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## TERRITORIAL VULNERABILITY IN THE AMAZON – AN ANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE FROM THE RIVER PIRACY IN THE SOLIMÕES RIVER

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**Abstract:** This article intends to discuss the territorial vulnerability of the Solimões River in the state of Amazonas based on the actions of “rivers pirates” also known as “water rats” in the stretch between Tefé and Coari, the largest cities in the region. The attacks of these criminals cause insecurity in river transport, to riverside dwellers in traditional communities and to respective cities. The methodology is based on a reflection of the facts that occurred in recent years supported bibliographic foundation linked to geographic science. This work provides subsidies to understand that pirate actions and the advance of violence in Solimões river are products of the fragility of space that can be verified from the performance of spatial elements recognized as institutions, infrastructures, firms, people and the environment in this fraction of the Brazilian territory.

**Keywords:** Territorial vulnerability, River Piracy, Spatial elements.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Amazon, rivers are the veins through which the life of relationships flows from the flows of regional circulation that integrate and allow the survival of the populations of its riverside cities. In this context, the Solimões River is configured as the main route for the integration of people, goods and goods through regional river transport in Amazonas (QUEIROZ, 2019). The significant flows effected by vessels of different types and sizes reflect the good access to river transport by the regional population, providing the Tabatinga-Manaus section with the highest satisfaction rate for river transport passengers in the Amazon (CNT, 2013).

However, many risks and dangers are inherent to navigation on the Solimões River, among the natural hazards the following stand out: the strength of the waters during storms; the vortex or giant whirlpools; the

banzeiros from lands fallen from the banks of the banks; the excess of organic matter on the water surface with the possibility of damaging the boat's propellers; and the countless paths that make up the “Amazon labyrinth” requiring experience from the crew of vessels to navigate its holes, creeks, Paraná and tributaries, shortcuts that can confuse and disorient many commanders who navigate by nautical charts or those who have no caboclo fluvial experience. Meanwhile, among the anthropogenic dangers most feared by urban riverside populations, rural communities and the crews of river transport vessels in the region, attacks by “river pirates” from the Solimões River stand out. These are robbers, kidnappers and murderers who devastate many places on the river.

Even in times of the Covid 19 Pandemic, which afflicts a large part of the world's population with serious health, economic, social and political problems, the actions of river pirates also known as “water rats” or “water bellies” do not cease; in many stretches such as near Lake Coari in the Middle Solimões, these actions even increased (Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/colunas/amaury-ribeiro-jr/2021/02/22/covid-facilita-attack-of-pirates-on-riverside-communities-of-amazonia.htm>; accessed on: 20 Mar 2021).

The study area of this geographic discussion refers to the stretch between the cities of Tefé and Coari, the largest urban centers in Solimões (Map 1). The city of Tefé is the managing center of the territory in this subspace (IBGE, 2017; QUEIROZ, 2017) has a peripheral centrality (QUEIROZ, 2016) that is important for the maintenance of the flows that establish the relations between the cities of its Immediate and Intermediate Geographic Region and the capital Manaus (QUEIROZ, 2020). The city of Coari, on the other hand, is the seat of Petrobrás' oil exploration activities

linked to the Urucu Oil Province, where the movement of vessels and people is significant due to the production of local hydrocarbons.

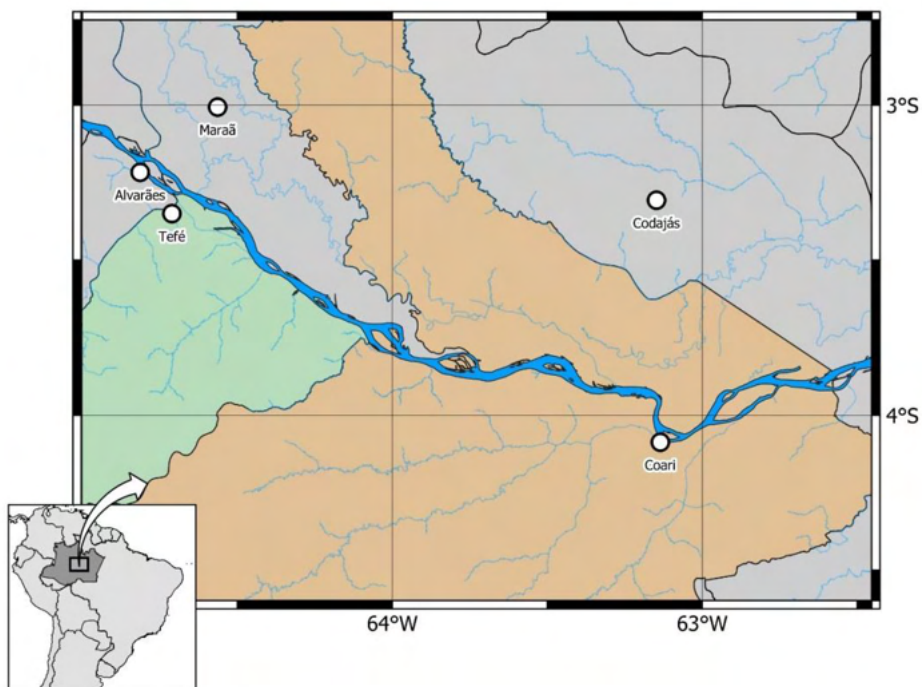
The respective stretch between these two municipalities presents the problem of territorial insecurity arising from the actions of river pirates, frightening the riverside population of these cities and surrounding traditional communities, as well as passengers and crews of regional river transport.

