

## THE AGRESTE PERNAMBUCANO CLOTHING CLUSTER: ORIGINS AND CURRENT CONFIGURATIONS

### *O POLO DE CONFECÇÕES DO AGRESTE PERNAMBUCANO: ORIGENS E CONFIGURAÇÕES ATUAIS*

### *EL POLO DE CONFECCIONES DEL AGRESTE PERNAMBUCANO: ORÍGENES Y CONFIGURACIONES ACTUALES*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses the formation of the Agreste Pernambucano Clothing Cluster and its relations with the current configurations of this productive territory. We traced the history of a territory that overcame the economic crises caused by the decline in rural production - mainly due to the great droughts in the region - and today it appears as one of the main centers of production of clothing in Brazil. Based on research carried out between 2017 and the beginning of 2020 - with visits to production units, interviews with workers and data collection on the local clothing industry -, we seek to discuss the productive organization of the Pole and the perceptions of workers concerning the valorization of autonomous work, even in informality. We argue that, forged in the dialectic between privation and inventiveness, the current configurations of the Pole and its competitive power reside, to a large extent, in the homology between the culture founded on an “imperative of independence”, related to the region's history, and the neoliberal logic contemporary of individual responsibility, whose material support is verified in flexible and intense forms of autonomous and informal work.

**KEYWORDS:** Agreste Pernambucano clothing cluster. Informality. Self-employment. Entrepreneurship.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo discute o histórico de formação do Polo de Confeções do Agreste Pernambucano e suas relações com as configurações atuais desse território produtivo. Procuramos traçar o percurso de um território que superou as crises econômicas provocadas pelo declínio da produção rural – principalmente em razão das grandes secas na região – e hoje aparece como um dos principais centros de produção de confeções e comércio popular do Brasil. A partir de pesquisa realizada entre 2017 e início de 2020 – com visitas a unidades produtivas, realização de entrevistas com trabalhadores e empresários e levantamento de dados sobre a indústria de confeções local –, buscamos discutir a organização produtiva do Polo e as percepções dos trabalhadores em relação à valorização do trabalho autônomo, ainda que na informalidade. Argumentamos que, forjadas na dialética entre privação e inventividade, as configurações atuais do Polo e seu poder de competitividade residem, em grande medida,

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*na homologia entre as disposições fundadas num “imperativo da independência”, relacionado ao histórico da região, e a lógica neoliberal contemporânea da responsabilização individual, cuja sustentação material se verifica em formas flexíveis e intensas de trabalho autônomo e informal.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Polo de confecções do Agreste Pernambucano. Informalidade. Trabalho autônomo. Empreendedorismo.*

**RESUMEN:** *Este artículo analiza la historia de la formación del Polo de Confecciones del Agreste Pernambucano y sus relaciones con las configuraciones actuales de este territorio productivo. Buscamos trazar la trayectoria de un territorio que superó las crisis económicas provocadas por el declive de la producción rural -principalmente debido a las grandes sequías de la región- y hoy aparece como uno de los principales centros de producción de confecciones y comercio popular de Brasil. A partir de la investigación realizada entre 2017 y principios de 2020 -con visitas a las unidades productivas, entrevistas con trabajadores y empresarios, y recolección de datos sobre la industria local de la confección- buscamos discutir la organización productiva del Polo y las percepciones de los trabajadores respecto a la valoración del trabajo autónomo, aunque sea en la informalidad. Argumentamos que, forjadas en la dialéctica entre privación e inventiva, las configuraciones actuales del Polo y su poder de competitividad residen, en gran medida, en la homología entre las disposiciones fundadas en un "imperativo de independencia", relacionado con la historia de la región, y la lógica neoliberal contemporánea de la responsabilidad individual, cuyo soporte material se verifica en formas flexibles e intensas de trabajo autónomo e informal.*

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** *Polo de Confecciones del Agreste Pernambucano. Informalidad. Trabajo autónomo. Emprendimiento.*

