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# Serrano Cheese and Coalho Cheese: tradition enhancement as an alternative to territorial development in Campos de Cima da Serra and Sertão Sergipano do São Francisco, Brazil

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## *Abstract*

**In this article, we used empirical data from research related to the production of two traditional cheeses in Brazil: the Serrano Cheese and Coalho Cheese, produced, respectively, in Campos de Cima da Serra, Rio Grande do Sul, and Sertão Sergipano, in Sergipe. The production characteristics and similarities found between the modes of production of these products, the cultural and historical aspects that approximate these cheeses produced in two geographically distant regions in Brazil, provide elements to discuss the role of traditional foods as promoters of rural development strategies. In this article, our aim is to emphasize the debate around the potential of connection between consumers and producers towards organization and consolidation of short circuits of production and distribution of traditional foods. In the limit, the debate we propose points out the role of these spaces or local markets - alternative to the hegemonic ones - in rural development strategies.**

**Keywords—** Serrano and Coalho Cheeses; rural development; small farmers.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In many countries around the world, traditional products have been increasingly valued and chosen by customers. This trend seems to be associated with a broad process of the upgrading of local production systems and the closer ties between producers and consumers. It is possible that in some areas where these short circuits between production and

consumption would be considered in terms of rural development.

In order to understand these processes in Brazil, we suggest to study two traditional cheeses produced in this country: Serrano Cheese and Coalho Cheese, respectively produced in Campos de Cima da Serra, Rio Grande do Sul State and in Sertão Sergipano in the State of Sergipe. These cheeses, despite the pressures of modernization, have maintained a greater or lesser degree of craftiness and traditional aspects associated with system production as well as close relationships with consumers.

Previous studies [1], [2], [3], [4] show a large similarity in the logic of production of milk and cheeses, highlighting the origin of herds of cattle, characterized by the predominance of rustic breeds<sup>1</sup>, cheese from raw milk (that is unpasteurized) and also the use of whey, a byproduct of cheese production used to breed pigs. The strong relationship of activities related to the management of the animals to cultural aspects is also evidenced in the two regions, in spite of being from different cultures. The enhancement of livestock and production of dairy products points to common aspects that make up the livelihood of families in Campos de Cima da Serra region and Sertão Sergipano region.

Among the main barriers related to production and commercialization of the cheese in the formal market it is possible to identify disputes that have been made under the possibility (or not) to reconcile the legal

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<sup>1</sup> Nowadays in the two areas of study, the rustic breeds have been crossed with dairy cattle breeds in order to increase milk production.

requirements for traditional production. Despite the economic, social, cultural and historical importance of these cheeses, their commercialization is currently held, outside the formal channels of trade, being common, in these regions, farmers being put under threat of having the cheese production forbidden.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the characteristics of production of Serrano cheese and Coalho cheese, the relation of these products in their regions of production, as well as discuss social and economic aspects that contribute to the emergence of dynamic and territorial strategies of development involved in the agri-food systems.

## II. PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS AND THE ENHANCEMENT OF SERRANO AND COALHO CHEESE

Recent studies have pointed out to the growing appreciation of traditional, natural and/or handmade or artisanal foods, related to culture and place of origin. This valorisation seems to happen at the same time that the consumers' mistrust increases in relation to industrial food production. Perhaps, a consequence of serial cases of food 'scares'<sup>2</sup>, environmental awareness, animal welfare and consumers' reflexivity.

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In Brazil, as evidence of such preference, Menasche (2003) [5], in a survey carried out with citizens in Porto Alegre, points out the increasing relevance of natural foods strongly associated with rural, as a reflex of distrust of industrialized products. Similarly, Garcia (2003) [6] indicates, based on the results of a study carried out in São Paulo city, the valorization of

natural taste in foods, characterized as non-industrialized, labeled as artisanal and increased in value as domestic production.

The consumer's demand and preference in relation to traditional foods, specifically in relation to artisanal cheeses, are also pointed out by Menezes (2009) [2], who highlights this fact in fairs in Aracaju. The author stresses the affirmation of these products compared to the industrialized ones.

