

Reciprocity and gift economy practises in Brazilian Nordeste peasant communities: a contribution to analysis of agriculture multifunctionality

Sabourin Eric P. (Cirad Tera , Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brazil)

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Abstract: This paper discusses the in-coherence between reciprocity or gift economy practises and local development policies in Brazilian Nordeste rural communities. The study is based on the monitoring of several local projects in semiarid area of Bahia and Paraíba states. In the rural communities, no merchant economic transactions (mutual help, free work) and community management of collective goods or resources coexist with a partial market integration characteristic of peasant societies. These practises, traditional or up-dated to the actual context, are mostly unrecognised by local development projects, even by organisational support proposals (association, co-operative, etc.) or community goods management (commons lands, water resources). In the same way, the forms of representation and local power associated to these practises and logics, are ignored or misunderstood. The paper presents some cases of incoherence or contradiction between public policies and rural communities tentative to up-date the traditional forms of reciprocity in the modern context. It also discusses some examples of institutional dialogue in order to adapt or to enhance such practises in a rural development perspective.

Introduction

In the rural communities of Brazilian semiarid Nordeste, the Sertão, parallel with merchant exchange, no merchant economic transactions are found. They correspond to the permanence of rural practices of traditional reciprocity, or which have been readapted into a new context. The notion of reciprocity corresponds to gift and redistribution dynamics made with the view of creating sociability (*lien social*) identified by Mauss (1950) as *total transactions (prestations totales)*. This fact has been verified in the more diverse human societies since Levi-Strauss (1960/1977) showed that the principle of reciprocity governs the elementary structures of family relationship. According to Caillé (1998) reciprocity or gift paradigm, is applied “*to every action or payment made without immediate expectations or certainty of return, with the view of creating, maintaining or reproducing sociability and supporting, therefor, a dimension of gratuitousness*” (our translation).

Temple (1999) thus distinguishes exchange of reciprocity as “*an exchange operation corresponds to a permutation of goods (objects), while the structure of reciprocity constitutes a reversible relation between subjects*”.

This paper deals with the question of inefficiency and predicament situation of public politics applied to these communities which, ignoring the coherence of the reciprocity logic, persist in proposing only the development of merchant exchange, based on the material accumulation and the competition for gain. The first section presents a permanence of reciprocity practices in the rural communities of Bahia and Paraíba. The second section analyses the boundaries of rural development actions uniquely founded on private property and merchant exchange.

1. The permanence and efficiency of reciprocity in the semiarid Nordeste

1.1 Peasant communities and rural networks

In semiarid Nordeste, a large part of the farmers live in small villages called *sítios* or communities (*comunidades*). The use of the term *comunidade* is recent, having been introduced by the pastoral action of the Catholic Church during the 1970s, by means of the Ecclesiastic Communities. The community, traditionally led by an informal council of the heads of families, manages access to collective resources (common land, water, share-tenancy practices), the redistribution or exchange of work (mutual help, day's work exchange) and an inter-family solidarity. This is seen by means of the donation of food or help without immediate return, in the cases of poor harvests, accidents or sickness within families. These practices were limited by repeated droughts in the latter years and are reproduced in moments of relative bounty. It is at these times, that promises previously made to the local patron saints (Saint Gonçalo, Saint Christopher) are paid, through dances, or get-togethers, for which the neighbours, friends and family relations are invited. The logic of the reciprocity system does not consider the exclusive production of use values or collective goods, but the creating of (human) "being" and sociability. If *to be sociable* means to give, to give means to produce. The logic of reciprocity also seeks, however, to increase the social and affective relations, for example, through a godparent (Lanna, 1995). The reciprocal sponsoring of children between two families, without family ties, is a very strong, extreme form of alliance which permits the multiplying of interpersonal networks outside of the local sphere, the social classes and of the socio-professional categories (Lanna, 1995). The relationship to others (an altering), as Darré (1986) showed, permits the peasant communities to modify their practices by integrating new norms. For example, the *palma* fodder cactus (*Opuntia sp.*) and the *algaroba* (*Prosopis juliflora*), were spontaneously disseminated by such interpersonal relationships between farmers, through proximity networks and neighbourliness, on a regional scale.

1.2 Peasant reciprocity practices and structures

In the communities of Juazeiro and Pintadas districts (BA) in San Francisco Sertão, but also in Solânea and Remígio in the Agreste region of Paraíba, there is seen a permanence of reciprocity transactions, through mechanisms of gifts (donations), of mutual help and by invitation. The inter-family gift is symmetric. It is seen in the dowries (trousseau) of the daughters and by donations (for the setting-up of the young people) made up of animals and their soon-to-be young, which had been attributed to each child since their birth. This generalising of gifts (which are offered to everybody), is verified in the invitations to local and religious festivities (the paying of promises, the celebration of patron saints), family parties (baptisms, weddings, funerals) or domestic feasts (the killing and cooking of an animal).

