

Palm Oil Diaspora

Behind the social and environmental destruction of modern palm oil production lies a long and complex history of landscapes, cultures, and economies linking Africa and its diaspora in the Atlantic World. Case Watkins traces palm oil from its prehistoric emergence in western Africa to biodiverse groves and cultures in Northeast Brazil, and finally the plantation monocultures plundering contemporary rainforest communities. Drawing on ethnography, landscape interpretation, archives, travelers' accounts, and geospatial analysis, Watkins examines human-environmental relations too often overlooked in histories and geographies of the African diaspora, and uncovers a range of formative contributions of people and ecologies of African descent to the societies and environments of the (post)colonial Americas. Bridging literatures on Black geographies, Afro-Brazilian and Atlantic studies, political ecology, and decolonial theory and praxis, this study connects diverse concepts and disciplines to analyze and appreciate the power, complexity, and potentials of Bahia's Afro-Brazilian palm oil economy.

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Palm Oil Diaspora

*Afro-Brazilian Landscapes and Economies
on Bahia's Dendê Coast*

CASE WATKINS

James Madison University



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Preface and Acknowledgments

On a drizzly afternoon in the winter of 2004, I sat at a plastic table along a cobblestone alley in the *centro histórico* of Salvador da Bahia sharing a steaming pan of *moqueca* – the iconic Afro-Brazilian seafood stew. “What is this buttery goodness?” I wondered aloud in gringo Portuguese.

“That’s *dendê*!” my friend called out, referring to the distinctive red palm oil that defines so much of Bahia’s Afro-Brazilian cuisine. “Dendê is all around us. It even has its own coast. You should check it out!”

I spent the years since then piecing together all I could about dendê, its journey to Brazil, and its staying power in the northeastern state of Bahia. Locally sourced palm oil is ubiquitous there, especially in the capital city, Salvador. From stands throughout the city, the venerable *Baianas de acarajé*, almost all of them women of African descent, offer mouthwatering fritters made from black-eyed peas deep-fried in palm oil and slathered in stewed okra and pepper sauce – all from food plants domesticated in western Africa. I eventually came to recognize the palm that produces dendê oil, also from western Africa, growing “wild” in backyards, ditches, parks, woods, and highway medians all over Salvador, and continuing in thick groves down the Atlantic coast that now shares its name.

I set out to comprehend dendê through its long-term geographical, political, and ecological relations. Devouring every word I could find on dendê, I was perplexed as searches for historical treatments kept coming up empty, in Portuguese as well as English. Studies of dendê in Bahia often begin by connecting palm oil with enslaved Africans before quickly moving on to the alleged inadequacies and untapped agro-industrial potential of its local economy. Given the ubiquity of dendê in local

landscapes and Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions, surprisingly little is written on the palm's transatlantic journeys, the historical development of its biodiverse landscapes, or its ecological roles in local cultures and economies. Blending ethnographic fieldwork with archives and other sources, I came to understand why this might be the case. Centuries of colonialism, anti-Black racism, and modern agricultural development have painted Bahia's traditional dendê economy as crude and incompetent. This discursive framing has worked to limit popular and academic recognition of its innovative cultural-environmental relationships. Instead of celebrating its biodiverse landscapes, public and private authorities have long worked to replace them with agro-industrial plantation monocultures like those ravaging rainforests and communities throughout the global tropics. Nevertheless, Bahia's traditional dendê economy perseveres, and indeed proliferates, as it has for at least four centuries.

Palm Oil Diaspora sets out to recover the past, present, and future of dendê in Bahia and the interconnected Atlantic World, to examine the collective wisdom of people and palms descended from Africa and displaced to the New World where, despite the brutalities of colonialism and transatlantic slavery, they carved out a home and (trans)formed worlds. This book asks what dendê can teach us about human-environmental relations, biodiverse communities and collaborations, and Afro-Brazilian contributions to world histories and futures. It is my sincere hope that this work (along with a subsequent Portuguese translation) might contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the dendê landscapes, cultures, and economies that have for centuries given life to Afro-Brazilian expressions and livelihoods.

As I put the finishing touches on this book, I am overwhelmed with gratitude: gratitude for the opportunities to visit, study, and learn in Bahia; gratitude for the countless folks who welcomed me into their homes, fields, and lives and who kindly and generously explained their experiences and perspectives; gratitude for the encouragement, knowledge, support, and sacrifices of so many that made this work possible.

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