### **REGARDING THE FRAGILITY OF THE TERRITORY TO SOCIO-SPACE IMPACTS**

In recent years, the disappearance of a police chief and an English adventurer in the outskirts of the municipality of Coari, as well as the shooting attack on a boat belonging to the Ajato passenger transport company from Tefé, have frightened the population of cities in the Middle Amazon region of Solimões.; these cases had repercussions in the media

and made it possible for society to pay more attention to this problem in the region. These facts expose the dangers and risks pertinent to the onslaught of river pirates, recognized as a risk and threat for people traveling in Solimões, susceptible to pirate attacks in this portion of the Amazon. The biggest fear of the inhabitants of the Coari lake floating boats is the pirates (QUEIROZ, 2021), the damage caused by their attacks in the Amazon exceeds 100 million a year, according to the National Federation of Shipping Companies (FENAVEGA) (CALCAGNO and CAVALCANTI, 2019 ).

The attacks on the Petrobras refinery in Manaus as well as on the operations center of this multinational in Coari; assaults on residents of floating ships near cities and on vessels of all sizes; added to the involvement of river pirates with agents relevant to drug trafficking and smuggling in the Solimões River and its tributaries, allows us to recognize



Map 1 – The stretch between the major urban centers of the Solimões River, the cities of Tefé and Coari

Source: Own elaboration, 2021.

river piracy in the Solimões as a major problem for the fluidity and territorial integration; a bottleneck to regional development as it impacts the dynamics of the limited agents of the regional economy, mainly linked to river transport and the trade and service sectors.

Under these circumstances, piracy in Solimões cannot be seen only as crimes related to theft and homicide of riverboats and floating vessels; they are expressions of the Amazonian territory because they represent the product of social and economic inequalities and contradictions inherent to the region, socio-spatial contextualizations relevant to the pirates' performance in this subspace; their harmful actions reveal the weakness of the territory when they produce risks and threats to people, institutions and firms (owners and lessees of vessels or shipowners; floating fuel stations or pontoons; floating trade and services, etc.) as well as to infrastructure and the environment; that is, they impact the available spatial elements, represented by these agents and described by Santos (1985, p.16) as: institutions, infrastructures, firms, the ecological environment and men. These actions that are offensive to society cause damage and impacts on social cohesion, where fear and crime end up harming relationships and exchanges in this Amazon fraction, producing socio-spatial vectors that contribute to territorial insecurity.

This stretch of the Solimões-Amazonas waterway has little inspection infrastructure and no beaconing, navigation is complex and requires care, skills and experience from the crew. The municipality of Coari does not have the effective presence of the Navy or Port Authority, the Military Police is restricted in the city (a little more than a dozen men for a population of more than 70 thousand inhabitants); Public security actions come from integrated support among national, state and local forces via operations against

drug trafficking and smuggling conducted by pirates. On the other hand, Tefé is a city that counts with the presence of the Captaincy of Ports, is the base of the Military Police Battalion in the region and of an Infantry Brigade of the Brazilian Army; however, it suffers from looting attacks, homicides and the increase in apprehensions of drug shipments belonging to pirates coming from sectors of the municipality of Coari, which already encourage local criminals to act in the same way.

