



**BETWEEN PRACTICES,
SUSTAINABILITY, AND CHALLENGES
TO AGRO-EXTRACTIVIST WOMEN
IN RIO CAJARI RESERVE, AMAPÁ,
BRAZIL**

**ENTRE PRÁTICAS, SUSTENTABILIDADE E DESAFIOS PARA
AS AGROEXTRATIVISTAS NA RESERVA DO RIO CAJARI,
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ENTRE PRÁTICAS, SUSTENTABILIDADE E DESAFIOS PARA AS AGROEXTRATIVISTAS NA RESERVA DO RIO CAJARI, AMAPÁ, BRASIL

Marília Lobato¹ | Raylan Miranda Cortez²

Arley José Silveira da Costa³ | François Laurent⁴

Ana Karolina Lima Pedrada⁵ | Carolina Lavini Lobato de Souza⁶

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¹ PhD in Socio-Environmental Development (UFPA).

Professor at the Federal University of Amapá.

Macapá - AP, Brazil.

E-mail: mariliaunifap@gmail.com

² Master's student in Sustainable Amazon Development

(UNIFAP). Macapá - AP, Brazil.

E-mail: rayllancortez16@gmail.com

³ PhD in Sciences (USP).

Professor at the Fluminense Federal University.

Niterói - RJ.

E-mail: arleycosta@id.uff.br

⁴ PhD in Hydrology (Mines de Paris - PSL).

Professor at Le Mans Université. Le Mans, France.

E-mail: francois.Laurent@univ-lemans.fr

⁵ PhD in Socio-Environmental Development (UFPA).

Professor at the Federal Institute of Amapá.

Santana - AP, Brazil.

E-mail: ana.lima@ifap.edu.br

⁶ Undergraduate student in Physical Education (UNIFAP).

Macapá - AP, Brazil.

Email: lobato3301@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the labor dynamics of agroextractivist women in the Rio Cajari Extractive Reserve, located in the state of Amapá, Brazil. The research aimed to analyze women's participation in family-based production systems and its implications for the development of rural agroextractivist communities. Employing a qualitative methodological framework, the study draws on semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted with agroextractivist workers in the communities of Água Branca, Martins, and Santarém between June 2022 and June 2024. Findings indicate that women participate across the entire Brazil nut production chain, in subsistence-oriented family agriculture, and in social organizations such as associations and cooperatives. Beside their extensive involvement in productive and political spheres, women continue to shoulder domestic responsibilities—an essential but frequently undervalued dimension of survival for agroextractivist families in the reserve. The study concludes that peasant labor within the RESEX Cajari is intrinsically linked to the empowerment of agroextractivist women, a process that is consolidated through collective forms of organization. However, this empowerment is paradoxically accompanied by a disproportionate workload, as women bear the brunt of rural, political, and domestic labor demands.

Key-words: Rural development, Women's labor, Family-based production, Agro-extractivism, RESEX Cajari

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa investigou a dinâmica do trabalho da mulher agroextrativista na Reserva Extrativista do Rio Cajari, estado do Amapá. O objetivo foi analisar a participação feminina na produção familiar e seu impacto no desenvolvimento de comunidades rurais agroextrativistas. Utilizou-se uma abordagem qualitativa a partir de entrevistas e observações participantes com agroextrativistas da RESEX Cajari nas comunidades Água Branca, Martins e Santarém entre junho de 2022 e junho de 2024. Os resultados demonstraram a participação das mulheres em toda a cadeia produtiva da castanha, na agricultura familiar para a produção de alimentos e em organizações sociais, como associações e cooperativas. Além de todas as atribuições laborais e políticas, as mulheres permanecem no trabalho doméstico, apesar da reduzida valorização e de ser crucial para a sobrevivência de famílias agroextrativistas da Reserva Cajari. Concluímos que o trabalho campestre em comunidades da RESEX Cajari é profundamente relacionado ao empoderamento feminino das agroextrativistas, o qual foi consolidado a partir das organizações coletivas. Contraditoriamente, o empoderamento ocorre associado a um processo de exploração, à significativa sobrecarga de trabalho rural, político e familiar atribuído às mulheres.

Palavras-chave: Desenvolvimento rural, Trabalho feminino, Produção Familiar, Agroextrativismo, RESEX Cajari

1 INTRODUCTION

Historical approaches to development have constructed analyses primarily centered on the economic dimension of societies, particularly those that are more industrialized (Sachs, 2000). This perspective, when applied to regional development, has represented a setback in understanding the dialectics and contradictions present in long-standing communities of the Amazon. Beyond economic conditions, when addressing agroextractivism, this study emphasized categories such as culture, way of life, and cooperativism. The theoretical and empirical approaches adopted in this research go beyond the orthodox notion of economic progress, prioritizing the well-being of traditional communities and valuing development strategies rooted in the territorial context of these populations. Furthermore, the study highlights the unique role of women, considering the historical invisibility they have endured.

