
**A TERRA DOS CABLOCOS: O PROCESSO DE TERRITORIALIZAÇÃO DO
LITORAL SUL DA PARAÍBA¹**

**THE CABLOCOS' LAND: TERRITORIALIZATION ON THE SOUTHERN COAST OF
PARAÍBA**

**LA TIERRA DE LOS "CABOCLOS": EL PROCESO DE TERRITORIALIZACIÓN
DEL LITORAL SUR DE PARAÍBA**

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Abstract

This article analyzes the associativist movement of the Tabajaras of Barra de Gramame, on the Southern Coast of Paraíba, based on an ethnography focused on domestic organization and neighborhood networks. I argue that the associative phenomenon emerges as an outgrowth of the internal logic of domestic organization, functioning as a mechanism of mediation between domestic units, the State, and the market. My research, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2010-2013 and resumed in 2022, demonstrates how the local categories of collective economy and individual economy structure domestic groupings and their forms of cooperation. I also investigate neighborhood networks, understood as associations based on the sharing of moral principles and forms of economic management that transcend mere spatial proximity. Finally, I discuss how associations act in legitimizing socially recognized land arrangements, such as partnerships, in the face of state interpretations and regulations. My analysis contributes to the understanding of territorial dynamics and the adaptation processes of traditional groups in the Brazilian Northeast, engaging with anthropological debates on ethnicity, territoriality, and customary rights.

Keywords: Tabajara Indigenous People. Associativism. Domestic Organization. Neighborhood Networks. Territory.

Resumo

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Este artigo analisa o movimento associativista dos Tabajaras da Barra de Gramame, no Litoral Sul da Paraíba, a partir de uma etnografia focada na organização doméstica e nas redes de vizinhança. Argumento que o fenômeno associativo emerge como um desdobramento da lógica interna da organização doméstica, funcionando como um mecanismo de mediação entre as unidades domésticas, o Estado e o mercado. Minha pesquisa, baseada em trabalho de campo etnográfico realizado entre 2010-2013 e retomado em 2022, demonstra como as categorias locais de *economia coletiva* e *economia individual* estruturam os agrupamentos domésticos e suas formas de cooperação. Investigo ainda as *redes de vizinhança*, entendidas como associações baseadas na partilha de princípios morais e formas de gestão econômica que transcendem a mera proximidade espacial. Por fim, discuto como as associações atuam na legitimação de arranjos fundiários socialmente reconhecidos, como as *parcerias*, frente às interpretações e regulamentações estatais. Minha análise contribui para a compreensão da dinâmica territorial e dos processos de adaptação de grupos tradicionais no Nordeste brasileiro, inserindo-se em debates antropológicos sobre etnicidade, territorialidade e direitos consuetudinários.

Palavras-Chave: Indígenas Tabajara. Associativismo. Organização Doméstica. Redes de Vizinhança. Território.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el movimiento asociacionista de los Tabajara de la Barra de Gramame, en el Litoral Sur de Paraíba, Brasil, a partir de una etnografía centrada en la organización doméstica y las redes de vecindad. Sostengo que el fenómeno asociativo emerge como un desdoblamiento de la lógica interna de la organización doméstica, funcionando como un mecanismo de mediación entre las unidades domésticas, el Estado y el mercado. Mi investigación, basada en trabajo de campo etnográfico realizado entre 2010-2013 y retomado en 2022, demuestra cómo las categorías locales de *economía colectiva* y *economía individual* estructuran los agrupamientos domésticos y sus formas de cooperación. Investigo, además, las redes de vecindad, entendidas como asociaciones basadas en el compartir principios morales y formas de gestión económica que trascienden la mera proximidad espacial. Finalmente, discuto cómo las asociaciones actúan en la legitimación de arreglos de tenencia de la tierra socialmente reconocidos, como las asociaciones en parcela, frente a las interpretaciones y regulaciones estatales. Mi análisis contribuye a la comprensión de la dinámica territorial y de los procesos de adaptación de grupos tradicionales en el Noreste brasileño, insertándose en los debates antropológicos sobre etnicidad, territorialidad y derechos consuetudinarios.

Palabras Clave: Indígenas Tabajara. Asociacionismo. Organización Doméstica. Redes de Vecindad. Territorio.

