

A geographical approach of the commons: reflections from the common lands in the Serra do Espinhaço Meridional (Southern Espinhaço Range) in Minas Gerais / Brazil

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Abstract: The work refers to the analysis of the sociocultural construction of the common in the Brazilian context in the Serra do Espinhaço Meridional (Minas Gerais), which houses peasant and quilombola groups. The approach was made from human geography in dialogue with anthropology and political economy. The logic of social reproduction of these groups combines agriculture-breeding-collection with a broad understanding of ecological dynamics that enable diversified economic strategies. Agro-food strategies combine environments from 600 to 1,400m; traditional knowledge transmitted/adapted by generations; food culture; water and adapted genetic resources. Reciprocity relations are in the appropriation of land, in the distribution of the territorial resources between the families that make up the groups, in the social relations of production and in the political action that promotes adjustments of use / management of resources (soil, water and biodiversity). The lands of common use among the peasants and lands of collective use among the quilombolas analyzed are processes of territorialization with specific territorialities according to the meanings of the land for the groups and the agrarian praxis based on customs. The difference lies in the territorial and economic practices of land appropriation and other territorialized resources, as well as in the social relations of production and division of the fruits of labor in it.

Key-words: peasants, quilombolas, lands of common use, lands of collective use, Brazil.

Introduction

The work refers to the analysis of the sociocultural construction of the common and collective lands in the Brazilian context. The approach was made from human geography in dialogue with anthropology and political economy. The surveyed area is in the Serra do Espinhaço Meridional (Minas Gerais/Brazil), which houses peasant and quilombola groups. In the state, the Serra do Espinhaço constitutes a set of "highlands" of north-south general direction whose physiographic reality is better defined by the term "plateau" (Saadi, 1995). Its southern portion, from the region known as Cipó (north of the state capital) to the municipality of Olhos D'Água (north of the city of Diamantina), contains springs of rivers and

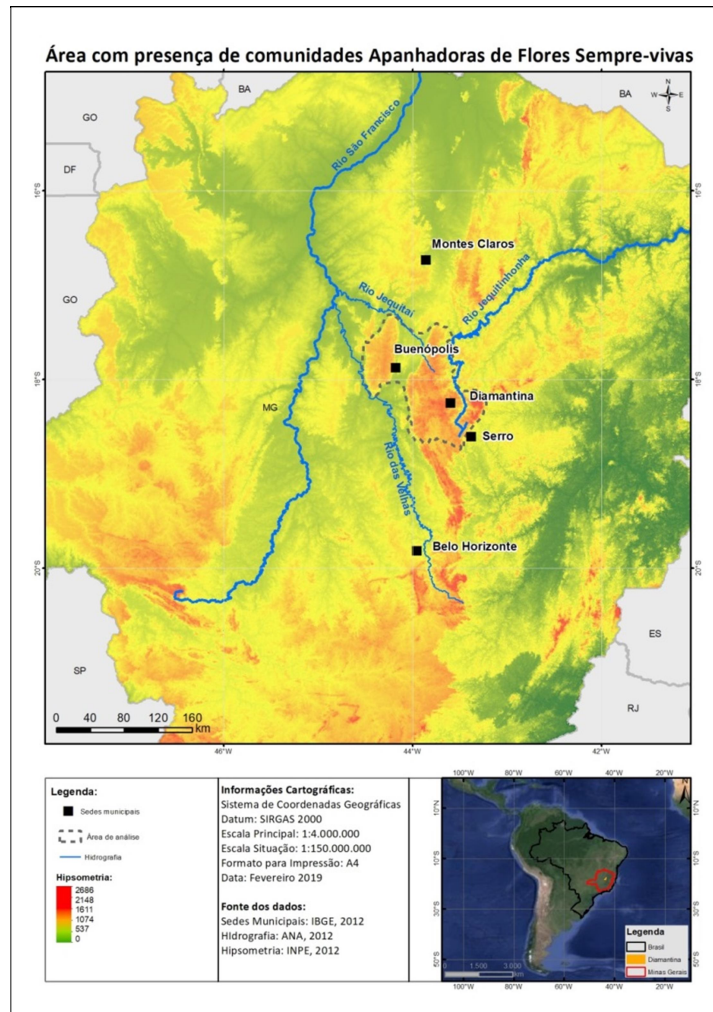
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tributaries that drain into different basins (Rio Doce, Rio Jequitinhonha and Rio São Francisco), responsible for supplying important cities in the country's regions.

