

Child labor and cashew nut production in João Câmara, state of Rio Grande do Norte

Trabalho infantil e a produção de castanha-de-caju em João Câmara/RN

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Abstract

The article aims to discuss the scope of social policies implemented throughout the 21st century in Brazil and the relevance of labor and territory in understanding their limits and potential. The concepts of exclusion and inclusion are also examined critically. The study is grounded on the analysis of the labor situation to which children and adolescents are exposed in cashew nut production at the Amarelão Community, in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte. The aim is to understand the conditions of exclusion and marginalization in Amarelão and the persistence of child labor in the community despite the existence of social programs. The analysis is based on a literature review, interviews with municipal managers and community residents, direct observation, and informal conversations within the community.

Keywords: Northeast region of Brazil; exclusion; marginality; child labor; public policies.

Resumo

O artigo pretende problematizar o alcance das políticas sociais instituídas ao longo do século XXI no Brasil e a importância do trabalho e território para compreender seus limites e potencialidades, sendo os conceitos de exclusão e inclusão também discutidos criticamente. Partiu-se da análise da situação de trabalho na produção de castanha-de-caju, a que crianças e adolescentes estão expostos na comunidade do Amarelão em João Câmara, RN. O objetivo do trabalho é entender a condição de exclusão e marginalidade do Amarelão e a persistência do trabalho infantil na comunidade mesmo diante dos programas sociais. A análise baseou-se em revisão bibliográfica, entrevistas com gestores do município e moradores da comunidade, além da observação direta e conversas informais na comunidade.

Palavras-chave: Nordeste; exclusão; marginalidade; trabalho infantil; políticas públicas.



Introduction

The Amarelão community¹ was formed around the municipality of João Câmara, in the State of Rio Grande do Norte (RN), at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, as a result of an Indigenous migratory movement, especially the Mendonça family group. The Mendonça migrated from the State of Paraíba to Rio Grande do Norte in search of a place where the group could survive. Coming from the *Brejo* region of Paraíba (PB), specifically from Bananeiras/PB, it is believed that the group was facing hardship due to land issues, drought periods, hunger, and epidemics that affected the population. The migrations continued into the early 20th century, leaving a lasting mark on the group's collective memory and establishing a strong sense of belonging and the constitution of a strong identity connected to Amarelão. The endogamous group of Amarelão, whose identity is rooted in the Mendonça lineage, is the result of a combination of Indigenous migrants from the Brejo region of Bananeiras/PB and Indigenous migrants from villages in São Gonçalo do Amarante/RN (Guerra, 2007).

In 2006, Guerra (2007) identified two hundred and sixteen families in the community, most of whom lived off the production of cashew nuts, which became their main source of income. In the first half of the 20th century, the Mendonças worked planting and harvesting cotton and agave, and transporting produce from the farms in the region. Saturdays were their payday, which they spent entirely at the town's marketplace, owned by the farm owners themselves. Since wages were low and labor exploitation was intense, workers often fell into growing debt, which was paid off by transferring

ownership of their lands, thus revealing the profound inequality in labor relations, akin to conditions of slave-like labor, very common in remote areas of Brazil, far from urban centers (Guerra, 2007). The Mendonças' desire to establish themselves in a territory was gradually undermined due to their subordinate role in labor and consumer relations.

Businessman João Câmara was one of the main agents of exploitation of labor within the community and, when he died in the late 1940s, cotton and agave cultivation declined. The situation became more critical with the sharp decline of the local economy, and in the absence of work, the community began providing agriculture and woodcutting services to small farmers. In the late 1970s, the situation became even worse with the outbreak of the "boll weevil" plague, which affected cotton production, leading several families into unemployment and, in some cases, into begging (Guerra, 2007). In this sense, it is important to highlight that the community, far from living in a situation of exclusion, participates in the local economy, and consequently in the economic cycles, in a marginal way. Despite remaining on the fringes of society, the community plays a significant role in the process of capital accumulation, as it is doubly expropriated, either through the exploitation of labor or through the incorporation of their land into the assets of local farmers.

It is also worth noting that the Indigenous communities in the Brazilian Northeast present unique characteristics compared to those in the rest of the country. João Pacheco de Oliveira (1999) argues that the contact between the Indigenous communities of the Northeast and Europeans since the beginning of colonization led to a process of cultural re-elaboration.

The isolation in their own territories, common among most Indigenous groups in Brazil, is not typical in the Northeast region. According to Oliveira, Indigenous people were incorporated into the economy and society, as was the case with the Mendonças. "In the Northeast, however, the 'Indians' were poor rural dwellers (*sertanejos*)² with no access to land and lacking strong cultural contrasts" (Oliveira, 1999, p. 17, author's translation).