Analyzing development through productive perspectives rooted in the capitalist system reflects a Western logic that subordinates traditional communities and perpetuates a homogeneous civilizational model, ranking societies according to a Eurocentric standard of social reality. It is therefore crucial to develop alternatives that challenge this predatory model of development (Gudynas, 2011), which obscures the underlying mechanisms of domination across regions, social classes, and genders. This requires an approach that recognizes the history, culture, and both social and technological innovation



within regional development—centering the narrative agency of social subjects. Such an approach values the concept of *Buen Vivir* (Good Living) and acknowledges social groups that, although historically rendered invisible, have played vital roles in the social, political, and economic structures of their societies. In this study, these groups are represented by the agroextractivist workers of the Cajari Reserve, in the state of Amapá.

The struggle for the recognition and social valorization of women has spanned centuries. Historically, women have often been relegated to so-called “secondary” roles due to a patriarchal and capitalist structure deeply embedded in society. As a result, the marginalization of female representation across various spheres remains a recurring phenomenon (Perrot, 1998; Simonian, 2001; Delphy, 2009). This reality has led to the devaluation and invisibility of women’s labor, particularly within the context of peasant communities.

Despite their significant presence in family-based production, most women still don’t receive financial compensation for their labor, perpetuating the invisibility and lack of recognition of their economic and social contributions (Meus; Ethur, 2021). This marginalization reflects a process of silencing that affects women’s participation in the economy of family-based rural production.

Women’s struggles for social recognition and valorization of their roles in rural communities are essential to understanding the challenges within the development of local production systems. From the outset, women are fighting to resist colonial paradigms designed to explore their labor and their bodies.

For example, in the Rio Cajari Extractive Reserve, in the municipality of Laranjal do Jari, in the state of Amapá, women face the challenges of a society historically rooted in patterns that subordinate them and make them unviable, and where there is also a social representation for the development of family-based production. Although little recognized, women’s contributions cover several areas, from extractive activities, collecting and extracting raw forest products for sale, to industrial activities and commerce, processing, adding value, and selling industrialized products.

This research observed the day-to-day reality of agro-extractive women from the Reserva Cajari conservation unit through the development of the outreach project *Produção familiar em rede nas amazônias: soberania, resistência e luta* (“Network Family-based Production in the Amazons: Sovereignty, resistance and Struggle”)¹, which consolidated its activities between June 2022 and June 2024, with

1 Outreach Project institutionalized at the Universidade Federal do Amapá (“Federal University of Amapá”-



the construction of an ecology of knowledges with rural communities.

It is essential to emphasize that female participation in agro-extractive labor plays a crucial role in the economy and survival of families in Cajari. Women often assume responsibility for planning and managing labor resources, collecting nuts, agricultural production, and remain active in domestic work (Picanço, 2005).

This study adopted a qualitative perspective to analyze women's participation in family-based production in agroextractive communities of the Rio Cajari Extractive Reserve. It held discussion groups and structured and semi-structured interviews with local women to understand their experiences and challenges in working with family-based production. The qualitative approach enabled an analysis of these communities' practices, stories, and social relations.

Field research highlighted the participation of women as political subjects (Bordalo, 2011) whose actions bring about changes in their social condition. Theoretical approaches such as those of Chagas (2015), Lobato (2021), Picanço (2010), Ribeiro (2013), and Simonian (2001) present a comprehensive perspective on the presence and contribution of women in family farming in rural territories. In this paper, we aim to highlight the specific role played by women in agroextractivist communities in the Amazon, by conducting research in the Cajari Reserve.

In this introduction, we summarize the dynamics of women's labor in the Cajari Reserve. We then present the context of historical transformations in the Amazon that influenced the living conditions of traditional communities participating in this research. In the subsequent section, we discuss the methodological approach in which we constructed an approximation of the reality observed in the Rio Cajari Reserve. The following analyses culminate in discussions about the different types of labor performed by agroextractivist women in the Rio Cajari Reserve, and the empowerment of local representation consolidated in recent decades. In the last section, we highlight that, in addition to the daily subsistence labor for the family, the agroextractivist women in Cajari are political subjects and multipliers of traditional knowledge, and that their actions foster the strengthening of the sociocultural identity in the region.

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2 AGRO-EXTRACTIVIST DEVELOPMENT IN THE AMAZON REGION

In the history of economic development applied to the Amazon, plant extraction and agriculture have played a fundamental role as productive activities responsible for demographic occupation. At the end of the 19th century, Henri Coudreau noted the presence of Brazil nut trees in the region that would later become Amapá (Coudreau, 1886). These activities have historically sustained a significant portion of the local population and preserved the way of life of traditional communities (Filocreão, 1992). From this perspective, the category of development transcends the notion of economic progress, incorporating social, cultural, and environmental aspects, prioritizing the well-being of traditional communities and the preservation of their ways of life (Lobato, 2021). This is because sustainable development in the Amazon requires a more holistic approach, which includes the active participation of local populations in defining their development strategies.

