

Amazonia, Brazil.

The villages in focus were selected for this research because they are two of the main places on which I had conducted participant observation and structured data collection between 2010 and 2012 (for one year, in three visits). I reported about the results of this research mainly in my doctoral thesis. Caruci and Garimpo are located on an isthmus that separates the Amazon river and the Arapiuns, and ends in the zone of their confluence with the Tapajos, in front of the city of Santarem (see Figure 1).

The city was built upon the old Tapajo mission, established in the seventeenth century by the Portuguese Jesuits among densely populated settlements, as several others in the region, that date back to 1300 BP. These were wrongly reported to have been abandoned by the mid-1800s, while they continued to exist as *tapuios* ‘civilized indigenous’ communities, commonly referred to as ‘*Caboclo* societies.’

During a recent period of military dictatorship (1964-1985), the region passed through radical socio-environmental changes that scholars have named as the ‘second conquest of the Amazon.’ In the 1940s, according to the official census (IBGE), Santarem had over 47,000 inhabitants. Seventy years later (2010), the reported population was six times bigger but, in a territory reduced to less than half of its previous extension, because of the rise of new municipalities. Most of the incomers —73% of its population (215,000)—live in the city’s urban area or along the adjacent roads. In the 1970s, the areas along the Lower Tapajos and the Arapiuns were kept reserved to exploration projects conducted by the Federal Government and private corporate groups. As an indirect effect, this strategy kept new incomers relatively away from the vicinities of the rivers and contributed to the survival of indigenous peasant villages.

In 2010, over 8,000 were recorded living in the district of Alter do Chao, that covers most of the zone of confluence between the Tapajos and the Arapiuns rivers. Of these, at least 60% (4,800) live in the homonym small town, the old Borari mission, that is currently growing fast because of tourism activities. The other 40% live either in Vila Franca (500), the old Arapium mission, or in several smaller clusters of houses formally organized in communities in the last four decades, as those I focused on for my research.

Since the 1990s, after the proclamation of a democratic Constitution (1988), traditional riverine dwellers began to be generically recognized as ‘traditional peoples,’ with collective territorial rights granted in protected areas for sustainable use. Currently, at least 4000 people (over 60 villages) in the banks of the Arapiuns and the Lower Tapajos identify themselves as mixed-blood indigenous peoples associated to at least 13 ethnonyms (e.g., Arapium, Borari, Tapajo) and claim the recognition of land rights. These various territorial claims are defended as a mean to contain processes considered to be the main drivers of environmental degradation as deforestation and over-fishing/hunting.

The riverine communities in the region speak a variation of Portuguese, largely influenced by the Nheengatu (or the Amazonian general language), a Tupi idiom spread

in the Amazon basin over Aruak and Karib in the XVIII century, with the contribution of the Jesuits. In Lower Tapajós region, communities are considered to have abandoned its use in the early part of the XX century. In the last decades, many of those that ‘value the indigenous culture’ have begun to study it again.

The Indigenous Land where the communities concerned are situated—named *Cobra Grande* (or anaconda), a reference to an aquatic enchanted being they claim to live at the bottom of the river (more in following Sections)—covers five villages and over 650 inhabitants (in 8,900 hectares). This area neighbors and overlaps with a settlement (*Lago Grande*) that, since 2005, formally guarantees collective territorial rights to traditional communities.

The households, typically inhabited by conjugal families, are grouped in clusters formed by cognatic kindreds, and distributed along interconnected hydrographical bodies, that is, the Arapiuns river, several lakes and *igarapés* ‘streams.’ The territory *Cobra Grande* is formed by over 16 clusters with a mean population of 32 inhabitants. Each community is formed as the result of an alliance among over four clusters (see Figure 2). The communities are administered by a *cacique* ‘chief’ also called the ‘president,’ but each cluster and chief of a kindred have large autonomy over others.

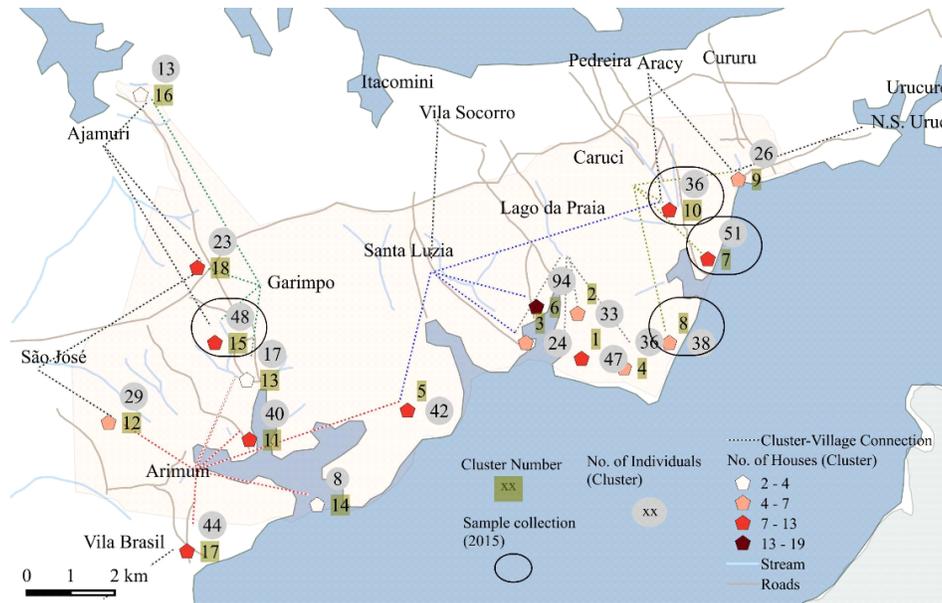


Figure 2. Clusters of houses in Indigenous Land *Cobra Grande* (2012), with sites of fieldwork in 2015.