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**Mumbuca and Sobrado: peasant communities in conviviality with the semiarid region****Mumbuca y Sobrado: comunidades campesinas en convivencia con el semiárido****Mumbuca e Sobrado: comunidades camponesas em convivência com o semiárido**Alex Dias de Jesus<sup>1</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4464-935X>

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**Abstract**

This article aims to analyze the experiences of conviviality with the semiarid in the peasant communities of Mumbuca and Sobrado, located respectively in the municipalities of Bom Jesus da Serra and Encruzilhada, Bahia. Such experiences were mediated by Articulação no Semiárido Brasileiro (ASA). The methodology used involved a literature review, survey of secondary data on land ownership structure and mainly the application of questionnaires with peasants living in the localities. The results obtained allow us to point out that the experiences of conviviality with the semiarid, mediated by the ASA, contributed to greater access to water and to the improvement of the living conditions of the population residing in these communities.

**Keywords:** Peasant communities. Conviviality. Semiarid.

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**Resumen**

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las experiencias de convivencia con el semiárido en las comunidades campesinas de Mumbuca y Sobrado, ubicadas respectivamente en los municipios de Bom Jesus da Serra y Encruzilhada, Bahía. Tales experiencias fueron mediadas por la Articulação no Semiárido Brasileiro (ASA). La metodología utilizada incluyó una revisión de la literatura, un estudio de datos secundarios sobre la estructura de propiedad de la tierra y principalmente la aplicación de cuestionarios a los agricultores que viven en las localidades. Los resultados obtenidos permiten señalar que las experiencias de convivencia con la región semiárida, mediadas por la ASA, contribuyeron a un mayor acceso al agua y al mejoramiento de las condiciones de vida de la población residente en estas comunidades.

**Palabras clave:** Comunidades campesinas. Convivencia. Semiárido.

## Resumo

Este artigo tem o objetivo de analisar as experiências de convivência com o semiárido nas comunidades camponesas de Mumbuca e Sobrado, localizado respectivamente nos municípios de Bom Jesus da Serra e Encruzilhada, Bahia. Tais experiências foram mediadas pela Articulação no Semiárido Brasileiro (ASA). A metodologia empregada envolveu revisão bibliográfica, levantamento de dados secundários sobre estrutura fundiária e principalmente a aplicação de questionários com os camponeses residentes nas localidades. Os resultados obtidos permitem apontar que as experiências de convivência com o semiárido, mediadas pela ASA, contribuíram para maior acesso à água e para a melhoria das condições de vida da população residente nessas comunidades.

**Palavras-chave:** Comunidades camponesas. Convivência. Semiárido.

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## Introduction

This article aims to analyze the experiences of living along and amidst drought, led by *sertanejo* peasants and mediated through the Articulation on the Brazilian Semi-arid Region (ASA, for *Articulação no Semiárido Brasileiro* in Portuguese) in the rural communities of Mumbuca and Sobrado, localized, respectively, in the municipalities of Bom Jesus da Serra and Encruzilhada, in the southwest of the Bahia state, as shown in map 1.

The methodology consisted of a literature review on the strategies of coping and living along the semi-arid conditions, a survey of secondary data obtained from the Agropecuarian Census of 2017 and the application of 40 questionnaires in each community with questions related to the land tenure situation, labor relations, production and the benefits arising from alternative practices of conviviality with the semi-arid situation.

A common interpretation about Brazilian peasantry is that it recreates itself under the capitalist mode of production in the everyday. Thus, the mode of production is sustained by the exploitation of salaried labor, allowing, in contradiction, the reproduction of atypically capitalist forms. This happens due to the unequal and mixed character of its development.

*Sertanejo* peasants is a particular expression of the Brazilian peasantry, of those living in the *sertão*, in vast areas of the country. They practice dryland agriculture and

know the conditions of the environment they inhabit. Such traditional knowledge is passed on throughout generations, through family or communitarian nuclei.

According to Neves (2007), ethimologists attribute the genesis of the word “*sertão*” to a derivation of “*dessertão*” (big desert). Others confer the origin of this word to *muceltão*, and then transformed into *celtão* and later, *certão*, from the original latin phrase *locus mediterraneus*, a place far from the coast, the inland, a site way from the sea. “For everyone it means a wild region, unpopulated, a secluded place, far from the coast, but not necessarily arid; land and population of the countryside; finally, the hinterland of the country” (NEVES, 2007. p. 9; free translation).

During the colonial period, *sertão* meant the frontier of colonization, where the colonizer would look for minerals and engage in wars against the original indigenous populations. In other words, the opposite of the coast, the distant, the unknown, but also the place linked to livestock and to the permanence of ancient customs and traditions, rather present in the North and Northeast of Brazil.

In the 19th Century, as Neves (2007) points out, at least two senses of *sertão* are identified: one associated with the idea of semiaridity; another associated to the economical activities of the region – mostly livestock raising – and its patterns of sociability. From there on, the use of the expression became general to designate both the semiarid Northeast and the innermost areas of the country’s hinterland, which were gradually incorporated to the national economy, since the colonial period, through mining and livestock activities.