In the context of these changes, from 1970 onwards, there was a significant increase in debates about the sustainability of natural resources, especially in the Amazon region. However, in that same period, under developmentalist premises, the government implemented development-oriented measures that resulted in the arrival and installation of several exploration projects in the Amazon (Filocreão, 2015). These projects devastatingly exploited natural resources, causing rapid and intense damage and harm to rivers, forests, soil, and subsoil.

Conservation units such as the Extractive Reserves represent the consolidated history of the Agrarian Reform movement in Brazil that began in the 1980s, based on the social struggle of peasant communities, which at the time was represented with significant emphasis by rubber tappers, who demanded the rights of peasant communities. After 30 years of structural and circumstantial changes in the daily lives of this population, it is necessary to build innovative alternatives so that production systems are more dynamic and help families survive (Maciel; Mangabeira; Kassai, 2021).

In the Amazon and Amapá, actions aimed at economic development were based on large-scale exploration projects. Of note is the work of ICOMI in Serra do Navio, which explored manganese for over 50 years. In addition, the Jari project, in the southern area of Amapá, covered everything from pulp production, to nut collection and processing, to livestock farming, highlighting the diversity and scope of exploratory activities in the region. These projects contributed to the state's economic growth while



bringing about immeasurable socio-environmental impacts and losses for the population of Amapá (Filocreão, 2015)

Since 1980, Amapá has undergone a series of transformations intended to ensure agroextractivists' rights to use land and access natural resources, as well as to create a mechanism to prevent deforestation in the Amazon. The establishment of these objectives was the result of political and social pressure from institutional entities interested in conserving biodiversity; from agroextractivist populations, who maintained their livelihood through forest resources; and from ecological movements, concerned with climate change due to predatory deforestation (Filocreão; Silva; Lomba, 2019). This process of territorial resistance, which continues today, aims to trigger alternatives to the expropriating development model that marginalizes centuries-old communities (Lobato, 2021).

Within this context, the southern region of Amapá proved favorable for the demarcation of land for agroextractive communities. In 1988, three *Projetos de Assentamento Extrativistas* ("Extractive Settlement Projects" - PAEs) were established in the Maracá area, which were unified in 1997, predominantly within the municipality of Mazagão. In 1990, the Rio Cajari Extractive Reserve was created in Laranjal do Jari as an additional effort to preserve ecosystems and support extractivist populations (Chagas, 2015).

The total area of the municipalities in the southern region of Amapá covers 46,787.90 km², corresponding to 32.6% of the state's territory, of which 85.3%, equivalent to 39,912.11 km², are legally protected by special use units (IBGE, 2010). The southern region of Amapá is home to a population of 69,402 inhabitants, distributed among the municipalities of Mazagão, Laranjal do Jari, and Vitória do Jari, representing approximately 10.36% of the state's population. The 2010 census showed that approximately 12,924 individuals in this region reside in rural areas, where they engage in extractive activities and slash-and-burn agriculture, constituting family-based production units (IBGE, 2020).

Authors such as Castro and Campos (2015); Simonian (1997, 2000, 2001); Filocreão (1992, 2015); and Lobato (2021) have emphasized the resistance of traditional populations in preserving the sustainability of their environment and socioeconomic conditions in response to the State's developmentalist policies, which have adversely affected these communities. Reflecting on the political and economic implications of the State's role is essential for understanding the 'sustainable viability' of the modes of production and reproduction that underpin the way of life of the region's centuries-old traditional populations

The development of territories in the Rio Cajari Extractive Reserve community represents the possibility of thinking about the way of life of the populations from the place of existence, in which the way of life of these people is associated with nature. That is, structuring a vision that resists the predominant perspective of thinking about nature in an objectified way, external to human beings and treated as a commodity.

3 THE ROLE OF THE AGROEXTRACTIVIST WOMAN IN LOCAL REPRESENTATION IN CAJARI RESERVE

The Rio Cajari Extractive Reserve, created in 1990 on lands occupied by the Jari Project by Decree No. 99,145 of March 12, has a complex social and economic configuration. Regarding the distribution of families in the Cajari Extractive Reserve, in the 1990s, approximately 62% lived in more isolated areas, while 31% lived in small villages (Picanço, 2005). In the first decade after its creation, this situation changed significantly, with more than 62% of families living in small communities along the road or river, with the remainder dispersed outside these areas. This change is attributed to the search for a better quality of life since the villages along the highway began to receive government assistance services, such as medical clinics, schools, and power (Picanço, 2005).