The reciprocity logic motivates an important part of the production, as well as its redistribution, but also management of resources and production factors. The "free" access to water reservoir, receding irrigation area, common grazing, community work help (by means of invitation or of mutual help), constitute a redistribution of production factors. This deals with a shared management of collective goods, but also with a form of productive gifts, in other words, of solidarity in the production. The constitution of the dowries, the celebrating of religious and family feasts, the hospitality (extended to the neighbours cattle in times of drought), are of so many forms of gifts which lead to a production growth, in accordance with the possibilities of each family and the climatic conditions. These costs, well above the average level of family consumption, explain also, in part, land extension dynamics, farming intensification processes or the adopting of cash crops, of multi-activities and also, of

migration.

Beyond complementary forms (mutual help) or collective interest (solidarity), the redistribution motivates the production within the boundary of gift reproduction, which goes on to constitute one of the principle engines of local economy (Temple, 1983). “*Give, receive and give back*” (Mauss, 1950) corresponds to the reciprocity destined to create sociability (*lien social*); but one can not take into account the “*other*” without worrying about the conditions of its existence. However, “*give, receive and give back*” do not just relate to the reproduction of the gift, “*but they also signify: produce to give, receive and produce to reproduce the gift, so as to give again*” (Temple, 1997). Thus, reciprocity generates, through redistribution, a socially motivated production. That constitutes an important economical development factor, which goes beyond the satisfaction of the elementary needs of the population (subsistence) or of the acquisition of material goods through exchange. Outside of infra-subsistence or crises situations, generally associated to the spoil of natural resources or to its degradation (soil, vegetation, drought), the Sertão rural communities would naturally generate surplus. An other reason for peasant poverty is the difficulties of access to resources provoked by agriculturally restrictive politics. The social motivation of production can be more powerful than the interest in gain or accumulation by means of merchant exchange (Temple & Chabal, 1995).

1.3 Mutual help practises

The term *mutirão* can indicate two types of mutual help: that which has to do with common and collective goods (construction or maintenance of roads, schools, water reservoirs), and the invitation to work in benefit of a single family. This invitation generally involves hard labour (land clearing, putting up a fence or building a house). The word comes from *mutirum* or *muxirum* in the Tupi language or from the Guarani language *potyrom*, which means *to put your hand to the plough*. It is called *batalhão* in Massaroca, *boleia* or *balaio* in other zones of Bahia. The *balaio* is a unit measure of agriculture products in a basket or cloth. Generally, the family, which is benefited, would offer a basket of food to the workers. In Pintadas (BA), the term *boi roubado* (stolen bull) is still used because, before, the farmer would kill a cow for the workers. Today, above all, he supplies sugar cane alcohol or beer.

This practice is associated with feasts to motivate reciprocal help. The number of day's work per family is not counted. The participation of all of the families in the community is desired: the young men and adults for the more arduous work, the children to clean water reservoirs and the women to prepare the *cassava* root.

This practice is not necessarily equal to all, because there is a giving back, but without counting of or symmetry of the transaction. There can also be a certain competition between families for the “redistribution” of food or drink. In this way, rivalry or challenges could be expressed in the good for all. The prodigality or generosity confers prestige and fame that are sources of authority or power in the economic system of reciprocity. Temple (1983), by observing indigenous and peasant communities in South America, has already proposed that reciprocity should be considered not as an egalitarian *gift rendering* (*the duality of the exchange* according to Polanyi) but as “*an obligation for each one to reproduce the gift, as a form of economic organisation and redistribution*”.

2. Predicaments of called community or participatory development

2.1 The dilemma of common goods

Traditionally, the community infrastructure collective management was limited to common grazing and to water reserves: wells, tanks among the rocks and small reservoirs. All the members of the community approve these infrastructures. In return, they have to assume certain tasks, such as, participating in the maintenance and cleaning, respect the use of each water hole (some are reserved for washing clothes and having baths, others are drinking water and others are yet for the animals). Peasants of Sertão knew how to find modes for common management of water reserves or common lands, contrary to the prophecies of Hardin (1968), which proclaimed the inexorable degradation of the common goods by excess of use, or those of Olson (1978) about the paradox of collective action weakness. Peasant communities did this without systematically compromising either its use or its reproduction.