As a result of the European, African and native miscegenation, the *sertanejo* peasant was constituted, “integrated and conscious of the belonging to their specific *sertão*” (NEVES, 2007. p. 23; free translation), in the semiarid Northeast, as well as in areas of Minas Gerais, Goiás, Mato Grosso and even the Amazon.

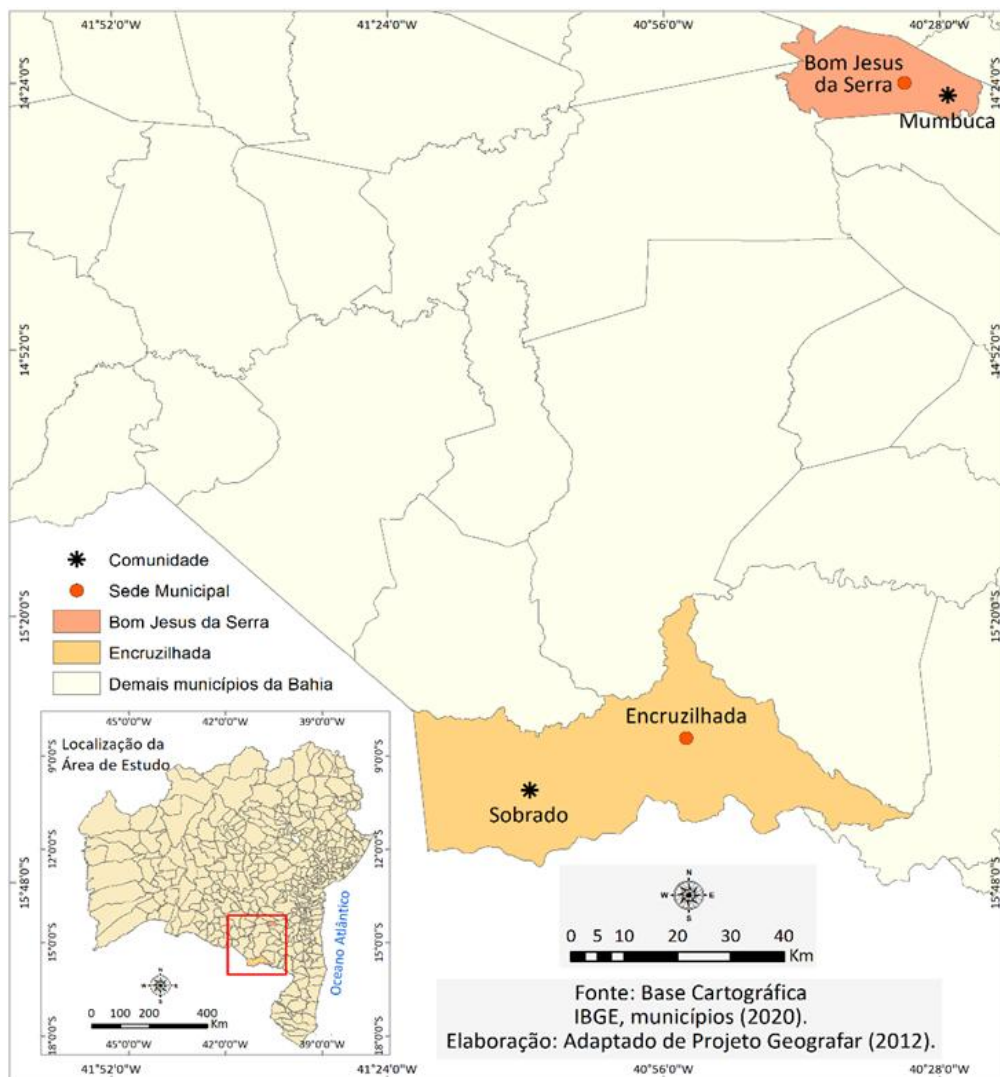
Although the *sertanejo* that is addressed in this research lives in semiarid áreas, that is not the determining factor in their constitution, but the social relations and the cultural exchanges among them and with neighboring groups and the especificities of the interaction between society and nature. They are, at the same time, *quilombolas*-

*sertanejos*, pasture bottoms-*sertanejos*, or as Dourado (2012) addresses them, Catinga peasants. On the relation between *sertanejos* and *sertão*, Ab'Saber argues that:

The man from *sertão* has a particular intuition for teluric forces. The distant signs of thunderstorms, which herald rains. The arrival of the rain season, called *winter*. The sprouting of foliage in all caatingas. The return of running waters from the rivers, at the time of the first rains. The knowledge of the productive potential of each small space of the *sertão*, from the ebbs of riverbeds to the heights of the dry and stony hills of the *sertão* (AB'SABER, 1999, p. 15; free translation, emphasis in the original).

Peasant families in the communities of Mumbuca and Sobrado in the southwest of Bahia may express in the everyday deals the knowledge of the environment they inhabit, in accordance to Ab'Saber (1999)'s description.

Map 1- Location of the addressed communities



Source: prepared by the author (2021)

The *sertanejo* peasants are understood to be a mode of life present in the current society, as a way of reinventing themselves, not as remnant of the past. Peasant identity is permeated by values that allow their permanence and recreation, even amidst the capitalist society. Hence, understanding peasant's recreation is necessarily linked to the comprehension of the peasant's valued. That is, the relation of these subjects with the land, with labor and with family.