The environment present in the area nearby the city of Diamantina-MG is Savannah. This biome was highlighted by the importance of its biodiversity and its role in the storage and replenishment of water for the feeding of these important Brazilian watersheds (Mazzetto, 2006), as well as the need to preserve it in the face of deforestation in recent decades of agricultural monocultures, forestry and cattle raising practiced by large properties of lands (Ab'Sáber, 2003).

The analyzed area is inserted in the Brazilian semi-arid zone, therefore, the water from the springs located in the Espinhaço Range means, in many cases, the only possibility of human and animal desentation of the agrarian communities analyzed. It is an area of ancient occupation and differentiated in the colonization process of Minas Gerais, Brazil, with emphasis on mineral extractivism that attracted the attentions and investments of the Portuguese Crown in the colonial phase (Machado Filho, 1980).

The reflections of this research were based on the materialist dialectical method with reference to the thought of Karl Marx and Henri Lefebvre. For the analyzed reality, we also considered the contributions of Oliveira (2007) that drew attention to the fact that when looking at agrarian studies it is of utmost importance to have a careful look at land appropriation, the social relations of production and the ongoing transformations in the field. He also pointed to historical materialism as a theory presided over by the concepts of the mode of production that takes place in a social formation, not homogeneous, under a conjuncture, which is fundamentally political, and processes must be considered in motion.



Map 01: Area with presence of “Sempre-vivas Flower Harvesting” communities (Source: Monteiro, F.T., 2018).

It is understood in this work that in Brazil, the peasantry, as a social class, finds itself in the midst of disputes, a constant in the country's history, and peasant ownership is an important expression of the struggle for land (Oliveira, 2007). In addition, the diversity of the Brazilian peasantry and the context in which they are inserted vary, being subjects that reveal themselves as small proprietors, squatters, etc. and recently "traditional communities" with self-defined *identities* that express *territorial links* (Heidrich, 2009) and *territorialities* (Raffestin, 1983). Many of them make reference to the product of the vegetal extractivism realized in the lands of common use that refers to processes of *territorialization* (Almeida, 2006). These subjects entered the political arena as collective subjects of their time and claim rights, among which social recognition and maintenance of ancestral lands.

It is from these groups that our analysis turned to understand the social construction of common lands and their relation with the *territory* (Raffestin, 1983) and territorial identities in the context of contemporary *socio-territorial struggles* (Fernandes, 1994) in the Brazilian

countryside, in movement and transformation. These struggles have strategies articulated in different dimensions, considering new legal norms, as well as the dynamics of territorial reordering mediated by the State.

The logic of social reproduction of the "harvesters of sempre-vivas flowers" - customs and norms for the use of territorialized resources

The logic of social reproduction of these groups combines agriculture-breeding-collection with a broad understanding of ecological dynamics that enable diversified economic strategies. Agro-food strategies combine environments from 600 to 1,400m; traditional knowledge transmitted/adapted by generations; food culture; water and adapted genetic resources. There are sacred rites related to agricultural production, use of adaptive techniques developed from ecosystemic potentials/adversities, considerable food sovereignty, and socioecological resilience. They represent representations and social practices of interaction with nature, seen as the creator of the life and totality of which they are seen as part.

In practice, this translates into "roças" in polycultures (with the presence of the "roça-de-toco" or "coivara" practice, which can use rooting with fallow for natural replenishment of soil fertility); agroforestry farms with high density of food species and raising of small animals of "caipiras" races around the houses; creation of large rustic animals using the native fields at high altitudes; and collection/management of species of native flora at different altitudes for feeding, cooking utensils, traditional medical practices, religious practices, celebrations, domestic constructions and ornamental plants for commercialization - of which the native live flowers of the *campos rupestres* (characterized by their rupestrian grassland in savanna vegetation) of Brazil's *Cerrado* biome are a fundamental component.

