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Rural development in Alagoas: nuances of the agrarian question in Alagoas from a historical perspective

Desenvolvimento rural alagoano: nuances da questão agrária de Alagoas sob uma perspectiva histórica

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Abstract: The agrarian development across territories is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Therefore, this research describes the nuances of the agrarian question that historically characterize the state of Alagoas, Brazil, contextualizing the evolutionary dynamics of the rural territory from social, economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions, essentially based on sugarcane cultivation. To this end, we present the three major historical periods that marked Alagoas' rural development: the colonial period, characterized by the occupation of the territory, the introduction of sugarcane, and the establishment of socio-productive dynamics; the period of modernization of the sugar-alcohol sector through agro-industrialization, the reformulation of production techniques, and the insertion of new social dynamics; and the contemporary period, marked by crises in the sugar-energy sector and the emergence of opportunities for agrarian reform movements. Finally, we conclude by showing the historical dualities of the rural environment in Alagoas and their impacts on the agrarian structure and the socioeconomic context of the state in contemporary times, highlighting the importance of studies on rural history.

Keywords: Economic activity; Rural development; Agrarian question.

Resumo: O desenvolvimento agrário dos territórios configura-se como um fenômeno complexo e multifacetado. Assim, a pesquisa realizada descreve as nuances da questão agrária que historicamente caracterizam o estado de Alagoas, Brasil, contextualizando a dinâmica evolutiva do território rural a partir de dimensões sociais, econômicas, culturais e ambientais pautadas, essencialmente, na atividade canavieira. Para tanto, apresentamos os três grandes períodos históricos que marcaram o desenvolvimento rural alagoano: o período colonial, caracterizado pela ocupação do território, introdução da cana-de-açúcar e estabelecimento de dinâmicas socioprodutivas; o período de modernização do setor sucroalcooleiro mediante a agroindustrialização, a reformulação de técnicas produtivas e a inserção de novas dinâmicas sociais, e; o período contemporâneo, marcado por crises no setor sucroenergético e abertura de espaços de luta pela reforma agrária. Por fim, concluímos mostrando as dualidades históricas do meio rural alagoano e seus impactos na estrutura agrária e no contexto socioeconômico do estado na contemporaneidade, evidenciando a importância de estudos sobre a história rural.

Palavras-chave: Atividade econômica; Desenvolvimento rural; Questões agrárias.

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1. Introduction

The rural environment stands as one of the defining elements of the state of Alagoas, even today. This is because agriculture has been Alagoas's primary economic activity since the state became an independent territory from Pernambuco in 1817. Consequently, it is difficult to reflect on this region without taking into account agrarian and rural development issues, which are inherently multifaceted and composed of intertwined social, political, economic, cultural, and ecological dimensions (Barbosa; Brandão, 2020).

In his book "O banguê das Alagoas", anthropologist Manuel Diegues Júnior draws on historical records to trace the elements that shaped the history of Alagoas and its intertwined trajectory with the economic exploitation of sugar in Brazil. Therefore, by looking back in time and analyzing the trajectory of rural development in Alagoas, we find latent evidence of the consequences resulting from the dynamics surrounding sugarcane, as well as large estates, the exploitation of nature and people, and the concentration of productive resources in the hands of a select few (Diegues Júnior, 2006).

To trace this historical trajectory—which provides a framework for understanding the evolution of rural Alagoas and reflects social, economic, environmental, and cultural dynamics—our study aims to describe the nuances of the agrarian issue that have historically characterized the state of Alagoas.

> Stemming from the state's historical development, economic difficulties have always had a profound impact on the Alagoas region; the complex public finances and an economy based on large estates—dominated by the sugarcane agro-industrial oligarchies—have prevented the state from achieving dynamic growth (Da Silva, 2024, p. 277).

However, we recognize that there is no uniform definition in the humanities regarding the agrarian issue, which is therefore addressed in different ways (Botelho; Caetano, 2022). Consequently, it constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon, comprising historical, political, economic, and social issues related to land concentration, forms of labor exploitation, and conflicts arising from the exclusion of individuals from access to land. In other words, it is not limited to the unequal distribution of land but is directly linked to the country's historical development and its structural model (Linhares; Silva, 1999).

Another aspect that forms part of the classical understanding of the agrarian question pertains to the social relations that are produced and reproduced in rural areas. Thus, elements inherent to land concentration, the expansion of capitalism, the subordination of labor to capital, and the movements and struggles for access to land characterize the Brazilian agrarian question (Wanderley, 2012).