### **The Articulation on the Brazilian Semiarid Region (ASA) and the actions of conviviality with droughts**

Historically, the intervention of the Brazilian State in the semiarid region of has been based on the idea of combating and overcoming the drought. In that sense, the construction of roads, large dams, irrigation works and other actions of assistentialism have been present in the State agenda for centuries. However, the failure of many works and the palliative actions bring forward the debate around a new paradigm for the semiarid: conviviality.

The critique on the discourse of overcoming the drought were already sketched in Guimarães Duque's writings over 40 years ago, in which the subject of conviviality with the semiarid was already proposed, as Silva demonstrates::

What advantages one may take from semiaridity? One gets the impression that in the past the concept of drought was that of modifying the environment for man to live in it better. Ecology is teaching us that we must prepare the population to live along semiaridity, taking advantage of it (DUQUE *apud* SILVA, 2008, p. 103; free translation).

In parallel with the State's actions in combating droughts, social movements, rural workers associations, pastoral agents, NGOs of various types have been developing experiences, seeking new ways of acting in the semiarid region.

Rural workers movements from the Brazilian semiarid, most of which had their origins in the rural union movement, in the Peasants' Leagues, in the 1950s; in the Rural Workers' Union, in the 1970s; and in the Base Ecclesial Communities

(CEBs, *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* in Portuguese) from the 1960s to the 1980s, become more autonomous during the redemocratization period in the country, in relation to political parties, politicians and the Catholic Church.

Movements towards proposing conviviality with the semiarid have strengthened with the support of the banners of “alternative agriculture” and agroecology, that have gained strength since the 1990s. In such context, the discussion has grown in the popular movements of the semiarid, and even within the State with the Brazilian Agricultural Research Company (Embrapa, *Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária* in Portuguese), for instance.

Not only the debate around conviviality was fertile during that period. Different agroecological experiences, adapted to the semiarid region, were set in motion by those movements. Many of those alternatives were experienced and perfected by social organizations alongside rural populations. A large part of these organizations joined, by late 1990s, to form the Articulation on the Brazilian Semiarid Region (ASA), such as Centro Sabiá, Program of Application of Appropriate Technologies in the Communities (PATAC, *Programa de Aplicação de Tecnologias Apropriadas às Comunidades* in Portuguese), Caritas Brazil, Movement of Communitarian Organization (MOC, *Movimento de Organização Comunitária* in Portuguese) and the Regional Institute of Appropriate Agriculture (IRPPA, *Instituto Regional de Agropecuária Apropriada* in Portuguese).

Social movements and rural workers organizations acting in the semiarid region built a public political debate over the years. The most emblematic actions led by these organizations were the occupation of the Northeast Development Superintendency (SUDENE, *Superintendência do Desenvolvimento do Nordeste* in Portuguese), on March 16<sup>th</sup> 1993, as a result of the drought in 1992/1993. It was summoned by the Confederation of the Agricultural Workers (CONTAG, *Convocado pela Confederação dos Trabalhadores da Agricultura* in Portuguese) and demanded measures in relation to the drought and permanent policies for coexistence with the semiarid.



This movement was the beginning of the constitution of collective spaces around the issue of the semiarid region, such as the Drough (Articulação no Semiárido Paraibano); t Forum (Fórum Seca) in Pernambuco; the Articulation on the Semiarid of Paraíba the Forum for Life in the Semiarid (Fórum pela Vida no Semiárido) in Ceará and Piauí; Forcampo in Rio Grande do Norte and other networks of debate (ASSIS, 2009)

At this moment, social organizations have gained visibility and legitimacy in the discussion of conviviality with the semiarid region. Parallel to the discussions and publicizing the debates, the construction of plate cisterns is gaining ground as an alternative for storing water for human consumption and as an efficient action to improve the life conditions of the *sertanejo* people.

From there, a discussion process began involving more than three hundred entities, which culminated in a seminar: Permanent Actions for the Development of the Brazilian Semiarid Region, held between May 10 and 13, 1993 at SUDENE's premises, with the participation of 152 people, representing 112 entities (DUQUE, 2009. p. 307; free translation).

As result of the seminar, the “Fórum Nordeste” (Northeast Forum, in English) was created, proposing to elaborate a program of permanent actions to value peasant agriculture and alternative practices of conviviality with droughts.

The governmental response came up, between 1993 and 1994, with the formulation of “Project Áridas: a proposal of sustainable development for the Northeast”. Nonetheless, few things were effectively implemented and, during the drought of 1998-1999, there were findings that once again State action would not solve the problems.

For Silva (2008), governamental action during that drought could be considered a synthesis of State’s behaviour throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in face of the drought occurrences in the semiarid region.

The late reaction pressured by local governments, by the risk of losing control of the situation and by the pressure of public opinion; the delay in implementing emergency actions, when the seriousness

of the problems was advanced; and the allocation of resources, right after the most serious period of the drought, characterizing a discontinuity of actions (SILVA, 2008. p. 73; free translation).