The territorial issue has been the greatest challenge for the affirmation of Indigenous groups in the Northeast of Brazil. If, on the one hand, there is difficulty on the part of public authorities and society in recognizing the ethnic diversity among the communities, on the other, there is the constant loss of territory through invasions and exploitation. Oliveira's theoretical framework provides a better understanding of the history of the Mendonças in the State of Rio Grande do Norte. However, it is important to note that there was significant resistance and political mobilization to gain recognition of their identities and to ensure the demarcation of their lands.

From the 1980s onwards, the Amarelão community began to work independently with cashew nut production. This activity transformed the reality of the community, as it enabled the group to survive, albeit in precarious conditions, preventing further migration flows and instances of begging. The cashew nut processing work helped strengthen the group's sense of identity and value their space. The problems that emerged as a result of cashew nut production were related to its organization, execution and profitability (Guerra, 2007). Cashew nut processing involves the entire family unit and is carried out in the domestic environment. Therefore, when children are

not directly involved in the production itself, they are expected to contribute to household chores. People who aren't from Amarelão have always considered this work to be degrading and unhealthy, and the main source of deprivation of children's right to education, leisure, rest and good health. Many families begin work in the early hours of the morning, burning the cashew nuts and cracking them open once they are roasted. During this process, everyone is exposed to heavy smoke, poor lighting, acidic oil from the cashew shells, and inadequate working conditions (Guerra, 2007). This reality is part of the community's everyday life, and its negative impact on the lives of the local youth and children is undeniable. However, when one gets closer to the lives of these people, one realizes that the situation is more complex than it seems.

In addition to the unhealthy working conditions, residents of Amarelão also pointed to the low financial return as a significant issue. Cashew nuts are processed using artisanal methods, which require, in addition to great physical effort, many hours of labor. To produce one kilo of processed cashew nuts, five kilos of raw cashew nuts are needed. Another issue concerns the role of the middleman, as most of the cashew nuts produced in Amarelão originate from the municipality of Serra do Mel/RN. In other words, the raw product is transported by the middlemen to the community, which processes the cashew nuts and passes them on to the middleman who earns the largest percentage of the profit. In this way, while the profit obtained does not make production unviable, it is much lower than the sales of the finished product in the market (Guerra, 2007).

When searching the website of the Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego/Sistema de Informações sobre Focos de Trabalho Infantil

– STI (Ministry of Labor and Employment/ Information System on Child Labor Hotspots), in Brazil one can find reports dating back to 2006 concerning the Amarelão district in the rural area of João Câmara/RN. Reports on other activities, such as cassava flour production and meat product production, can also be found. It is noteworthy that many reports regarding cashew nut production date back to 2013. Several actions by the local government, a religious entity and the Ministry of Labor have sought to put an end to this situation. Nevertheless, the situation persists (Ministério do Trabalho, 2016).

Cashew nut production is included in the Brazilian List of the Worst Forms of Child Labor³ (TIP), according to Decree n. 6,481/2008. According to the TIP List, this activity is similar to the processing of sugar cane, sisal, and tobacco, causing numerous health problems for those exposed to such working conditions (Morais, 2013).

Guerra (2007) reports that the activity constitutes exhausting labor and is closely associated with a major social issue: the use of school-aged children and young people in cashew nut production, which is considered illegal. As a consequence of child labor, low academic performance, school dropout and grade repetition are observed among children and young people, in addition to the health problems they present.

However, upon visiting the community and observing its daily life, it becomes clear that this situation deserves closer attention, not only in terms of what work represents for the group in terms of the formation of its identity, but also with regard to its current role in ensuring the group's maintenance and survival. Currently, cashew nut production and commercialization,

in addition to income transfer policies, have contributed to a more stable financial situation for the group compared to the past.

Exclusion or marginal inclusion?

Understanding the historical context of the formation of the Amarelão community is essential to grasp the importance of territory in the group's affirmation and continuity. However, throughout the 20th century, little importance was given to the issue of work and territory. From a theoretical standpoint, developmentalism led to certain interpretations of our reality in which a dualistic view prevailed, contrasting the "underdeveloped" rural versus the "modern" urban, and formal versus informal labor relations, which were considered remnants of "underdevelopment" and would tend to disappear as industrialization and urbanization advanced.