## Introduction

Large billboards advertising jeans, beachwear and dresses welcome anyone who arrives in the Santa Cruz do Capibaribe region, in the countryside of Pernambuco. [...] Many of the inhabitants of the place are proud to have the DNA of entrepreneurship and strictly follow the government's mantra of “fewer rights, more jobs”. [...] Informality in the labor market is around 80%. There are no reliable statistics on employment, but in the region it is repeated all the time that are without work only those who do not want to work (ZANINI, 2019, our translation).<sup>3</sup>

The excerpt above describes the impact of arriving in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, one of the main cities that make up the so-called Clothing Pole of Agreste Pernambucano. In a region without an industrial tradition, marked by precarious infrastructure, lack of public services and a past identified with the decadence of the economy based on livestock, cotton and agriculture,

<sup>3</sup> ZANINI, F. No agreste, polo de confecções serve de laboratório para reforma de Guedes. **Folha de São Paulo**, abr. 2019. Available: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2019/04/no-agreste-polo-de-confeccoes-serve-de-laboratorio-para-reforma-de-guedes.shtml>. Access: 11 Oct. 2019.

the emergence of a pole with such vitality draws attention, especially due to the presence mass of “informal entrepreneurship”.

Based on the numerous surveys carried out in the region (BURNETT, 2013; LIMA; SOARES, 2002; MILANÊS, 2019; SÁ, 2018; VÉRAS DE OLIVEIRA, 2013), it appears that informality in work relationships, female, home work and family are striking features from the origin of local production and trade in popular fairs to the present. As well as the strong entrepreneurial discourse propagated in the midst of intense and precarious work, carried out in countless informal productive units.

Considering these aspects, based on research carried out at the pole between 2017 and 2020<sup>4</sup> and on the literature on its origins, we will seek to recover the path of a region that has overcome the economic crises caused by the decline of rural production - mainly due to the great droughts in the region - and which today appears as one of the main centers of production of clothing and popular commerce in Brazil, mobilizing extensive commercial circuits and in which thousands of people earn their living in informal occupations or in the “gray areas of work” (AZAÏS, 2012). Next, we will try to present some aspects related to the work and organization of the polo apparel production, identified in its current configurations. Finally, based on interviews with formal and informal producers, we will discuss issues related to the broad appreciation of self-employment in this territory - even if informally and through intense work -, which is often perceived as a form of individual entrepreneurship.

## Origin and development

The origins of the Clothing Pole of Agreste Pernambucano date back to the mid-1950s, from the artisanal production in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe that was distributed at popular fairs traditionally held in the cities of the region. However, before finding in the production of clothing the main resource for the development and generation of work and income for the population, the region of Agreste Pernambucano had livestock, cotton cultivation and small agricultural production as its fundamental economic activity even if they always lived with some difficulty, given the climatic conditions – in view of the significant periods of drought, characteristic of the region. According to Milanês (2019), the characteristics of the climate hampered the possibilities of a permanent and stable source of income for the population. It is

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in this scenario that clothing activities appear as alternatives for work and income for the Agreste population, with women being the main protagonists of the process, mobilizing techniques and experiences acquired as a generational heritage (BEZERRA, 2018; PEREIRA, 2019). Thus, relying primarily on the mobilization of the local population, large quantities of knitwear, denim and jeans were produced.

Due to this unplanned emergence, forged in the practices of populations that sought economic alternatives in the face of scarcity of resources, there is some debate in studies on the formation of this productive territory. Part of the explanations recover the origin of the clothing pole, attributing it to the imperative of survival of this population and to a later “spontaneous” development (LYRA, 2006). From a different perspective, the emergence of this space is narrated, highlighting the ancestral collective experiences, transmitted by generations, which culminated in inventive ways of producing life (ESPÍRITO SANTO, 2013; MILANÊS, 2019). In the latter, the agency of the people who built the pole in an “inventive” way is then focused. We understand, however, that these approaches are not necessarily exclusive, since the emergence of local production can be considered a creative and collective way of responding to an objective need for survival.