Faced with new frustrations, in 1999, during the Third Session of the United Nations Conference of the Parties for the Convention to Combat Desertification (COP3), held in Recife, between 15 and 26 of November, representatives of social movements, NGOs and religious entities – as usual in the UN Conferences –, formed a “parallel forum” to the governmental sphere to reflect about the reality of the semiarid region and propose effective actions for intervention.

In that sense, besides the exchange of experience of conviviality with the drought, discussions advance about the necessity of a more permanent articulation of the popular social organizations of the Brazilian semiarid region. As result of the debate, the Articulation on the Brazilian Semiarid Region (ASA) emerges, aggregating diverse organizations from several states, some of which had lots of experience on the debate and the actions implemented in the region.

Taking advantage of the moment of convergence of ideas, the great political visibility and the context of the great drought that still remained, the Declaration of the Semiarid Region was launched with the objective of giving greater prominence to the issue of conviviality.

The document presents proposals based on two premises: the sustainable use of resources in the semiarid region and the breaking of the monopoly on access to water and land in the region. The Declaration of the Semiarid Region serves as a manifest of constitution of the ASA, which was consolidated in February 2000, when releases the Chart of Principles, in Igarassu, Pernambuco.

“The Articulation on the Brazilian Semiarid Region –ASA- is a forum of civil society organizations that has fought for social, economic, political and cultural development in the Brazilian semiarid region since 1999” (ASA, 2012; free translation). That is the definition that the ASA takes as guide of its actions throughout its existence.



Currently, over a thousand entities in the most diverse segments, such as evangelical and catholic churches, developmentalist and environmental NGOs, rural and urban workers associations, community associations, unions and rural workers federations compose the ASA.

Several projects have been carried out by ASA during these years. The most important is the project “Um milhão de Cisternas” (One Million Cisterns), known as P1MC. The project aims to build a million cisterns for families in the Brazilian semiarid region, ensuring that rural populations have access to quality water. It basically consists of collecting rainwater through the roof of houses and storing it in 16,000 liter cisterns. This water is used by the family for drinking and cooking.

### **The action of the Articulation on the Brazilian Semiarid Region in the Southwest of Bahia**

The experience of building cisterns in the Southwest region of Bahia began in 1997, when the then Bishop of the Archdiocese of Vitória da Conquista received a donation to build three cisterns. They were built in the municipality of Bom Jesus da Serra, through the works of the Land's Pastoral Commission (CPT, Comissão Pastoral da Terra in Portuguese) in a process called Solidary Rotative Fund. The fund was constituted for the construction of cisterns in the families' houses, which in turn refunded R\$20,00, every month, so that when the refund reached the cost value, another cistern was built in another family's house. Through that process, 21 cisterns were built in Bom Jesus da Serra, five of them in the community of Mumbuca, analyzed in this research endeavor.

Since then, the CPT started this experience, coinciding with the period of elaboration of the P1MC, presented to the Ministry of Environment in 1999, for a possible fundraising. The project was approved and entered in a phase of demonstration, when three Microregional Management Units (MMUs) were created. The MMUs are coverage areas where ASA's management and performance is defined, aggregating some municipalities.

Initially coordinated by the CPT, the management of ASA in the region was transferred to the Centro de Convivência e Desenvolvimento Agroecológico do Sudoeste da Bahia (CEDASB, Centre for Conviviality and Agroecological Development of the Southwest of Bahia), whose action is focused on agroecology. As CEDASB agents remind us: “Cisterns are an agroecological alternative”. However, even in partnership with CEDASB, ASA keeps a close connection with the parishes and the Archdiocese of Vitória da Conquista, Bahia.

Since the beginning, the connection with the Catholic church was direct, given that Diocesan Caritas, CPT and Diocesan Action already engaged in these discussions within their teams. Thus, the first partners sought are parishes and pastoral agents.

From the beginning until 2020, in the MMU of Vitória da Conquista built over 20,000 cisterns of common consumption, 255 school cisterns and over 3,000 technologies of “second water”, which comprise the production cisterns, mud pits and stone tanks. In addition, they created 56 community seed banks and over 2,680 families received technical assistance, serving more than a hundred rural communities in 15 municipalities (CEDASB, 2021). Among them, the communities of Mumbuca, in the municipality of Bom Jesus da Serra, and the community of Sobrado, in the municipality of Encruzilhada, which are studied in this research.

It was through this process of dialogue between the Church and rural communities that ASA was consolidated in the region, serving the communities of Mumbuca and Sobrado, which we will analyze in more detail below.

### **The first experiences in the Mumbuca community**

Solidarity Rotative Funds work as “chests” with resources of the families and are used in moments of need, or well, to build a collective or individual good. Each family contributes a certain amount during a period and, through a draw, the families withdraw the total resource from the sum of the contribution of all the

families. If a family is drawn at the beginning, it continues to contribute until all families benefit.

This strategy has been in existence for a long time among peasant families in the Northeast of Brazil and started to be publicized by ASA with the aim of encouraging solidarity. It was precisely for this purpose that the Solidarity Rotative Funds originated in the Mumbuca community, in Bom Jesus da Serra, Bahia.

