Making shade in a conflicting timescape  
Mariana Lima (Unicamp/Brazil)

If you look up to the mountain range, you can have a sense of a time which is no longer here. This previous time actually persists through landowners who have spread its seeds and modes of relation. Between April and June, when Erythrina trees bloom in southern Bahia (Brazil), you can see how their orange flowers still dye the surrounding ground. They are not exactly native. They were introduced by landowners and their allies, State-sponsored researchers, to almost every cocoa (Theobroma cacao) plantation around the 1970’s in an attempt to increase productivity. At that point, they had understood cocoa grows better under the shade of higher trees. Because most of the coppice had been removed in the previous crisis cycles, they reshaped the landscape using a single species of Erythina tree – its rapid growth would do the rest. For them, speed and synchronicity were relevant, conditional aspects to split forest from crop lifecycle. However, in the 1990’s, Crinipellis perniciona fungus took over and its illness – the witch’s broom - spread all around into the cocoa crops. Landless workers call it “the witches’ time”, a stage in which their organized action was possible. That was also the moment when indigenous populations reclaimed their territories.

If you now wander those roads you will also see people working under the shade of growing ancient trees. There are a bunch of them. If you stop and listen, you might hear Joelson’s words. He tells us not to rush. We must learn from the forest’s pace. We must grow food forests where we can see, learn from example and, as birds, make the forests travel. Joelson is a landless movement peasant. He was invited by Rita, a shaman of Pataxó Hâ-hâ-hâ people, to her home. She wants to see the forest back; she wants to relearn how to coordinate agriculture and forestry, so that all beings are taken care of. That’s what Joelson has been doing for the last twenty years within his own community, the 960 hectares Land Reform territory called Terra Vista.

When they first arrived at that piece of land, in 1992, the cocoa plantation farm had been abandoned by its owners. The forest – and its pace – took over, but that too had to be cultivated by the landless peasants who arrived. Sometimes, caring means hurrying up the forestry cycles. The river, for instance, could not wait for the forest to come back on its own sake. Most of its bank was exposed and the water level was very low. What was started 20 years ago transformed this area into a completely different landscape. If you walk through the pathways by the river, you might hear birds and children looking for fruits and playing on the upper branches of the native and fruit trees. You would also accidentally run into a monthly community’s assembly or some other kind of conversation taking place under the shade of a tree. The forest’s pace is one of a long term spam. But it is also one of constant and frantic transformations. The cocoa areas are an excellent example of this. When this fruit first started to be commercially cultivated in the region, it was done through the use of a set of techniques called Cabruca, a word which means thinning up the forest. Cabruca draws from ancient agroforestry systems and was put together by landowner employees, most of them indigenous and black workers previously displaced from their territories. Most cocoa areas in Terra Vista had to be reopened once the peasants arrived, since the forest had gone back and shading levels were too high for cocoa to grow healthy.
At these sites, caring means slowing down the forest pace and the rapid transformations it entails. That is not done only once, when each area is reclaimed by its new keepers. Even now, if you happen to walk through the pathways that take you between Cabraca areas in Terra Vista, you will surely hear the noisy orchestra of chainsaws. If you hold your breath for a little while, the concert will eventually come to an end – most probably a contingent one. At that point, you might hear a vivid discussion on which trees should be cut off, which should stay and if that shade is good enough for cocoa. The species and each detail of its ways of interacting with the other will be considered. In Cabraca, the assynchronic growth of trees entail uneven shading, besides providing nutrition to soil, people and animals and work for peasants, a lot of it. Here, decay play an important role in this polyphonic assembly.

So, most probably too, the conversation will be interrupted by the sounds of hoes and somebody saying we should care - something meaning the opposite of talking. This somebody is, most probably, opening up beds for new seedlings of various trees which will, eventually, be the topic of a future debate on whether they should go or stay. You will not be able to grasp that sound for long; the chainsaws will restart at some point. Restoring these shade patterns means also caring for a very specific cyclic temporality, in which balance is always at stake and depends on a very fine and precise coordination of rhythms.

For these peasants, and the lifeforms they care for, the messiness of patterns of shade matter – and not only in cocoa areas. That makes me return to the blooming Erythrina trees. How come they can still be an enemy? How would they block the forest’s pace? At first site, they do not. Actually, they effectively blend into the landscape. Yet, its efficiency is the first problem. Erythrina trees carry spikes on their barks. Walking around them requires caution – too much of it. A cocoa area has many dangers already – snakes, wasps, itchy grasses. Dealing with Erythrina’s spikes slows down the complex work of managing Cabrucas. And peasants see no good outcomes of it. If lonely in the agrosystem its shade is sparse and allows too much wind and sunlight to get into the area – neither of them favour cocoa growth. Also, they cannot use its wood, which play-acts polystyrene. It also steals water from other trees, it grows too fast, but take too long to decompose. For landowners, that made the perfect combination, since any further nutrition and/or protection would come from chemical fertilizers and pesticides. They had sold timber from the native trees in previous crisis, when cocoa did not give them all the surplus they expected. And then, the witches’ broom took over – some would even say it was partially due to the poor soil feeding Erythrina and chemical.

There is a contrast between the homogeneous patterns of shade this sole species introduced in cocoa cultivation, and the rhythm of care that it entails, and the simultaneously messy and balanced patterns of shade these peasants are working on. Maybe that too has to do with a previous correlation, the one between the vanishing of specific plants, the ancient trees, and the modes of knowledge ancient peoples developed for growing cocoa in this region.

That is what the small plot we opened in Rita’s backyard was intended to promote. Its design materialised what was previously described here: fruit trees (in green) planted along the pathways; scattered plantain, cocoa and cupuaçu trees (in dark green, red and yellow) for food, and commerce, mixed with ancient trees (in purple), native and exotic, for timber, medicine and... shade.