Until the late 1940s and early 1950s, the clothing industry basically consisted of artisanal work using scraps made from waste from the textile industries in Recife (BURNETT, 2013). These scraps were taken to Santa Cruz do Capibaribe on the return of residents, small producers and breeders who traveled to the capital of Pernambuco to sell chickens, charcoal, cheese, among other products (LYRA, 2006). With this material, women's underwear was produced (LIMA; SOARES, 2002), simple pieces of clothing and patchwork blankets (which became a kind of typical product in the region). These products were then sold at the street markets that historically took place in the main cities of Agreste Pernambucano, appearing as important not only economic, but also social and cultural spaces (SÁ, 2018).

The fundamental productive unit of this activity was the family and domestic environment. In possession of a sewing machine and under the command of the “mother of the family”, as Burnett (2013) observes, clothes were made to order or on their own initiative, intended for popular consumption. According to Lyra (2006), it was common for larger clothing manufacturers from urban areas to lend sewing machines to women who lived in nearby rural areas, inserting them into the production chain as subcontractors (a situation that resembles the so-called putting-out system, characteristic of the first configurations of capitalism). Thus, it can be observed that the production of the Agreste is already marked by flexibility and sustained

in informal, domestic, family, autonomous work and with the marked presence of subcontracting.

With the growth of this production and the intensification of the commercial circuits around it, the factories of Recife began to charge for the scraps, previously collected for free. In this context, throughout the 1960s, large quantities of scraps also began to be brought from São Paulo, giving new impetus to the Agreste industry. According to Campello (1983), tons of scraps from the discards of factories in Brás – the heart of São Paulo's industry at the time – were taken to Pernambuco and destined for the production of low value-added garments. It would have been this southern origin of the material that gave the name by which the production of Agreste Pernambucano came to be known: *sulanca*; contraction of the word “*helanca*” (patchwork material) and Sul (geographical origin). The term *sulanca* came to represent garments produced with simple finishes, intended mainly for the consumption of low-income populations (LIMA; SOARES, 2002; LYRA, 2006).

It is with the relative fame acquired by *sulanca* and the consequent identification of the economic potential of this activity that Caruaru and Toritama “entered the business”, throughout the 1970s (MILANÊS, 2019), at least regarding the more intense activity of production (considering that in terms of the circulation of goods, Caruaru was already an important center). It is worth mentioning that until the mid-1960s, the city of Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, today considered the capital of *sulanca* (MORAES, 2013), was an inexpressive urban center in the context of the state of Pernambuco (BURNETT, 2013). The association between the popularization of *sulanca* in the Northeast and other regions of Brazil with the commercial activities of Caruaru, considered the “true economic capital” of the Agreste Pernambucano, can therefore be justified (CARDOSO, 1965, p. 60). The economic importance of “pre-*sulanca*” Caruaru is evident in the characterization made by Cardoso in the 1960s, in which the author highlights the economic and social characteristics of this city as an important warehouse for Northeastern and Southern products through its fairs, without even mention *sulanca*. The trade of clothing items appeared without prominence among several other products, such as the region's fruits, jerked beef, leather items and other handicrafts.

The injection of large quantities of scraps from São Paulo into the production of *sulanca* contributed to the expansion of this production, inducing a leap in scale. Local popular fairs grew and gained even more importance, becoming known as *Sulanca Fairs*. These retail and wholesale trade spaces then activated expressive circuits of “scholars” from different regions of the country (RABOSSI, 2008).

**Figure 1** – View of the Sulanca Fair, in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe



Source: Personal file provided by José de Oliveira Góis

In this context, from the 1970s onwards, the figure of the *sulanqueiro* appears with an important role (MILANÊS, 2019). *Sulanqueiro* was the term used to describe the peddlers who traveled selling these confections outside the Agreste, a rural version of urban street vendors (BURNETT, 2013). According to Milanês (2019), the *sulanqueiros* left with pieces of clothing, usually produced within their own family, and traveled for weeks through cities in the North and Northeast, exposing the product on the streets. Alongside the “*sacoleiros*” (peddlers) circuits, the role of the *sulanqueiros* was important for the dissemination and establishment of other markets for the *sulanca*, which also demanded an intensification of supply and the engagement of many other families in their production (MILANÊS, 2019).

**Figure 2** – *Sulanqueiros*



Source: Unidentified author. Personal file provided by José de Oliveira Góis.