This idea, already known by the archdiocese's Bishop, was proposed by a nun who acted in the Archdiocese of Vitória da Conquista's CPT. Knowing the hard reality of the region, in 1998, she proposed that the families organized the Funds to build cisterns that could ease the suffering due to the lack of water. With them, only five cisterns were built, but these served to several families that lived close to each other.

The cisterns built through the Solidarity Rotative Funds were totally financed with the families' own resources and store up to 16,000 liters of water, caught on the houses' roofs; in the same manner that those currently financed by ASA. For over 10 years they have been operating normally, storing water for drinking and cooking in the houses where they were built.

According to IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) (2010), there are approximately 10,113 inhabitants in the municipality of Bom Jesus da Serra; of them, 7,345 (73%) live in the countryside, configuring a predominantly rural city in which a large portion of its population works in agricultural activities, facing the climate difficulties and the concentrated land structure.

Out of the 1,570 rural establishments registered in the 2017 Agricultural Census in Bom Jesus da Serra, 1,296 (82.5%) have less than 20 acres and own only 32% of the total area. That is the situation of the *farminh* units in the Mumbuca community, where most of the estates are no larger than 20 acres. Among the proprieties of the interviewed families, only three had more than 20 acres, the largest – with 55 acres – was shared by three families, indicating an estate fragmentation in even smaller proprieties.

According to data from the Residents' Association, there are about 125 families in Mumbuca who live primarily from working with the land. As reported by the eldest, they have inhabited the region for over 150 years, when enslaved fugitives established in the site and took up residence there. The people of the community struggled for about four years to obtain the certification as quilombola community from the Palmares Cultural Foundation (FCP), which finally happened in February 13, 2011.

The residentes recognize themselves as quilombolas and by means of fieldwork visits it was possible to observe that that is a collective sentiment; that is, there is no divergence in terms of self-recognition. As stated by E. M., president of the Association of Family Farmers of the Remnant Territory of the Quilombo of Mumbuca, the process of mobilization for awareness raising and self-recognition, and the posterior certification, was smooth and did not face many obstacles.

The community of Mumbuca is located 8 km. away from the seat of the municipality of Bom Jesus da Serra. It is a region with great difficulties in accessing water. Before the ASA's actions started, inhabitants walked for more than 6 km. in search of water during the periods of greatest drought. The few sources that existed were disputed by hundreds of families from various communities and farms nearby.

In addition, the water consumed was of poor quality, which kept the rate of infectious diseases always high. In the summer months there were frequent attacks of diarrhea, fever and vomiting, due to the consumption of contaminated water. This situation is no longer seen in the community.

Almost all residents own land titles through purchase, and those families who do not have them live as partners on the lands of their ancestors. In other words, when they marry receive a plot of land near their parents' house. For that reason, there is an excessive fragmentation of land ownership in Mumbuca, which makes agriculture unfeasible in some cases.

On the properties, beans, cassava, pumpkin, corn and other legumes are planted, which are mainly for family consumption and, in some cases, are sold at the town

market. According to the residents, commercialization is increasingly rare, as a result of the difficulties in producing that they face due to droughts and the fragmentation of the land. The planting of these species is done between the months of November and March, as from that period onwards agriculture becomes impractical due to lack of rain. Those who do not plant during this period will no longer plant during the year.

For this reason, during the other months of the year many workers go looking for jobs in large cities such as São Paulo, Belo Horizonte or in nearby cities such as Vitória da Conquista. The temporary mobility of the workforce takes place annually for civil construction or, as is quite common, for the cutting of sugarcane and coffee plantations in the region. This “flight of the swallows”, as Martins (1986) called it, deals with seasonal migration and guarantees, in many cases, survival when long droughts occur.

Nonetheless, these workers do not stay in migrant labor. They always return to take care of their land during the planting and cropping season. The period they spend abroad is precisely to ensure the maintenance of the peasant family that remains on the land, taking care of the house and the breed. This means that salaried labor is a temporary condition for the maintenance of work and the peasant way of life.

A resident comments that “December, January are always months with more people in the community because it is the raining season, it is the time for planting and many men come back home”. It is a season for “plawing the swidden”, get over the longing of the woman and children, do some house chores and get ready to go abroad again. Although striking, this is not the predominant situation in the community. Most family heads remain in their homes, even when it is impossible to practice agriculture for most of the year.

Due to these situations, ASA supporters realized the need of bringing to Mumbuca the construction of cisterns, through the Solidarity Rotative Funds. Soon after the construction of the first five cisterns financed by the families, the

construction of others began with the help of the ASA's Transition Program, in partnership with the National Water Agency, and many families decided to wait to get theirs.

And so it happened. In 2003, the Community was beneficiary of a number of cisterns for water consumption, financed by the One Million Cisterns Program that was starting their operations. Since then, the Community was benefited twice again with cisterns of the P1MC, and as result, currently all families have cisterns next to their houses, with water for drinking and cooking.

For the families, the cistern has been the greatest benefit they have received. All the interviewees affirm that their lives changed for better after the construction of the cisterns and that, for them, there is no chance of living without that water. The following testimony of a peasant woman shows the contentment after the benefit.

Before, there was a lot of suffering here. You don't know the suffering it is to live without water and when there was, it wasn't good to drink. Not nowadays, everyone has clean water, rainwater to drink and cook. Sometimes it's even missing, when it doesn't rain for a long time, but most of the year we have a place to get water from (VERBAL INFORMATION)<sup>2</sup>.

