

Cowboys, Morão Races and Bulls Catch in the Old Paraiban Cariri, in Northeast Brazil

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Abstract: We have studied cowboys (cattle drovers), and their activities. They face a harsh environment, marked by uncertainties, and reinforce traditional practices, such as: Pegas de Gado (cattle herding) and Morão races, as sustainable socio-environmental alternatives. In order to study such cowboys and their practices of Pegas de Gado and Morão races at the Cariri region in the Paraíba state, we have resorted to documental and bibliographical material, as well as to empirical research, “in loco”. To a better understanding about “Cattle catching” and “Morão races” we had to retrieve cowboys’ activities on ranches, or cattle farms, in addition to their performance during the “Cattle separation festivals”, Morão races and the like. To understand how these activities have developed and survived at the Paraiban Cariri, even with the reduction of cattle breeding, we ought to preserve the biome, by treating animals well, linking present to future, needs and wishes, thus constituting a form to men’s survival, in a more sustainable way.

Key words: cowboys, traditional practices, sustainable way

1. Introduction

1.1 The Cariri Region, Cowboys and Their Probity

Northeastern region, territorial complex occupying almost 1.2 million of square kilometers, about 20% of Brazilian territory, and 30% of our population, corresponding to 45 million inhabitants, has constituted a population repulsion area since the beginning of this century, providing labor hand to other regions in the country [1], being a region formed by different areas with natural and economical disparities: Sugar cane, cacao-bean, and petrochemical zone, with outstanding urban centers and large demographical concentrations; Agreste, a harsh transition zone, between the coast and the sertão (dry hinterland), economically based on cattle raising and land multi-culture; Middle North, in Maranhão state, or the extracting coconut zone; and finally, the semiarid

Sertão, with the prevailing Caatinga, displaying an extensive agriculture and cattle raising.

The semiarid region has been occupied by conquerors (settlers, bandeirantes and sesmarias dwellers) since the XVII century, with extensive farms and ranches, as well as vegetal extraction. There has been exploration of vital, natural and economical resources, particularly water resources for food growing [2]. The Polígono das Secas (dry land area) represents 13.5% of Brazilian land, more than 74% of the Northeastern region [2], where about 20 million inhabitants live. From the socio-economical viewpoint, it displays high rates of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, child mortality, underemployment, poor dwelling conditions and diseases.

Cradle of several indigenous nations, kariri and tarairiú (sukuru, ariu, icó, paiacu, canaió and others) who, in a few land stretches received the name of the linguistic group Kariri, Cariri, cairiri or quiriri (from Tupi *kiriri*, meaning “silent” or “enchanted lake”); they have connections with tupis’ linguistic branches, who comprise the main indigenous language family of the

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Tapuias, or from the macro-jêdo, a language body at the Brazilian sertão. Nomads living by the St Francisco river, but occupying spaces near the hydrological basins of the Sertões, Cariri, Agreste and Brejo, in Paraíba, were killed, and arrested (Barbaros Wars, 1683-1713) or pushed out of their land. The land represented the community's main reason of existence [3], as they dwelled on the banks of Piranhas River (Paraíba and Pernambuco states), the Old Cariris, or on the banks of Jaguaribe River (Ceará state), the New Cariris.

With the development of livestock activities, as well as weir constructions raised tensions between traditional dwellers, subsistence economy farmers (based on growing and collecting of a few farm produces: manioc, maize, tobacco), hunting, fishing, and the landowners living in the micro-region of Eastern Cariri or Middle Sertão of the Old Cariris, on the Borborema plateau, a crystal sector of the Borborema bulk limited by Curimataú, Cariris from Paraíba and Cariris from Princesa town. It is an area known as the driest triangle in Brazil (Cabaceiras/Cariri, Barra de Sta. Rosa/Curimataú and Seridó, in R.G.Norte.) with a predominant semiarid climate (W.Koppen), hot, dry or sub-humid, in the areas of mountain ranges and depressions, with summer rains and annual medium temperatures above 24 degrees Celsius.