As a result, in the 1970s, it was no longer a small production of clothing, but a myriad of small informal businesses with family and home work. Economic growth and employment and income opportunities in the region have attracted many residents of surrounding towns, as well as the rural population. Thus, the importance of clothing production for the region can be verified by the impacts on the urbanization of its main cities, which resulted from the

concentration of production units and commercial activities and the new economic opportunities created (VÉRAS DE OLIVEIRA, 2013).

Still in this process, it is also worth considering the effects of the development of the clothing hub on migratory processes. Historically characterized by being a region of “expulsion” of migrants, from the 1980s onwards the scenario changed, relatively, with the intensification of return migration (LYRA, 2005). In addition to the employment crisis that marked the Brazilian industry at that time, reducing the possibilities of economic insertion of migrants in the Southeast, the dynamization of economic activities in the Agreste contributed both to the reduction of migration and to the return movement. On the other hand, the networks previously established by the migration circuits that linked the Agreste to large centers in the Southeast appeared as even more important for the economic circulation of the *sulanca*, forming a kind of “national network of kinship and friendship of productive and commercial arrangements”. (BURNET, 2013, p. 11, our translation).

From the recovery of the history of the economy of *sulanca*, it is clear that the origin and development of this form of production and commerce cannot be attributed only to the action of pioneers and emblematic figures, even if they exist - as shown by Gomes (2002) and Rabossi (2008) –, much less government projects and incentives. According to Vêras de Oliveira (2013), even the developmental policies present in the Northeast from the 1960s onwards, implemented mainly through the Superintendence for the Development of the Northeast (SUDENE), did not directly affect this region. Also remembering that, in the period, the region practically did not exist from an institutional point of view, in terms of production of data on industrial activity.

It is, therefore, a productive space that emerged and developed practically without state support and whose history was related to a “national division of labor” (BURNETT, 2013, p. 11), in which the rural exodus from Agres in the 1950s favored the growth of industries in the Southeast while originating – in the dialectic between deprivation and creative action – the activities of the retailers, the *sulanqueiros* and an entire population engaged in the production of clothing in the Agreste Pernambucano.

### **The Agreste Pernambucano clothing Pole: current configurations**

The production and commerce of the *sulanca* built an industrial territory that developed “outside the state umbrella” and, also for this reason, was underestimated for decades by official statistics (LIMA; CORTELETTI; ARAÚJO, 2020). Bearer of the fame of producer of popular

pieces, with low added value and low quality items aimed mainly at the consumption of the poorest populations, the pole has grown and reconfigured since the 1990s, when it started to be perceived as a possibility to face the Chinese product (which has in fact occurred in some segments), which was already threatening the national industry (LIMA; RANGEL, 2019). Since then, its importance has become evident, given the proportion of production, the number of workers engaged, the multiplication of productive units and the extension of commercial networks.

The productive and commercial activities developed there were consolidating and becoming more closely associated with the field of fashion and various services, such as management and marketing consultancy and participation in fashion events; it was also during this period that the first own brands of producers from the pole appeared (VÉRAS DE OLIVEIRA, 2013).

According to Chang and Corteletti (2019), the hub currently comprises an extension of approximately 15 municipalities, having expanded to smaller cities in Agreste Pernambucano, in rural and urban regions. The main centers continue to be Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, Caruaru and Toritama. Each of these three municipalities has different characteristics in terms of the general segment of the pieces produced: Santa Cruz has specialized in cotton knitwear, underwear and beachwear; Toritama is renowned for the production of jeans; and Caruaru produces and sells various clothing items, but mainly knitted fabrics (SEBRAE/UFPE, 2013).

According to the SEBRAE/UFPE report (2013), the hub is the second largest clothing center in Brazil, generating a total turnover of around R\$1 billion in 2011. 80% of the hub's total production is carried out in informal production units. The character of the production can be defined as mass production, but following the trends that appear in the major media, that is, fast fashion fashion (popularly known as *modinha*), where pieces, models, colors and fabrics change quickly and manufacturers must always be aware of the speed of demand. In addition, the wholesale trade is another characteristic of the pole, a modality in which producers have a small profit margin on each piece and depend on sales in large quantities. Therefore, it is evident the importance of the peddler circuit who buy for resale in other cities and states.

