LAND AND HOUSING RESISTANCES IN THE COMMUNITY OF COQUE IN RECIFE

RESISTÊNCIAS SOBRE O TERRITÓRIO E A MORADIA NA COMUNIDADE DO COQUE EM RECIFE

Amanda Martínez Elvir
amarelv@gmail.com

Dweison Nunes Souza da Silva
dweison@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to portray through narratives, expressions of resistence identified in the community of Coque in Recife, Pernambuco. The community confronts different types of threats from local government, ranging from physical removal of their houses to imposition of payment to receive public services that the State do not provide to the neighborhood. Using oral history as a research methodology, we intend to introduce the complexity of resistances through the voice of residents and by constructing theories based on our field experiece at Coque. Resistances to the denial of the right to the city of those who live in this community is a complex issue. There are groups arising out of the community to provide legal and human support. On the other hand, there are individual resistances, disarticulated and lived in isolation from those who refuses to leave the territory.

Key words: Resistance movements, Right to the city, Urbanization

Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é gerar pequenos retratos que relatem as distintas formas de resistência que se registram na comunidade do Coque, em Recife, na atualidade. As ameaças concretas da população se apresentam desde a remoção física das moradias em território *informal*, até o pagamento de taxas de serviços públicos que o Estado não fornece aos seus moradores. Utilizando a história oral como metodologia de pesquisa, são apresentadas narrativas de moradores da comunidade e nossa própria experiência de campo para gerar um retrato de algumas formas de resistir presentes nesta comunidade. As Resistências diante da negação ao direito à cidade de quem mora nesta comunidade é complexa. Algumas se articulam através de grupos que surgem fora da comunidade e brindam apoio jurídico e humano. Por outro lado, existem resistências individuais, não articuladas e vivenciadas no isolamento de quem se nega a abandonar seu território.

Palavras-chave: Movimentos de Resistência, Direito à Cidade, Urbanização.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es ofrecer pequeños retratos que describen distintas formas de resistencia observadas hoy en día en la comunidad de Coque, en Recife. Las respuestas a las amenazas enfrentadas por quienes viven en este barrio van desde la destrucción física de las viviendas, localizadas en terrenos *informales*, hasta la imposición de pagos por servicios públicos que el Gobierno no brinda a los pobladores. Utilizamos como metodología de estudio la historia oral. Se hizo uso de narrativas de pobladores de la comunidad y de nuestra propia experiencia de campo para generar retratos de algunas de las formas de resistir que encontramos en Coque. Las resistencias a la negación del derecho a la ciudad que se observaron en el barrio son complejas. Algunas de ellas se articulan a través de grupos que surgen de personas externas a la comunidad brindando apoyo legal y humano. Por otro lado, existen resistencias individuales, sin ningún tipo de articulación y experimentadas en el aislamiento de quien se niega a abandonar su hogar.

Palabras clave: Movimientos de Resistencia, Derecho a la ciudad, Urbanización

Introduction

Through narratives of residents of the Community of Coque and our own field experience, this article will seek to portray the complexity faced by movements fighting for territory organized in this community. The struggle for a space in the city and for adequate housing arises from resistances; some of them are collective and others individual. The physical characteristics of space and cultural diversity inside and outside the neighborhood create an important role in the construction of resistances inside Coque.

To explain this complexity, we made a historical journey of the community in order to describe the stigma that they face, labeled as one of the most violent areas of the city of Recife. Because of this stigma and the location of Coque, surrounded by elite urban developments, the desire of the local government to remove the community from the city is high. This factor derived in a struggle for the territory among Coque inhabitants and the local government. The expressions of the clashes to remain in the city are multiple. The aim of this article is to describe some of them and their complexity.

The Community of Coque: The story of a stigma

In 2010, Brazil had 11.42 million people living in slums and informal territories. The city of Recife is included among the five Brazilian cities with the highest concentration of slums. Of the 3,676,067 inhabitants of the Metropolitan Region of Recife, 852,700 people (23.2% of the total population) lived in households occupied by subnormal settlements (IBGE[1], 2010).