1 INTRODUCTION

During my journeys through the Southern Coast of Paraíba, particularly in Barra de Gramame, I was confronted with the complex history of resistance and reorganization of the Tabajara people. The history of indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Northeast, as I experienced and documented, is marked by complex processes of attempts at legal and social erasure followed by contemporary

mobilizations for ethnic and territorial recognition. The Tabajara people of the southern coast of Paraíba constitute an emblematic case of this phenomenon, often described in anthropological literature as part of the movement of ethnic “resurgence” or “reemergence” (Pacheco de Oliveira, 2004). Officially declared extinct in the 19th century through legal devices aimed at releasing land for the emerging real estate market, the Tabajara resurfaced on the political scene in 2005, demanding the return of their expropriated lands and recognition of their specific indigenous identity.

In this article, I aim to analyze the associativist movement of the Tabajara of the Barra de Gramame Village, located in the municipality of Conde, Paraíba. From my ethnographic perspective, I seek to understand how the formation and operation of the local association do not constitute an isolated or merely instrumental phenomenon but are intrinsically linked to domestic social organization and the networks of relationships that structure social and economic life on the Southern Coast of Paraíba. My research is anchored in fieldwork conducted during two main periods: first, participant observation between 2010 and 2013, which resulted in my undergraduate thesis (Pereira, 2014), and a return to the field starting in 2022, when I was invited to actively participate in the process of restructuring the Tabajara Indigenous Association of the Barra de Gramame Village.

My central argument is that Tabajara associativism emerges as an organic outgrowth of the logic of domestic organization and the neighborhood networks that characterize the local way of life. Associations act as strategic mediators between domestic groups, the State, and the market, legitimizing and enabling local forms of labor and territory management that often come into tension with hegemonic legal and administrative models. This perspective allows me to understand associativism not as a simple adoption of exogenous organizational forms but as a creative re-elaboration of pre-existing social practices, adapted to new political and legal conditions. To develop this analysis, I have structured the article into five main sections, in addition to this introduction. In the second section, I contextualize the historical process of territorialization and dispossession of the Tabajara, highlighting the crucial events that shaped their contemporary relationships with land and the State. In the third section, I examine the concepts of domestic organization, collective economy, and individual economy among the Tabajara, using the theoretical framework of Wilk (1984) and discussing their implications for understanding local political leadership. In the fourth section, I investigate neighborhood networks, analyzing how these networks, based

on shared moral principles and forms of management, transcend geographical proximity and enable complex cooperative and land arrangements. In the fifth section, I discuss the specific role of the association, analyzing its formation, operation, and how it translates and negotiates the demands of domestic groups with state agencies. Finally, in the conclusion, I revisit the main arguments and reflect on their implications for studies on social movements and indigenous territoriality in contemporary Brazil.

My methodology is predominantly ethnographic, based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Insertion into the field was uniquely facilitated by historical friendship ties between my family and community members, which allowed me deep access and a relationship of trust with my interlocutors, especially with Chief (Cacique) Carlinhos Tabajara and his kin. This position, far from being an obstacle, proved fundamental for understanding the nuances of the social relationships I seek to analyze.

2 TERRITORIALIZATION AND DETERRITORIALIZATION: A HISTORY OF TABAJARA STRUGGLE

When beginning my fieldwork, I needed to understand the deep historical marks that configure the Tabajara present. The historical Tabajara territory dates back to the colonial period when their ancestors inhabited the coast and were territorialized through the Jacoca and Arataguy mission villages in 1614 (Mura; Palitot; Marques, 2015). The Jacoca Land Grant (Sesmaria da Jacoca), granted in recognition of services rendered as allies of the Portuguese, constituted for centuries the basis of their physical and cultural reproduction. However, what I witnessed in my research were the lasting effects of a process of dispossession.

The first major official dispossession occurred in the 19th century with the enactment of the Land Law of 1850. This legislation, as pointed out by Spinelli (2022), was crucial for the formation of private property on the Southern Coast, as it created the legal concept of “devolutas” (unclaimed public lands). These lands, seen as unoccupied by the State, were in fact the territories of traditional indigenous occupation, which began to be auctioned and sold to private individuals. In the 1860s, the Tabajara mission villages of Jacoca and Alhandra were declared extinct by the imperial government, and the engineer Justa Araújo executed a forced subdivision of

the lands in 1866, confining 58 indigenous families to small individual plots while most of their former land grant was transformed into large estates (latifúndios).