In fact, new problems appeared with development projects. The water tanks and community dams, the cassava root treatment houses and the schools were multiplied with Church and State intervention. Before, the mobilisation of the community for commons maintenance was done through a specific type of *mutirão* by the *fazendeiro* or by the heads of the community. With the increasing and clientelist distribution of water tanks and small dams, the rigors of the maintenance and of motivation suffered a reduction when they were not involved in conflict. The rules of these new collective infrastructures are ambiguous in terms of using rights and responsibility. Conflict and negotiation on the maintenance arises between the users, but above all, with the public services. Some of these infrastructures, for example tiled or plastic cisterns, were soon shown as inadequate. Others, such as motor pumps, mechanised cassava houses and water treatment plants have a very high maintenance cost beyond the rural workers means. For the communities, in these cases, the State should assume the maintenance and the working of this collective equipment, which it builds for public use (especially before an election). The federal services, on their side, consider that they are common goods, fruit of co-operation between the population and the State, and their maintenance depends on local communities. This kind of common infrastructure would be transformed in public goods, in the sense given by Ostrom & Ostrom (1978). In fact, agriculture modernisation projects and, in particular irrigation in the San Francisco valley, compromised the previous equilibrium in matters of common and public goods management. The building of the Sobradinho dam lead to the end of fishing and receding irrigation in the region, without offering alternative forms of income for the communities involved. Land speculation in the potential irrigation areas provoked illegal invasion of the common grazing. The solution negotiated between the State and the peasants was the giving of collective land titles to community associations. This worked relatively well until the moment when the Federal Administration wanted to charge an elevated tax for unproductive land, to these common pastures.

2.2 The boundaries of the professional organisations

Today, the traditional rules of peasant reciprocity, which were essentially established around the redistribution of production factors (land, water, labour force and technologies) do not correspond anymore to the new demand of farming activities and, above all, to the conditions imposed by the public services intervention. Evolution and adaptations are necessary. The communities, however, seek new forms of organisation, mainly those proposed or imposed by public authorities and by external organisations (church, NGO). They do this so as to assume new roles: defence of professional interest and pensions funds administration for the peasant Unions, inputs supply and production marketing with the co-operatives, access to financing (credit) and collective equipment management in the case of community associations.

Integration to the market and the global society (administration, church, schools and technical services) has led the rural communities to adopt new structures of representation, co-operation and monetary exchange. All this was done, whereas, without abandoning the organisation forms and, above all, the values and practices of peasant reciprocity. Although a long way from bringing solutions, these new forms of organisation also create new problems in the sense that they ignore or disrespect the reciprocity rules or, they work exclusively, according to the contradictory principles of competition and exchange.

The co-operatives: The first rural co-operatives that were created in the Nordeste united big or medium-sized farmers, which thus managed to receive benefit from public help. This was the case of the cotton producers in Ceará and Paraíba, dairy producers in the semiarid regions of Bahia and Pernambuco. Smallholders held bitter memories of co-operatives management systems, which were generally associated to political interests and propitious to missing funds or corruption. The farmers were accustomed to say that “ *each co-operative had its owners* ”. In the study area, the main part of the co-operatives found is associated to an external tutelage. In the irrigated perimeters of Petrolina and Juazeiro, the co-operatives were directly founded by the State. In such Land Reform projects as Lagoa do Angico in Petrolina, or the May 2nd Land Settlement in Madalena (CE), the model of the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) prevailed. The manager is usually someone from the MST movement sent from the south of Brazil. In such conditions, when the rural workers are relieved of its administration, the co-operative becomes a new management authority of the common infrastructure (water, perimeter irrigation), a new middleman to market access (milk, fruit and cotton). It could also be seen as a new owner.

The farmers’ associations: Given its flexibility, the farmers’ associations constitute the model of local organisation that has been specially developed within the last twenty years. These associations are also a means for the State or for local municipalities to redistribute favours through the local politicians. The majority of associations was born from a set of three factors: a) the necessity of the local communities to get legal representation, b) the intervention of external actors (church, NGO’s, extension and public projects), c) the existence of help and finances reserved for community or association projects, generally with a productive end. The association is a non-profit making civil society, based on voluntary membership. It very often gets together the members of a community (or just the heads of families), but around the specific objective of an economic project. This project could be access to financing for collective equipment (schools, water, electricity, health post), commercial ends or the processing of produce. The associations should rewrite and publicise their statutes in the *Diário Oficial* (government white paper), elect and renew the directors and an auditing council. In reality, the community or their leaders readapt the rules. The elections are arranged beforehand. Important decisions are taken before the formal and public meetings into proximity power relationships circle among the families and local community groups.