There have been several criticisms of the cepalist model, of Furtado's thinking, and of other dependency theories based on the contrast between "underdeveloped" versus "developed". Francisco de Oliveira (2003), in the book *Crítica à Razão Dualista* (Critique of Dualist Reason), when analyzing the development of Brazilian capitalism post-1930, draws attention to the formation of endogenous conditions for the development of the advanced industrial sector. According to Oliveira, the populist State created a stable horizon for capitalist accumulation through labor legislation and the establishment of a minimum wage. On the other hand, the persistence of archaic relations in agriculture is related to new forms of production, with strong repercussions in the city, since

[...] the offering price of urban labor was basically composed of two elements: the cost of food – determined by the cost of reproducing rural labor – and the cost of urban goods and services; within these, a strange form of urban ‘subsistence economy’ weighed heavily, [...] all of which forced down the offering price of urban labor and, consequently, real wages. On the other hand, industrial productivity grew enormously, which, in contrast to the labor situation and assisted by the type of state intervention described, led to the massive industrial accumulation of the last three decades. *It is in this combination that the root of the tendency for income concentration in the Brazilian economy lies.* (Oliveira, 2003, pp. 46-47. Emphasis added. Author’s translation)

An important point in the author’s thinking is that the relationship between the “underdeveloped” and “modern” sectors leads to an increase in the capitalists’ profit rate. First, the relationship between the “modern” and “underdeveloped” sector is not unique to the Brazilian case, though a peculiarity is presented here. Second, there is no opposition between them; rather, there is an exchange relationship in which the “modern” feeds off archaic forms of production and labor.

Therefore, it is possible to acknowledge that economic development is connected to external relations; however, it is essential to understand the internal dynamics of development and those resulting from the clashes that occur between classes. The state, which acts in favor of the local elites, will promote the general conditions for capital production and reproduction. It will aim to maximize the gains of the dominant classes while keeping the

subordinate classes within a state of “normality”. Thus, a network of connections emerges in urban centers, linking the advanced industrial sector with the informal market.

What is the volume of trade in certain *industrialized* products – the emphasis is intentional – such as razor blades, combs, cleaning products, cutting tools, and countless other small items, carried out by street vendors in the central streets of our cities? What is the relationship between the increase in the number of private vehicles in circulation and the hand-operated car washing services? Is there any contradiction between the growing volume of automobile production and the rise of small workshops dedicated to the *re-production* of vehicles? How can we explain that all types of personal consumption services grow precisely when industry recovers its dynamism in job creation, and when an entire process crystallizes – according to the 1970 demographic census – into a more unequal income distribution? These types of services, far from being excrescences and mere deposits of the ‘industrial reserve army’, are integral to the process of global accumulation and capitalist expansion and, in turn, reinforce the tendency towards income concentration. (Ibid., p. 58. Author’s translation)

Informality has a dual aspect. It creates subsidies for capitalist profit through labor surplus, wage suppression, and the generation of minimum income to meet the consumption needs of informal workers. On the other hand, informality, when managed by the state, also serves as a mechanism for social mobility and an effective buffer against social conflicts. In the case of the Mendonças, the precarious labor

relations, subordinated to labor exploiters and providers of subsistence means, also led to a process of deterritorialization.

Kowarick (1985) points out the insufficiency of the modernization theory in explaining the formation of marginality and corroborates Oliveira's thinking, since, for him,

[...] marginality is not the result of dysfunctions within the system. On the contrary, it is the result of global societal structures that inherently carry a set of contradictions, with multiple expressions, including marginality itself. The approach must be doubly shifted. On the one hand, the concept to be emphasized is no longer *dysfunction*. The core concept is *contradiction*. On the other hand, from a theoretical standpoint, this contradiction must be analyzed as stemming from a structural configuration necessary to the dynamics of society. Unfulfilled participation is the result of the system that generates it. And for the *system*, this is not necessarily dysfunctional. On the contrary, it represents a reduction in labor costs, which, from the *system's* perspective, is highly 'functional'; that is, profitable and inherent to the accumulation process. (Ibid., pp. 55-56. Emphasis in original. Author's translation)

Oliveira (2003, p. 47) points out that "behind the apparent duality lies a dialectical relationship". Thus, informality and marginality are not direct effects of underdevelopment or dependence. They are phenomena related to the way dominant elites appropriate the State and impose maximum exploitation in order to extract the greatest possible surplus.

It is important to once again refer to José de Souza Martins who, in *A Sociedade Vista do Abismo* (Society Seen from the Abyss) (2002), draws attention to the fact that the numerous forms of forced labor in Brazil at the end of the 20th century (such as farm workers,

child prostitution, human trafficking, among others) cannot be directly associated with our slave-owning heritage. Furthermore, these relationships cannot be considered residual and/or dysfunctions of capitalism that are expected to disappear as economic growth resumes. In the case of Amarelão, cashew nut processing became an economic solution to minimize the intense exploitation of the community's labor. However, the community remains subject to the exploitation of middlemen and exposed to precarious working conditions.

