

STREET VENDORS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES IN THE MUNICIPAL MARKET OF SANTO ESTÊVÃO (BAHIA)

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the street market and its vendors, with the aim of identifying the forms of articulation and strategies used by these professionals to remain in the market. In addition, it seeks to analyze the daily lives, work, and protagonism of the vendors, as well as to briefly contextualize the history of the street market in different eras, highlighting the existing inequalities. The research was conducted using the Oral History methodology, with face-to-face interviews conducted in 2024, using forms to collect essential data. The study was developed with vendors who sell fruits, vegetables, and greens at the street market in the municipality of Santo Estêvão. The street market is not limited to an economic function, as it involves issues of sociability among the individuals who occupy this space. The relationships established between families, the interaction with the public of different classes, and the strategies in the art of selling and surviving are some of the aspects that make the market a place of many experiences and stories of individuals who contribute to the local economy.

Keywords: market vendors; open-air market; municipal market; Santo Estêvão (Bahia, Brazil).

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objeto de estudo a feira livre e os feirantes, com o objetivo de identificar as formas de articulação e as estratégias utilizadas por esses profissionais para permanecerem na feira. Além disso, busca-se analisar o cotidiano, o trabalho e o protagonismo dos feirantes, bem como contextualizar brevemente a história da feira livre em diferentes épocas, destacando as desigualdades existentes. A pesquisa foi realizada por meio da metodologia da História Oral, com entrevistas presenciais realizadas em 2024, utilizando formulários para coletar dados essenciais. O estudo foi desenvolvido com feirantes que comercializam frutas, verduras e hortaliças na feira livre do município de Santo Estêvão. A feira livre não se limita a uma função econômica, pois envolve questões de sociabilidade entre os sujeitos que ocupam esse espaço. As relações estabelecidas entre as famílias, a interação com o público de diferentes classes e as estratégias na arte de vender e sobreviver são alguns dos aspectos que tornam a feira um lugar de muitas vivências e histórias de sujeitos que contribuem para a economia local.

Palavras-chave: feirantes; feira livre; mercado municipal; Santo Estêvão (BA).

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Introduction

The research in question focuses on the open-air market in the municipality of Santo Estêvão, Bahia, specifically located in the Supply Center at Praça Lineu Cerqueira da Silva. The interest in the topic arose from the lack of materials and texts to work with middle school students in the subject of Popular Culture. Motivated by the unknown and discontent, the research aims to learn about the stories of undervalued and unrecognized people. The objective is to investigate the market vendors, identifying the forms of articulation and strategies used to remain in the open-air market, as well as analyzing the daily life, work, and protagonism of these professionals. The central problem of the research is to understand how the economic and social relations of the market vendors in Santo Estêvão are structured. To address this issue, the research is based on two premises: methodology and the historiographical field.

The methodology adopted was the Oral History method,³ through interviews, we resort to interpretations of narratives based on memory. Thus, the research is situated within the History of the Present Time and aims to work with vendors from the Santo Estêvão Municipal Market, given that it is a plural space.

According to Roger Chartier (1996), the History of the Present Time is the field of historical study that analyzes the continuities and ruptures of the past in the present. Regarding the History of the Present Time, the historian Chartier (1996) says that:

The historian of the present time is a contemporary of his subject and therefore shares with those whose history he narrates the same essential categories, the same fundamental references. He is, therefore, the only one who can overcome the fundamental discontinuity that usually exists between the intellectual, affective, and psychic apparatus of the historian and that of the men and women whose history he writes. [...] the history of the present time confers a particular acuity to one of the most difficult questions faced by all historians: the articulation between

³ According to Carla Pinsky (2008), the richness of oral history is clearly related to the fact that it allows for the understanding of experiences and ways of life of different social groups. In this sense, the researcher has access to a multiplicity of "stories within history" which, depending on their scope and dimension, allow for altering the "hierarchy of historiographical meanings," in the words of the Italian historian Silvia Salvatici (p. 166). At the same time, working with oral history can show how the constitution of memory is the object of continuous negotiation. Memory is essential to a group because it is linked to the construction of its identity. It [memory] is the result of a work of organization and selection of what is important for the feeling of unity, continuity, and coherence—that is, of identity. And because memory is mutable, it is possible to speak of a history of the memories of people or groups, which can be studied through oral history interviews. Disputes over which memories will prevail in a group, a community, or even a nation, are important for understanding that same group, or society as a whole (Pinsky, 2008, p. 167).

the voluntary and conscious part of men's actions and the ignored factors that circumscribe and limit them (Chartier, 1996, p. 217).⁴