Nevertheless, despite progress in agricultural dynamics, it is important to emphasize that the state still lacks economic diversification and is characterized by a significant concentration of land. Consequently, the duality of rural realities—large estates and subsistence farms—is evident (Firmino, 2022), a situation that historically stems from coronelismo and constant conflicts over land tenure (Silva *et al*., 2022).

Therefore, our study describes the historical periods and the dynamics that emerged in each of them regarding rural development in Alagoas, presenting a summary of the key events that have led us to the present day. The first phase pertains to the colonial period, the second to the period of modernization of the sugar and ethanol sector, and the third concerns the crises in the sugar-energy sector and the emergence of opportunities for the struggle for agrarian reform.

In addition, we reiterate that our research falls within the field of economic and social history, in which the rural world and its nuances constitute one of the most pressing and interdisciplinary themes (Neves, 1989). Therefore, "the analysis of historical development is essential to understanding the current territorial configuration of Alagoas" (Da Silva, 2024, p. 275).

Thus, we emphasize that rural history encompasses economic, political, and social relations that enable us to understand the socioeconomic dynamics and transformations of production systems and to reflect on their implications for the present day. We recognize that although the agrarian issue is studied from economic, political, social, and historical perspectives, it remains a contemporary phenomenon, even in the context of globalization (Akram-Lodhi; Kay, 2010).

2. Methodological approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach, since it does not use quantification but is based primarily on theoretical knowledge that lends it scientific validity (Vieira, 1996). According to Flick (2009, p. 20), "qualitative research is particularly relevant to the study of social relations due to the pluralization of the spheres of life," which is consistent with

the characteristics of the study we conducted. As for the purpose, this is a descriptive study, as it describes "the facts and phenomena of a given reality" (Trivinos, 1987, p. 100).

In terms of methodology, our research is structured as a bibliographic study. According to Prodanov and Freitas (2013), this type of research is based on the analysis of published material, which allows for the verification of data accuracy, as well as the identification of any inconsistencies or contradictions regarding the subject under analysis. Therefore, it is based on the collection and critical analysis of published information regarding the topic under investigation (Boccato, 2006).

Epistemologically, we employed the hypothetical-deductive method, and as an analytical procedure, we adopted historical-descriptive analysis, "understood as a methodological process suitable for research focused on the 'how,' in addition to addressing contemporary phenomena that have not been fully studied" (Guimarães *et al*., 2012, p. 26).

3. Colonial period: occupation of the territory, introduction of sugarcane, and socio-productive dynamics

Geographical features played an important role in the expansion of settlement centers and the development of agricultural activities in the state of Alagoas. The main factor contributing to this expansion was the hydrographic network, consisting of rivers and lakes. "Colonization follows the waterways" (Diegues Júnior, 2006, p. 46), and it was along the banks of these rivers that land grants were distributed and sugar mills were established, as sugar was considered the most financially viable crop to produce in the Portuguese colony (Furtado, 2007).

However, before European settlers began invading the territory of Alagoas, the state's lands were inhabited by indigenous peoples. To the north of Alagoas lived the Potiguaras, to the south the Tupinambás, and along the east coast the Tupis; the various ethnic groups within these peoples were often in conflict with one another. The Caetés were located on the coast, the Pitiguarés in Porto Calvo, and the Abacatiares on the islands of the São Francisco River, along with the Aconãs, Coriris, Caropotós, and Cairiris, who lived near this same waterway (Espíndola, 2001).

The settlement of the Alagoas region by colonists took place in three initial areas: the first in the north, with Porto Calvo as its center; the second located in the center around the lagoons, known as Alagoas or Alagoa do Sul and Alagoa do Norte; and the third in the south, with Penedo as its center of expansion. With the exception of this last settlement, the first two centers of expansion were economically based on the operations of sugarcane mills (Diegues Júnior, 2006)..

Thus, the "banguê – type mills were essential to the onset of agro-industrial activities and the social development of the Alagoas region (Da Silva, 2024). These were rudimentary manufacturing facilities, situated in a landscape characterized by fertile soils where sugarcane cultivation took root in the valleys and floodplains. The river provided the moisture needed for cultivation and also facilitated the transport of the harvest. This was because, in addition to transporting sugar on barges and canoes, ox-drawn carts were used to haul the sugarcane to the mills. The forests were used as a source of fuel for the furnaces, and slave labor was the most important resource for the development of the banguê (Diegues Junior, 2006).

The tools used on the plantations were basically "the planting hoe, the sickle, and the axe for clearing, as well as animal-powered mills and open-fire boilers" (Santana, 1970, p. 305). Thus, historical records indicate that in 1639, Alagoas had 16 sugar mills, whereas by 1879 there were 632, and by 1905 there were 964 sugar mills in the state of Alagoas (Santana, 1970), whose sugar was exported mainly to Europe (Da Silva, 2024).