As Martins (1997) cautions us, capitalism has as its intrinsic force a movement from exclusion to inclusion. Thus, to a greater or lesser extent, individuals are uprooted, removed from their certainties, and placed in a whirlwind of events with pre-calculated opportunities, where they are led to make choices that are nothing more than adjustments. "Capitalist society uproots, excludes, in order to include, to include in a different way, according to its own rules, according to its own logic" (Ibid., p. 32, author's translation).

In this sense, it is also worth highlighting the mistaken interpretations of informality in Brazil as something residual and/or temporary. From a structuralist and economicist perspective, informality has always been seen as a transitional issue, based on the belief that economic growth would lead to an increase in formal jobs and the absorption of informal workers (Tomazini, 1995). The lack of a more consistent theoretical framework contributed to the persistence of such belief. The dualistic conception of a "modern" and an "archaic" sector, "integrated" and "marginalized", disregarded the interfaces that emerged throughout the industrialization process. Based on the critique of this dualistic interpretation

(Oliveira, 2003; Kowarick, 1985, among others), informality and marginality came to be understood no longer as a dysfunction of the system, but as the result of contradictions within the industrialization process of a peripheral country.

What was observed throughout the 20th century is that, despite economic growth, there was neither a sufficient increase in formal employment nor an improvement in income distribution. Throughout the 20th century, most Latin American countries, especially Brazil, experienced strong economic growth, an increase formal employment, and the consolidation of workers' protection laws. However, the informal sector persisted and has undergone drastic changes since the 1990s. The process of economic restructuring led to a significant rise in unemployment and major changes in the composition of employment and income (Pochmann, 2001).

Regarding the concept of exclusion, Martins (1997) argues that there is a mistaken understanding of the term. There is a tendency to treat all social problems as forms of exclusion, thus turning exclusion into an explanation for everything. This way of conceptualization reveals the extreme vagueness of such a narrative of the explanation, as it disregards the historical processes of exclusion.

Exclusion carries contradictions that stem from the development of capitalist society. However, it is considered a fixed, predetermined, and fatal condition (Martins, 2009). In Martins' words, "there is no such thing as exclusion: what exists are contradictions and victims of exclusionary social, political and economic processes" (Martins, 1997, p. 14, author's translation).

Capitalism causes exclusion in a brutal and rootless way. In fact, it excludes in order to include. A clear example is the case of enslaved people and the poor free individuals, who did not have the right to land, property and ownership of land, and were thus forced to offer their labor force to the owners of the means of production. Capitalist society excludes and then includes in its own way, on its own terms, and in whatever manner that best suits its interests (ibid.).

According to Martins (ibid.), it is necessary to uncover what lies behind exclusion, its concealments. A critical reflection on the historical processes tied to exclusion is essential in guiding human action, a kind of action grounded in conscious practice, capable of transforming the lives and the world of those affected by different forms of exclusion.

Neoliberalism demands a minimal State, one that fails to fulfill various social obligations, shifting the responsibility for solving the most diverse problems to civil society. However, when referring to neoliberalism, it is necessary to proceed with caution so as not to adopt the term in a generalist and decontextualized way. In Brazil, neoliberal principles began to be implemented in the 1990s, mainly through privatization and the precarization of labor relations. On the other hand, the ongoing redemocratization process and the new State agenda expressed in the 1988 Constitution led to an expansion of social policies in pursuit of building a social protection network. Furthermore, based on the premise of political and administrative decentralization, municipalities began to innovate in the creation of participatory policies and social control mechanisms. It should also be noted that in

the 2000s, there was a period of renewed economic growth and expansion of social policies, although with an economic policy that continued to favor the financial sector. In short, when discussing neoliberalism in Brazil, it is necessary to take into account the constant movement of advances and setbacks considering a specific economic and political context.

In this sense, the neoliberal policies implemented in Brazil have revealed that inclusion or re-inclusion occurs in a very precarious, unstable, and marginal manner for certain social groups, as they remain at the mercy of the advances and setbacks of government policies. The re-inclusion processes into which people are being inserted are often poor in content, insufficient, and have even proven to be indecent (*ibid.*).

When inclusion policies are implemented exclusively through the market, this does not mean that the individual is the direct recipient of the benefit and development. On the contrary, the individual is being used by capital; there is a reification of the human being. That is, the individual is included in the economic process, in the production and circulation of goods and services, thus serving to reproduce capital. What is offered to the object of capital is an exclusionary form of adaptation, which in fact manipulates the individual into believing that, by entering the world of consumption, their human dignity is being respected and fulfilled. This inclusion, which in reality is exclusion, only demonstrates the precariousness and marginalization in which the individual is inserted and immersed (*ibid.*).