At times, the association is not better than the co-operative at resolving the question of collective goods management. However, by facilitating access to individual credit (through a collective guarantee) the associations accelerate the processes of accumulation and capitalisation and also contribute to a socio-economic differentiation among farmers. This is not a surprise in a capitalist system. But, originally this was rarely the objective indicated to the farmers who can, logically, consider themselves misled.

- ***Up-dating or paralysing of reciprocity structures***

The new farmers' organisation correspond to socio-professional and voluntary structures. Nobody becomes a member of an association naturally or for reasons of birth, as is in the case of the community, but by free and voluntary choice and through a contract relation (payment of quotas). In spite of their productive specificity, the creation of producers' organisations can correspond to the modernisation of peasant reciprocity, or to the contrary, privilege the development of merchant exchange through the forming of co-operatives, for example.

The first case is verified with the community associations of Massaroca-BA, which were created to guarantee common grazing management (*fundo de pasto*) in a land speculation context, and the second with the co-operatives of the irrigated public perimeters of Petrolina and Juazeiro.

In all cases, the new organisations are destined to manage the interface between the local domestic world (family, community) and the external society (markets, administration and towns). At times, the change in the organisation system leads to a confusion of values and to the adoption of logic and strategies of a different, or even a contradictory nature. This was the case with the installation of the smallholders on the irrigated perimeters of the San Francisco Valley. Confronted with the logic of marketing integration with an intensive production of fruit and vegetables, they should completely change, not only their farming system, but also their system of values and references, or abandon irrigation (Sabourin et al., 1998). In the first irrigated perimeter of the region, Bebedouro (Petrolina-PE), occurred a conflict between the logic of market competition and that of the reciprocity development. Part of the smallholders, who had been installed by the State, continued to work according to a peasant logic. Satisfied with a family cattle business, sustained by irrigated fodder, they sought local prestige at the cattle rodeos. This situation continued and provoked a greater worry for the public services who desired to impose the production of mangoes and grapes, considered to be more lucrative, and in such a way as to guarantee the working of the co-operative that only commercialises fruit, but not cattle and trophies.

2.3 Participatory development: incoherence or contradiction?

In the Sertão communities, reciprocity is not obligatory, and neither is it exclusive to interests (individual or collective) and to exchange. In Brazil, as in other parts of the world, the indigenous communities also used exchange and all the peasant societies generally developed merchant commercial relations (Mendras, 1978). Simply, these societies were essentially founded on human values generated by the reciprocity (Temple & Chabal, 1995).

However, reciprocity is also indispensable to the majority of the families and, thus, to the quality of human relations and social order. For example, mutual help is necessary to face the peak periods or to carry out certain tasks (clearing land, branding of animals and making fences). To regenerate social relations it does not depend only on the proximity or solidarity. It has also to do with all the practices that contribute to relations knitting and lead to the making and respect of human values, in as much as the same productive structures are shared (Temple & Chabal, 1995). Caillé (1998:77) writes "*in a certain way, the gift is not disinterested. It simply benefits the interest of friendship (alliances, friendliness, and solidarity...) and of the pleasure or creativity over all instrumental interests and over obligation and compulsion. The obsession of the religions or numerous philosophies in seeking a gift which is fully disinterested, is, however, without objective.*" (our translation)

- ***Networks, mutual help and reciprocity***

In the practice of mutual help, day's work are not counted, but in the “*troca de diarias*” (daily's' exchange) they are registered and returned to the other family, at times to carry out the same type of work. This exchange could be monetary. Some farmers pay for the day's work instead of entering into a rendering of services. They thus assume their material obligation, but according to the community, not their social duty.

This is important, because certain practices of reciprocity (feasts, mutual help) suffer the competition of new exchange transactions (salaries, the sale of alcohol or the payment of a rate at a feast). While such practices are particularly associated to, or dominated, by exchange, they do not guarantee a modernising or an up-dating of new reciprocity structures susceptible to maintaining the same density of human relations, or the same quality of sociability. The exchange of daily pay is different to mutual help. Any person can substitute the head of the family. Paid work does not have anything to do with invitations to work: it is to do with monetary exchange. The meetings of the associations happen in a more formal way, less sociable than the proximity meetings. They are associated to credit (exchange), with politics (elections and favours), to tractors or trucks management (exchange and competition). These are logical evidence of a capitalist system. But it was not to guarantee this kind of role or function and in agreement with these rules, that Nordeste smallholders agreed to create the associations. They trusted the technicians, the priests or politicians who offered the associations as a way to access to new richness, new knowledge or new collective equipment, which for them should have, before anything else, contributed to an expansion of reciprocity or a generalising of redistribution.