In my conversations with the elders, I realized how this legal dispossession was followed by a process of social and symbolic invisibilization. The Tabajara ethnic identity was systematically diluted into generic social categories, such as “caboclo”, “pardo”, or “moreno”, a political strategy that served to deny their specific territorial rights. The lands that remained for these families continued to be targeted by land grabbing and the expansion of large estates throughout the 20th century. The central event that marks the group's contemporary memory, and which I heard repeatedly in emotionally charged narratives, is the final dispossession of the “Sítio dos Caboclos” (Mura; Palitot; Marques, 2015), a common-use land that had resisted until the mid-20th century. This dispossession, which occurred in the 1950s, is attributed to the powerful Lundgren family, consolidating what my interlocutors call the “expulsion”.

For decades, as I learned from the stories shared in conversation circles, the history of dispossession and the indigenous identity of this people remained as “subterranean memory” transmitted orally within domestic groups. This memory was the trigger for the ethnic mobilization that began in 2005, when the descendant families of the former residents of Sítio dos Caboclos sought out the National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples (FUNAI) to claim their rights. Today, the Tabajara people fight for institutional recognition and the demarcation of their traditional territory, occupying and resisting in the heart of their former land grant, mainly in the municipality of Conde.

In my fieldwork, I also noted that the Southern Coast of Paraíba, recognized for its mineral relevance (especially the presence of limestone and clay) and coastal tourism potential, has been the target of significant interest from private actors. However, such interests often result in conflicts with traditional communities. These tensions are aggravated by historical practices of land grabbing and possessory dispossession, the occurrence of which intensified between 1910 and 2018. The practice of dispossession in the region depended on a developed network of land grabbing, where notary offices played a crucial role in the “institutionalization of land grabbing” (Spinelli; Silva, 2021). Understanding this history of dispossession was fundamental for me, as it does not constitute a distant background but a living presence that structures current relationships with land, the State, and others. Narratives about the past are not mere memories but political instruments that guide actions in the present and shape strategies of resistance and territorial reorganization.

3 DOMESTIC ORGANIZATION, COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL ECONOMY

In my first ethnographic incursions between 2010 and 2013, I encountered a complex system of social organization that seemed to articulate around principles distinct from those I knew from anthropological literature on indigenous peoples in “more isolated” contexts. It was only by immersing myself in the daily life of Barra de Gramame that I began to understand the internal logic structuring domestic and economic relations. Following Wilk (1984), I came to understand domestic organization as the way domestic units structure themselves and function, articulating moral, symbolic, productive, and resource transmission dimensions. In turn, the domestic unit refers to a group of people who share fundamental activities of production, consumption, and reproduction, regardless of cohabiting the same space. Among the Tabajara of Barra de Gramame, domestic organization articulates around two central native categories for labor management that I identified in my observations: the *collective economy* and the *individual economy* (Pereira, 2014). The *collective economy* encompasses activities that integrate the domestic group, such as farming, fishing in certain modes, and house construction. These are tasks where effort is pooled, and the resulting income or products are managed by the head of the unit or the domestic grouping (*household cluster*) (Wilk, 1984, pp.17-19). The head, in turn, has the obligation to provide for the members, negotiate with external employers, and mediate conflicts. The *individual economy*, on the other hand, is linked to activities that require specific skills from certain members, such as certain modes of artisanal fishing, beekeeping, or specialized services (e.g., tractor operator). In these cases, remuneration is more directly associated with the individual, although they are expected to contribute to the sustenance of the domestic group. These categories, as I observed and analyzed in previous work (Pereira, 2014), are not mutually exclusive. Ideally, an individual should engage in both, balancing their contribution to the collective with the development of their particular skills.