The interconnection between extractivist practices and family farming is evident in the state's protected areas, combining to form agroextractivism. This integration between activities is so significant that the name Agroextractive Production Unit has been proposed to describe the production units of centuries-old and traditional communities in these regions (Filocreão, 1992). In these territories, in many cases, agroextractivists spend days traveling to the nut grove and collecting and breaking the nuts, hence the need for a small, rudimentary dwelling in the forest during the night. In general, extractive and agricultural activities alternate throughout the year, influenced by the nut harvest season (Filocreão; Silva; Lomba, 2019).

In Cajari, the extraction of native products is a family activity that mainly involves nut gathering, and is essential to the local economy. In the upper Cajari region, nut groves have been exploited for over a century, standing out as the most significant extractive activity. In the lower Cajari River, there has been an increase in swidden activity and sugar cane cultivation. Hunting and fishing also play a fundamental role



in family subsistence. The adaptability of family farming to different historical and situational contexts is essential to understanding the reality of these communities (Benjamim, 2004).

The collection of the nut seed vessel, also known as “ouriço”, happens during the rainy season, which lasts six months from December to June. During this period, all family members (husband, wife, and children) settle in the temporary residence in the nut groves, to avoid traveling long distances from the community to the groves located deep in the forest. The work at the extraction site is divided into three distinct stages: collection, breaking, and transport of the “ouriços”. Although primarily carried out by the masculine gender, this task with the nut is also performed by women (Picanço, 2005).

Support for policies to intensify nut harvesting in the Upper Cajari region aimed to strengthen the economic relevance of this resource and improve local living conditions. Technical and financial assistance from the State encouraged the creation of cooperatives such as the *Associação dos Trabalhadores Agroextrativistas da Reserva Cajari* (“Agroextractivist Workers’ Association of Cajari Reserve” – ASTEX-CA), the *Cooperativa Mista dos Extrativistas do Alto Cajari* (“Mixed Cooperative of Extractivists of Upper Cajari” – COOPERALCA), the *Cooperativa Mista Extrativista Vegetal dos Agricultores do Laranjal do Jari* (“Mixed Cooperative of Plant Extractivism of Farmers of Laranjal do Jari” – COMAJA), and the *Associação de Mulheres Agroextrativista do Alto Cajari* (“Association of Agroextractivist Women of Upper Cajari” – AMAC), taking advantage of the area’s significant potential for nut extraction. This dynamic is supported by the availability of skilled labor, passed down through generations in communities that have inhabited the region for over a century (Filocreão; Silva; Lomba, 2019).

The Brazil nut in the RESEX-CAJARI is generally sold in its natural form, without any type of processing. There are, however, two types of processing: one is made in the factory of Iratapuru Sustainable Development Reserve (RDS), managed by the *Cooperativa Mista dos Produtores e Extrativistas do Iratapuru* (“Mixed Cooperative of Producers and Extractivists of Iratapuru” – COMARU). The factory mainly produces oil, which is used in manufacturing various products, such as soaps, creams, and oils, and has significant sales potential (Filocreão; Silva; Lomba, 2019). The second type of processing is performed by women in small factories that produce cookies, chocolates, *paçocas*, sweets, cakes, and Brazil nut bread. These products are sold together with other agricultural products, such as sweet potatoes, purple yams, oranges, bananas, and Brazil nuts, both peeled and in shells (Ribeiro; Filocreão, 2013).



Agriculture intensifies during the off-season for nut harvest when agricultural activity is a crucial part of these communities' income and essential for their food autonomy. The main products are cassava, bananas, corn, beans, rice, pineapple, and sweet potatoes, as well as greens, pigs, and chickens (Picanço, 2005). Cassava and bananas stand out in commercial terms and also for ensuring a constant food supply for the population. Agricultural activities are carried out in a diversified production system that includes fields, backyards, farms, and raising small animals (Ribeiro; Filocreão, 2013). Historically, women played a central role in controlling areas of nut groves located on the banks of rivers and streams in Cajari. In this context, men dedicated themselves to nut grove exploitation on dry land or product transportation. In places like Água Branca, on the banks of the stream known as Rio Branco, women owned and managed nut groves or *colocações* (demarcated areas for nut extraction) (Simonian, 2001).

Currently, in the communities of RESEX-CAJARI, one of the most prominent activities among agro-extractivist women is the production of cookies, *paçocas*, and chocolates made from Brazil nuts. This practice has gained relevance as an alternative source of income and economic strengthening for women in these regions.

Female participation in agroextractive activities in southern Amapá has developed over many years, with the creation and operation of women's associations that work to produce and sell products derived from local biodiversity, especially Brazil nuts. The experience of these women in agroextractive activities, combined with the search for economic autonomy and improved living standards, has generated important transformations in the region (Ribeiro; Filocreão, 2013).