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[1] IBGE - Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics.

The community of Coque with 12.755 inhabitants is located in the central area of Recife (IBGE, 2010). It is situated in a socially segregated part of the city, in an important crossroad between avenues that connect the center of Recife and the *Boa Viagem* Neighborhood, a vertical and high-class urban complex. Avenues that connect important parts of the city, such as the commercial and medical district to the central neighborhoods, pass through the Coque community.

Because of its location, nearby the city's center and surrounded by an elite urban development, the community has been the subject of territory disputes among government authorities that insist in developing urban exclusive projects, and residents of the community who fight to stay.

Figure 1. Urban Dynamics around the Community of Coque

Source: Amanda Martinez, 2016.

The clash for a territory: The Garbage dump and the River – 1920 to 1930's

According to the Masters Research of Rafaela Vasconcellos entitled *The Politics in the Coque Vive Network: diversity, conflicts and confluences in the construction of a collective action*, the community has the fourth highest percentage of people that live with minimum wage or less (42.52%) and has the lowest Human Development index (HDI) in the Metropolitan Region of Recife (Map of End of Hunger II, 2004). The communities' occupation process, becoming later a slum, happened almost 100 years ago on a former garbage dump in the island of Joana Bezerra (FREITAS, 2005), where most of the residents were black descendants slaves and families who migrated from rural areas (*Agreste, Sertão and Zona da Mata*) to be settled in the region and fight against the garbage dump

and the river to finally establish themselves in a portion of land (NETO VALE, 2007). Coque is an example of the emblematic process of *slumnization* that happen in different cities in Brazil because of land property problems of rural areas where the option of monoculture was adopted, which led to massive migration to the cities. Since Recife is a city surrounded by rivers, immigrants from the countryside fought againts nature to build landfills in areas covered by water; Coque is one of many examples of such develioment.

Beyond the urban poverty of the community, there is a collective imaginary in Recife's society labeling this neighborhood as one of the most violent of the city. Such a representation of Coque´s inhabitants has serious consequences on social and urban topics. As an example, we recall a specific case of urban mobility, where taxi drivers of the Metropolitan Region refuse to enter the community at any time of the day. Consequently, those living in Coque have to walk a 1-kilometer distance, being the longest inside the community, to reach a bus stop or a taxi. As Vasconcellos reported:

> Its population is described as "violent and dangerous people", largely due to the media representations that insist on crystallizing the community in the unlawful action of groups linked to drug traffic and robbery that occur along Joana Bezerra. Thus, Coque became a territory of fear to the city and it is seen as a threat to the safety of the surroudings (VASCONCELLOS 2013, p. 63).

Because of the stigmatization as an unsecure place and as a threat, residents of certain areas of Coque live in constant risk of removal due to urban projects that claim will "improve" the quality of life and conditions of urban space inside and outside the community.

Land Tenure and the Sales Proposal of the Joana Bezerra Island– 1980's

Even thought the community is recognized as a violent place until now, we cannot ignore its past full of social mobilizations, especially in the 1980's. Coque was one of the first communities in the city to fight for its right of land tenure, especially in this decade during the military dictatorship of president João Baptiste Figueiredo.

Because of their social mobilizations, geographer Regina Bega dos Santos identified Coque as one of the most important movements of occupation of urban land in the country during the military regime. According to Santos:

> Between 1977-81, there was in Recife sixty occupations (about two per month), with the strengthening of urban popular movements for the legalization of land tenure. Several neighborhood associations were created: Coque, Joaneiro Island, Mamanguape, Chie and Brasilia Teimosa (Stubborn Brasilia) (SANTOS in NETO VALE, 2010, p. 108 in VASCONCELLOS, 2013, p. 61).