It is an area with predominant shallow, rocky soil, or crystal outcrops that make it impossible water absorption. This has favored caatinga vegetation concentration (do Tupi: ka'a[mata] + tinga [branca]), an exclusively Brazilian biome. For Mendes (1987)[2], different from other dry regions on Earth, due to the presence of long dry seasons, as well as the latent state, vegetation seems apparently dead, with dry fallen leaves, thus retarding its growth. However, when the rains come, it explodes greenish, flowery life.

Bull's catch and overthrow are concentrated in the Old eastern and western Cariri, with the lowest pluvius rate in Brazil (about 500 mm/year), high

medium temperatures (about 27°C), sharp water deficits, xerophilous vegetation (savannah/caatinga). Such features, associated to soil limitations (shallow, rocky soils, mostly with high salinity), and due to the predatory use of the land (livestock activity and wood extraction) present large vegetation extensions, with degraded soil and the largest desert lands in Brazil.

The livestock activity with ill management of natural resources, waters, and ecosystem derive from pollution in the water systems; from the rise of plagues and diseases in the fields and , consequently, rural exodus, as well as poverty.

2. Cowboys on Ranches

In the Northeastern semiarid region, farmers and cattle raisers used to live far from their domains, by the seaside, only enjoying and profiting from their large, faraway "sesmarias". Their cowboys managed the farms or ranches, working as slaves. They resulted from a mix of native people and foreign settlers, with a skin color half way between Indians and white people's. Mystical and superstitious, did not fit well in that sort of hard, severe work. Darci Ribeiro (1997) [4] stated that those men were a result from a continuous miscegenation among indigenous groups in the Sertões, despite the hostility established between cowboys and Indians.

During the absence of the landowners, cowboys managed the farms, bossing around workers and servants. They implemented the livestock activity, the subsistence agriculture to supply the families in the region. With the cattle living freely on the farm, they used to run across the farms, taking care of everything, including fences, water ponds, pasture; killed wild animals, burned the fields for a new crop, etc. They conducted the cattle through the caatinga, towards "mangas" (proper spaces) to heal their wounds (bicheiras) with herbs and prayers; to brand or mark the animals with hot iron. At the beginning, the marks consisted only of ear cuts, then of hot iron on the back of the animals.

The cowboys, with the help of the farm dwellers worked hard every day, receiving as a pay for the work and partnership, the right to housing and a quarter of the production: “quarteação”. Honesty and moral serving as guarantee for the work done.

3. Cowboys' Garments



Fig. 1 Map of Cariris Velho located in the state of Paraíba, Brazil.

As the large cattle ranches were not surrounded by fences at that time, after rainy seasons, the farmers told the cowboys to gather the cattle scattered in the caatinga, or mixed with the others from the neighborhood, in order to mark, separate, castrate, exchange or sell them. Due to the large number of animals involved, they usually asked the neighbors' help for the task.

The catch and gathering of the cattle usually took place in an open large field, with no fences or ditches, where the cowboys shared tasks among them. A few animals called “marueiros” would not answer the call from the cowboys, most often resisting to the call. This needed a greater ability and courage on the part of the cowboys to deal with the problem. Protected by their leather garments, they had to ride on their horses into the woods with a harsh vegetation, to catch and join them to the herd. It was a very difficult situation; they often had to grab the animal's tail to take it down.

The catch and separation of the herd used to gather a large audience, who applauded the cowboys and their horses. This conferred them fame and glory, and many times they won prizes, which could be the conquered animal itself, or a sum of money. These events attracted more and more people, due to the isolation of the farms, thus becoming a larger and larger event, and finally,

As cowboys in their activities, spent most of their time on horseback, they needed a special kind of garment, in order to protect themselves from the caatinga vegetation, mostly with branches and thorns, as well as from sunburn. They were made of raw goat leather, covering most of the body, including a hat from the same material, looking like medieval horsemen.

turning into a festival, with music, dance and fireworks; wine, ginger ale, “cachaça” and “cachimbo” (a drink made of brand and honey); folk poetry, pamphlet literature, repentes (improvised songs), viola players, and forró (typical dance from the sertão).

From the 1920s and in the second half of the XX century, such events became very popular, changing into profitable, official sports, a great festival with music, dance, drinks, food and fireworks, as well as prizes for the winners.