As already mentioned, informal work in the Pole is predominant, mainly in smaller production units called *fabricos* and *facções*. It can be said that forms of work organization characteristic at the beginning of *sulanca* production continue to be widely reproduced in the pole. In this sense, the so-called *fabricos* represent the small production units in which the production of clothing takes place. Many work in rented sheds, but are usually installed inside the domestic environment, in garages or backyard extensions (LIMA; CORTELETTI;



ARAÚJO, 2020). It is worth mentioning that in recent years many *fabricos* have grown, developed their own brands and modernized their physical and organizational structure, becoming true factories.

The *facções*, in turn, tend to operate in even more precarious conditions than the *fabricos*, inserting themselves in the production chain as outsourced workers for them and for larger companies, performing certain production tasks. As service providers, the work can range from the individual production of seamstresses in their home environment to small sheds adapted with their own machines.

At the same time, partly due to the increase in production driven by the growing engagement of new workers and the consequent multiplication of productive units (formal and informal), local marketing modes have been reconfigured, as the traditional *Sulanca* Fairs no longer supported the flows of goods, people and the incessant entry of new merchant-producers. Thus, from the beginning of the 2000s, as a result of private investments and some partnerships with local governments, large shopping centers were built in Toritama, Caruaru and Santa Cruz do Capibaribe. These ventures are, at the same time, effects and part of the strategy of local governments and private investors to change the stigma of production and local markets associated with the historic image of the *sulanca* (RANGEL, 2020). In a broader perspective, these shopping centers are part of the formalization processes that have been taking place in this territory for some decades, mainly by larger companies, which serve large national chain stores (LIMA; RANGEL, 2019).

In addition, the change of the name *Sulanca* Fairs to Clothing Pole of *Agreste de Pernambuco* was a strategy to improve the pole's image, since the term *sulanca* is immediately associated with peddlers, *sulanqueiros* and low quality and cost popular products (VÉRAS DE OLIVEIRA, 2013). This formal and symbolic change also has to do with the growth of producers who seek to make better quality articles and refuse the stigma of *sulanca*. One of the interviewees in our survey carried out in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe explains this passage:

I went to a lecture in Taquaritinga and the professor there [said] “you here in *sulanca*”; I said, “professor (at the time the people even applauded), we don't speak *sulanca* anymore, what we do it's sewing”. Because you can see that people are looking more for quality now, something that used to be traditional, it used to be like that, now it's not. So now we make it, we don't make *sulanca*, we make clothing, so much so that my children, me, Nana [sister], we dress with garments from here. We buy all our clothes here, understand? (Rodrigo, 39 years old, our translation).

However, the aspect of formalization and “modernization” is partial. The business in the commercial center can be formalized, while the production of the merchandise sold there – in general, manufactured by the merchant himself – is structured in the use of varying degrees of informal, outsourced, subcontracted and precarious work. On the other hand, this situation provokes us precisely to complicate dichotomous categories such as formal and informal, as well as autonomous and subordinate work, and the very dimension of labor exploitation, as experienced by agents.

If we consider the “moral economy” (THOMPSON, 1998) characteristic of this work, we will see that a large part of the workers in these productive units organize their economic relations based on social and kinship ties based on trust, situations in which the notion of “help” is crucial, as observed by Moraes (2013). In this sense, the categories boss and employee are of little help in understanding these relationships, and the formalization of contracts seems much less important than deals established through relationships of trust and mutual aid principles (MORAES, 2013).

This also implies considering that the informality that marks a large part of the production of the Pole, represented mainly by the *fabricos* and *facções*, instead of just signifying a remnant of archaic productive forms, is a constituent of the “modern” form of this productive territory, fundamental to its configuration. contemporary. On the one hand, it is a condition for lowering costs and maintaining competitiveness; on the other hand, the meaning of informal relationships and the expectations built in precarious and informal work go far beyond that. Given the structure of opportunities at the pole, informal *facções* appear as true “gateways” to the valued condition of self-employed workers in the clothing sector (VÉRAS DE OLIVEIRA, 2013).