The literature that approaches the topic of quality of foods has been considering that it would involve a process of social qualification. This process would be constructed and negotiated among the social actors involved and so in specific production-consumption contexts the quality building would be associated to the manner how alternative networks of production and distribution are built in different farming systems, cultural traditions, organizational structures, consumers' perceptions, and institutional and policy support (SONNINO e MARSDEN, 2006) [7].

Miele (2001) [8], referring to the context of European countries, highlights the complexity of food quality notion and considers that it involves productive, ecological, brand, consumer-perceived quality.

In Brazil, researches in this area would contribute to the understanding of the relationship between producers and consumers in relation to traditional/artisanal foods. In this sense, it seems relevant to investigate two traditional cheeses produced in Brazil: Serrano Cheese and Coalho Cheese, produced in the South and in the Northeast of Brazil, as illustrated in Figure 1.

In these regions the artisanal cheese production is made from raw milk, unpasteurized. The techniques and knowledge related to production and processing are traditional and have been passed from generation to generation. Faced with the impossibility to meet pressures for the adoption of tools and control systems and management of the sanitary quality assurance and, in some cases, to scale up production, these cheeses have been commercialized outside the formal system. This is possible due to the close relations and trust between consumers and producers.

In both cases, it is possible that we are referring to the Localized Agrifood Systems (LAFa). The configurations of the production of these cheeses in

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<sup>3</sup> In relation to food scares, see Knowles, Moody e McEACHERN (2007).

their regions have been woven by various actors. These systems are based on territorial attributes, identity and recognition by consumers. We could characterize these cases as traditional artisanal agrifood systems, since there is not (or is just beginning) the collective organization by the actors. Furthermore there is not the recognition that validates the production of these cheeses by the State.

**Figure 1: Production regions of Serrano and Coalho Cheeses.**



Source: elaborated by the authors.

Due to the features that are associated with contexts of production of these cheeses, and also the theoretical context that we propose at the beginning of this point, our aim is to discuss the possibilities of the connection between consumers and in relation to structuring or consolidation of short circuits of production and distribution of food and, ultimately, the influence of these spaces to development strategies.

For this reason, in the next topic we show some key features of the production regions and of the cheeses. Then, we discuss the possibilities and the limits of traditional products associated with rural development strategies.

#### *A. Serrano cheese and Coalho Cheese: similarities in the contexts of production and consumption*

The Serrano and Coalho Cheese are strongly associated with the process of settlement and development of their production regions. In Campos de Cima da Serra and Sertão Sergipano, the historical characteristics, periods and objectives of settlement were different; even so, there are many similarities, especially regarding the importance of production, consumption and marketing of these cheeses in these regions.

Although these cheeses have some different characteristics as milk production system, climatic and process conditions, and maturation period, both are highly appreciated by consumers, who identify the "favorite cheese" by the name of the producer or the source property, even in the absence of conventional labels and packages. As another similarity, we can accentuate the importance socio-cultural and economic of these cheeses, which are produced largely by small farmers, providing income and contributing to the maintenance of many rural families.

##### *The Serrano Cheese*

The Campos de Cima da Serra region, located in the northeast of Rio Grande do Sul, has as some of its main features the native grasslands and the subtropical climate with well defined seasons, characterized by high amplitude of temperatures. This region has the lowest temperature of the country, resulting from the combination of factors such as altitude, latitude and the influences of Polar Atlantic Mass. The cheese, which in the early occupation of the region, around the late eighteenth century, was one of the products transported by drovers, currently sold to local consumers, small traders or middlemen. Even today, it remains giving to the producers families the income that allows the access to food and goods not produced on the farms (KRONE, 2009) [1].

The Serrano Cheese preserved, for nearly two centuries, the physical and organoleptic characteristics given by the region micro-climate and the traditional techniques of production, linked to the activity of breeding beef cattle and making the product from fresh milk from beef cows fed with native pasture

(KRONE and MENASCHE, 2010) [9].