For Martins (*ibid.*), re-inclusion produces in the individual's imagination the need to imitate those who hold wealth and power,

creating a society of imitation, which would supposedly lead to equality among all. However, what actually is constructed is a false new society that blends and confuses what is false with what is true, recreating inequalities that ideologically unite while materially separate. A new mentality is needed, one that seeks critical awareness, fosters the role of creation and revolution, and fundamentally promotes the dignity of the human person.

According to Martins (*ibid.*), society must undergo deep and fundamental changes, holding everyone accountable, not to construct an inclusive alternative per se, but to create the conditions for an awareness that rejects the current system and its contradictions within society, prioritizing human needs over the conveniences of big capital. The social policies of the 2000s largely aimed at promoting conditions for overcoming extreme poverty in which a significant portion of the Brazilian population lived. The Bolsa Família Program⁴ contributed substantially to this purpose. In addition, several other programs and projects sought to create conditions for the emancipation of groups and/or individuals. Without delving into the concrete outcomes of these policies, it can be said that, overall, there was a quantitative leap in the reduction of extreme poverty reduction up to 2017.

On the other hand, the policy that promoted the resumption of economic growth was mainly guided by the expansion of consumption. In other words, the inclusion process of the 2000s was based on both social welfare policies and the market, via consumption. In theory, this was expected to mark a new phase of affirmation and complexification of social policy, aiming at fostering autonomy among the most vulnerable

groups. However, since 2017, what has been observed is a major setback in social policy and the loss of rights gained by minorities, particularly Indigenous peoples.

The Amarelão community, from exclusion to peripheral inclusion

From a methodological standpoint, the research adopted a qualitative approach. In this regard, the fieldwork sought not only to describe the daily reality of the Amarelão community but also aimed at exploring different facets of that same reality by incorporating the perspective of the municipal administrators involved in promoting social assistance. The field research consisted of an on-site survey to assess the community's situation. Field observation took place within the community, where it was possible not only to conduct interviews with residents, but also to observe aspects of their daily lives, including the cashew nut roasting process. In addition to direct observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with families from the community and people involved in educational and cultural activities promoted by governmental and non-governmental entities, as well as with social assistance administrators of João Câmara. During one of the visits to João Câmara and the Amarelão community for direct observation of the reality, interviews were carried out with Mrs. Claudete,⁵ coordinator of the Centro de Referência Especializado em Assistência Social – Creas (Specialized Reference Center for Social Assistance), responsible, among other programs, for the Programa de Erradicação

do Trabalho Infantil – Peti/Bolsa Família (Child Labor Eradication Program); with Ms. Mariana, a local leader of Amarelão; and with members of Mauro's family, who were working in the production of cashew nuts. The empirical study provided a broader understanding of the reality of the Amarelão community.

Amarelão was officially recognized as an Indigenous community in 2009 by the Fundação Nacional do Índio – Funai (National Indian Foundation), a recognition that has benefited all its residents. Since then, they have been able to obtain access to various entitlements from the Social Security system as Indigenous people, such as retirement pensions, sick pay leave, and maternity leave. Another important point is the land demarcation that is being carried out by Funai; however, the process has been slow to materialize.

The Amarelão community comprises approximately 250 families and 1,200 people in total. According to Mrs. Mariana, the vast majority were beneficiaries of the Bolsa Família Program, and, during the periods of drought, the families received basic food baskets. These social programs served as a supplement, as the primary source of income was the roasting and processing of cashew nuts. Some residents worked as construction workers, others were retirees and pensioners, and some worked in private passenger transportation.

Based on the interviews and conversations, it can be stated that nearly all families were involved in cashew nut processing. They purchase the raw product from middlemen, who source it from the municipalities of Assú/RN, Mossoró/RN and Serra do Mel/RN, and even from the states of Piauí and Ceará. Each sack of raw nuts weighs 50 kg and yields approximately 10 kg of processed (shelled) cashew nuts for sale.

The processed nuts are sold in João Câmara/RN, Natal/RN, in Recife, capital of the State of Pernambuco (PE), and other locations. As for the middlemen, the community worked with around ten different intermediaries, each of whom had their own group of families working for them. The largest middleman was from the city of Serra do Mel/RN.

Before the cashew nut processing, the residents of Amarelão worked on farms as seasonal workers (*boias-frias*), in agriculture, and in deforestation activities, such as woodcutting. Many even resorted to begging and lived in a state of destitution. However, with the help of a nun, Sister Terezinha, things began to change, as she became involved with the community and initiated a social project aimed at organizing the residents of Amarelão.