It is observed in the reality of the pole that informality acquires different configurations, but without ceasing to reproduce old practices of tradition and customs, that is, the new arises from traditional aspects, maintaining essential elements of the previous condition. In this sense, the process of “informal entrepreneurship” stands out, which marks the current configurations of production and work in the territory; a kind of popular entrepreneurship that, as Penteadó and Cruz Junior (2020) observe, cannot be completely reduced to neoliberal rationality.

## **Entrepreneurship and informality at the Pole**

As already discussed, if there is a protagonist in the history of the formation of this clothing hub, it is the collective subject of the Agreste population, historically accustomed to the “imperative of independence”. Although in recent decades the center has been the object of new development projects and private and public investments, the ethos of autonomy that marks the perceptions of workers engaged there can be related to its origin, as well as to the local culture, used to surviving on the margins of large government projects.

The figure of the State itself, as highlighted, has always appeared as something distant from the development of the region, only recently becoming more directly involved through modernization and formalization projects, after a certain consolidation of the production of clothing in the Agreste. State action is generally verified in attempts to regulate work, in the fight against the circulation of goods without an invoice or in the control of the environmental impacts of this production, such as regarding water pollution caused by jeans laundries (SÁ, 2018). From this derives a certain negative view of state regulation, rarely associated with greater social protection (RANGEL, 2020), which legitimizes adherence to the discourse of “less rights, more jobs” promoted by the Bolsonaro government, as expressed in the excerpt of the news that opens this text<sup>5</sup>.

Reflecting on the roots of the search for autonomy in the Agreste people, Milanês (2015) highlights the entry of agricultural men into the world of sewing as symptomatic and refers to the relationship of work as an interaction between man and nature, in which the demarcation of time and the rhythm of agricultural work are established by the human relationship with the natural, and not by the demands of industrial production. The recognition of relative autonomy linked to rural work brings this analysis closer to the work of Juarez Brandão Lopes (2008), who, in the early 1960s, observed a mismatch between the culture of self-employment, especially among northeastern migrants, and principles of the industrial production system – rationalized, disciplined and subordinated. Thus, it can be considered that the value of autonomy, independence and non-subordination at work precedes, in the case in question, the “neoliberal rationality” (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016), identified with the expansion of individualism and the principle of competition, currently conveyed by the discourse of entrepreneurship.

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<sup>5</sup> The text by Zanini (2019) also highlights the fact that, in the 2018 elections, Jair Bolsonaro won both rounds in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, contrary to what happened in the rest of the state of Pernambuco. This indicates the possible identification of the free market discourse promoted by the candidate's campaign with the expectations present in the local “work culture”..

Considering, then, the historical aspect of the fundamentally autonomous formation of the pole, without further governmental support, and the current characteristics of production, with hegemony of small enterprises<sup>6</sup>, one can understand the plausibility of the entrepreneurial discourse that guides the behaviors and choices of most of the workers. Becoming an entrepreneur of your own and starting your own clothing brand is the dream of most people who work with sewing in the region, although, as we have seen throughout the research carried out, some families recognize the importance of having a member working regularly, with a formal contract. According to interviewees, this can represent greater security to face the current economic crisis, although the financial gains are more attractive when they work autonomously and for productivity.

In the region, the empirical trajectories of those who ascended socially are well known due to the proximity of networks of personal relationships. Also, for this reason, the perception was created that the most “possible” path to economic ascension is through the business itself (FREIRE, 2016). This perception is often validated by real and close situations, along with a majority that continues to try to engage in intense, precarious and unprotected work. Anyway, according to Milanês (2015), most of the large wholesalers in Santa Cruz, for example, are descendants of the pioneers of production and commerce in the *sulanca*, which tends to reinforce the value of self-employment.

Considering this situation, Freire (2016) sought to understand the configurations of work in the pole through the analysis of the trajectories of entrepreneurs, how they started from the condition of workers in *fabricos* and *facções* to the current position. The author verified that this change is not only linked to an individual will, but to the family experience brought in the memory of entrepreneurs, since their childhood. In the author's words:

The social heritage received from parents, family members and acquaintances, considered the first wave of clothing entrepreneurs, combined with rural customs and trade made in fairs, made everyone want to have their own business. This would be the way to overcome difficult life conditions (FREIRE, 2016, p. 176, our translation).