This structure resonated with Wilk's (1984) analysis of the Kekchi Maya, where the author identifies production interactions of the *tight* type (rigid), associated with food security and self-consumption, and *Loose* (flexible), linked to market activities and individualized skills. The Tabajara collective economy would correspond to the *tight*

type, while the individual economy would approximate the *loose* type. The management between these two spheres is crucial and falls largely to the head of the aggregated domestic grouping (*household cluster*), a figure who accumulates prestige, possesses a broad network of relations in the *local political community*³, and whose authority often correlates with political leadership in a larger sphere (such as a chief or shaman).

In my observations, I found that the head of the domestic aggregate must meet three basic prerequisites: 1) possess an income higher than that of the other nuclear families in the aggregate; 2) maintain a good relationship with members of the local political community; and 3) have an untarnished reputation in that community. This configuration seemed revealing to me, as it demonstrated how political leadership was rooted in economic management capacity and social relations, not just in formal or traditional attributes.

Thus, the case I observed closely that illustrates this dynamic was that of Chief (Cacique) Carlinhos, who, in addition to being a recognized political leader, was the main manager of his domestic grouping. He coordinated collective economy activities (such as collective planting during certain times of the year) and also mediated the placement of young people in individual economy jobs, such as construction work or specialized fishing. His authority derived both from his traditional knowledge and his ability to negotiate with the external world, including public agencies and non-indigenous employers. This arrangement is not static but historically adapts to land policies and ecological conditions. Domestic organization thus reveals itself as a dynamic moral and economic system, which provides the foundation upon which other forms of association and collective action are built. In my analyses, I realized that understanding this domestic logic was essential for deciphering the broader forms of political and associative organization I would go on to study.

³ Mura and Barbosa da Silva (2011) termed **local political community** certain particularities that can only be observed at a local (micro) scale: “*we are referring to a local scale level, whose specificities are relevant, such as the dimension of kinship and interpersonal interactions as the basis for defining political alliances, moralities, and technical and economic practices. For this reason, in this second case, we prefer to speak of 'local political communities'*” (Mura; Barbosa da Silva, 2011, p. 117, our translation). According to the authors, this notion is understood in a Weberian framework (Weber, 2001), referring to forms of social action in which groups constitute a shared framework of morals, practices, and techniques. They define these social groups as domestic groups, considering them key elements for mapping these actions on a local scale.

Figure 1: Collective economy activity: women and children gathering material for building temporary housing. Photo: Antônio Cardoso, March 2025



4 NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORKS AND LAND ARRANGEMENTS: BEYOND SPATIAL PROXIMITY

As I deepened my insertion in Barra de Gramame, I began to realize that Tabajara domestic organization articulated with a broader social phenomenon I came to define as *neighborhood networks*. Initially, I had a narrower conception of neighborhood, associated with geographical proximity. However, my field experiences showed me something different. Unlike conceptions that restrict it to cohabitation or geographical proximity (Pitt-Rivers, 1992), I understood these networks as forms of association based on the sharing of moral principles and forms of economic management, which can include individuals and domestic groups dispersed territorially. I treated them as a system of communication and cooperation that enables association or dissociation in leisure and work activities. My concept approached Barth's (1978) notion of social scale, which emphasizes the correlation between social groups and institutions, considering the flow of knowledge. In the neighborhood networks of the Southern Coast, as I could observe, fishermen, indigenous people, quilombolas, and settlers share knowledge about the territory, such as fishing spots (*bocas de barra*) and narratives about spiritual entities, regardless of their formal religious affiliations. This common cultural flow (Barth, 1987) proved fundamental for cooperation.

A striking example of this dynamic occurred with Jean, son of Mr. Brasil, a fisherman I met through my family relations (Jean's father was the godfather of my father). Although residing in Jacumã, Jean maintained intense fishing relations with partners in Abiaí, in Pitimbu/PB. When his request for the *defeso* benefit (a benefit given to fishermen to not fish during certain times of the year – mainly during the reproduction period of endangered marine species) was denied based on a territorial criterion (his residence in Jacumã prevented access to the Abiaí *defeso*), it generated outrage not only in him but among the fishermen who knew his operational reality. This case made me understand that the neighborhood, for my interlocutors, was not limited to municipal boundaries or formal residence, but to networks of cooperation and work circuits. It was within the scope of these networks that I observed the development of crucial land arrangements, such as partnerships (*parcerias*), which, unlike formal lease⁴ – seen locally as an “ordinary way of making money” or of “creating enemies” –