The use of industrial agricultural inputs (pesticides, seeds and chemical fertilizers) is low and even absent in many communities, as well as access to agricultural credit. The absence of the use of such inputs, in general, is accompanied by cultural resistance. On the other hand, the monetary income of these groups is due in part to the commercialization of agricultural production and in part to the sale of products of the native flora (more than 200

species for ornamental uses), in which the sempre-viva flower species endemic to the Espinhaço Range².

In general, the families stay on the mountains during long days in the altitude fields, during the dry season (drought), for the collection of sempre-viva flowers and for the management of rustic cattle and pack animals. They usually lodge on "ranchos," as defined by constructions generally made of raw materials found therein, such as wood and native palm leaf. It is also common to inhabit the "lapas" (as caves are defined in the rock formations), using mattresses made with grasses native to the mountains. Some caves, even, receive the names of the families that traditionally settled there for the collection of flowers, an activity that can recruit all the members of the same family. These moments allow meetings, parties and links between families from different communities.



Photo 01: Native altitude fields where there is grazing of animals and collection (Source:Monteiro, F.T., 2018).



Photo 02: "Lapa" of housing during collection (Source: Nac/Ufvjm, 2011).

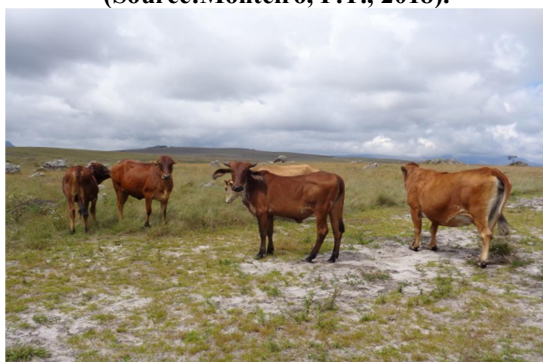


Photo 03: Grazing animals in communal lands (Source:Monteiro, F.T., 2018).



Photo 04: Collecting flowers in communal lands (Source:Monteiro, F.T., 2018).

² The collection of the sempre-viva flowers - plants whose species of greater commercial value belong to the genus *Comanthera* - constitutes an important source of income for the families. The flowers occur in the rupestrian grasslands of the Cerrado and refer to the term popularized for these inflorescences that, after being harvested and dried, retain their shape and color. In addition to the flowers, leaves, nuts, seeds, etc., are collected from different collection environments (locally defined as fields, saws, sawdust, etc.) depending on the time of year and demand.

Therefore, transhumance occurs between "dwellings from below" (houses) and "dwellings from above" (lapas and ranchos), as a mechanism to circumvent limits and to use agroenvironmental potential (Ribeiro, 2010) contained in the totality of the Southern Espinhaço Range, according to the seasons of the year and the productive practices are organized in an agricultural calendar. In the rainy season, families concentrate their activities in the lowlands, where the "roças" are concentrated, mainly to feed the families; and during the dry season they concentrate their activities in the highlands, where they collect ornamental plants to be traded, as well as use the fields with native grasses for cattle pasture with constant crossings according to productive practices and ties of sociability among communities.

Food production has as a priority family consumption and is made possible by agro-food strategies anchored in the combination of agro-environments; knowledge transmitted by orality and updated over generations; in culture, including food, which prioritizes certain varieties of seeds and food races; family and community use of water, land, biodiversity and agricultural genetic resources adapted to soil and climate conditions. In this way, they optimize the energy and nutrient fluxes of the agroenvironments associated to agrifood and economic strategies of the families, which can vary according to the rhythms of the biota involved, generating a close relationship and dependence, since there is no or low use of external agricultural inputs.

In addition, the use/management of agroenvironments is done considering water conservation, including use of controlled fire in agriculture-pasture-collecting of flowers. This logic occupies variable and considerable size areas, being most in the mountain, including steep slopes, escarpments/rock formations and preserved forests, in addition to the native fields. It is worth highlighting the presence of management practices in the communities with a view to maintaining populations of native species including sempre-viva flowers, as well as water and soil. These logics are disseminated to a greater or lesser extent in the various communities, pointing to the socialization of knowledge between groups.