Câmara Cascudo (1984) [5] evidenced in Chile, in the first decades of the XIX century, the overthrow of bulls, under the name of O'Higgins. From there, the practice came to Brazil, establishing itself in the Northeast due to the environmental conditions. Here, our harsh, thorny vegetation did not allow the use of a rope (lasso) to catch the oxen and cows.

As to the habit of overthrowing the bulls, Câmara Cascudo (1984) [5] evidenced that such practices came from Spain, but only for field services. As a leisure and fun activity, with enthusiastic audience, the practice had its origin in Latin America itself. The interesting is that it was established in the Northeast and not in the South of Brazil, near Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina, countries with a Spanish tradition. Venezuela, Colombia and Peru could not transmit the “coleo” to

the Amazon region, because it was a work unrelated to cattle breeding, proper to Bolivia, Mato Grosso and other states in the South and Center Brazil.

The bull's overthrow by the tail has influenced Northeast in the worst places, such as hostile woods and tablelands, but it was scarcely used in the most traditional pastoralist states, such as Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul. The Gaucho pampas were influenced by the Alentejos, the cattle conducted by herdmen, stopping the bull with a sharp stung (*topar o*

touro), the bull's overthrow has developed in a tight, limited path, with lime tracks, thus forming the "jiqui". Two cowboys and the bull started to run, and the men tried to hold the animal between the horses in order to catch its tail and throw it to the ground. They were applauded for the achievement and were treated as heroes, receiving prizes, as well as money. Eventually, cows and horse races were developing so as to become recreating competitive sports events.



Fig. 2 The Northeast cowboys equipped.

In the 1980s, the progress of cattle breeding and related events turned into very profitable activities, very popular not only in the Northeast but also in other regions. By this time, small Northeastern farmers started to promote the "Corridas de Mourão", rodeos, cattle roundups, with defined limits, rules and subscriptions paid by each cowboy pair. The money was used to organize the events and give prizes to winners.

The gravel and dirt soil ground was where the two cowboys the "puxador" (puller) and the "esteireiro" had to line up the animal in order to parallel it was replaced by a sand surface. On this track, the cowboy responsible to throw the animal down, held its tail firmly, while the other kept it between the two horses until it came to the ground. The pair of cowboys who scored more points would be the champions, receiving

a trophy and a sum of money as prizes. Such events started to be questioned from 2010 on, by animals' rights activists, due to the way the animals were treated. Sometimes they had their tails pulled out or had bone fractures, exploited for leisure and for fun.

At the Cariri, the prolonged drought (1982-1983; 1997-1998; 2014-2016), reduced significantly cattle breeding and subsistence agriculture, thus limiting even more the local economy. In order to survive, the poorer population started to organize itself into associations and increased the goat herd, stimulated by financial assistance, both private and public. And they continued to promote the traditional festivals: Morão races, bulls catch, as skilled parties, in fenceless caatingas, with drinks, dances (*forró*), prizes, folk music, fireworks, etc. This would break the monotonous, poor existence in the Sertão.



Fig. 3 The “Corridas de Mourão”, rodeos.

4. Conclusion

At the Cariri, as a thorny, rocky place, not only saline but scarcely humid as well, nature punishes with hot and dry seasons. Cattle breeding and subsistence agriculture has been significantly limited, and consequently, affecting part of the poor population’s survival, in the rural zone. Therefore, rural zones’ dwellers have been searching for alternative survival forms, by creating associations and increasing goat herds, stimulated by both public and private financial incentives. And more specifically, by continuing with Bull’s catch and Morão races festivals, as a way to survival, and to keep tradition alive.

Such practices help keep cultural roots, as well as the “religare” (reconnection) of people with nature. As parties dealing with skillfulness, the Morão races and the Bull’s catch take place in open fields, not causing much damage to animals, thus permitting both profit and leisure as sports and recreation events. As a culture originated from cattle farms, despite the herds reduction, there is a tendency to maintain breeding in the fields, thus preserving the caatinga. By preserving the biome, not ill treating animals, the cowboys profession is also preserved, stimulating cooperation, coexistence and solidarity among them.

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