On a regular basis, the water accumulated in the cisterns is sufficient for the needs of a family of four to five members during the months without rain. However, there are years of less rain than usual and the cistern or other reservoirs from which water is drawn for chores other than drinking and cooking do not fill up, and families need the help of the Army or City Hall and their engines.

Still, in general, the cistern, nicknamed the "with doll of the *sertão*" by a popular poet of the region, represents a way out during the months of greatest water scarcity. Peasant families no longer depend on the local political chief to meet their water needs. They depend on how they use the stored water during the raining season. Exceptions exist with the occurrence of great droughts.

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<sup>2</sup> Interviewed by FB, March 2012. Interview conducted by the author. Notes on survey questionnaires.



To own a cisterna at home means autonomy in relation to the water resources that supply the most basic needs of the family. Women have more time to devote to their children, home and themselves with the time they no longer spend fetching water from distant places. Children also gain more time to play, study or help their parents with other chores, as it is common in the countryside.

This is why it became a valuable asset for them. The cistern represents not only a better quality water, closer to their homes. It represents a step forward in the process of building peasant's autonomy. This is because the water was obtained without local political intermediation. It is not a political favor that needs to be returned to anyone. It is each family's individual achievement and a collective one too, of the community.

Before, we depended on the city hall. Sometimes the clay pits were cracked without any water and we had to get up at night to fetch water far away. We often waited for the water to run out to fill up the vessels. Besides having to walk a lot, we still had to wait in line because there were people who slept there. It was a lot of suffering and I hope I don't have to go through a situation like this again (VERBAL INFORMATION)<sup>3</sup>.

From the account transcribed above, we understand the symbolic value that the cistern represents for the family. In addition to representing greater convenience, autonomy, as they are the ones who control the use of water, it represents more health, a fact that can be proven by the monitoring reports of the families, made by the Community Healthcare Agent, who comments:

It only took a few months without rain and we had to drink the same water that the animals drank from the mud pits. The contaminated water increased the rate of illnesses, such as fever and diarrhea, not only here in Mumbuca, but everywhere here in Bom Jesus. Every year we saw a sad epidemic here. After the cisterns, no one needed to drink any more dirty water and now it's the hardest thing to see these diseases. (VERBAL INFORMATION)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Interviewed by AB, March 2012. Interview conducted by the author. Notes on survey questionnaires.

<sup>4</sup> Interviewed by ABS, March 2012. Interview conducted by the author. Notes on survey questionnaires.

The reports show the beneficial character of the cisterns for the lives of families. Directly, they have been positively impacted by the application of simple and easy-to-use technology. In addition, after the mobilization for the construction of the cisterns, which always require a joint effort, people report that they became more united. In other words, the mobilization process that is involved is a fundamental part for the benefited communities.

Given the above exposition, it is possible to assert that ASA, through the Centre for Conviviality and Agroecological Development of the Southwest of Bahia (CEDASB) contributes in a significant manner to the process of conviviality with the semiarid situation and, in consequence, to the permanence of the peasants in the land, in the peasant territory of Mumbuca.

### **The actions for conviviality with the semiarid region in the Sobrado community**

The community of Sobrado reveals yet another stage of the actions of the Articulation on the Brazilian Semiarid Region. Although ASA's actions in the community have existed since its inception in the region, the focus of our analyzes were the recent experiences and their consequences at a time of greater bonding between the entity and the State.

As in the Mumbuca community, in Bom Jesus da Serra (Bahia), the realization of the great difficulty with access to water in the Sobrado community, in the municipality of Encruzilhada (Bahia), made ASA's supporters place it among the priorities for the acquisition of cisterns.

The municipality of Encruzilhada is located in the microregion of Itapetinga, according to the regionalization of the Secretary of Planning of Bahia, and it integrates the Identity Territory of Vitória da Conquista. Encruzilhada has a total population of 23,766 inhabitants, of which 18,636 people resides in the rural area (IBGE, 2010). That is, 78% of the population lives in the countryside, even with the great difficulties they face in the reproduction of their existence, as will be evidenced below.

Part of the population resides in the Sobrado community, 40 km. away of the town seat. About 100 families live in this community, they grow, predominantly, cassava, beans and corn and raise small animals, such as chicken and swines. Currently, some families have also cultivated vegetables, using water from production cisterns. Such production has the priority aim of self-consumption, which highlights the character of peasant agriculture in the region.

In Sobrado, small properties predominate where exclusively family labor is used. In the community, there was a more permanent migration of work, that is, many children live abroad and do not return during rainy periods, but they have rather built an urban life, mainly in large cities. This process avoids an excessive fragmentation of land ownership, as seen in the Mumbuca community, for example.

Out of the 1,871 rural establishments registered in the 2017 Agricultural Census in the municipality of Encruzilhada, 1,223 (65.4%) own plots smaller than 20 acres and hold only 6.9% of the municipality's total area. At the other extreme, only 12 rural establishments (0.64%), each of them with more than 1,000 acres, control 19.48% of the total area.