⁴ The Tabajara Indigenous people hold the status of agrarian reform settlers (*assentados*) under the State. This category prohibits these populations from engaging in lease agreements. This ethnic group seeks recognition to obtain collective land title, thereby ensuring that, beyond the prohibition of leasing, there is no possibility for their land tenure certificates to become private property titles – which would

, is an informal contract based on trust and reciprocity. A case I followed closely involved Chief (Cacique) Carlinhos, who ceded part of his farming space to work together with a quilombola family from the region. Initially, the agreement provided for the division of production (one-third for the quilombola family), but it evolved into payment in daily wages (paid by the quilombola family), as the quilombola family integrated into the social dynamics of the Tabajara domestic group. This transformation in the agreement was not merely economic but social. As they participated in parties, commensality relations, and other events with the Tabajara family, the quilombola partners became more integrated into the neighborhood network, and the terms of the partnership adjusted to this new relationship. This showed me how partnerships are living relationships that transform as social relations deepen.

Such arrangements often come into tension with land legislation, such as the Land Statute and INCRA Normative Instruction No. 99/2019, which operate with the concept of *family unit*, generally interpreted as a nuclear family. Partnerships, however, involve logics of extended family and neighborhood networks. In my observations, the actions of a notary in Conde, starting in 2021, who began to interpret some analogous cases as “usufruct cession,” demonstrated how state agents can, at times, incorporate and legitimize – albeit partially – this traditional knowledge, creating new sub-traditions (Barth, 1987) in the interpretation of land relations. This interaction between local knowledge and official interpretations proved fascinating. The notary, Dra. Sílvia Helena Schmidt, gained notable esteem among locals, to the point of receiving the title of honorary citizen of Conde, a recognition directly linked to her interpretations favorable to the organization of domestic groups. In my conversations, I perceived that her actions had created a new repertoire – the “partnership in the style of notary Schmidt” – which coexisted with other traditional forms of partnership. Therefore, neighborhood networks showed me to be the terrain where cooperative and land practices that escape the State's formal models are negotiated and legitimized. They represent a local political community (Mura; Barbosa da Silva, 2011), with its own moralities and techniques, which constantly dialogues and disputes meanings with official institutions. For me, understanding these networks was essential for

allow sale to third parties (such as industry owners, resort chains, etc.). For further information, see: Brazilian Lei (Law) nº 13.465/2017.

deciphering not only economic strategies but the very foundations of social life on the Southern Coast.

Figure 2: Work in partnership: nuclear family of Marcos (quilombola) with relatives of Chief (Cacique) Carlinhos. Personal archive, 2013.



5 ASSOCIATIVISM AS MEDIATION: THE BARRA DE GRAMAME ASSOCIATION

When I returned to Barra de Gramame in 2022, after almost a decade away, I was confronted with a phenomenon I had already perceived in germ in my previous work but which now presented itself in a more consolidated and complex form: the formal associativist movement of the Tabajara. The Tabajara Indigenous Association of the Barra de Gramame Village emerged, in my analysis, as a strategic unfolding of the organizational logic I had already studied. Its central function, I could observe, was to mediate the relationship between domestic groups, with their organization based on collective/individual economy and neighborhood networks, and the spheres of the State and the market. The formation of the association is directly linked, in my understanding, to land conflicts and the struggle for ethnic recognition. Historical

processes of dispossession, such as the forced subdivision of the lands of the Jacoca Land Grant in the 19th century and the expropriation of the Sítio dos Caboclos by the Lundgren family in the mid-20th century (Mura; Palitot; Marques, 2015) created a context of legal insecurity that I learned about through the narratives of the elders. More recently, pressure from mining ventures and agribusiness on the territory, especially after the creation of the Paraíba Cement Complex, intensified these conflicts and led to splits in Tabajara political organization, with each village forming its own autonomous association.

