

# The babaçu breakers of Brazil

## Fighting for the protection of the forest and their way of life

In Brazil 300,000 women support their families by gathering and breaking the babaçu nuts that come from palm trees on the fringes of the Amazon. These women, called *quebradeiras*, are some of the most marginalised people in Brazil yet they are fearless fighters for their sole source of income which is now in danger. The Brazilian government's support for economic activities such as biofuels, cattle, mining and other large-scale profitable activities has put the babaçu palm trees in line for destruction. As it takes 90 years for a babaçu tree to bear fruit reforestation is not an option.

In response to this threat, several small communities joined forces to form the Movement of Women Babaçu Breakers, or MIQCB. The MIQCB provides a voice to this otherwise unrepresented community, enables them to improve their living conditions and challenges society's perceptions of their status and value.



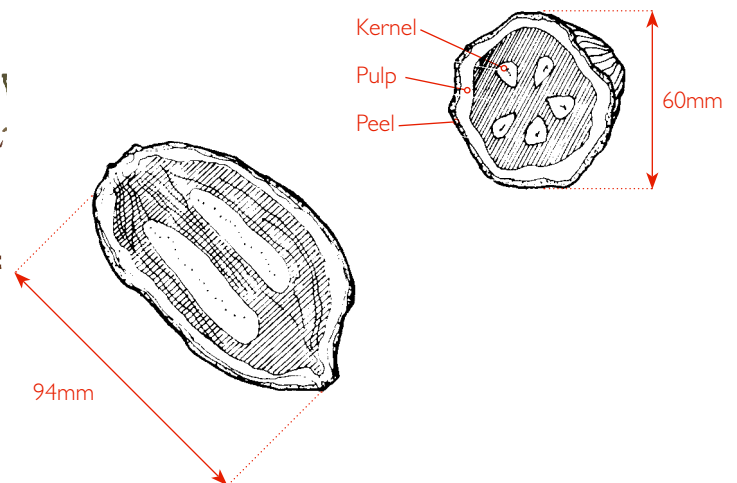
FIGHTING GLOBAL POVERTY

# Who are the quebradeiras?



The *quebradeiras* are indigenous women in northern Brazil who survive on the income provided by gathering and breaking babaçu nuts. They are able to sell oil extracted from the nuts, and a type of flour called *mesocarpo*. The babaçu nut is the fruit of a palm tree found across a band of the Amazon that sprawls over nearly 70,000 square miles of the Brazilian states Maranhão, Piauí, Pará and Tocantins. There are more than 350,000 women gathering and breaking babaçu nuts today who have lived in the region for generations.

The *quebradeiras* use every part of the babaçu palm tree. The **leaf** is used to make the roofs of their houses, baskets and other household products. The **shell** of the babaçu nut is used as charcoal. Between the shell and the nut is the mesocarpo that is an invaluable source of protein and is often ground into a flour to make a local porridge. Finally, the **kernel** produces oil that is used for cooking and as a component of fuel. The oil is also used to make soap with which to wash clothes or bathe. The *quebradeiras* use and sell all these products, which usually represent their only source of income.



Separating the babaçu kernel from the shell is a difficult and tedious process. The babaçu is smaller than a normal coconut and is covered by a very hard shell. Holding an axe with her legs and steadying the nut on the blade with one hand, the *quebradeira* hits the nut with a stick with the other hand. The nut must be hit several times, carefully, in order to remove the three to five kernels it contains.


Women are the traditional *quebradeiras*. The rituals of work, as well as songs and other communal knowledge, are passed down from mother to daughter. Babaçu trees are so important to these communities that they are given names. The *quebradeiras* are guardians of the forest, using each babaçu nut without damaging the tree. They live and work in harmony with the babaçu palm trees, making their meagre living by respecting the environment of this precious ecosystem.

Many of the *quebradeiras* are descendents of former slaves or indigenous tribes of North and Northeastern Brazil. Beginning in the 1960's, the Brazilian government pushed an expansion of the farming, lumber and mining industries. Each of these industries requires vast amounts of land, which was taken in part from the babaçu producing regions. Their needs long marginalised by the redistribution of land, the *quebradeiras'* survival is now at risk. They are forced to walk longer and longer distances to gather babaçu nuts, or pay for the right to collect them. The privatisation of public land and the destruction of the forests are slowly robbing these communities of their livelihood.

The *quebradeiras* face increasing competition for the land from the likes of loggers, cattle ranchers and farmers growing crops for biofuels. Unlike the babaçu nut breakers, these new schemes do not work in harmony with the delicate ecological system and have contributed to the region's rapid devastation. Denuded forests, unproductive soil and contaminated water sources from chemical fertilizers are common problems. This destruction is not only harmful to the environment but also devastating to the communities who depend on that environment.



# Charcoal



Charcoal prices have risen due to mining and refining industries using it as fuel, making babaçu nuts valuable as a source of coal. Landowners prevent the *quebradeiras* from accessing their land to collect the nut, depriving *quebradeiras* of their livelihoods. At the same time landowners are 'renting' communal land in order to have exclusive rights to areas where the babaçu grows.