Thus, the *specific territorialities* (Raffestin, 1983) to the analyzed communities combine different environments. We have the configuration of communities or *territorial units* (Bombardi, 2004) constructed from the social relations that were *territorialized* there in a delimited space-time that forms and is also formed by the *territorial identity* in a dialectical relation and relates to an experience historical-geographical location. In another dimension of identity, the "harvesters of sempre-viva flowers", self-defined *collective identity*, expresses territorial links of the different territorial units articulated and in movement. Today, these groups enter the political arena as collective subjects. Although the collection of flowers is

not the only activity that takes place, it is this collective identity triggered in the political struggle for the defense of the ancestral lands.

In territorial units, rules based on *customs* predominate (Thompson, 1991), with sanction of control of use, and *customary law* of its use by all the members that compose it. The norms, control and sanction of the use of the resources territorialized by the groups are *adapted* (Ostrom, 1990) to contexts and based on *reciprocity* (Sabourin, 2015). These groups have been challenged by the implementation of private/capitalist projects. In response, they formed a committee; carried out political acts; judicial, legislative and executive powers at different scales; they sought similar alliances in defense of their ancestral lands.

In this respect, Sabourin (2015) stated that for the theory of reciprocity in the social sciences, this type of cooperation pointed out by Ostrom corresponds to an elementary structure of binary reciprocity: sharing or sharing. It is a symmetrical structure between the individual and the group and between each of the individuals and the group. And that there is universality of the structure of sharing and the contradictions that it presents in relation to the logic of exchange and privatization. At the same time, the author considered that Ostrom described elementary structures of reciprocity: binary (the face to face, the learning: the learning together), ternary (the inter-knowledge leading to a mutual engagement). Having empirically verified that the search for symmetrical relationships (the reduction of asymmetries) generates more wealth to be divided (to increase collective gains), in keeping with the proposals of the theory of reciprocity.

Sabourin (2015) pointed out that the repetitions of "reciprocal play" began early in humanity and the recurrence of the results of this original relationship has built the figure of an elemental structure of reciprocity. The tendency to give, receive, and reciprocate, as Mauss pointed out, is in fact a characteristic of humanity. However, as Sabourin (2015) pointed out, there are not always any explanations for the behaviors of human nature, but the origin of these behaviors is not in biological explanations, which can even lead to the invocation of natural selection.

On the other hand, Dardot and Laval (2017) highlighted the limitations of understanding these processes from the field of "classical" economic sciences by the notion of "common goods" based on the theory of private goods and public goods and, therefore, its management by the market and by the State; as well as the need for analysis of internal and external power processes that have destroyed many "traditional commons", which do not act only by predicting expected benefits and expected costs to achieve strictly private advantages. On this way, the focus on the role of collective norms for individual calculation and situation

variables, such as the economic and political structure of the country, ends up underscoring the insufficiency of neoclassical postulates. This means that the "common" is "not decreed from the outside, as it is not the result of an aggregate of individual decisions taken in isolation, but derives from a social process with its own logic "(p.167).

At the same time, the authors emphasized the demonstration in Ostrom's work of how these reciprocal relations operate by creating institutions of the commons with rules of practical use of resources and decision-making in a democratic way with active participation of the subjects involved to produce adjustments that are deemed necessary - there is co-responsibility, co-production and co-decision. But they emphasized that this is not spontaneous and that it would be more interesting to think of the "common" as the construction of a regulatory framework and democratic institutions that organize reciprocity and avoid opportunistic or passive behavior within the group and also against external agents.

Our analysis showed that reciprocity relations are in the appropriation of land, in the distribution of the territorial resources among the families that make up the group, in the social relations of production and in the political action that promotes adjustments of use/management of resources (soil, water and biodiversity). It happens that this reciprocity, agreeing with Mauss - give-receive-reciprocate - gives a reference of rights and duties within the group's morality. The social practices of managing these resources rely on norms and sanctions informed by the customs that are fed both by the world views of the group, as well as by the knowledge associated with the agroenvironments, as well as by the conjuncture (environmental and political-economic) that varies in the internal-external duality .