Associação dos Tabajara de Barra de Gramame (The Association of the Tabajara of Barra de Gramame) currently presided over by Juscelino Tabajara, son of Chief (Cacique) Carlinhos, exemplified how the associative structure was molded to domestic organization. Although it had 55 formal members (who paid dues), its meetings gathered about 100 people, and its network of influence reached approximately 500 individuals. This happened because the heads of domestic units, often the same ones who held positions of political leadership, represented their kin in the association. The meetings, significantly, were summarily presided over by Chief (Cacique) Carlinhos, and not just by the formal president, indicating the primacy of traditional authority in the decision-making process. My active participation in the restructuring of the association in 2022-2024 allowed me to observe this process up close. Together with Juscelino Tabajara, I acted as the drafter of the new statute, while my older brother served as the final reviewer. Decisions were made by consensus, which required numerous debates and meetings. During this time, I could observe the significant growth and expansion of interactions and social relations in the Barra de Gramame Village, a direct result of the activism work developed by the group.

The association acted, in my analysis, on multiple fronts: seeking resources via cultural grants and government projects, it negotiated with agencies like INCRA and FUNAI and politically represented the group at the Municipal and State levels. It thus functioned as a “corporation” in the terms of Bohannan (1964), converting local authority based on kinship and neighborhood networks into a legal entity recognized by the State. This process allowed the Tabajara to access resources, negotiate rights, and defend their territory within the national legal framework, without completely abandoning their social logics derived from neighborhood networks. One aspect that particularly caught my attention was how the association dealt with tensions between customary law and federal legislation. Analyzing INCRA Normative Instruction No.

99/2019, I realized that its provisions using the term “family unit” without the proper conceptual distinction between nuclear family and extended family generated discomfort and debate among my interlocutors. The association then became a space where these tensions were negotiated and where ways were sought to adapt local practices to formal requirements or to contest these requirements when incompatible with the traditional way of life.

This associative model did not seem unique to the Tabajara. In my forays into other communities on the Southern Coast, I observed a similar configuration in other traditional communities, such as in the Acaú-Goiana Extractive Reserve (RESEX) (76km² of the Tabajara Association of Barra de Gramame), where associations brought together members from various municipalities and acted in the management of common territory (Silva, 2022). Associativism thus appeared as a historical and adaptive form of organization that allowed traditional groups to face external pressures and negotiate their physical and cultural reproduction in the contemporary world (Targino, 2012).

My analysis of the association in light of Bohannan's theory and the *memorandum of Associação Brasileira de Antropologia* (the Brazilian Anthropology Association) (Mura; Moreira; Barbosa da Silva, 2020) reinforced my conviction about the inadequacy of interpreting indigenous and traditional land possession through the narrow lenses of private civil property. Land, for these groups, is a dynamic territory, the foundation of their cultural reproduction, and the association emerges as an instrument to defend this *sui generis* conception before a legal order that often ignores or antagonizes it.

Figure 3: Declaration by President Juscelino Tabajara attesting to the author's collaboration in restructuring the association. Source: Personal Archive, 2024.



Associação Indígena Tabajara da Aldeia Barra de Gramame
CNPJ: 17.831.706/0001-06
Av. Beira Mar S/N - Aldeia
58.322-000 - Barra de Gramame - Conde - Paraíba

DECLARAÇÃO

Eu, Juscelino Silva de Souza Tabajara, na qualidade de Presidente, declaro para os devidos fins que Caio Tácito Rodrigues Pereira prestou auxílio fundamental na organização da documentação necessária para a regularização da Associação do povo indígena Tabajara da Aldeia Barra de Gramame.

O trabalho de Caio foi crucial para garantir que toda a documentação estivesse em conformidade com as exigências legais e administrativas, contribuindo significativamente para o fortalecimento da associação e a promoção dos direitos dos membros da comunidade.

Agradecemos sinceramente a dedicação e o empenho de Caio Tácito Rodrigues Pereira em apoiar nossa causa.

Aldeia Barra de Gramame - Conde PB.15/05/2024

Juscelino Silva de Souza Tabajara

Presidente da Associação Indígena Tabajara da Aldeia Barra de Gramame

6 METHODOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY: REFLECTIONS ON AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF RETURN

Reflecting on my methodological path, I perceive that my research falls within what could be called an “ethnography of return.” My first contact with the Tabajara of Barra de Gramame occurred between 2010 and 2013, when I conducted the research for my Undergraduate Thesis (Pereira, 2014). During that period, my insertion into the field was facilitated by pre-existing family relations: my father had developed a friendship with community members in the 1980s, and this shared history opened doors that would probably have been closed to an external researcher.