The cheese production begins at dawn, with the milking activity that, in general, is performed manually. After milking, women are responsible for manufacturing the cheese. For this, after having filtered milk, rennet is added (and in some properties salt is also added). When the milk is coagulated, the whey separated from the mass, it is then placed in the molds, which in most traditional properties is still made of wood, that are being gradually replaced by plastic or steel. The cheese is then pressed, with the support of a traditional system that uses stones to promote pressure. At the end of the day, the pieces of cheeses are turned in order to make the pressing uniform. Only in the next morning, the cheeses are ready to be ripped. It is important mentioning that - just as occurs in the Sertão Sergipano - the whey, a byproduct of cheese production, is important in the properties, because it is an essential food for fattening pigs, reared by most families in the region for the family consumption (by the family) (KRONE, 2009) [1].

The sale occurs in the same town of production or in cities in the region where this cheese is widely appreciated by consumers.

However, despite the tradition and enhancement that characterize this cheese, the production and commercialization happens in a marginal (or informal) way, outside of the formal channels of trade and the fiscal and health inspections. Farmers report cases of seizure of the product by the sanitary inspection, which creates great uncertainty about the commercialization. Consequently, as a way to avoid losing the production, many farmers end up using intermediaries to sell products (CRUZ, et al., 2008) [3].

Consumers, in turn, remain unconnected to the alleged risks highlighted by the inspectors, keeping the Serrano Cheese consumption, a practice that, even informally, legitimizes the quality of the cheese and gives visibility to many producers.

### *The Coalho Cheese*

The climate in Sertão Sergipano is tropical semi-arid, with seven to eight dry months and rainfall

concentrated in the autumn and winter (May to August), which rarely exceed 800mm/year. When rainfall does not occur during this period, it settles the phenomenon of drought. The low latitudes, associated with low vegetation cover cause high temperatures, with average annual temperature generally above 22 °C.

The Sertão Sergipano occupation was conformed, in the sixteenth century, with the donation of large and small tracts of land by the Portuguese Crown in order to establish land ownership, then threatened by the Dutch invasion (MENEZES, 2009) [2]. Although other groups have participated in the settlement, the Sertão has in the cowboy one of the precursor agents of its occupation: "using the *quarteação*<sup>4</sup> eventually becomes a cowman, beginning a structure of small farmers that persists even nowadays" (DINIZ, 1996, p. 52) [10].

To obtain the milk, the cows were separated of their calves in the late afternoon. The milking, held the next day, was the responsibility of manpower male. The farmers used to take advantage of the milk for food to prepare the Coalho Cheese, butter and, in some farms, *requeijão*, a type of curd cheese. These activities were women responsibility.

The cultural practice of these dairy products was passed by the ancestors to the female domain. The home interior was the territory for their production. This know-how, internalized by women, was almost exclusively intended to focus on feeding the family itself.

Menezes (2009) [2] shows that in the Sertão Sergipano, the Coalho Cheese was going through a ripening process and it was possible to consume it several weeks after production. The female producers used, then, a larger amount of salt, with the aim of conserving this food.

Since the 1970s, the cattle-raising in Sergipe, located mainly in the Agreste and Sertão, has had a rapid growth. Sautier and Cerdan (2002) [11] point out that this growth was the result of some favorable factors such as, for example, better roads, climate for grassland, lower incidence of cattle disease and

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<sup>4</sup> The term *quarteação* originates from the practice of every five years, the farmer passes to the cowboy the fourth part of **calves** accumulated during the period, as a way to remunerate the employee's work.

agricultural credit policy geared especially to the semi-arid region. As a consequence of this urbanization process, there was an increase in milk demand and an enhancement of the product.

In the 1970s, the Coalho Cheese, previously used for family consumption, becomes an activity focused on generating income for rural small farmers. The development of the product remains as responsibility of women, however, since that period; the purpose of this cheese would be the commercialization.

The Coalho Cheese is not standardized in shape and their weight varies between one and two pounds. After unmolded and salted, the cheeses are stored in plastic boxes and covered with a white cloth. Daily, the cheese pieces are washed and receive a new layer of salt for preservation of the product until the time of commercialization. Currently, in a few days of ripening, they have a light white color, resembling to the others fresh cheeses produced in the northeast states.

The commercialization of Coalho Cheese is largely held by relatives who migrated to the state capital, Aracaju, becoming products sellers, reselling it in bakeries, stores, markets and fairs. Thus, we have the configuration of small farmers production units and the urban market demand affected by the expansion of milk production and products, as Coalho Cheese, which represented only use value, began into exchange value (Menezes, 2009) [2]. Updates the know-how and the cheese is no longer geographically restricted to spaces of farm producers as in the past, being in the last two decades, an income generation strategy.