Sister Terezinha, Mrs. Mariana and Mr. Francisco (who is now deceased) were the founders of the Amarelão Association in 1994. Through this organization, the entire community came together, built a community bakery, and further developed cashew nut processing activity. With international financial support from her religious congregation, Sister Terezinha built the association's physical headquarters and carried out her social work. It is worth noting that this initial initiative did not receive any government support.

In 2001, Francisco, the first leader of the association, was murdered, which was a major shock for the entire community. The association was practically inactive for about 10 years, although the work with the cashew nuts continued independently. It was only in 2011 that Mrs. Mariana took over the leadership and resumed the association's activities, with 17 members. The association is structured into administrative coordination, secretariat,

treasury, education and leisure department, development department, and the department of gender and generation. Many teenagers and young people are involved in the life of the association, where leadership development is a continuous process. Currently, the association has approximately 140 members.

The work developed by the Amarelão Association includes the participation of a youth group, a dance group (*Toré* – an indigenous dance), an indigenous handicrafts group, musical groups with recorders and a symphonic orchestra, and a women's group that produces cakes, sweets, and savory snacks to be sold within the community. The association also has a telecenter with computers and internet access available to anyone who wishes to use them.

The association obtained funding through Banco do Nordeste – BNB (Bank of the Northeast), which allowed them to purchase musical instruments for the music group. The women's group *Filhas do Sol* (Daughters of the Sun) applied for a grant from Consul⁶ and won approximately five thousand reais and several appliances (refrigerators, microwaves, freezers, stoves) to help with the production of sweets, cakes and savory snacks. The women are trained in a sweets production course through the Programa Nacional de Acesso ao Ensino Técnico e Emprego – Pronatec (National Program for Access to Technical Education and Employment). The community also gained access to water cisterns through a water cistern program, one cistern per family, through the Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social – MDS (Ministry of Social Development) and the NGO Associação de Apoio as Comunidades do Campo – ACC (Association for Support of Rural Communities). It is evident that the resurgence of the association has enabled

strong engagement with the State and access to public policies aimed at fostering production and professional qualification.

In terms of infrastructure, the community has a daycare center, a municipal school for grades 1st through 5th, a health clinic, and a church. Mud houses have been eradicated, and all homes are now built with masonry. The community still lacks adequate space for sports activities and is fighting for a school up to the 9th grade. The streets are not paved, there is no sewage system, and there is no public transportation. Residents rely on privately organized rides by community members, taxis or personal means of transport. Nearly all families have electricity; however, around thirty families are still waiting for installation, having already submitted their requests.

Regarding children's participation in the cashew nut shelling process, Mrs. Mariana explained that it is a cultural issue. According to her, the children help because they "like it" and because the whole household participates. She stated that this does not interfere with the children's education or with extracurricular activities at school or at the association. She also mentioned that work starts at dawn, which might slightly affect school performance, but not significantly. A major concern, however, was the loss of fingerprints due to the handling of the nuts, but nowadays most people use protective gloves, which prevents this problem. It is important to highlight this point, as one of the most harmful effects of the cashew nut processing work is that, when handling the nuts while they are still extremely hot, children used to burn their fingers, resulting in the loss of their fingerprints. However, this problem gained more attention due to its visible and immediate nature.

According to Mariana, what truly causes harm is the smoke, which leads to health issues for both children and adults. This is because, in Amarelão, cashew nut processing takes place in the backyard of each household, and the smoke spreads to neighboring homes, affecting everyone. In the nearby Santa Terezinha settlement, there is a specific location for burning the cashew nuts, which reduces the amount of smoke reaching the houses. In Amarelão, a similar initiative was attempted; however, families did not adapt well, as being away from their homes interfered with their domestic and daily routines. There have also been efforts to convince people to use protective masks to lessen exposure to the smoke, but these have not been successful.

Mrs. Claudete, one of the coordinators at the CREAS, stated that despite government social policies and interventions from the municipal government, the Ministério Público do Trabalho (Public Ministry of Labor), the Ministério do Trabalho (Ministry of Labor) and the Ministério Público Estadual (State Public Ministry), children have continued to engage in cashew nut processing, and this has indeed negatively impacted their school performance. On the other hand, Mrs. Mariana disagrees, asserting that children only work with cashew nuts when they are not participating in other activities. According to her, the children are involved in the Child Labor Eradication Program (PETI) and the Programa Mais Educação (More Education Program), which offer various activities for children and adolescents, such as soccer, recreational games, tutoring in Portuguese and mathematics, capoeira, music and dance classes.