When I returned in 2022, initially for family reasons (the passing of my father), I was surprised by the invitation to assist in restructuring the association. This return

was not planned as a field return but transformed into a unique opportunity to observe processes of change and continuity. My position was, therefore, complex: simultaneously a researcher, a community ally, and someone carrying a shared family history. This hybrid position presented both challenges and opportunities. The methodology combined intensive participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. I participated in association meetings, community parties, fishing and agricultural activities, and religious ceremonies. My familiarity with the region and the people allowed me access to spaces and conversations that might have been inaccessible to an external observer. However, this same familiarity required constant reflexivity on my part about my role and how my own analytical categories might be shaped by my personal relations.

One methodological aspect I would like to highlight is what I call the “ethnography of documentation”. By acting directly in the drafting and reviewing of the association's documents, I was able to observe up close how legal and bureaucratic categories were translated, appropriated, and given meaning by community members. This practical experience complemented my more traditional observations and provided me with valuable insights into the processes of mediation between the local and the federal. Thus, my analyses were also enriched by what I learned from studies on the flow of knowledge by Barth (1987) and on domestic organization by Wilk (1984). These theoretical perspectives helped me go beyond analyses that take culture as something static and homogeneous, allowing me to focus on the dynamic processes of continuous adaptation and cultural flow. At the same time, my field experiences constantly challenged me to refine and complexify these theoretical tools, creating a productive dialogue between theory and ethnography.

I recognize that my research has limitations. By being strongly focused on Barra de Gramame and its immediate networks, I could not explore with the same depth the dynamics in other Tabajara villages or in non-indigenous communities in the region. Furthermore, my position as someone with historical ties to the community, although facilitating access, may also have influenced the type of information I had access to and the interpretations I developed. I sought to mitigate these limitations through data triangulation and constant reflexivity about my role in the field.

7 CONCLUSION

My ethnography of the associativist movement of the Tabajara of Barra de Gramame revealed to me the profound interconnection between domestic organization, social networks, and formal collective action. Far from being an exogenous or merely instrumental creation, the association emerged in my analysis as an organic unfolding of this group's internal social logic. It is shaped by the categories of collective and individual economy that structure domestic groupings and is operated through the extensive neighborhood networks that link people beyond village boundaries. My study demonstrated how these networks enable complex land arrangements, such as partnerships, which are morally legitimized locally but often tense state legal categories. The association then acts as a crucial instance of mediation. It translates the needs and practices of domestic groups into bureaucratic and legal language, negotiates with public agencies, seeks resources, and defends the territory. In doing so, it performs a double function: it allows the Tabajara to access the instruments of the nation-state while seeking to preserve the integrity of their way of life and their dynamic conception of territory.

This analysis contributes, in my perspective, to the broader understanding of territorial dynamics and ethnic mobilization processes in the Brazilian Northeast. It shows that the formation of associations are not isolated phenomena but are rooted in domestic histories, long-term adaptive strategies, and systems of knowledge that continually negotiate their existence with surrounding power structures. The Tabajara case illustrates the capacity for agency and social innovation of traditional groups, who, from their own institutions and relational logics, build complex paths to assert their rights and project their future in the 21st century.

I point out that the research also indicates the need to rethink the legal and political categories through which the Brazilian State relates to traditional peoples. The tensions between local partnership practices and land legislation, as well as the difficulties in framing Tabajara domestic organization within INCRA's concepts of "family unit", reveal deep incompatibilities that require not only technical adjustments but more substantive transformations in how we conceive territorial rights and forms of collective life. Finally, my experience of "ethnography of return" reinforced in me the importance of methodological approaches that recognize the historicity of research relations and the researcher's position. My long-term involvement with the Tabajara community was not an obstacle to knowledge but a condition of possibility for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the social processes I sought to analyze. I hope

this article contributes not only to anthropological studies on indigenous peoples and social movements but also to methodological reflections on how to conduct ethnography in contexts of prolonged and committed relationships.

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