According to Pierre Nora (1993), the oral source, an instrument used to conduct research, is related to memory:

Memory is life, always carried by living groups and, in this sense, it is in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to all uses and manipulations, susceptible to long latency and sudden revitalizations. [...] Memory is an ever-present phenomenon, a link lived in the eternal present. [...] Because it is effective and magical, memory does not accommodate itself to details that comfort it; it feeds on vague, telescopic, global or floating, particular or symbolic memories, sensitive to all transfers, scenes, censorships or projections. [...] Memory emerges from a group that it unites. [...] Memory is rooted in the concrete, in space, in gesture, in image, in object (Nora, 1993, p. 9).⁵

Access to information is fundamental to the construction of History. In this sense, “the study of memory by historians has grown significantly in recent years. It offers opportunities, taken advantage of by few scholars, for cooperation with anthropologists, sociologists, literary critics, and psychologists (Burke, 2012, p. 172).”

During the field research, we conducted systematic observations of the fair space, the behavior of vendors and customers, as well as the organization of the stalls. Subsequently, the research was presented to each vendor individually, clarifying its importance and obtaining acceptance. Then, we conducted interviews to collect qualitative data.

⁴Original version: O historiador do tempo presente é contemporâneo de seu objeto e, portanto partilha com aqueles cuja história ele narra as mesmas categorias essenciais, as mesmas referências fundamentais. Ele é, pois o único que pode superar a descontinuidade fundamental que costuma existir entre o aparato intelectual, afetivo e psíquico do historiador e o dos homens e mulheres cuja história ele escreve. [...] a história do tempo presente confere uma acuidade particular a uma das questões mais difíceis com que se deparam todos os historiadores: a articulação entre a parte voluntária e consciente da ação dos homens e os fatores ignorados que a circunscrevem e a limitam (Chartier, 1996, p. 217).

⁵Original version: A memória é a vida, sempre carregada por grupos vivos e, nesse sentido, ela esta em permanente evolução, aberto a dialética da lembrança e do esquecimento, inconsciente de suas deformações sucessivas, vulneráveis a todos os usos e manipulações, susceptíveis de longa latência e de repentinas revitalizações. [...] A memória é um fenômeno sempre atual, um elo vivido no eterno presente. [...] Porque é efetiva e mágica, a memória não se acomoda a detalhes que a confortam; ela se alimenta de lembranças vagas, telescópicas, globais ou flutuantes, particulares ou simbólicas, sensível a toda as transferências, cenas, censuras ou projeções. [...] A memória emerge de um grupo que ela une. [...] A memória se enraíza no concreto, no espaço, no gesto, na imagem, no objeto (Nora, 1993, p. 9).

Interviews were conducted with eight vendors, three women and five men. However, most vendors (more than 40) refused to participate, citing lack of availability or fear of reprisals related to retirement, social security, or government programs.

This reluctance to share information highlights the lack of awareness about the importance of academic research and the value of recognizing market vendors as relevant subjects for the municipality. In addition, this experience highlights the challenges encountered in Oral History.

To ensure confidentiality and protect the participants' data, we chose to use the initials of the vendors' first and last names in the information collected during the interviews. During the interviews, I used a form prepared with the following questions: name; age; race; education; length of time working at the open-air market; working hours; income to support the family; safety at the workplace; origin of the goods sold; daily life at the open-air market; participation of family members in activities as market vendors; development of another activity to supplement income; challenges of the profession; whether they have children or grandchildren in universities. From this information, it was possible to reach the objectives established for the research.

For better understanding, this research was organized as follows: The first topic discussed the historical context of the emergence of the open-air market. The following topic discusses the women occupying public space, these as providers of the home. Next, the socioeconomic relationships established at the fair between vendors and customers were discussed. The fourth topic addressed the challenges faced by vendors, as well as their strategies.⁶ and skills that are designed to ensure the effective purchase and customer loyalty.

Brief historical context about the open-air market

The open-air market is among the oldest forms of commercial exchange and has long held considerable significance for regional economies. It was through the expansion of open-air markets that urban centers developed during the Middle Ages, when life was

⁶ “I call strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relations that becomes possible from the moment a subject of will and power (a company, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. Strategy posits a place susceptible to being circumscribed as something of its own and to being the basis from which relations can be managed as an exteriority of targets or threats [...] (Michel de Certeau, 1998, p. 99).”

still organized under feudal systems. These markets facilitated commercial exchange, the expansion of maritime routes, and cultural interactions. According to Alexandre Oviedo Gonçalves and Mônica Chaves Abdala (2013, p. 1):

The origin of the open-air market dates back to the ninth century in Europe. Local markets were organized with the aim of supplying the population with basic necessities. Thus, these markets emerged alongside the earliest agglomerations, initially understood as hamlets and villages and later as towns and cities. [...] Since Medieval Europe, markets constituted spaces of sociability, periodically bringing together merchants from different regions. From Italian ports, overland trade routes were consolidated, transporting Oriental goods throughout Western Europe [...].⁷

From the need to exchange foodstuffs, markets emerged in ninth-century Europe, later contributing to the formation of cities. These markets attracted merchants from various regions, establishing new overland routes, stimulating commerce, the Crusades, and urban growth, which gave rise to the bourgeois social class.