In addition, autonomous and informal work at the pole is favored by the very nature of clothing production. Access to a single sewing machine is a condition for starting a *facção*. According to Milanês (2019), most of the projects in the Pole start in a similar way: sewing and other activities within the domestic environment, family work, providing services to other

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<sup>6</sup> According to data from SEBRAE/UFPE (2013), at the Pole more than 70% of the production units work with up to two people employed.

companies and, over time, consolidation of a more structured production unit. An interviewee, who currently produces the merchandise she sells in a store at *Moda Center*<sup>7</sup>, illustrates this process through her own trajectory:

[...] Then mom and dad worked at the company and stuff, but you make a lot of money here in the sewing business. It's the economy here. Then Mom started as a partner, which Mom didn't know either, she didn't understand anything and the person understood. Mom bought the machines and they started, then it went with the flow [...] And in that I was at the sewing every day. [...] Then, I started to sew, curious, and I would go there and sew. Then mom closed, stopped, closed, closed, closed. But the machines continued at home and I wanted money, so I started to sew, [...] to sew at home, then I started here, then later I said "I'll start for myself". And I don't know how long it's been, like 10 [years]. There a long time, more than when I started college, I was already doing it, then I started, then we, there you go, go on, go on, you go one of these. It's not like "I'm going to study medicine", "I'm going to do law", because I have the aptitude for that; no, you fall for it and you accidentally start (Tatiana, 42 years old, our translation).

According to the trajectory presented above, entering the sewing is not a purely individual choice, but a job that appears as an alternative income and is part of the life of most residents of the region. It is relatively easy to start a business in the pole, just having a machine; the fabric can be purchased "on credit" (on the basis of friendship and trust) at any store in town. Then the pieces are made and sold to larger contractors or directly at fairs and shopping centers. With the money acquired in the sale, the fabric is paid for in the store and part is reinvested in the purchase of more material for making new pieces, and so on.

Because of this dynamic, there is a certain discourse in the region that there is no unemployment and that only those who do not want to work do not work. Lyra (2006) also highlights this perception, placing it in the general context of precariousness that originated and still surrounds the garment industry in the agreste region.

In a region with several social problems, this becomes an "oasis" in the middle of the semi-arid region. Economic growth is referred to as a symbol of progress and wealth, where unemployment is almost non-existent and people have income, at least to survive (LYRA, 2006, p. 107, our translation).

Many employers complain that young people have been resistant to working as salaried workers. In this regard, it is important to consider that the "choice" between self-employment (informal or not) and available salaried jobs can only be understood taking into account the different possibilities announced and perceived in each condition (RANGEL, 2021). Thus, Lima, Corteletti and Araújo (2020) highlight that, for many, the value of remuneration for work

<sup>7</sup> Large popular shopping mall in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe.

in autonomous production, even informal and precarious, is one of the main criteria of attraction. In general, payments are based on productivity, the more parts produced, the higher the yields. The difference in self-employment income is explained by another interviewee, who left paid work to work on her own:

Look, let's put [what you earn] on average 50% more. Even the girls who work with me, who work from home. Today they are more preferring to work at home than working in factories, freedom gains much more. Because, until then, working by production, if the seamstress works and makes 100 pieces, she gets paid for those 100 pieces, do you understand? (Carla, 44 years old, our translation).

The tension between entrepreneurship and informality, or rather, strategies considered entrepreneurial in informal and precarious work, has coexisted with attempts to formalize this work, put into practice in recent years at the pole. Pereira (2019) cites as an example the project “Reducing informality through Social Dialogue”, which was carried out in 2010 and coordinated by the Inter-union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE). According to the author, the purpose would be “to promote coordinated actions that favor formalization through social dialogue and the articulation of a system of networks of local, national and regional organizations (in Latin America)” (PEREIRA, 2019, p. 162, our translation). Another project to be highlighted is “Voices of Fashion– Agreste 2030”, which was promoted by institutions such as InPACTO, Ethos Institute, Brasil Reporter, DIEESE, and C&A Institute, with the main objective being to improve working conditions and promote the socioeconomic development of the region (PEREIRA, 2019). It is also worth mentioning the “Fashion Express” project, created by the Pernambuco Treasury Department, which sought to facilitate the issuance of electronic invoices, aiming to reduce the fiscal insecurity of traders and buyers, improve competitiveness and, above all, increase control over informal trade.