One of the main associations representing this movement is *Associação de Mulheres Agroextrativista do Alto Cajari* ("Association of Agroextractivist Women of Upper Cajari" – AMAC), created in 2004 and currently with 180 partners distributed within the 13 communities in Alto Cajari. AMAC is based on environmental protection criteria, seeking to preserve natural resources and ecosystems and to guarantee sustainable extraction.

The development of women's activities in communities within the CAJARI RESEX is closely linked to AMAC. Initially, the association focused on cut-and-sew work, as well as handmade jewelry, including bracelets, necklaces, and earrings made from materials collected in the forest.



This initiative enabled women to generate income through the production and sale of their items. However, in recent years, the association has not been able to reach its full potential as a sustainable productive activity (Ribeiro; Filocreão, 2013).

The women members of AMAC are engaged in the production of cookies, *paçocas*, sweets, and other nut-based products, as well as fried bananas. They organize into groups to work in the association's community kitchen, in the locality of Água Branca do Cajari, and take turns using the space. The association promotes collective production and has access to government public calls such as the *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos* ("Program for Food Acquisition"- PAA), which facilitates commercialization and donation for people in situations of food and nutritional insecurity (Benjamim, 2001).

Another active association is the *Associação de Mulheres Moradoras e Trabalhadoras da Cadeia de Produtos da Biodiversidade do Alto RESEX Cajari* ("Association of Women Residents and Workers in the Biodiversity Product Chain of Upper RESEX Cajari"- AMOBIO), founded in 2012 to enhance AMAC's reach. AMOBIO benefits mainly the communities of Martins and Sorocaba, performing similar activities to AMAC, including qualification and education courses on women's health and sexuality.

Both associations, AMAC and AMOBIO, aim to promote income generation and employment for rural women, contributing to environmental preservation and access to policies. Women's labor in these associations has been fundamental to improving the quality of life in the communities of southern Amapá.

The significant presence of women in the communities at the Rio Cajari Extractive Reserve highlights their representation in all stages of family-based and agroextractive production. Women play a broad and comprehensive role in planting and harvesting, in preparation and commerce of agricultural products, and in activities of collecting, transporting, and shelling nuts, demonstrating their importance in the sustenance and development of these rural communities.

Although women are involved in the entire nut production chain, there is a discourse in academia that women's work is focused solely on processing nuts for the production of foodstuffs. This narrative may be due to the fact that producing cookies has more economic evidence in the domestic and foreign markets, as it is an activity with great potential for generating income. In addition, the capitalist perspective of development tends to analyze nature as a mere source of raw materials with great potential for transformation and generating economic growth (Chagas; Filocreão, 2019).



4 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study adopted a qualitative approach to highlight the voices of women involved in family-based production in the Rio Cajari Extractive Reserve, in the municipality of Laranjal de Jari, in the south of the state of Amapá. This perspective seeks to understand society's phenomena beyond pre-established material facts (Haguette, 1997).

Regarding the theoretical analysis, the research is based on authors such as Chagas (2015), Lobato (2021), Picanço (2010), Filocreão, and Silva and Lomba (2019), who offer a historical and social perspective of the communities, characterization of the locus, and a discussion on the development based on the centuries-old way of life of the communities. Regarding the visibility and importance of women's labor in the region, it was based on works such as Ribeiro (2013) and Simonian (2001), since they contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the historical, socioeconomic, and gender aspects related to women's empowerment in family-based production in agroextractivist communities.

Field research sought to understand the main mechanisms responsible for the subsistence, reproduction, and functioning of the way of life of agroextractivist communities in the South of Amapá, mainly concerning the activities carried out by women within family-based production units, as well as in facing their main difficulties.

To comply with ethical research standards, we forwarded the work to the *Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade* ("Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation" - ICMBIO), and presented to the community a formal request for access to the Cajari Reserve in January 2022, to develop research on the daily work and way of life of agroextractivist populations. ICMBIO and *Associação de Mulheres Agroextrativistas do Alto Cajari* (AMAC) sent confirmations of their consent to perform the activities.

To understand the complex relationships experienced in agroextractivist communities, we conducted thirty interviews over two years (2022-2024), with producers and families to reconstruct their local stories and experiences, as well as 10 (ten) group discussions, where women from associations and cooperatives shared their stories, experiences and difficulties related to the work of agroextractivist women. Participants signed a free and informed consent form, which guaranteed their names would not be published. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis based on categories such as



Culture, *Buen Vivir*, and way of life.