It is worth noting that the relationship between the community and the various regulatory institutions was far from positive,

as the community perceived these institutions as attempting to impose rules without understanding the reality of Amarelão. This is an important point for problematizing the role of the State in promoting social well-being. Often, social policies are designed to address specific issues without a deeper understanding of the beneficiary groups. Due to Brazil's heterogeneity, there is a need for principles and guidelines to guide public actions, as has been done. However, when it comes to implementation and evaluation, there is a significant challenge in considering diversity and acting in ways that take it into account. In the case of Amarelão, the conditionality of certain programs, such as the school attendance requirement of the Bolsa Família Program, proved to be an important element, though not sufficient to fully eliminate child labor.

Mrs. Mariana reported that the issues related to school performance and dropout occurred more frequently among students who had to study in the city, where they faced challenges such as lack of teachers, lack of school meals, among others. However, students who remained in Amarelão reportedly experienced fewer problems, which is why the community advocated for a school that could provide education up to the 9th grade, allowing children and adolescents to remain in the community longer. The current school no longer met the demand; there was not enough space for all the classes, resulting in the implementation of multigrade classrooms. Additionally, there was no space available to accommodate the More Education Program at the school.

An important point reported is that young people tend to marry early and have children at a young age; some do not complete high school, although other students excel and are

already enrolled in higher education, at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte – UFRN (Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte) and the Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia do Rio Grande do Norte – IFRN (Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Rio Grande do Norte). Apparently, the involvement of children in activities related to cashew nut processing has affected their school performance. In this sense, the interventions of the Public Prosecutor's Office, for example, aim to hold parents accountable. However, according to the testimonies collected, the school has been a major ally in confronting the issue of child labor. When considering the cultural and territorial aspects of Amarelão, it becomes clear that a substantial change not only in the educational infrastructure but also in the way educators are integrated into the community could be the most effective path to addressing the issue.

Regarding adults, the Creas representative said that the awareness-raising efforts on the use of gloves, masks, and even the proposal to purchase a nut shelling machine have had no impact, as families prefer to continue working using traditional artisanal methods. According to Mrs. Claudete, some families managed to earn around two thousand reais from cashew nut production and maintain a reasonable standard of living. What can be observed is that, following the traumatic dissolution of the association, families now prefer to work individually. A certain distrust toward the benefits of cooperative labor remains within the group.

During another visit to Amarelão, an interview was conducted with Mr. Mauro's family; at that time, his children were working in the cashew nut processing. Initially, everyone was hesitant about the questions being asked, but

they gradually became more comfortable and began answering them. They reported that they start working at 2:00 a.m. and continue until 4:30 p.m., only taking a break during school hours. The raw cashew nuts are purchased from middlemen and once processed, they are sold in Natal/RN, specifically at Ponta Negra Beach, at UFRN, and other locations in the city. The roasting process does not occur on Saturdays and Sundays, but sales take place every day. On this particular day, Mr. Mauro was working with his children, while his wife, Margarete, was in Natal/RN selling the nuts. The couple has ten children, and nearly all of them work in the cashew nut production process, except for the youngest ones.

At the time of the field visit, three young people were working alongside their father, a task they have performed since childhood. The first had completed high school and was working as a contracted teacher for *Educação de Jovens e Adultos – EJA* (Youth and Adult Education). The second had dropped out in the second year of high school. The third was currently in the first year of high school. They also reported having a sister who had degrees in Pedagogy and History and was working as a contracted teacher in elementary school.

When asked about studying while also working with cashew nut processing, they stated that they felt tired but that it did not interfere with their studies. For them and their father, it is a “cultural” matter that children and youth work in cashew nut processing. However, they acknowledged that some children give up studying due to a lack of interest and the demands of working with cashew nuts. The young woman who teaches in EJA mentioned that many of her students, aged between 20 and 40, had dropped out of class due to their work with cashew nuts.

When asked whether they would choose a different occupation if given the opportunity, the young people said that they would leave the cashew nut production for something better, but they also shared that they “miss it” when they are not working. Another important point stated was that, while they do not feel excluded from social life, they do face a certain degree of prejudice at school and in other settings in the city due to living in Amarelão and working in the cashew nut production.

Based on field conversations and observations, it is evident that working in cashew nut production exposes both adults and children to a variety of problems, whether related to health or education. These issues are the heart of many disagreements and discussions, since public institutions view children as being harmed by working in degrading activities, whereas for the Amarelão community, it is a cultural matter and a way to strengthen family and community identity.

Although it has improved the living conditions of all involved, this process of inclusion does not eliminate or extinguish the contradictions experienced within the community, considering that the work involved in the cashew production is both arduous and degrading, generating significant profit for the middlemen while yielding much smaller returns for the families engaged in the production.