Various types of media identified Coque in the 1980's as a community of resistance. According to a News article from *Diario de Pernambuco* in 1981:

> Many slums in the central area disappeared such as the *Cais do Areal*, part of Coque and Santo Amaro - in obedience to the same needs to abandon the land for the construction of road works. Coque was one of the only poor areas to continue resisting and today holds a different form of struggle, within the set of fights being held in the widespread guerrilla. That is, residents of Coque, for some time, have been seeking to improve local living conditions and are waiting impatiently, the claims response made in a letter to the Governor Marco Maciel (*Diario de Pernambuco*, *Caderno 1* A in VASCONCELLOS 2013, p. 62).

While fighting for the right to legally own the land, the community also fought against the sale of the Island Joana Bezerra, the exact location of the community in the city, to a business group that intended to build a shopping center in the area. The project was not implemented and finally, in 1983, the ZEIS (Special Zones of Social Interest) were developed and institutionalized by the Law of Land Use in Recife that established low-income housing areas which rose spontaneously and are consolidated by the government, and where urbanization and regularization is allowed. The ZEIS was the first, or one of the first, achievements in the battle of Recife to get recognition of low-income housing, or what we know as slums, as a legal part of the city. The law protected these areas from public and private investments in this historically excluded places. It was the first time that slums where recognize as a legal part of the city in Recife, and later on, in Brazil.

As Neide Silva informs in an interview for the documentary *Coque: histories of the land*: "Coque in the 80's brought together a number of actions, many of them linked to the Commission of Justice and Peace *Dom Hélder Camara*, but also groups linked to the educator Paulo Freire and even international appearances as the French NGO Frères des Hommes "

The Judiciary Pole Project – 2010-2012

Even after the creation of ZEIS in the city, in 1983, which protected areas that we recognized as slums, Coque was once again threated to be partially removed by a Project proposed by the local government in 2010. This Project intended to build a judiciary complex service in an area of 217 m2. It would be part of an urban complex of offices that included the Public Ministry of the State and the new offices for the headquarters of The Justice Ministry, The Court of Pernambuco, the Office of the Brazilian Institute of Lawyers, The Public Defensory and the State School of Magistrates in addition to the already existing Criminal Forum, located next to Coque. The Project also contemplates the construction of a parking lot for 4,000 cars or more.

Figure 2 Image of the Modifications planned for the Judiciary Pole in Coque's Territory

Source: CISNEIROS, Leonardo. 2016

As a compensation to the community it would be built an environmental reference center, a park with a center for early childhood education and a road system of access to intermodal bus-subway station. According to the local government they would invest 50 millions Reais in the neighborhood. Yet, the project would imply the removal of many families without relocation options (See Figure 6). It would also eliminate public spaces that are highly used by the community such as the football field and the City's Academy, one of Coque biggest and only consolidated public space. The project also violated the ZEIS legislation since it would directly intervene in its perimeter of protected social land. In an interview to Cleiton Barros, resident of Coque about the project, he expressed:

> I think it's perverse to have 30 to 40 thousand people in one place and those people are virtually invisible to the city (...) You talk about life, you decide the lives of so many people, without looking, in fact, for those people. This is absurd (CLEITON in VASCONCELLOS 2013, p. 108-109).

The community rejected the Project and received support from movements such as Urban Rights and the Coque Vive Network, an issue we will discuss later in this article. The project was not built; however, we do not know whether it would be taken up in the future.

The Joana Bezerra Bus Station and the Canal Ibipora Project 2012-2016

Inaugurated in 1994, the metro and bus station of Joana Bezerra, next to the community of Coque brought the possibility to the community to be connected to this public transportation facility, on the other hand, both projects may have removed many families within the area. In the past, before the metro stations existed, there was a train station instead. That area of the neighborhood was called *Beira da Linha* (Train Line Border).

Figure 3 Houses removed from the Projects of Joana Bezerra and Canal Ibipora in Coque

Source: Amanda Martinez, 2016.