Under this scenario, discussing the vulnerability of the territory requires knowledge of the dangers and risks that plague populations. In this sense, Marandola Jr and Hogan (2009, p.174) argue that: "the discussion about vulnerability always leads us to think about insecurity and protection systems, which open a fundamental perspective so that we can identify elements that help to compose vulnerability" (MARANDOLA JR and HOGAN, 2009, p.174). The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) addresses vulnerability as the "inability to face risks or the impossibility of managing assets to protect oneself" (MARANDOLA JR and HOGAN, 2006, p. 36). It is reflected, if the territory does not have sufficient and efficient spatial elements, it tends to reproduce inequalities and contradictions that lead to its fragmentation and the production of places of violence, places made up of vigorous places, socio-environmental conditions that allow situations to happen less virtuous to society and the economy such as piracy in Solimões; that is, territorial integration that takes place as the repercussion of economic activities from one subspace to another (SANTOS, 1979) tends to suffer harmful impacts via pirate actions arising from the fragile performance of the available spatial elements.

Peripheral territories or territories close to the border, such as Tefé and Coari in the Solimões region, are more favorable to these socio-spatial conditions, where the economic and social circumstances of cities are more precarious and needy (BECKER, 2005). Thus, vulnerability takes place as a consequence of the weak performance of institutions, infrastructures, firms and men in peripheral territories: “many authors have spoken of the restriction of citizenship assets, either by decreasing income or by other related processes, resulting in the vulnerability of citizenship itself” (MARANGOLA JR and HOGAN, 2006, p. 35).

Therefore, the hypothesis that territorial vulnerability in the Solimões River comes from the fragility and weak performance of spatial elements in these lethargic and sparse territories (QUEIROZ, 2017) allows us to understand the dynamics of river pirates that cause insecurity in the Solimões-Amazonas and hinder the territorial fluidity relevant to regional circulation.

Therefore, the pirate element assumes behavior similar to the classic Caribbean sea pirate of the 17th century; this is characterized as “the individual who does not adjust to the new norms and insists on the daily use of violence as a natural form of social relationship” (DURAN, 2011, p.101). Tozi (2014, p.47) argues that “pirates are not, in principle, criminals, but men, companies, States and institutions that, in order to transform an intention into reality, appropriate something and, thus, expropriate others.” As a social phenomenon, river piracy in the Amazon region of Solimões seems to be the fate of many of those without a job or even marginalized in the service of people who hire robberies or criminal “services”. Finally, in principle, they are “excluded” people who reflect the economic, political and social conditions to which they are subjected in this

fraction of the national territory. In this sense, “the history of piracy is nothing more than the history of the formation of yet another social frontier between men.” (DURAN, 2011, p.150).

In this context, it is necessary to know the protection measures arising from public policies, actions by the private sector and civil society that promote the bases that subsidize an atmosphere of fear among the population for pirate actions in the stretch most valued by river pirates on the Solimões River. The verification of the spatial perception of violence pertaining to the population when organizing their defenses and investing in private security contributions provides knowledge of the geography and landscapes of fear. The participation of agents from the municipalities, the state of Amazonas and the Union via the River Police, the Military Police, the Port Authority is essential to mitigate this problem in situations arising from the phenomenon of piracy in Solimões, causing relevant impacts on the territory.

Silveira (1999a, p.26) comments that the geographic situation “is a scenario for new forms of production and life, for new actions and for the implementation of new objects, responding to new rationales, new intentions, new futures”. Cataia (2011, p.116) argues that geographical situation “is a complex of forces in action, organized according to a bundle of variables that come together in a unique and unprecedented combination, at a given time and in a given subspace”. The geographic situations related to piracy in the Solimões River express the gaps and gaps related to the full performance and effectiveness of spatial elements in the region.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Barriers in the territory linked to the absence of infrastructure and institutions to guard and manage it, causing adequate failures

to produce violence and the occurrence of crimes in the stretch between the two cities; “the lower the degree of social cohesion, the greater the probability of various crimes occurring” (LIRA, 2017, p; 64), inequalities, unemployment, poverty and the immensity of the river in this scenario of neglect favors the manifestation of outbreaks of violence due to these socio-spatial specificities relevant to cities and existing flows of people and goods. Thus, the economic and functional devaluation of regions such as Solimões lead to criminal events and fragmentation of solidarity that maintain territorial integration.

The scenario of contradictions, lack of infrastructure, institutional agents, deep inequality and poverty configures the socio-spatial landscape of the Middle Solimões in Amazonas, where its largest cities, Tefé and Coari, face violence from the attacks by river pirates. Understanding this social phenomenon that is configured as a territorial expression of this peripheral space and discussing possible forms of mitigation is essential for social well-being and the improvement of fluidity and territorial integration in the Amazon.

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