As in Mumbuca, in Sobrado, in addition to the difficulties with water to produce, land concentration is imposed as a factor that hinders peasant reproduction. Thus, it is possible to evidence a reflection of the concentration of land in the municipality in general. In the community, there is a predominance of properties of up to 10 acres. Only 25% of the interviewed families have properties larger than 15 acres and in no case was there a property that reached 100 acres. Nevertheless, it is peasant units like these that supply the weekly markets in the cities of Encruzilhada and Cândido Sales, revealing, on a local scale, the importance of peasant agriculture nowadays.

Most of the peasants stated that they have titles to the land, acquired, in most cases, through inheritance. It was also verified the presence of married children who live in their parents' property, despite the fact that they often leave for other places, as mentioned above.

Despite being located in the municipality of Encruzilhada, the rural-city relationship is greater with the seat of the municipality of Cândido Sales, which is less than 20 km from the community. It is in the city of Cândido Sales where children from the second cycle of elementary school and high school study. Younger children go up to 4th grade in the community itself. It has a school, a church, a community flour mill and part of the families carry out a collective effort to clean these collective spaces or to harvest or clean the swidden of a "*compadre*" or neighbor.

This community suffered from the lack of water and the Association of Small Producers took the situation to ASA's supporters who, as well as in the Mumbuca community, decided to prioritize the location to benefit from the first cisterns in the Southwest of Bahia after the consolidation of the ASA on a national scale.

In the Sobrado community, the first cisterns were built in 2002, with funds from the Brazilian Banks Federation (FEBRABAN) in alliance with the national ASA. As in other communities, the construction process needs a counterpart from the family that guarantees the lodging and food of the stonemasons who are trained by ASA, in a specific course, and a counterpart from the community to help in the construction of the cisterns for a faster process.

Thus, from 2002 to 2011, the families of the Sobrado community benefited from the construction of 80 consumption cisterns, eight production cisterns and four community-type trench cisterns. In this community there are cisterns that were financed by partnerships with the private sector, federal and state government, through FEBRABAN, the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) and the Secretary of Social Development and Fight against Poverty (SEDES), respectively.

Hence, the difficulties in accessing to water have decreased since the first cisterns in 2002. Currently, in addition to the 80 cisterns for consumption, eight families have production cisterns and are able to maintain a reasonable production of legumes, vegetables and some fruit.

The following report of a peasant woman shows the difficulties they faced before the construction of the first cisterns:

JESUS, A. D. de.

We drank clay water, muddy and polluted water. There are people who took water from the river that is already polluted from Cândido Sales. You can imagine how much disease there was around here. It was a very terrible suffering. Sometimes the water was so bad that it didn't even quench your thirst. Nowadays, no one has a problem with water anymore. It was a very good thing these cisterns here. (VERBAL INFORMATION)<sup>5</sup>.

As in the Mumbuca community, the cistern represented a guarantee of quality water for the families of Sobrado, with its free access and controlled by the residents themselves. They no longer depend on external agents who used the supply of muds during drought periods as a political favor owed by the community. The peasant family began to ensure its own access to water, although the relationship between ASA as an organization of civil society and the State is still confused in the minds of the benefited families.

Anyways, cisterns, donated or acquired, grant a better quality of life for the families in the semiarid region of Bahia. There was not even a comment about contempt of the Program To get a cistern is to get water and quality water was a rare asset in the semiarid region before it.

Also in Sobrado, the disease rate dropped drastically after the purchase of the cisterns, according to J.S, Community Healthcare Agent of the community. This proves another advantage that adds to the others already discussed.

Undoubtedly, after we started consuming water from the cisterns, a lot changed around here. There were people who even brought water from Cândido Sales so they wouldn't have to drink water from here. There was a lot of disease, today it's the hardest thing to see because water has good quality (VERBAL INFORMATION)<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to the consumption cisterns, which store 16,000 liters of rainwater, and which are responsible for such a significant change in terms of health, comfort and well-being, eight families in the Sobrado community benefited from the cisterns of production, that are capable of storing 52,000 liters of water captured through the

<sup>5</sup> Interviewed by MS, March 2012. Interview conducted by the author. Notes on survey questionnaires.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewed by JS/ACS, March 2012. Interview conducted by the author. Notes on survey questionnaires.

runoffs and which can be used for the production of legumes, vegetables, fruit, etc. The choice of families, as is common in ASA processes, took place at a meeting of community residents.

The One Million Cisterns Program aims to build a million cisterns in the Brazilian semiarid rural environment; still, the water of those cisterns is fit for drinking and cooking only. As a result, the difficulties to produce remain accentuated. With the P1+2 Program, that is, one land and two water sources, both drinking water and water for production in backyards next to homes is ensured.

Evidently, 52,000 liters of water, stored during the rainy season, do not guarantee use for all types of crops, but smaller ones can be irrigated with this water. This is the case of vegetables, which are produced in Sobrado and sold weekly at the farmers market in Cândido Sales, a municipality near the region.

Experiences with gardens in the backyards of houses, supplied with water from production cisterns, have shown that the problem is, and has always been, lack of access to water for any type of crop to flourish in the *sertão*. Not only in the Sobrado community, but in all those where land is accessible, however small, and in which agroecological practices of conviviality with the semiarid region are implemented, green and well-kept gardens can be seen for most of the year. This changes profoundly the family's diet, which before that, only consumed some types of food if they were bought in the regional markets.