> From the very beginning, sugar production was the main economic activity, and settlements began to spring up around the mills, with small-scale subsistence activities such as the cultivation of certain crops—provided these did not encroach on the areas planted with sugarcane (Anjos; Lages, 2010, p. 85).

Even in a scenario where land was strictly reserved for colonists—who received authorization from the Crown to administer the land grants distributed to them—there is evidence of multiple land-occupation movements carried out by other actors, such as free and poor peasants, escaped slaves, and Indigenous peoples. According to Andrade (2008), in order to escape hunger, death, and especially slavery, the forests offered a wide variety of animals to hunt and fruits to gather.

In addition, the rich and fertile soils provided favorable conditions for managing shifting cultivation areas, which made it possible to grow corn, beans, cassava, bananas, and coconuts, as well as to raise livestock (Andrade, 2008). Like these groups that "irregularly" occupied "Crown lands," the quilombos stand out because they influenced the dynamics of the entire Alagoas region—so much so that there are historical accounts documenting invasions, looting, and the abduction of slaves from the sugar mills (Diegues Júnior, 2006).

A series of factors and significant events led to the decline of the sugar mills, ranging from the economic shift toward southern Brazil to internal problems such as inadequate road infrastructure and falling prices for the product on the international market. In addition, earlier events—such as the end of the slave trade (1850) and the severe cholera epidemic (1857)—which decimated many slaves and plantation owners —as well as climatic anomalies and the central role of state credit policies aimed at establishing sugar mills—also contributed to the end of this era in Alagoas.

The sugar mill had entered a period of crisis, as Diegues Júnior (2006, p. 147) points out: "[…] labor crises, price crises; also capital crises, freight crises—crises, in short, of everything." Despite the strenuous efforts and coordination of the plantation owners, the emergence of more efficient production facilities (the sugar mills) triggered the final crisis for the sugar mills, which—unable to keep pace with the advances and improvements brought about by the sugar industry—were forced to shut down or integrate their production into the new system.

With the decline of the sugar mills and the rise of the sugar and ethanol plants, a new period began in the agricultural history of Alagoas. This period was marked by the modernization of the sugar and ethanol sector, with the overhaul of production techniques and new social dynamics, as described in the following section.

4. The modernization of the sugar and alcohol industry: agroindustrialization, overhaul of production techniques, and new social dynamics

The first mill to be established in Alagoas was the Brasileiro Mill, built in 1892 in the municipality of Atalaia. It wasn't long before the industrial phase of the sugar and ethanol economy took off, and dozens of mills sprang up throughout the forested region. By 1910, there were nine mills; that number rose to 15 by 1920, and ten years later, there were 25 mills in Alagoas.

One of the most prominent mills in this wave of modernization of sugar production processes in the state of Alagoas was the Brasileiro Mill. It was responsible for introducing new agricultural management methods, such as the use of chemical and organic fertilizers in sugarcane cultivation and new varieties from other regions. The Brasileiro Mill was also a pioneer in implementing new improvements to the industrial process, which included mills capable of crushing 250 metric tons of sugarcane per day—increasing to 800 metric tons at the peak of its production capacity—as well as the installation of quadruple-effect vacuum evaporators as early as 1923 (Santana, 1970).

However, the expansion of Alagoas's mills was marked by various conflicts, such as disputes over property boundaries and competition for labor between mill owners and plantation owners. According to Ramos (1999), the expansion of the mills occurred primarily through expropriation, as mill owners and sugar plantation owners competed for industrial and agricultural concentration and centralization. Thus, because they held greater advantages, the mills ended up expropriating the land of the surrounding sugar plantations. It is also worth noting the emergence of new social dynamics reshaped by the arrival of the mills, as pointed out by Lima (2001, p. 34):

> The very emergence of the plantations introduced new patterns of relationships between workers and landowners, as well as a new administrative hierarchy, represented by the emergence of new roles—such as the plantation manager and the field supervisor, among others—revealing new social dynamics (Lima, 2001, p. 34).

In the 1950s, the expansion of sugarcane cultivation was significant throughout the country, especially in Alagoas, which from that point on began to incorporate new areas previously considered unsuitable for sugarcane cultivation. According to Andrade Neto (1990), this was essential for the development of the sugar sector, as it ushered in a new phase in the production process with the incorporation of the coastal plains.

