength or its weakening through its movements of *rising* and *ebbing*, *flowing* or *stagnant*. In the same way, the clouds move and gather to *shape the weather*, conferring beauty to the grey sky, which in turn becomes a harbinger of the movement of the precipitation of waters in the form of rain, essential for fertilising the land and enabling the river to *have*

---

10 A period of fish reproduction in which fishing is suspended and fishermen and women registered in fishing colonies receive an income for four months paid by the federal government.



*flow*. Although it is one of the entities most traversed by stabilising forces, the earth is also driven in part by the waters that *carry everything*, but in the infrastructure of the dams, encounter their points of accumulation and return to the bottom of the river.

The movement of such human and other-than-human beings inscribes and shapes the landscape alongside juxtaposed rhythms and temporalities. Through this, I seek to draw attention to the ‘co-temporalities’ in which the coordination of overlapping elements tell ‘more-than-human stories’ (Tsing, 2021, p. 187). For example, the *desmontes* [dismantling] and *remontes* [remounting] caused by floodwaters leave marks on the river banks visible in bands of sediments in light and dark colours that overlap to tell stories of the river and its banks, together with narratives of displacement while ‘hunting for a better life’ (Benites, 2018) close to or far from Ribanceira compose the signs of the stories of many *barraqueiros*. The San Francisco landscape is formed by these different stories that overlap and intertwine. Such histories are also entangled with the cycles of the *times of the waters* and the *drought* and other seasonalities of *barraqueiro* social life, such as the *times of parties* or the *time of politics* (Benites, 2010, 2015a, 2015b). It is by being attentive to these ‘co-temporalities’ in which the movements of people, waters, lands, plants, fish, among other actants, are entangled that we can apprehend how the surroundings of the São Francisco are being shaped as a landscape that is increasingly immersed in a dry atmosphere.

## When the end does not end

We could inquire about the ontological status of the *entendências* extracted from *barraqueiro* practices and narratives. After all, accounts like Pedro’s begin with the following warning: ‘I’ve heard more, this part is straight from people’s mouths’. Here, one thing that seems fundamental to me is Luzimar Pereira’s (2018, p. 28) reminder concerning the ‘ontological non-commitment’ of the narrator in the formulation of narratives in northern Minas Gerais, since it leaves ‘the assessment of its veracity to the listener of an account produced by a collective of people strategically dispersed in time and space’. Such an attitude may suggest that:

The effect of this distancing is ambiguous: if it is ‘invention’, it was the ‘people’ [...] who ‘invented’ it. Therefore, the narrator would not be passing on a ‘lie’ as if it were true. But, on the other hand, if the ‘people say it’ it may be that it is real. In northern and north-western Minas Gerais, as the saying goes, the voice of the people can also be the voice of god; which, in other words, reveals the creative power of his word. (Pereira, 2018, p. 28).

It is this creativity that I defend here. The *barranqueiro* modes of analysis demonstrate an openness to other explanations. After all, as Pedro says ‘I don’t doubt anything either [...], because all of this can really help, right?’. Thus, by not defending any explanatory exclusivity, the *barranqueiro* opening raises the possibility of meddling in global and local sciences in the articulation of scientific consensuses on environmental change and the ontologies of different peoples and communities ‘through pragmatic encounters that transpose ontological boundaries’, as suggested by Mauro Almeida (2021, p. 331).

The ethnography that I have been conducting is also in motion, much like the waters and *barranqueiro* thinking, and will probably lead me to other currents, crossings and backwaters of reflection and, perhaps, heuristically approaches that which has inspired it: the *entendências*.

Translated into English by Philip Badiz from the original in Portuguese “O rio e a época: *entendências* barranqueiras sobre a água na paisagem perturbada do Vale do São Francisco”, also published in this issue of the journal.

## References

- ALMEIDA, M. Anarquismo ontológico e verdade no Antropoceno. In: ALMEIDA, M. *Caipora e outros conflitos ontológicos*. São Paulo: Ubu, 2021. p. 309-334.
- BALLESTERO, A. The anthropology of water. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, [s. l.], n. 48, p. 405-421, 2019.
- BENITES, L. F. *Olhando da ribanceira: perspectivas de influência e vulnerabilidade no Vale do Alto-Médio São Francisco*. 2010. Tese (Doutorado em Antropologia Social) – Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2010.