Therefore, these practices are forged/updated in the geopolitical context internal and external to the group, as well as by the family needs of consumption within a morality in that delimited/territorialized space. That is realized in the norm/sanction duality of what is right/wrong, possible/impossible, in a given historical-geographical context in space-time within the milestones of belonging to that group.

They occur, in agreement with Thompson (1991) in dialogue with Bourdieu, in an ambience, *habitus*, in a lived environment that includes practices, inherited expectations, rules not only of limits to the uses as of possibilities, norms and sanctions of both the law and the pressures of the neighborhood. That is, customary law uses vary in space-time, both locally and dynamically involving adjustments. For example, years of longer droughts alter the collection of flowers and even the collection rate. This in itself poses challenges in relation to the State and its rigid legal frameworks. Thus, the commons demand greater autonomy to

make essential adjustments to the longevity of resources without the rigidity and slowness of the State.

This means that we understand that there is a self-organization and self-government of the commons with institutions that allow decisions with effective participation of group members to enable the production/social reproduction of the group in a longer way under that basis of territorialized resources. This implies co-responsibility, which feeds on the feeling of belonging to that territorial unit. But it absolutely does not occur without tensions, internal or external, and it is not "natural" of the human.

In the field we identified differentiated responses in the appropriation and distribution of the flower, for example, with direct effect on its management and its longevity. It is understood that this resource is not the property of that family and that it must be guaranteed to the descendants who will have the right to use this resource. The same goes for water and soil conservation - which will have to feed and feed current and future generations. This being understood as duty, given the right of use in actuality, according to this placement of a dweller: "I cannot destroy what is not mine. This is going to have to last for the others. Because as well as I'm using, they also have to use. Both now and coming. That's the way".

In this way, customs inform/produce the appropriation of the land and the elements contained therein defining: who, where, how, when to use the land and its elements within the community. As well as the social relations of production that count on reciprocity (that guide the rights and duties of the group). Since these uses are updated in the territorial unit according to internal and external conjunctures, not free of tensions, and feed resistance in the search for maintenance of the social reproduction conditions of the group. We are referring, therefore, to the exercise of political-economic power of the rights of use and distribution of wealth with co-responsibility, with social and cultural forms of territorial appropriation based on customs and not on legal norms as is the case in capitalist society.

The social relations of production and the appropriation of lands - lands of common use and lands of collective use

Regarding the social relations of production, we consider here some anarchist contributions that start from the understanding of the logic of work organization and distribution of its fruits and of how the land appropriation is structured, in this case, from one of these logics: collective or community. In the first case, the organization of labor is

collective, and therefore the use of the land and the division of the fruits of labor take place among all who participate in it. That is, we have the collectivization of land, labor and its fruits³. In the second case, the organization of labor and the common use of the land and distribution of its fruits are given according to the needs of each individual taking into account the group - this is communal use⁴.

In the anarchist writings there is mention of peasants and community use of land (WOODCOCK, 2002) - something that could also be taken into account when analyzing the use of land by non-proprietors who influence the peasant logics in Brazil. Kropotkin (1910) pointed to the importance of partial communism by everyone's possession of the soil and instruments of work, which would bring about the common enjoyment of the fruits of common labor according to need. At the same time, he stressed the little contact that many peasant groups had or had with the national state and the importance of mutual aid, the political and economic freedom of individuals, as well as autonomy and individuality to be respected. He mentioned the common heritage of society, not individual and private.

In our analysis, what we identified was the family organization of work in family units and common lands, where the use of the territorialized resources is given according to the needs and labor force contained in the family. As occurs the distribution of the fruits among its members independently of having worked directly in the production, since they are members of the nuclear family, or, there is a familiar appropriation of the fruits of the work. There is predominance of artisanal work in the communities and there may be a partnership between families for agricultural production and collection, as well as practices of reciprocity between them in different ways, being fundamental to the social reproduction of groups. The work can recruit all the members of the same family and there are women protagonism in the cultivation of the gardens and management of the yards.