The local government implemented a renovation Project of the Bus and Metro station that left many people from the community without a place to live. While interviewing residents, we were informed that the government offered, in the best scenarios, 4,000 reais to the ones that were eligible to receive financial support. Others would be simply removed without any type of financial

remuneration. A placed called *Sitio do Cajueiro,* inside the perimeter of the Bus and Metro Station Project, was completely removed resulting in a migration those families to the poorest areas of Coque.

The Canal Ibipora Project started in 2013. The aim of this Project was to clean the canal and give a sanitary infrastructure to the community. However, the area of the canal was not empty since numerous families lived at its border looking for a place to live in a neighborhood that offered a few m2 to its residents. As in the case of the Joana Bezerra Metro and bus Station, the local government offered a symbolic amount of money to a few residents and aggressively removed other. As a resident of Coque told us in an interview:

> Some of them went to live at a new invaded place, at the Imperial Street, at a place called, *Vila Imperial*. Others went back to the interior of the state and others went to live around here at new invaded territories. The majority decided to look for a small space here in Coque. They rented a small house (*barraco* or *palafita*) and are waiting for the opportunity to get a financial support for the removal. People that were removed from the canal organized a new invasion that we know as *Vila Imperial*. They made a Vila and it is well organized and it even has an entrance door. (Resident of Coque, September 2016)

Struggle and resistances over territory

History should be reread constantly, systematically, and always critically. This could be one of the few ways to identify the pieces that lead to social struggles and the very structure of history as well. There is no finished history as we can always come across new facts or approaches to old issues that have not yet been acknowledged.

New approaches brought by groups that live today in poverty, as a social subject, suggest a review of the particular history of nations. For the Nicaraguan historian Aldo Diaz Lacayo it is necessary to recontextualize national and regional history taking into consideration voices that remained in silence and kept outside the official history of the world (DIAZ 2014, p. 23).

It is in this perspective that we use oral history as a methodology while producing this article, in order to have a closer approach to discourse and to create small portraits of forms of resistance in the Coque community. For Mexican Anthropologist Alicia Lindon, there is recognition that discourse is a fragment of a collective subjectivity of the territory that has incorporated and redefined people based on life experiences. In speach we can find traces - often dispersed, encapsulated, encrypted – of these ways to link up with space that we try to rebuild through interpretation (LINDON, 2006, p. 14).

Figure 4 Map of 7mts wide street of the Community of Coque
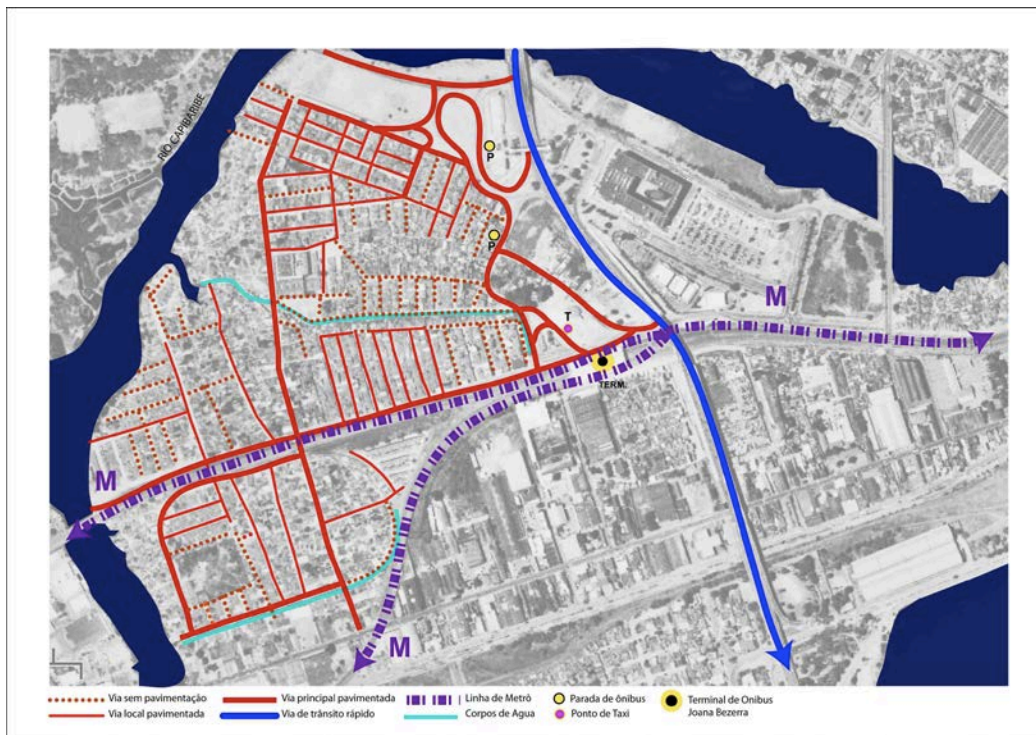
Map done by Amanda Martínez Elvir, Cleber Bezerra, Cleiton Barros and Katarina Severino.