The consent to perform interviews happened after formal contact from the professor responsible for the outreach project *Produção familiar em rede nas amazônias: soberania, resistência e luta* (“Network Family-based Production in the Amazons: Sovereignty, resistance and Struggle”) of Universidade Federal do Amapá, in April, 2022. After this initial contact, we held discussion groups to present the research’s objective and exchange knowledge with the community members. Next, an integration network was built with some agroextractivist workers from the Cajari territory - only then were the initial research procedures initiated.

We also used direct observation techniques, where researchers participated in community activities to gain a deeper understanding of practices and social interactions. Participation occurred in activities such as collecting nuts, farming, selling nut cookies, and community meetings.

The analysis involved transcription, narrative coding, and interview interpretation, with an emphasis on the Ecology of Knowledges (Santos; Meneses, 2010), aiming to construct a collaborative research that values traditional knowledge and resistance movements for the survival of the communities of the Cajari River Reserve.

The information was organized into thematic categories related to women’s experiences, activities, and contributions to agroextractive activities, with attention to each community’s cultural and social specificities. Results were interpreted based on the cited theoretical references, seeking to identify relevant actions regarding women’s participation in family-based production.

5 WOMEN’S PROTAGONISM IN SOUTHERN AMAPÁ: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

The productive, social, and political activities of agroextractivist women add to the intense demands imposed by their daily lives. They play an active role in agricultural and extractive production, in addition to community responsibilities and unpaid domestic labor. They work on farms, collect extractive products such as nuts, and engage in other agricultural activities essential to their families’ subsistence.



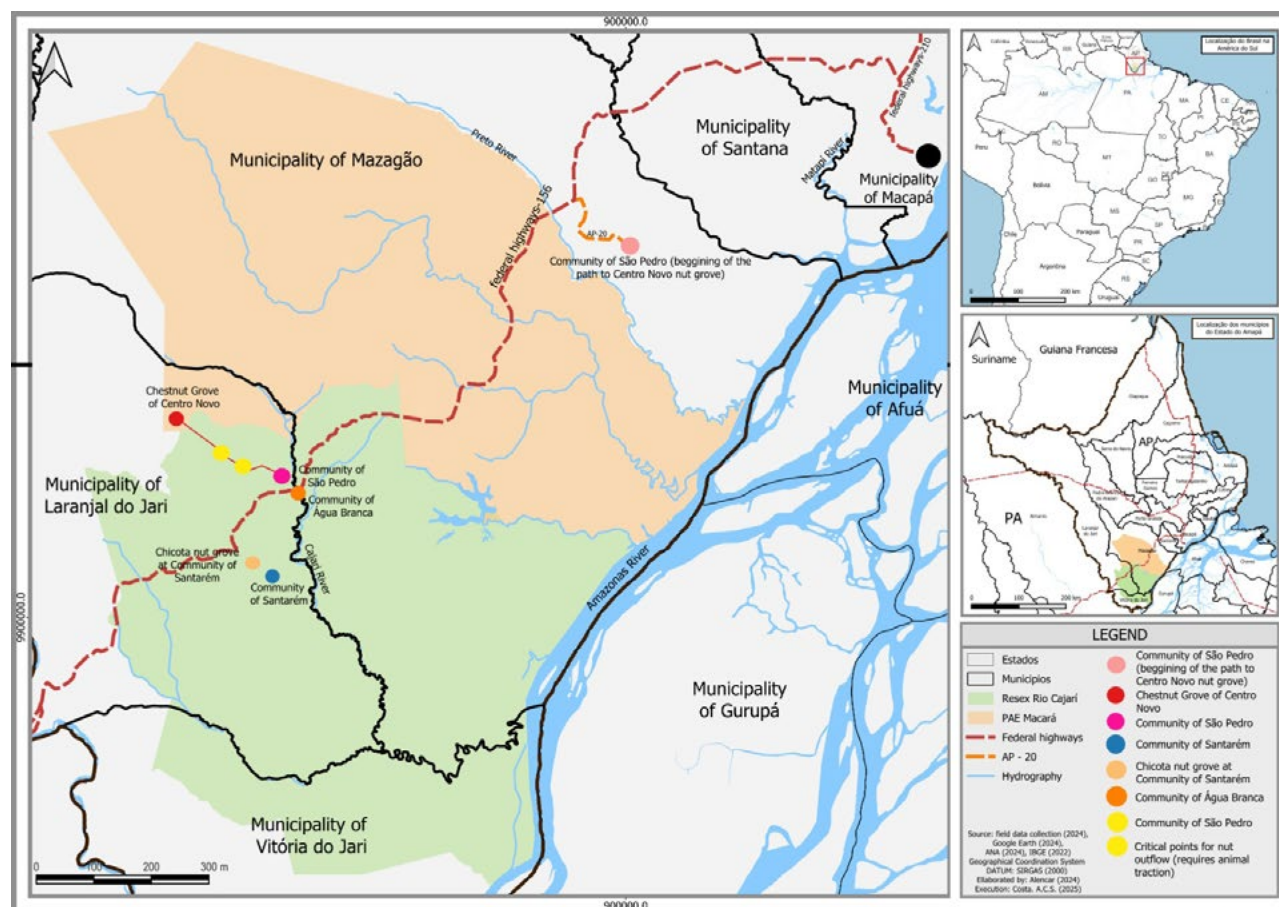
Actions related to traditional knowledge preservation stand out in the social reproduction of women's labor. Many women have skills and knowledge inherited from previous generations, including practices such as planting, harvesting, food preparation, and craft production. By passing this knowledge on to other generations, they are contributing to the continuity of their communities' cultural traditions and identity.