At the same time, the production of the nuclear family relies on social relations of reciprocity with the extended family and even with the different extended families. Thus, the work articulated by the nuclear family-extended family relationship and the group as a whole benefits from the community work products carried out in the communitarian lands by all the families in relation to the management of the natural resources that guarantee longevity in their offer, occurring according to norms/sanctions, and the defense of territorial unity. Therefore, reciprocities are vital in the production itself and in what it generates in terms of community fruits of labor - native water and native flora and protection of territorial unity.

³ Bakunin was a reference of the logic of land appropriation and organization of collective work, or collectivism.

⁴ Kropotkin, another important anarchist thinker, is reference for work organization and common use.

As far as land appropriation is concerned, there is usually family ownership of areas for housing, backyards and crops - family units, or “family possessions”. Regarding grazing and collecting lands, the research revealed differences in the customs of these groups in relation to the social practices of land appropriation, including the territorialized resources as well as the social views of the world imbricated in these constructions. Thus, there are lands of common use and lands of collective use as processes of territorialization with specific territorialities in which the meanings of the land for the groups and the agrarian praxis based on customs. Lands of common use among peasants and lands of collective use occurs among the quilombolas analyzed. The difference lies in the territorial and economic practices of appropriation of common land and collective land and other territorialized resources, as well as in the social relations of production and division of the fruits of labor in it.

From this perspective, two aspects stand out: the way in which customs operate as a guideline of social practices that feed and are nurtured by social views of the world; and that customs are carried out by groups with relationships of descent and kinship, including alliances that are built from there, as cultural references that guide the moral of groups in the relationship between themselves and the elements termed by them (land, water and biodiversity) that are embodied in relations of reciprocity. It is also emphasized that the reciprocity relations are in the appropriation of the land, in the political action and in the social relations of daily life production, that counts on rites and religiosity.

In this way, customs inform/produce the appropriation of the land and the elements contained therein - water and biodiversity - defining who, where, how, when to use the land and its elements within the community in the framework of reciprocity relations (which guide rights and group duties). These territorial units contain boundaries, not rigid limits, permeated by flows, people, resources and products. Since these customs are updated in the territorial unit according to internal and external conjunctures of the reality in movement and fuel resistances in the search of maintenance of the own agrarian regimes practiced. We are referring, therefore, to the exercise of political-economic power with social and cultural forms of territorial appropriation based on customs and not on juridical norms such as occurs in capitalist society.

In the analyzed context, lands of common use occur within the extensive family patrimony of peasants where the common use of common property occurs according to customary norms that guide the internal organization, including divisions of areas for collection, since the grazing is free occurring mixing of the herds. It is therefore a common

property of "heirs" as they define, with spouses and children, not a domain of all members of the community living in that locality adjacent.

At the same time, what operates is not private individual/nuclear family law over the common land, but the right of common use by all "heirs" of the land where use and necessity prevail as parameters of access to the extended family patrimony. They rely, therefore, on customary rights of access, use and inheritance of undivided family patrimony, which translate into social practices permeated by culture. Such customs are rooted in the affiliation and marriage forming kinship ties of extended families of heirs-kinsmen of lands of common use that is at the same time land of dwelling and of work. They are families, therefore, peasants who defined part of the land for appropriation and common use and another part for the possession of the family units, being the condition of heirs-relatives in the access and use of common lands.

On the other hand, collective land use, in the analyzed context, is under the territorial domain of extended families, which in this case refers to quilombolas who make collective use of it and understand them as belonging to the group, inalienable and indivisible, take on the meaning of ancestry, not property of descendants. The collective use of the land acts as a guarantee mechanism for access to and use of the territorialized resources to all the group, according to their needs in compliance with the customary norms that guide the internal organization without divisions (for collection or grazing of the family herds). So that although consanguinity marks the offspring references to the group, all those who have become members of the community by marriage or affinity (without marriage, as in the case of some) have free access to and use of collective lands.