It has become common practice for local companies to buy the babaçu nut whole from the local communities, stopping them from producing oil and flour to feed their families. The *quebradeiras* become simply "babaçu collectors" earning a much lower income. One kilo of babaçu nuts bought by refineries costs US10 cents but in areas where the MIQCB is strongly organised, they buy it at about US60 cents a kilo

## Cattle

Cattle ranching is to blame for 80% of the deforestation of the Amazon. Since 2001 Brazil's beef exports have been on the rise as a result of disease fears in Europe and Argentina. About 30% of Brazil's cattle graze in the Amazon region. Trees have been cleared for pastureland and natural springs have been destroyed, both with knock on effects that will further destroy the region.

## Lumber

After clearing the forests of mahogany, loggers have set their sites on a range of other fast growth trees. Lumber and cellulose exports have skyrocketed in recent years, and with growing demand from China are expected to grow even more. As sales grow the lumber industry becomes more powerful and able to demand from the Brazilian government the rights to public land.

# Corporate farming



The expansion of corporate farming poses a great threat to water resources. Pesticides have polluted the water supply and the industrial farmers have built dams and diverted rivers for their own purposes without consulting local communities. A vast expansion of the sugarcane industry is also planned for the region, which will require clearing a significant area of babaçu trees. This spells the end not just of a precious ecosystem but also of whole communities who rely on the babaçu to provide a living to their families.

While the new plantations will also provide jobs for the region, they are so low paying and physically difficult that they are tantamount to slavery. But even if they do pump money into the region, these industrial jobs cannot repair the social fabric destroyed along with the forests.



# Chasing alternative fuels at all cost



While the industrialised world searches for alternative sources of fuel, it is people like the *quebradeiras* who are dealing with the consequences. Crops like sugarcane and soy eat up land and water resources, making less land available for food production and other necessities.

There is a need for alternative fuels, but the MIQCB knows that it must not come at the expense of the ecological and social balance of regions such as the Amazon. They believe that any fuel policy should rely on a variety of energy sources to maintain this crucial balance.

## MIQCB and the fight to protect babaçu palm trees

As a response to these threats the *quebradeiras* formed local associations to fight for unfettered access to their land. In 1991, groups from different Brazilian states came together to form the MIQCB, a movement of babaçu women breakers. MIQCB campaigns to protect the *quebradeiras'* right to their way of life. To achieve this goal, MIQCB has two main campaigns running now



# Campaign against the burning of the entire babaçu nut

Most threats the *quebradeiras* face stem from the destruction of the babaçu forests. But those who seek to preserve the palm trees and commercialise their products pose their own dangers. As a component of charcoal, the market for babaçu has increased. While only the shell and husk are needed to make charcoal, some producers burn the whole nut, destroying the more valuable kernel in the process. This wasteful practice deprives the *quebradeiras* of much needed income.

MIQCB is campaigning against this destructive practice. By highlighting not only the waste of the method but its impact on the *quebradeiras* they hope to preserve the traditional use (husk and shell for charcoal, kernel to make oil and soap to wash clothes and to bathe) whilst ensuring that the women's work is valued.



# Lobbying and law initiatives

As their sustainable way of life has come under threat the *quebradeiras* have fought back. In the movement's early stages the women would negotiate directly with the landowners, but as time passed MIQCB began to organise and lobby local governments as well. The passage of the Law of Free Access to the Babaçu Forests in several municipalities is an important first step. The law grants *quebradeiras* the right to collect babaçu nuts in every municipality where the law has been passed, whether the trees are on public or private land. It also outlaws the destruction of babaçu trees. These measures represent a key victory, but the fight continues at the national level to ensure that all the country's babaçu forests remain intact.

In July 2007, about 300 women travelled for two days from the far north and northeast into Brazil's capital city Brasilia. This was part of MIQCB's current campaign to make the Law of Free Access national, ensuring that the babaçu forests are protected throughout the country. This law also prohibits destruction of the trees in the entire country and gives ownership to the communities that work with the babaçu. Although the Brazilian congress heard from the *quebradeiras* their struggle to safeguard the forest, their livelihood and their communities, there is still a lot of work to be done. MIQCB is resolute in demanding that the Brazilian government:

- Ensures that babaçu trees are protected so as to guarantee the *quebradeiras*' livelihood while preserving their cultural and environmental knowledge.
- Acts against environmental crimes as a result of corporate farming, cattle ranching, lumber companies and refineries.
- Resolves long standing land disputes to reduce conflicts in the area.
- Extends programmes on health and education to women and girls in the babaçu regions.

## Join War on Want to support the *quebradeiras*' struggle

If you would like more information on this topic visit  
[www.waronwant.org](http://www.waronwant.org) and [www.miqcb.org.br](http://www.miqcb.org.br)



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This material was produced on the basis of

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