The main characteristic of these coastal plain areas was the natural poverty of organic matter in the soils, which necessitated the introduction of chemical fertilizers and the use of hardier varieties of the plant. As a result, this period saw an increase in the erosion of the natural biodiversity of the Atlantic Forest region (Andrade Neto, 1990).

However, the sugar and ethanol sector in Alagoas experienced its greatest expansion in the 1970s and 1980s through the federal government's efforts via the Sugar and Alcohol Institute (IAA) with the Planalsucar and Proálcool programs. The former aimed to coordinate research into the creation of genetically modified varieties to meet the sector's needs, while the latter sought to develop the market to maximize production, as well as to expand and modernize the sugarcane agroindustry.

The IAA implemented protectionist measures for sugar production, enabling the government to influence the domestic market through price fixing and a purchasing monopoly. In addition, it regulated the transportation, handling, and storage

of sugar (Rezende; Goldin, 1993). In other words, "the state's presence is absolute (...) market reserves and the purchase of the harvest guaranteed production itself" (Carvalho, 2000, p. 16).

In addition to the expansion of productive activity, these programs had socio-environmental and economic impacts. According to Andrade Neto (1990), the expansion of sugarcane monoculture led to the elimination of livestock farming in the region, a deterioration in labor relations, and a decline in workers' living conditions. Santos, Pereira, and Andrade (2007) add that the new model of land use promoted by the federal government resulted in increased human impact and heightened pressure on natural resources. Specifically, the Proálcool program led to further devastation of native vegetation cover and accelerated the process of land concentration (Lima, 1998).

The Proálcool mill owners also destroyed the farms of countless smallholder families, who grew mainly beans and cassava on their flat, open lands, turning them into low-wage rural workers, from where they were pushed into the city only to return to the countryside, creating a cycle of self-perpetuating poverty that intensified with the expansion of sugarcane plantations (Rique, 2004, p. 98).

The 1990s marked a turning point for the sugarcane sector due to the beginning of the federal government's declining capacity to act. Article 174 of the 1988 Federal Constitution came to define the State as "a normative and regulatory agent of economic activity (…) with functions of oversight, incentive, and planning" (Brazil, 1988, n.p.), paving the way for the weakening and subsequent dissolution of the IAA—which took place during the Collor administration on March 15, 1990.

> The effects of this process impacted the sugarcane industry in a wide range of areas, namely the system for setting product prices, control over production, and the Harvest Plans—which were the responsibility of the government—as well as public policies supporting fuel ethanol and sugarcane (Lima, 2001, pp. 83–84).

In addition to adjustments in public policies for the sector, this period was also shaped by the shift of investors from the Northeast to other producing regions. Consequently, under the new conditions in effect starting in 1990, many mills ended up ceasing operations. As a result, the sugarcane sector's activities became concentrated exclusively among six large corporations.

The bankruptcy of the mills represented a historic turning point for the possibility of land redistribution in the state of Alagoas. Consequently, agrarian reform gained prominence in public discourse, and the struggle for it led to changes in the rural landscape of Alagoas. The following section discusses the contemporary period marked by the struggle for agrarian reform in the state.

5. Contemporary period: the struggle for agrarian reform

As we have seen, settlement and population growth in the state of Alagoas were driven by sugarcane monoculture, which had multiple consequences for the region. The landscape, once dominated by the Atlantic Forest, gradually gave way to the vast green expanse of sugarcane fields, causing a myriad of environmental problems—such as soil erosion, water contamination, river siltation, and the extinction of plant and animal species (Nascimento, 2010).

In addition to these geographical changes, social dynamics were characterized by the breakdown of cultural ties, accompanied by the acculturation and "subjugation" of indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans, and, shortly thereafter, of rural workers. Customs and ways of life were profoundly shaped by the dynamics imposed by sugarcane cultivation. The worsening concentration of land ownership, the subjugation of rural workers to dependence on large landowners, and the absence of formal employment relationships—particularly in seasonal and precarious jobs—contributed to increasing income concentration and maximizing social inequality (Nascimento, 2010).

> Following the transition of sugar production from sugar mills to processing plants, the large-estate system tied to sugarcane monoculture took on new dimensions, yet it continued to rely on precarious labor, exploiting workers and contributing to the perpetuation of poverty among the rural population. This population, deprived of the means of production—in this case, land, ownership of which is concentrated in the hands of large landowners (large farmers and sugar mills)—sells its labor power as sugarcane cutters under a system of free labor (Cavalcanti *et al*., 2015, p. 40).

Starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s, sugar and ethanol mills began closing due to the crisis in the sector, which

helped land create new opportunities for land reform movements—as the Peasants' Leagues had been leading movements in the Northeast Region since the early 1960s (Castro; Lima, 2024)—which led to agrarian reform projects throughout the state of Alagoas. Thus, social movements linked to the struggle for agrarian reform gained supporters mainly as a result of social exclusion and the decline in the use of rural labor in the sugarcane sector. Consequently, these workers—driven by the desire to find new alternatives to overcome social exclusion and improve their living conditions—began to join these movements (Nascimento, 2010).

> The first steps in the struggle for land began in the first half of 1980 in the sertão. This was the region where the peasant resistance occupied territory and continued to expand its presence through occupations in the state's two other mesoregions: Agreste and Leste (Castro; Lima, 2024, p. e82376).

According to Melo (2024), the restructuring of the sugar and ethanol sector was a factor that effectively contributed to the emergence of new actors in the struggle for land. This is because, with government deregulation, structural adjustments, and the bankruptcies of sugar mills, unemployment rose exponentially, homes were destroyed, and the living conditions of workers and rural residents became even more precarious.

> This is not simply a problem of government, nor is it a problem that involves only certain groups. What is at stake in the issue of agrarian reform today—as a result of the social processes we have seen—is the opposition between two movements that involve clashes of diverse interests and that, so to speak, cut across the whole of society (Palmeira, 1989, p. 107).

Social movements such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), and the Movement for the Struggle for Land (MLT) were the main driving forces behind the occupation of unproductive farmland. As a result, areas of land previously used for sugarcane cultivation are undergoing social and productive restructuring through rural settlements. Currently, the state of Alagoas has 138 agrarian reform settlements, all with environmental permits (ITERAL, 2022).

Overall, agrarian reform settlements in Alagoas cover more than 90,000 hectares and benefit approximately 9,500 families (Alagoas, 2026). Consequently, changes in the Alagoas economy are evident, changes that have "shaped a new landscape in the productive sector, altering some of the traditional characteristics that have persistently marked the state's economic history" (Da Silva, 2024, p. 295).

This change in land tenure represents a step forward in strengthening family farming in Alagoas. According to SEBRAE (2017), 115,000 rural holdings are operated by family farmers, who account for 72% of the rural workforce. Despite limitations imposed primarily by agricultural areas with low productive capacity, structural deficiencies (such as road conditions, access to electricity, and basic sanitation), and limited access to technical assistance and rural extension services by family farmers, this group is responsible for food production and income distribution in rural areas and plays a leading role in initiatives focused on rural production linked to the adoption of environmental practices (SEBRAE, 2017).

Furthermore, we reiterate that Brazilian agrarian reform—not only in the context of Alagoas—is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon that requires attention (Rocha, 2014), including from the perspective of development, the implementation of public policies, and the active role of the State (Leme, 2024).

6. Final considerations

Rural development in Brazil is characterized by social, economic, environmental, and cultural dualities. However, in the state of Alagoas, this situation has historically been more pronounced, leading to specific agrarian dynamics that persist to this day.

Sugarcane cultivation is a fundamental element of the socioeconomic development of the Alagoas region, to such an extent that transformations in the sector have led to significant changes in both the agrarian structure and the biodiversity of its flora and fauna. Therefore, we recognize the impact of legitimized sociocultural behaviors, public policies, and technological innovations implemented over time in Alagoas as drivers of movements aimed at agrarian reform in the state.

Furthermore, we believe that studying and discussing aspects inherent to the rural history of these territories is a essential for understanding the different socio-environmental and economic realities and contexts. In other words, we

cannot consider the rural development of a territory without taking into account its evolutionary trajectory and its specific geographical and productive characteristics.

In the meantime, for future research, we suggest collecting primary data from members of social movements focused on agrarian reform, government officials, and representatives of the sugar and ethanol sector in order to analyze their perceptions of the agrarian dynamics and rural characteristics that define the state of Alagoas. Thus, we highlight that the main contribution of our research lies in the historical systematization of agrarian development in the state of Alagoas, examining this phenomenon from an interdisciplinary, multifaceted, and complex perspective.

We therefore emphasize that we cannot consider the rural development of a region without taking into account its evolutionary trajectory and its specific geographical and productive characteristics. In the meantime, for future research, we suggest collecting primary data from members of social movements focused on agrarian reform, government officials, and representatives of the sugar and ethanol sector in order to analyze their perceptions of the agrarian dynamics and rural characteristics that define the state of Alagoas. We also recommend conducting comparative analyses with other Brazilian states to identify similarities and differences regarding the agrarian issues that define these territories and that contribute to an understanding of current cultural, environmental, technological, and socioeconomic dynamics.

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