In addition to these local strategies, it can be said that the main policy for formalizing enterprises in the region consists of encouraging the registration of informal producers and traders under the figure of the Individual Microentrepreneur (MEI). However, as shown by Lima, Corteletti and Araújo (2020), the MEI regulation is not enough to cover the reality of work in the *fabricos* and *facções* of the Pole, since, rarely, the informal producer has only one employee, the which ends up creating a situation in which the business is officially formal, but continues to operate with informal “contracts”. In other words, formal and informal work complement each other and become confused in “gray areas” (AZAÏS, 2012), in which the links are unclear.

As Vêras de Oliveira (2013) observes, with the modernization of the Clothing Pole of *Agreste*, the *sulanca*, in terms of the organization of production and mobilization of the workforce and modes of marketing, did not disappear. Nor is it just a hybridity between archaic and modern production models. These are new relationships in which the transformations in the *sulanca* caused by the development strategies of the pole configure a complex situation that goes beyond the characterization in terms of informal, precarious and family work, and which, at the same time, remains very far from the normative ideal of the formal economy.

### Final considerations

The social experience produced by the material shortage caused by the great droughts that devastated the region, by the decline in the economic cycles of livestock and cotton and by the marginal position in the national dynamics of development, stimulated the Agreste population to pragmatic and inventively mobilize productive activities linked to characteristic cultural aspects, associated with the relative autonomy of the small rural property, the fusion between reproductive and productive space and the importance of street markets in the economic and social life of the Agreste. Thus, the origin of the pole goes back to the use of what was initially considered garbage by the fabric industries, mobilizing the domestic environment as a productive unit and the sexual division of labor in the clothing and itinerant trade of the *sulanca*. These combined elements ensured the low cost of production and its suitability for a broad popular consumer market.

The informality that marked the beginning of this production and was a condition for its development, is still present and with the same role of collaborating for the greater competitiveness of the pole. Currently, there are well-established small and medium-sized companies, but *fabricos* and *facçôes* still represent most of the production units. Large-scale production, female, family, home work, without any type of regulation, remain ordinary aspects and characterize entrepreneurship by necessity that prevails there.

However, it is possible to perceive a reconfiguration of informality and of the different forms of work organization and production management. New technologies are gradually being incorporated into work processes, especially by formal and larger companies. Even in the others, the use of devices that allow displaying and even selling goods on virtual social networks has increased. Public authorities, universities and large private enterprises have also been more present in the clothing sector in Agreste Pernambucano, identifying the economic importance

of local production and operating processes of modernization of the pole, which are developed together with the maintenance of poor regulated working conditions.

Through the analysis of the social relations of work present in the pole, it can be seen that, since its origin, there has been a customary use of flexible forms of production, such as the use of subcontracting and the use of work in negotiations outside the salary norm. It can therefore be said that the traditional structure of Agreste's clothing production has affinities with the contemporary trends of the “lean company”; and, in the current context, what was previously seen as archaic and averse to the trend of modernization of work and production practices is now identified as a model of competitive strategy.

In this scenario, there is also a process common in peripheral economies crossed by neoliberal logic, which is the reconfiguration of informality in entrepreneurship. However, as shown, the appreciation of autonomous work in the region precedes the expansion of the neoliberal ideology of entrepreneurship, referring to a certain culture of rural work and the relatively autonomous origins of sulanca production, forged in the dialectic of deprivation and inventiveness. Thus, it can be said that, in the current configurations of the pole, its power of competitiveness resides, to a large extent, in this homology between the dispositions of workers, based on the “imperative of independence”, related to the history of the region, and the contemporary neoliberal logic of individual accountability, being materially sustained in flexible and intense forms of autonomous, informal and precarious work.

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