After the characterization of the regions of study, we look at the item below; discuss some empirical aspects in the light of theoretical discussions about short circuits of production and consumption, as well as about the rural development issue.

### III. TRADITIONAL PRODUCTS, LOCAL MARKETS: RELATION PRODUCTION-CONSUMPTION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The Serrano and Coalho Cheeses characteristics, as

well as their contexts of production and consumption refer to what Goodman (2003) [12] has pointed out as quality turn, which broadly, would cover the organic production, alternative agro-food networks (AAFNs), issues related to quality assurance and territorial strategies to enhance local foods.

For this author, the current historical moment indicates a movement from standardization and the logic of mass commodity production towards quality based on trust, tradition, location, organic products and new forms of economic organization. Thus, through the upgrading of food practices linked to rural areas, alternative food networks could create "new economic spaces" capable of overcoming the globalizing forces, uncontrolled markets, division of labor and power of large companies.

In relation to the cheeses in the study, the markets where these products are located are not new, newly built, but traditional spaces, where trust, inter-knowledge and close relations between producers and consumers validate and, in some ways, certificate the quality of these cheeses.

It is also relevant to mention that Goodman (2002, 2003, 2004) [13], [12], [14], in different works, has criticized the negligence of researches about alternative food networks and related to food quality have considered consumption. The author defends that the growth and reproduction of alternative networks depend on the ability to reconfigure relations between producers and consumers, which requires that consumers are recognized as active partners in changes in agro-food practices.

Although in the case of Serrano and Coalho cheeses cannot, in fact, consider alternative networks because these networks are traditional in the areas where they occur, it is possible to affirm the importance of consumption, direct and closer relationship between producers and consumers. The markets for these cheeses are characterized as short circuits, founded on trust, which seems to be the main element for the maintenance of such spaces.

Accordingly, in addition to considering the diversity and multiple realities of the countryside, the production-consumption relationship seems to be a promising new element to reflect on the theme of rural or territorial development, at least with regard to the direction of food production.

In summary, new relations based on closer links between producers and consumers, have been advocated by authors such as Goodman (2002, 2004) [13] [14], Marsden (2004) [15] Soninno and Marsden (2006) [7] and Wilkinson (2003, 2006) [16] [17], who have studied alternative agro-food networks and in particular short chains of production and food supply. In general, these authors have defended the reconfiguration of supply chains as an important mechanism for the emergence of new rural development strategies, from the reconnection between producers and consumers of products.

Marsden (2004) [15], reflecting on the notion of quality in the development and regulation of food supply chains, considers, given the reconnection between producers and consumers and the strong relationship with the notion of locality, be more appropriate use the term "short" - instead of the not specific adjectives "new" and "alternative" - as a common denominator to describe the types of food supply chains that are emerging from the debate on rural development. For the author, short chains could be an important vehicle for creating more effective linkages between rural areas and urban spaces.

Soninno and Marsden (2006) [7] argue that short supply chains, in spite of falling within conventional chains, can provide new relationships between producers and consumers. These chains would be able to promote the rehabilitation or the re-localization of food. According to this approach, "quality", "transparency" and "location" have characterized the short chains because it relates quality and small production, traditional practices, landscapes, nature and local resources. From this perspective, the changes, which would leave from the industrialized sector and conventional food toward the re-localization of food and small production, have been identified as potentially involved in the emergency of food circuits capable of revitalizing rural areas.

In the case of areas where there is already a local market, alternative to the conventional, as is the case of the cheeses studied, we could consider that in the Campos de Cima da Serra region and Sertão Sergipano region the market already exists and the consumer has kept the consumption of cheeses by assign them qualities that surpass the quality of highly processed cheeses, produced far from the vision and

knowledge of consumers.

In this sense, we could consider that attributes such as proximity, reputation of producers, traditional production methods and strong link between products, history and culture of the region, involve, in some way, features that surpass the quality of food from the large scale production, graded by the search of standardization. Apparently, it is the diversity and symbolic values related to specific aspects of a region or group of producers who conform and differentiate the quality of traditional products.