- ***Redistribution or misappropriation***

In the same way, communities and farmer organisations strategies are not always well thought of by technicians or local politicians, who denounce an alienation when not corruption by the peasant leaders. Temple (1983) explains that peasant and indigenous organisations leaders who receive help or capital from external groups *are submitted to two external pressures: those of the community who demand redistribution and those of the institutions of development who demand investment for accumulation*. So as not to be condemned by their members, the leaders have to redistribute. This is considered by the technicians to be misappropriation or corruption of funds. But the peasants or the indigenous communities, *who intend to perpetuate their system of reciprocity and gift, consider this redistribution which ends investment of a destructive system of its values, as a just act, and even a revolutionary one* (Temple, 1993).

Following on from the same logic, it is not rare to see peasant or communities involved in technical investments or accepting productive projects - *a priori* incoherent - in the perspective of participating in new social relations, that is, strengthening reciprocity structures. Smallholders of Pintadas and Massaroca take on considerable expense and mutual work to build rodeo parks and horse racing tracks. Given the importance of the feast and the prestige of the challenge, the investments, even monetary, are generally profitable. The productive infrastructures (cassava houses, garages for tractors and warehouses), are, very often, accepted or sought after by the community to use them as a party room, a chapel, a meeting room or as school rooms. It is to say for religious, spiritual or cultural functions, and not for productive projects. Thus there are seen in the Sertão, cassava houses where cassava is not grown anymore and warehouses with no products to stock. Field days are accepted by the farmers to get transport, a good lunch and space for chatting or partying, more that for hearing a talk on hydroponics corn farming.

- *Agriculture as a public good*

The question of rural development logic, exchange and/or reciprocity, is extremely actual and ranges over the debate on agriculture multifunctionality, in particular, if agriculture is considered to be a public good (FAO, 1999). Bindraban *et al.*, (1999) show that in the production of positive external economic effect (natural resources management and carbon sequestration), as well as in the creating of negative one (maintenance costs of public goods, pollution treatment costs) there are several social, ecological and economical “global” functions involved. These roles confer on the agriculture a public character, where diverse functions implicate, according to the authors in (a) a non-exclusive access to goods and services (generalisation of redistribution) and (b) indivisibility of the effects (positive or negative) of farming production (amplifying of reciprocity and non-alienability of resources).

On the other hand, vast agricultural areas on the planet would be condemned if free trade became general without offering alternatives. Competition would strengthen the tendency of the reduction of farming prices, only if the liberalisation was limited to zones with high farming potential. To the contrary, it would be necessary to guarantee, at the same time, the redistribution of production valorising the comparative or specific advantages in zones with a reduced agricultural potential. The authors realise that the major risk of such a scene would be the weaknesses of farmer organisations, if they were incapable of guaranteeing, at the same time, resources preservation and their families needs. They recommend to the FAO, for certain rural societies, the maintaining of the protection measures and of politics, which favour the up-dating of the multifunctional character of agriculture.

Such measures could very well correspond to a price differentiation in accordance with the nature of the transaction and of the market (monetary exchange, barter, reciprocity, gift), or with the nature of the produce and of the forming of its value (market value, use value or prestige value). In this way, the frontiers in the interface between systems that are regulated by free trade/exchange or by reciprocity would be set out. On the other hand, to guarantee the strength and the legitimacy of producers’ organisations (peasants, natives, craftsmen, farmers or agri-business), particularly in terms of common resources or collective goods management, it would still be necessary to leave them the possibility of several choices. These choices would be between the dynamics of competition /exchange/private enterprise and the alternative “reciprocity/redistribution/free access”. The question remains as to the future of natural resources or cultivated ecosystems of the planet and of social peace - starting from the recognising of forms of legitimacy, of authority and of citizenship, founded on the reciprocity, which generates sociability, the matrix of human values.

Conclusion

The facts and examples quoted confirm the different nature, perhaps even contradictory, of the economic logic of reciprocity and that of exchange. Each economic logic could be verified in reality, whereas the two could outweigh respective advantages and, above all, some precedents and some credits, which are probably irreversible. Our proposal is not to deny this reality, or to propose a feedback to the origins. In terms of local or regional development, one cannot be concerned with, the claim to exclusivity of this or that dialectic, but yes, of a double reference. As Temple (1997) has underlined, the political and public recognising of a reciprocity economy would permit the delimiting of a system interface and open a debate between this or that logic. This debate would be to deal, for example, with the nature of the rural or local organisations, about the delegation of

power and about the norms and principles of common or public goods management. It would be also, in a more global and general way, about values that should guide or fund social and economic development projects. While the political economy recognises only one logic economy, that of exchange, it would be the height of unique thinking, even though disguised, of various schools and theories.

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