BENITES, L. F. Da 'consideração' e da acusação: notas etnográficas sobre reputação, fofocas e rumores na política. In: COMERFORD, J.; CARNEIRO, A.; DAINESE, G. (org.). *Giros etnográficos em Minas Gerais: casa, comida, prosa, festa, política, briga e o diabo*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras: Faperj, 2015a. p. 65-92.

BENITES, L. F. Mexendo com a roça: trabalho e movimento no Sertão Mineiro. *Ruris*, Campinas, v. 9, n. 1, p. 39-61, out. 2015b.

BENITES, L. F. What happens between the roça and the urban periphery? Some questions about movement. *Vibrant*, [s. l.], v. 15, n. 1, e151402, 2018.

BRANDÃO, C.; BORGES, M. Um risco, um lago, um rio: o São Francisco e suas imagens cartográficas em mapas antigos do Brasil e das Américas. In: BORGES, M. C.; LEAL, A. F. (org.). *Etnocartografias do Rio São Francisco: comunidades tradicionais ribeirinhas do Norte de Minas Gerais*. Uberlândia: EDUFU, 2013. p. 18-67.

DANOWSKI, D.; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, E. *Há mundo por vir?: ensaio sobre os medos e os fins*. Florianópolis: Cultura e Barbárie: ISA, 2014.

GAN, E. *et al.* Introduction. In: GAN, E. *et al.* (ed.). *Arts of living in damaged planet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. p. G1-G14.

GOMES, F. S. *Mocambos e quilombos*. Rio de Janeiro: Claro-Enigma, 2015.

HASTRUP, K.; HASTRUP, F. (ed.). *Waterworlds: anthropology in fluid environments*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017.

HELMREICH, S. *Alien ocean: anthropological voyages in microbial seas*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

HIRSCH, E.; O'HANLON, M. (ed.). *The anthropology of landscape: perspectives on place and space*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

INGOLD, T. Temporality of landscape. In: INGOLD, T. *The perception of environment: essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge, 2000. p. 189-208.

INGOLD, T. Landscape or weather-world? In: INGOLD, T. *Being alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description*. London: Routledge, 2011. p. 126-135.

KIRSCH, S. *Reverse anthropology: indigenous analysis of social and environmental relations in New Guinea*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

KRAUSE, F.; HARRIS, M. (ed.). *Delta life: exploring dynamic environments where rivers meet sea*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2021.

KRAUSE, F.; STRANG, V. Thinking relationships through water. *Society & Natural Resources*, [s. l.], v. 29, n. 6, p. 633-638, 2016.

PEREIRA, L. O diabo da dúvida: histórias de pacto com o demônio no norte e noroeste de Minas Gerais. *Revista del Museo de Antropología*, Córdoba, v. 11, supl. 1, p. 25-34, 2018.

POVINELLI, E. *Geontologies: a requiem to late liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

SIQUEIRA FILHO, J. A. de et al. *Flora das caatingas: história natural e conservação*. Recife: Andreia Jacobson Estudio, 2012.

STRANG, V. *The meaning of water*. Oxford: Berg, 2004.

STRANG, V. Fluid consistences: material relationality in human engagements with water. *Archaeological Dialogues*, [s. l.], v. 21, n. 2, p. 133-150, 2014.

TSING, A. L. More-than-human sociality: a call for critical description. In: HASTRUP, K. *Anthropology and nature*. New York: Routledge, 2013. p. 27-42.

TSING, A. L. In the midst of disturbance: symbiosis, coordination, history, landscape. In: ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2015: symbiotic anthropologies: theoretical commensalities and methodological mutualisms, 13th-16th April 2015, University of Exeter, Exeter. *Annals [...]*. [S. l.]: ASA, 2015.

TSING, A. L. O Antropoceno mais que humano. *Ilha*, Florianópolis, v. 23, n. 1, p. 176-191, fev. 2021.

Recebido: 29/08/2022 Aceito: 26/02/2023 | Received: 8/29/2022 Accepted: 2/26/2023



Esta obra está licenciada com uma Licença Creative Commons - Atribuição 4.0 Internacional  
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License