One example is the narrative of interviewee A, who states that at "76 years of age, living in the Água Branca community, even though I was born there in Açaizal and moved here 45 years ago [...] all my children were raised with the sustenance that came from nuts." The localities underwent several changes over the seven decades the interviewee lived in the region. Communities grew, and the highway provided access to the municipality of Laranjal do Jari, as well as to the capital, Macapá. In addition, new technologies such as the Internet impacted the communities' way of life and social relations.

Regardless of these changes, work in the nut grove continues to be an integral and relevant part of the lives of all families in the Cajari Reserve, and women are actively involved in this activity. They participate in the entire production process, as emphasized by Interviewee B when she states that "during the nut harvest season, we all go there [...] I gather them, I break them, I put them in bags for us to bring back." In a similar context, Interviewee C mentions that she works in the Reserve as a teacher and that since "the nut harvest season coincides with the school holidays, I always help to pick, gather, beat the chestnuts in the bag and bring them back."

The narrative of the interviewees above was obtained during interaction with the communities of Água Branca do Cajari, Martins, Martinho, and Santarém, all located in the Cajari Reserve, municipality of Laranjal do Jari (Figure 1).

Figure 1 | Location of the Cajari Reserve and agro-extractive communities within the study area, Amapá, Brazil.



Reaching the communities required a five-hour travel along the highway from Macapá to Laranjal do Jari and to the Água Branca Community. Then, another hour of driving to reach the Santarém community via a branch road. Access to the Chicota nut grove (figure 3) required crossing the river that passes through Santarém with the help of a small rowing boat. The journey also involved a one-hour walk along a narrow branch road to reach the nut collection point, which presents extreme difficulties for transporting the nuts (figure 2).

Figure 2 | Access branch to Chicota nut grove, community of Santarém, Cajari Reserve (March 29, 2024).



Source: Outreach project: Produção familiar em rede nas amazônias: soberania, resistência e luta (2024)

The interviewees' narratives highlight how agroextractive labor is a significant part of their lives, from collection, crushing, and transportation, to storage. Community member D remembers when the nut processing factory existed. "I hope the Nut Factory starts operating again. Many things are missing from our daily lives. The work is hard, but each one does their part." The women face challenges, but they also demonstrate resilience by overcoming difficulties and continuing to contribute to the local economy and the livelihood of their families.

The images recorded during fieldwork in the Água Branca Community, in the Cajari Reserve, show part of the daily work of the agroextractivist workers, in this case, interviewee E. They show the route to collect the fruit in the nut grove, which involved walking for over an hour in a lot of mud, and crossing the Santarém river due to heavy rains during the research period (Figure 3). After this initial route, still on the branch road, it is necessary to cross the river in a small boat (Figure 3) to take the unprocessed fruits in fiber bags to the storage location.

Figure 3 | River passing through the Santarém Community, Cajari Reserve (March 29, 2024)



Source: Outreach Project Produção familiar em rede nas amazônias: soberania, resistência e luta (2024)

The continued work with Brazil nuts and the active involvement of women in this process reflect the importance of extractive activities for life in local communities. Just as the changes brought about by modernization affect the dynamics of these communities, activities with food products, such as the production of nut cookies by the AMAC and COOPEMAC associations, offer new opportunities for income generation and female empowerment. In this way, women not only actively participate in nut extraction, but also expand to other productive activities, which helps to strengthen local production chains and perpetuate the traditions of these populations.

The political participation and social engagement of agroextractivist women in the *Associação de Mulheres Agroextrativistas do Alto Cajari* (AMAC) and the *Cooperativa Mista de Mulheres Extrativistas do Alto Cajari* (COOPMAC) represent mechanisms of collective organization aimed at strengthening productive activities in the region. These organizations promote cooperation, self-management, and female leadership, reinforcing local production chains and generating income (Ribeiro; Filocreão, 2013).