Figure 5 Map of alleys of the Community of Coque. Red Areas represent spaces of high predominance of alleys.
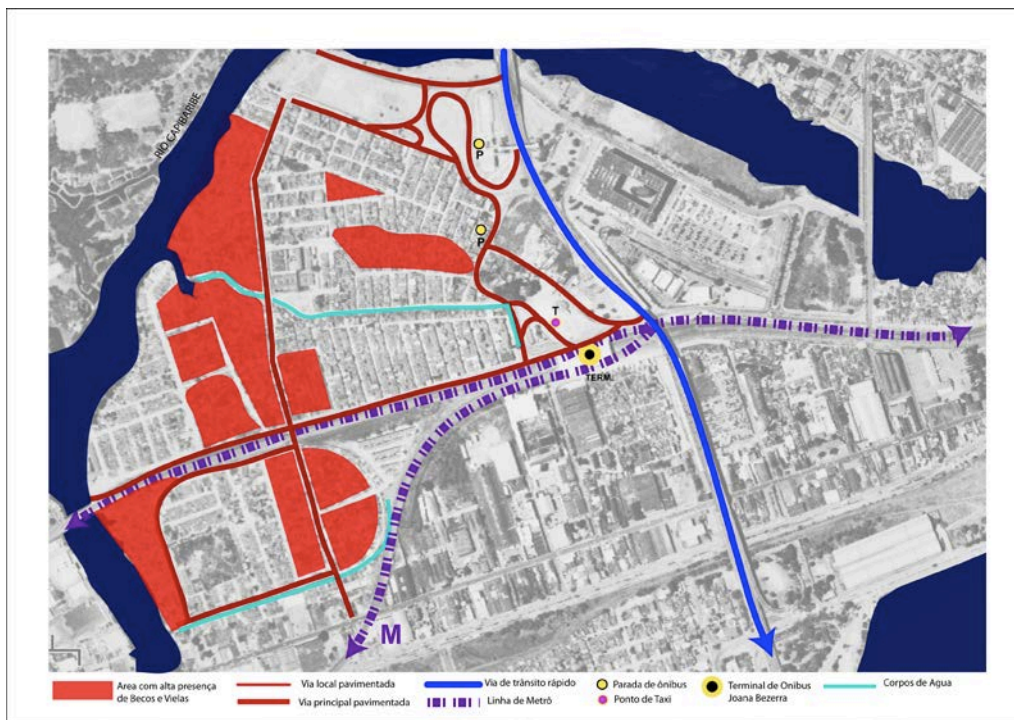
Map done by Amanda Martínez Elvir, Cleber Bezerra, Cleiton Barros and Katarina Severino.

Coque is a complex and spatially heterogeneous territory. Community roads with specific characteristics in someway define people according to the area of the territory they inhabit. There are areas with paved streets of 7mts wide, areas with unpaved streets, also of 7 meters wide, and areas with high prevalence of alleys, some close to the Capibaribe river side and some others in central areas of the community. The specific characteristics of the roads inside Coque could create a hierarchical system within the community, for the poorest areas are located on roads with high prevalence of alleys. This spatial division, while generating social stratification, may cause that residents of certain areas of the community do not attend or establish relation with the inhabitants of poorer areas.