Production cisterns represent a step forward in the so-called agroecological transition in the Brazilian semiarid region. In addition to being a practical activity, the production in areas where it seemed impossible before, the experiences based on this and many other appropriated technologies for the region, have deeply changed the way people deal with agriculture in the semiarid region.

There have been changes in the land management process. Peasants, through the exchange of experiences, are experimenting with new forms of cultivation. The Microregional Management Unit of Vitória da Conquista has promoted several meetings with the peasants in encounters for the socialization of practices adapted to



conviviality. Encounters of that kind have become more frequent among the peasants associated to ASA. As result, they widen their knowledge, teach new ways of plantation, harvesting and consumption of foods. They are peasants united in network in favor of conviviality with the semiarid conditions.

Here, Whatever you plant grows! It is not lack of will, **It's just that the land is little**, you know? So, the little piece of land that we have is not enough for planting many things. Now, with the cisterns we're able to plant a little thing, but it's more for us to eat. Sometimes we can get something for selling, but just having vegetables next to one's house is already a lot. Before that we could not grow anything. There's no use planting without water. It's wasting time (VERBAL INFORMATION)<sup>7</sup> (our emphasis).

The report above is quite significant to show the limitation of production due to the size of the properties in the communities analyzed. It is worth remembering that properties smaller than the municipality's fiscal module are considered smallholdings. A situation that prevails in both Mumbuca and Sobrado.

Initiatives like this have contributed to increasing the relative autonomy of peasants in the production process. This means that with the possibility of producing, even in small quantities, the peasant starts to have more control over the elements of the peasant economy, in the balance between work and consumption. However, this does not make them self-sufficient, capable of not depending on outside elements. On the contrary, the more production they have, the more contact they will have with the world outside the community to market the fruit of their work.

Peasants have a profound knowledge of the stages of that process, as is evident in the speech of a resident on the rainy season and the price of food in the city

It all depends on the rain, right? When it doesn't rain for a while, crops start to run out and everything becomes more expensive in the market. Now, when we are not able to harvest our crops, most of the time we cannot meet the price. It's not worth selling, for the work we

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<sup>7</sup> Interviewed by MF, March 2012. Interview conducted by the author. Notes on survey questionnaires.

have to do, it doesn't pay, it's better to eat that ourselves (VERBAL INFORMATION)<sup>8</sup>.

Meanwhile, inspite of enabling a great advancement in respect of the family's productive process in the semiarid region, the cisterns for production are not able to guarantee the production in large scale of basic products like beans, corn, cassava, etc. For these types of crop it is necessary to wait for the rainy season, which has a fixed period to fall in the semiarid region. In addition to that, many animals suffer from the lack of drinking water and the communitary sources of water to wash clothes, during the dry season, are improper for use.

Peasants in the Sobrado community have experiences new forms of conviviality with droughts for over 10 years. Currently, despite the difficulties, the reproduction of the peasant's life modes occur in an adapted manner to the environmental conditions. Problems still exist, but the agroecological experiences have lessened them more and more.

### **Final Considerations**

Given the exposition above, it is necessary to highlight the importance that the Articulation on the Brazilian Semiarid Region has for the Brazilian countryside, specifically for the Southwest region of Bahia, where they have led many and great changes in the rural communities that they have performed. Both in the communities analyzed for this research and in other ones in the semiarid region of Bahia, it is observed a great acknowledgement for ASA and their actions.

The visits to the peasant families in the communities of Mumbuca and Sobrado evidence a shift in the activities of ASA over time. The first experiences with the Solidarity Rotative Funds, although aiming the construction of cisterns directly, contributed to the social mobilization process, exercising the spirit of solidarity and communal share. New actions, in spite of the benefit for the peasants, are not as

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<sup>8</sup> Interviewed by MN, March 2012. Interview conducted by the author. Notes on survey questionnaires.

engaging in the community level anymore. Perhaps this happens because the cisterns came to be seen rather as a governmental program than one of ASA's.

The elevation of the One Million Cisterns Programme to a public policy of the Brazilian Federal Government contributed to reaching a larger number of beneficiary families. Nonetheless, the analysis of the reality, from the standpoint of the studied communities, shows a gradative loss of autonomy of the entity in regard to the State.

With this, the Articulation widens the range of benefited families, but loses autonomy in the processes of mobilization and execution of actions. The demands for agility in the construction of cisterns "runs over" the rich process of popular education, in which various themes are discussed, extrapolating the construction itself.

Proof of this was the Federal Government's strategy to replace plate cisterns with plastic cisterns in order to lower the Program's costs and reduce construction time. As a result, ASA began a broad campaign demonstrating the harms of this strategy, calling for the continuity of plate cisterns throughout the semiarid region.

This example demonstrates that the actions of the State in the Brazilian semiarid region continue to have the aim of mediating conflicts and not radically solving the problems of the rural population. ASA is responsible for the strategy of continuing to exist, promoting considerable transformations in the life of rural *sertanejo* peasants without losing their autonomy, even more.

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