In terms of quality, Soninno and Marsden (2006) [7] consider that it involves a social process of qualification. For this reason, the quality of food is constructed and negotiated among the actors involved. In specific contexts of production-consumption, the quality construction sets different standards and local economic strength, reflecting in the way as different alternative food networks are built in different cultural traditions, organizational structures, consumer perception and political and institutional support. These authors, illustrating the visions of different countries in relation to the quality of traditional products, point out difficulties in generalizing aspects or characteristics of food quality versus specific contexts and conventions of each country. The authors emphasize that, behind the different understandings of quality, there are different methods and systems of production, responsible for the reform and reorganization of the food supply chain. It reveals a political dispute that reflects different interests, agendas and values.

In this sense, Canclini (1997) [18], who studies the reasons for consumption, believes that although the society is undergoing a process of globalization, the consumer choices and the way how consumer relates to the products and services offered are linked to the culture to which they belong.

However, as noted above, there are strong pressures around the formalization and legalization of traditional production, especially in the case of Serrano Cheese. These pressures point out the limits of short chains or alternative circuits, because to allow the legalization of these cheeses production, it may be necessary to expand the scale of production, which could undermine the traditional characteristics and specific aspects of production of these cheeses. Many

producers, not having enough resources to match the structure of production to the requirements of legislation, especially the sanitary laws, could not legalize the production and possibly would be in the borders of this process. Still, such changes probably imply an increase in the prices of products, restricting the access to many local consumers.

The limits also point out the ownership of "local" attributes of quality by major production and distribution companies of agro-food sector, the scale increase of traditional food and various processes of social and economic exploitation that may be present even in short chains or alternative circuits.

It is possible, although considering the challenges such as those outlined above, that food production and supply alternative networks, mainly through short chains, as a strategy for the development of some regions, especially those which have sought to enter the market through the production and marketing of food. However, for this strategy to succeed, it is necessary a strong process of enhancement of production by small producers. It may happen complementary through the State mechanisms of intervention, reconnection of production-consumption and social action movements.

In this sense, Marsden (1999) [19], reflecting on the changes in patterns of development and regulatory processes in the rural context of Europe, considers the changes in the form and the meaning of State intervention. He believes that public intervention in rural areas should be more effective. The author, although taking into account the difficulty even to the rural sociology to examine the diversity of rural areas in methodological and conceptual terms, he considers the potential number of rural areas cannot be captured by analyzing only by the globalization perspective and the environmental issue, which would mean to say that State interventions should take into account the diversity, characteristics and local needs. Regarded to the links between producers and consumers, Goodman (2002, 2004) [13] [14], as highlighted, has defended the production-consumption relation, through alternative production and supply chains as a way to enhance the traditional production. Integrated strategies of State intervention, organization of producers and approach between production and consumption may contribute, in fact, for the

legitimacy of traditional or artisanal products, which have been sidelined outside of conventional trade because they do not achieve, in most (of) cases, sanitary and tax requirements, for example.

To sum up, we understand if alternative networks may be a strategy for rural development, this strategy must be designed and built from the dialogue with local producers, especially in regions where there is already some interest from producers in activities aimed to the market yields, avoiding, to some extent, the risks of developing strategies that do not correspond with reality and expectations of the region.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The Serrano and Coalho Cheeses in Campos de Cima da Serra and Sertão Sergipano, respectively, represent not only an important source of income for producers but also the maintenance of a lifestyle, linked to the cultural and historical conformation of these regions.

The quality of these products, although not achieving the requirements, is legitimized by the relationship between producers and consumers, who, through trust and social networks, find mechanisms to ensure the quality of cheeses.

The specific characteristics of these cheese producing regions point out to a positive dynamic, where the local markets, grounded in short circuits and trusts relationships, become an aspect of differentiation. These characteristics, that shape the contexts studied as SIALs, indicate that in these areas, where there is direct relationship between who produce, commercialize and consume the Serrano and Coalho Cheeses is possible that traditional foods are a booster for rural development strategies.

To this end, we consider not only the relationship between producers and consumers can contribute to these dynamics, but also, and just as important, the organization of producers and State support.



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