By interviewing residents of Coque we found out that the term *favela* (slum) is referred to the places of high predominance of alleys. People who live in paved street areas do not necessarily recognize themselves as inhabitants of a *favela* in an internal social structure matter. They are aware that from the outside of the community perspective they are inhabitants of a slum, but inside the neighborhood the social and spatial structure of the favela concept is different.

In our master's research about women and urban mobility in this community, we found the existence of three Coques, or perhaps even more according to conversations with Cleiton Barros, resident of Coque and Project Coordinator and Administrator at NEIMFA (Educational Center Younger Brothers of Francisco de Assis). There is a Coque with the formal limits set by the city, the ZEIS Coque (Special Areas of Social Interest) with a perimeter larger than the first one, and the affective Coque consisting of areas outside the community boundaries, where there are people who recognize themselves as part of the neighborhood. The affective recognition of residents from outside the boundaries may be a response to house removals done by local government. As people are removed from their homes they look for spaces within or near the community, refusing to recognize themselves as part of another district.

For our master's research and for this article we use the limits of Coque established by the local government (See the green limit in Figure 1). This is the smallest limit within the three Coques that we initially recognized. It was within these limits that we found the socio-spatial fragmentation of this perimeter, in response to the road structure that determines a social and financial code that in somehow defines people that live in specific areas. As we said before, the poorest within an already poor community live in the alleys and apparently people with a better financial status live in paved street areas.

This spatial complexity, which translates into a kind of internal hierarchy, generates forms of resistance in the struggle for territory that are as heterogeneous as the space within. The articulation

and organization of social movements might respond, to some extent, to the physical accessibility and symbolic reading of a particular territory within the community.

Figure 6. Boundaries of the Community of Coque.

Map done by: Amanda Martinez Elvir, Cleber Bezerra, Cleiton Barros e Katarina Seberino.

NEIMFA, COQUE VIVE AND COQUE RExiste

There are three main movements, recognized in our research, that are organized in the community to give help and support to social and territorial issues to some Coque residents. In chronological order, the first one to arise in the community was the NGO NEIMFA, mostly formed by researchers from the Federal University of Pernambuco, and young volunteers and professionals willing to support the community. As João Vale Neto explains during an interview for researcher Rafaela Vasconcellos:

> We went there to visit and give assistance to people and it was then that we started to become closer. We went from one house to another in the houses that were part of the

> Xerxa's [2] net in Coque. We talked to people and we started to listen to their difficulties and problems getting sensitive about the reality lived inside. But it was just it, we only gave assistance to people in that way (VASCONCELLOS 2013, p. 64).

According to Vasconcellos, it was through that assistencialist work with spiritual motivation that NEIMFA emerged, as an aspiration to help residents of Coque through charity and spiritual orientation along with donations of medicines, clothing and food (Vale Neto in Vasconcellos 2013, p. 64). It was in 1994 that NEIMFA institucionalized as an NGO, and buys a house in the community as place to work and to conduct spiritual encounters and social projects.

In 2006, the then student of journalism and member of NEIMFA, João Vale Neto, proposed an edition of a university magazine at his department with the subject of Coque. After the publication of this magazine's edition there was a closer interaction between part of the community and the University. NEIMFA then proposed and extension project between the community and the university to work in subjects such as the stigmatization of the community through social media, and this is how the COQUE VIVE NETWORK (RED COQUE VIVE) was founded. In words of Yvana Fechine: "Coque Vive is the name given to the actions and projects established between UFPE (Federal University of Pernambuco) and members of the community" (VASCONCELLOS 2013, 74). One of the projects of the Coque Vive Network was a training course for solidarity communicators. The aim of the project was to make critical analysis of social media in Coque. As described by Vale Neto: "we were dozens of young middle class people in our 20's coming from different parts of the city, we were all insecure and inexperience, but open and willing to build along with 20 youngster from Coque -between 14 and 17 years old- an invitation for others to enroll at the course, and this type of knowledge production actions and project are the ones developed from Coque Vive (VASCONCELLOS 2013, p. 74).