When asked about their main activities in the community, the interviewees frequently mentioned associations, especially highlighting the production of cookies in the AMAC kitchens. This was confirmed by interviewee F, a board member of both AMAC and COOPEMAC, when she stated that “currently, 103 women participate in the associations in the communities of Água Branca, Martinho, Martins, and Santarém”, which shows the reason why she mentioned the associations since the interviewees are from the localities where AMAC is managed.

Although the interviewees highlighted the production activities in the community kitchen, interviewee G commented that “currently, the cooperative kitchen is not operating due to lack of maintenance, with only 8 women still working on the production of cookies in their own kitchens.” This narrative demonstrates the survival strategies that agroextractivist workers build in the face of challenges in developing the structure necessary for the growth of the Brazil Nut Agroindustry. Even in a small group, the social structure for the production of cookies is maintained. From this perspective, according to interviewee G, they are “hopeful that the factory will be used again to make cookies.”

Currently, part of the cookie production, made in the community kitchen and in the homes of the agroextractivist workers is sold at markets in the community itself and another part is sold to the *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos* (PAA) and the *Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar* (“National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture”- PNAE).

The impact of the closure of the cookie factory is revealed in the interviews. According to interviewee H: “When we made biscuits, we sold them to PAA and PNAE, which guaranteed us an income for our needs.” The production and sale of food products in community kitchens help women’s work become more independent and visible (Benjamim, 2004). Some communities reported that cookie production was reduced after the closure of the nut factory, which caused a reduction in the income of the community members. This fact did not diminish the continuous action of agro-extractive workers in building survival strategies, such as creating the community kitchen.

Although this research does not provide answers as to the reason that led to the factory closure, it is possible that in future work we will be able to obtain greater details regarding the absence of agroindustry in the Cajari Reserve.

The narratives of agroextractivists demonstrate that working with food products produced by women goes beyond economic development in the communities; it can strengthen the nut production chain in the Reserve and highlights both a collective spirit, common among those who are on the margins of capitalism, and an aspect of sisterhood in the perspective that women help each other. Thinking about territorial development based on the reality of the place means valuing the transmission of knowledge acquired over time, perpetuating the way of life of these populations, and creating alternatives for survival (Lobato, 2021). Consolidated agroextractive production can provide food sovereignty for these populations (Filocreão; Silva; Lomba, 2019).

Female participation in agroextractivism in the Cajari Reserve involves the relationship with peasant labor in different production chains. Due to their roles in food preparation, women are in favor of diversifying production in the vegetable garden, which is essential for the health of families. Collecting and preparing nuts, growing cassava and leafy vegetables, making cookies, and making and selling bio-jewelry, among others, show the wide range of activities developed by agroextractivists, as participants, not as helpers, despite this appearing in their statements and in the understanding they have of themselves and their responsibilities.

Therefore, the cultivation, production, and sale of different products are part of the local economy and the income generation of these communities and the family nucleus (Ribeiro and Filocreão, 2013), with broad participation of women in all processes. Future work is expected to identify the income and social impact of these production chains.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Female participation has a significant impact on the development of rural communities in southern Amapá. The work of agroextractivist women both sustains the community through the direct consumption of what is produced, and generates wealth that enables the purchase of food (not produced in the Cajari Reserve), as well as other goods and services. This situation reflects the form of social organization that has been taking shape over recent decades. The agroextractivist woman represents an active political subject who seeks to bring about both structural and situational changes in her reality.

In this context, the economic activities in the Cajari Reserve break with the logic of unbridled exploitation of natural resources, which is characteristic of the hegemonic Eurocentric development model. The premise of agricultural and agroextractive practices is based on a sustainable vision that keeps the forest standing, conserves biodiversity, and preserves natural resources.

The appreciation of the way of life and the territory observed during field research is grounded in a network of survival strategies shaped by numerous social, economic, political, and environmental challenges that Amazonian rural populations have faced for centuries. The obstacles mentioned in this study—such as the lack of infrastructure for transporting nuts, insufficient investment in agro-industries for processing the raw product, and limited participation in the community kitchen—are among the challenges that must be overcome.

Difficulties in accessing the nut collection points are key issues that hinder the dynamics of agroextractive work. Long distances covered through mud or small boats to travel along the river to reach the nut groves demonstrate limited support from the government in developing viable solutions to improve the quality of life of agroextractivist workers.

However, a constant act of resistance is observed, aimed at valuing traditional cultural practices, transmitting local knowledge to future generations, and strengthening community participation for the survival of the communities. The creation of associations as an expression of collective spirit, the pursuit of access to public policies such as PAA and PNAE, and the maintenance of the community kitchen represent some of the mechanisms that express the strength of the agroextractivist woman of the Cajari Reserve.



In this way, this research aims to break with the paradigm that marginalizes the active participation of women in rural labor, seeking to give voice and social recognition to the struggle for the valorization of culture, traditional knowledge, and the empowerment of the agroextractivist women of the Cajari Reserve.

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