Final considerations

With regard to the condition of exclusion and marginalization of the people of Amarelão, what was found can be described as a form of exclusionary adaptation. Everyone is included

or re-included in a precarious and marginal way, intentionally so, by capital, which reproduces itself through work and commercial relations established between the Mendonças, farmers, merchants, and middlemen, at different moments in history.

However, it cannot be denied that the group's conditions improved when they chose to work autonomously within their own territory. In the past, they even resorted to begging and suffered great deprivation. The initial impressions about child labor in the community, formed through media reports and demands from the Public Prosecutor's Office and other government entities, suggested that children were suffering due to their involvement in the cashew nut roasting process, being deprived of a healthy and playful childhood. Yet, the first contacts with people who work closely with and monitor the community revealed that the story of the Mendonças is more complex and nuanced than it initially appeared. While the community's history throughout the 20th century was marked by exploitation, expropriation and poverty, in more recent times, the group has been rebuilding itself through the autonomous work of cashew nut roasting.

While there is no moral justification for the use of child labor, it is important to understand the historical and economic conditions that shaped this situation. In this sense, it becomes clear that labor represents more than just a source of income and family survival; it is culturally embedded in the community's way of life, and the preservation of the territory is a fundamental aspect of the group's identity reconstruction. Nevertheless, controversies remain regarding the educational and health-related harm caused to children involved in the cashew nut processing work. Cash transfer policies, such as the Bolsa

Família Program and the Child Labor Eradication Program (PETI), along with actions by non-governmental organizations, have had a positive impact in reducing child labor but have not yet managed to eradicate it. In the case of Amarelão, the conditionality of certain school-attendance-based programs, like Bolsa Família, has proven to be an important factor, although not sufficient, to remove children from labor activities.

Martins' reflections (1997, 2002) are fundamental for understanding the reality of Amarelão and other Indigenous groups in the Northeast of Brazil. There is a fundamental contradiction between the exclusion process of Indigenous people in the Northeast from their territories and the forms of marginal and subordinate inclusion imposed by capital. This directly affects the identity of the groups and their family relationships. When Indigenous youth enter the capitalist labor market, whether formal or informal, they not only experience marginalization but also undergo a process of identity loss, which affects the entire group.

The "mixed-race Indians" (*índios misturados*) (Oliveira, 1999) suffer from exclusion from their territories and the weakening of their cultural identities. The history of the Amarelão community highlights not only the importance of territory for the maintenance and reconstruction of cultural ties but also offers another perspective on labor relations, including those categorized as "child labor." Under Brazilian law, child labor is defined as any economic activity carried out by individuals under the age of 16. The age-based legal framework overlooks the social relationships involved in labor practices within Indigenous cultures, particularly in the case of Amarelão.

What is observed in the community's daily life is that labor does not carry the same connotation as capitalist activity. There is no

formal or clear distinction between work and leisure time, or between the workplace and the home environment. Labor is not merely a means to earn income for survival. Cashew nut production is the group's primary livelihood, but it also represents autonomy, recognition, education, and personal development. The involvement of young people and children in production activities does not necessarily

imply their exploitation, as is typically the case in the capitalist employer-employee relationship.

In this context, it is crucial to consider the cultural aspects that influence the continuation of practices involving the inclusion of children in work environments. One such aspect is the way the community appropriates and attributes meaning to its territory.

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Notes

- (1) The name Amarelão refers to the ancient custom of the descendants of the Tapuia people to “seek the sun” or “reach for the sun”. This tradition was conveyed orally by current members of the community; for more details, see Guerra (2007).
- (2) Footnote by the translator: Sertanejos are rural inhabitants of the Brazilian backlands.
- (3) The term “child labor” in this Plan refers to economic and/or survival activities, whether or not intended for profit, paid or unpaid, carried out by children or adolescents under the age of 16, except in the case of apprenticeships starting at the age of 14, regardless of their occupational status. For the purposes of protecting adolescent workers, any work performed by individuals between the ages of 16 and 18, and in the case of apprentices, between the ages of 14 and 18, will be considered work, as defined by Constitutional Amendment No. 20, dated December 15, 1998. (Brasil, 2011).
- (4) Footnote by the translator: The Bolsa Família Program is an initiative by the Brazilian federal government aimed at providing direct financial transfers to families in situations of social and economic vulnerability. For more information, see: <https://www.gov.br/mds/pt-br/acoes-e-programas/bolsa-familia>.
- (5) Fictitious names were used to protect the identity of the interviewees.
- (6) Footnote by the translator: Consul is a home appliance brand of Brazil. The company Consul carries out social programs aimed at women entrepreneurs.

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Received: August 30, 2016
Approved: April 29, 2022