From the projects and proximity of young professionals of the Coque Vive arise the Coque RExiste movement. It was through a closer contact with the reality of a part of the community that problems in the struggle for territory and the conflicts between the state and Coque itself that emerged another struggle to be faced by the ones seeking to give human support to the neighborhood. Cleber Bezerra, a resident of Coque and once a member of Coque RExiste, define the movement as:

> Coque RExiste is born as a demand of some residents who needed help to avoid being removed from their homes. Many lived between 30 and 40 years in these houses, and Coque RExiste came to help these residents. But it emerged as a demand. There was a demand and people needed help. Even in the month that was created there was a big event here in Coque. The ones who articulated this event were people from outside of the community, people from another social movement, Coque Vive, that was

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[2] Xerxas is a group of young people that are part of an Spiritual Movement in the City.

established 10 years ago here, but most participants of these social movements were from outside. Most were journalism students from other areas of the city (Cleber Bezerra).

During the fieldwork for our master's project we found that in areas we consider as the most precarious in terms of urban infrastructure, these social movements were unknown by the population. The internal social dynamics and spatial heterogeneity generate a complex territory with various types of resistance in the struggle for the right to housing. Some resistances are individual; others are articulated with the social groups that support the community.

The fact that people from these movements are recognized as outsiders, among other factors, apparently complicated the communication between the population and the social action groups. One of the demands of Coque RExsite was to incorporate more people from the community. Yet, the complexity of the territory, difficulties in physical and social access to certain areas, and different cultural dynamics between outsiders and insiders challenge the development of social movements in such a heterogeneous urban territory.

Cultural differences not only occur among people from outside of the community. Even people from inside have microstructures of particular cultural and world views that form a rich and complex scenario for articulated social resistances. Religious differences among inhabitants generate localized groups and movements that share a worldview. The social structure of Coque, to some extent, characterizes the complexity of urban social structures. It seems that in the big cities of Latin America, the sense of community emerge in localized groups that share a common view, and not necessarily because of huge masses organized in a single movement, since cultural particularities create smaller communities within an area.

In this regards, territorial disputes among residents and local government are diverse. People unable to communicate with social movements like Coque RExiste might ended up losing his/her space in the neighborhood. In words of a resident interviewed for this article:

> I met a few residents who were resisting. The pressure of the state is so big that they get scared. People sometimes do not know their rights. The form of resistance I've seen here was not leaving their homes. Roll over, the car comes but they don't get out of their houses. The state is aggressive, and I mean it. People are threated all the time and sometimes they receive dead threats. There were people coming at night saying that if you don't leave things were going to get worse. But then some residents resist, others are afraid and ended up not resisting and leave (A Resident from the community, August 2016).

So far in our research, we were unable to identify a consolidated movement that specifically fight the territorial struggles of Coque organized by people inside or outside the community. Since the fight for territory occur within specific actions, some of them collective or some individuals.

Conclusions

Articulating urban struggle for space goes through a complex social scenario. Internal and external cultural dynamics within a single community generate various forms of resistance. Complexity not only derived from cultural and economical differences among people from inside and outside Coque. Internally, there is a diverse spatial and social structure that produces complex social codes and several Coques, with diverse groups, battles for territory and worldviews.

In this regards, differences do not necessarily represent a threat to those who want to live in a democratic city in defense of the right of the groups that have been excluded. However, recognition of the social and spatial complexity that creates challenges in articulating struggles is necessary in order to think of ways that include heterogeneous social groups. Understanding the social and economic diversity of Latin American cities could be the first step to communicate with groups that might be excluded from the organized urban battles.

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