In these quilombola groups analyzed, the family units are divided into possessions, but the collective domain also operates on them, since in practice they are lands with undivided family uses by extended families. Thus, in the current conjuncture, duality family units/collective use of land is present where the notion of ownership is given subordinate to collective right within the extended family - in family units. There is a collective right for those who need the land to live. Thus the right of inheritance affects only the unit used by the parents, after the death of the same, having its use defined by the descendants according to usage and customs. Moreover, it is necessary to understand the economic organization through extended families, even though each nuclear family appropriates the fruits of it.

In the analyzed realities, the "common" and the "collective" act as a mechanism of equality/inequality, duality in movement, of access and use of the territorialized resources and even of distribution of wealth with internal organization of the parts/whole and of the

whole/part. But they operate with different logics in which the notion of property that the land assumes, or not, is the basis of customary law of use, also considering needs. Since equality of access and use here cannot be confused with egalitarianism, because there are internal differences with direct relation to the number of members in the family, the age of these subjects and the material conditions of accomplishing the work in the common and collective lands.

Final considerations

The common and collective lands are therefore combined/articulated with family possessions and concern processes of territorialization with specific territorialities. They refer to socio-cultural, political and economic constructions that involve different dimensions of socio-territorial formations with: notions of ownership and dominion in the appropriation of the land and resources involved; of collective use and absence of property; social organization of production and division of its fruits; social visions of the world (Lowy, 2002) and the relationship with the Other; and geopolitical context internal and external to the group. Being that the common and the collective act as a mechanism of distribution of the resources territorialized by the groups according to the transformations that respond to internal and external conjunctures.

Their analysis demands to consider the territorial formation of the area and the wider social, economic-political and environmental context in which they are inserted, considering the land structure and the legal forms that are imposed on customs. These are fed by social visions of the world (and *vice-versa*) that signify the earth and are embodied in social practices based on customary law that codifies land appropriation, access and controlled use of common resources with norms and sanctions. These practices are updated by families who work on the ground, according to the conjunctures, and are anchored by reciprocity relations between descendants and relatives of these territorial units and even among neighbors.

These relations of reciprocity take place in the appropriation of the land, in the political action and in the social relations of production of daily life. Thus, the exercise of political-economic power with social and cultural forms of territorial appropriation, organization of production and distribution of wealth based on customs takes place. There is, therefore, a political economy of the commons and of the collectives, subjects of these social constructions, that can bring different groups together, enabling joint socio-territorial struggles for common and collective lands.

There is also an internal and external geopolitical dimension of these constructions that respond to conjunctures that generate transformations of reality, as totality in movement, of which they are/are not part. They seek to adapt without losing relative autonomy in which the dominion over the means of production, the land on which they work in family and community, has a centrality. At the same time, the possessions of the family unit are articulated to the common property or to the collective domain, being the owners of the right of use stressed by the conjuncture and these dualities are important in the strategies of resistance.

According to the context, conflicts arise that lead to socio-territorial struggles for the maintenance of these lands, which are fundamental enablers of the socio-cultural reproduction of the groups, and the contradictory duality of territorialization/desterritorialization is concretized in which custom and law are confronted. In the current conjuncture, this confrontation between customary law based on use (which does not separate subject from place and thing) and law based on property (public or private) occurs in face-to-face *enclosures* (land, biodiversity and knowledge), which are mediated by the State and in an unequal correlation of forces within the hegemonic urban-industrial-capitalist society.

This confrontation expresses the contradiction of the struggles waged by class society in the production and reproduction of its existence in an unequal condition. At the same time, these forms socio-territorial formations carried out by the common and collective occur within the capitalist society. This confirms that this mode of production occurs in a contradictory and combined way. But they develop in relation to capitalism, for they are part of this contradictory process of the mode of production as totality in movement. Since its genesis had other references of societies and of economics-politics.

Thus, communal lands and collective lands of the “sempre-viva flower harvesting” communities are part of the totality of the current territorial dynamics of the Brazilian countryside, where there are struggles in an articulated and solidary way between the common and the collective - subjects that are forged in these agrarian praxis and who are fighting for the maintenance of life in the Southern Espinhaço Range in Minas Gerais.

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