In Brazil, the open-air market dates back to the period of slavery. Enslaved people were compelled by their enslavers to work outdoors, selling their goods on the streets. Black women occupied public thoroughfares selling prepared foods, sweets, farm products, and various other commodities.¹

Observing the open-air market requires attention to pre-established and historical relations, including the racial dimension. This was also noted by Márcia Regina da Silva Paim (2005):

The analysis of the racial variable is likewise necessary, for activities related to the preparation and sale of food, and to the operation of stalls or street vending, were, for the most part (already before the nineteenth century), carried out by Black women. In this sense, the aim is to establish connections between the stallholders/ganhadeiras of the past and the current female vendors of São Joaquim. It is known that, biologically, the concept of race does not apply to human beings; however, it constitutes a useful category for analyzing gender

⁷ Original version: A origem da feira-livre remonta ao século IX, na Europa. Mercados locais organizavam-se com vistas a suprir a população com gêneros de primeira necessidade. Dessa forma, as feiras surgiam junto às primeiras aglomerações, inicialmente tidas como povoados e vilas e posteriormente cidades. [...] Desde a Europa Medieval, as feiras se constituíam como espaços de sociabilidade, reunindo periodicamente mercadores de diversas regiões. A partir dos portos italianos consolidava-se um comércio terrestre, levando mercadorias orientais por toda a Europa Ocidental [...].

¹ This refers to so-called "slaves of gain," who worked in the streets and therefore received a small remuneration, which, properly saved over a few years, would result in a sum sufficient to purchase their freedom, according to Stuart B. Schwartz (1988).

inequalities together with those of class. In an effort to legitimize racial “inequalities and inferiorizations,” from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, European intellectuals formulated a series of justifications that would constitute racialist theories [...] (Paim, 2005, pp. 14–15).²

According to Paim (2005), the daily routines of *quitandeiras* and *ganhadeiras* bear a strong resemblance to the work performed in today’s markets: “In addition to circulating with trays, bowls, and baskets skillfully balanced on their heads, the *ganhadeiras* occupied streets and city squares designated for public markets and open-air fairs where they sold almost everything (Soares, 1994, p. 56).” The representation and symbolism of the open-air market—and their contemporary expressions—are rooted in a context shaped by Black bodies, particularly women, as also emphasized by Mary del Priore:

The considerable increase in the urban population generated new opportunities for the expansion of commercial and supply activities. Small and medium-sized establishments multiplied, such as general stores, butcher shops, wine cellars, stalls, retail shops, bars, and taverns. The participation of women in such businesses was, from the outset, decisive. Many of these establishments were even known by the names of their female owners. In street commerce, among various types of peddlers, many women sold vegetables, greens, fruits, flowers, eggs, potatoes, onions, poultry, meats, fish, milk, bread, among other products. Some sales were occasional, such as offering a surplus or leftover from household production. In many cases, however, the activity was regular, as with the produce vendors—mostly immigrants—who displayed in the open-air markets what they cultivated on small farms on the outskirts of the city [...] Occupations such as these were embraced by women not only because of barriers to entering the formal labor market, but also by choice, as they preferred not to accept regular employment with fixed hours and predetermined workdays (Priore, 2013, p. 64).³

² Original version: A análise da variante racial também é necessária, pois as atividades ligadas ao preparo e comercialização de comidas, venda em quitandas ou ganho eram, em sua maioria, desempenhada (isto já antes do século XIX), por mulheres negras. Nesse sentido, procura-se estabelecer as relações entre as *quitandeiras/ganhadeiras* do passado e as feirantes atuais de São Joaquim. Sabe-se que, biologicamente, o conceito de raça não se aplica a seres humanos, mas se constitui em uma categoria útil para análise das desigualdades de gênero juntamente com as de classe. No intuito de legitimar as “desigualdades e inferiorizações” raciais, a partir da segunda metade do século XIX, intelectuais europeus formularam uma série de justificativas que vão constituir as teorias racialistas [...] (Paim, 2005, p. 14-15).

³ Original version: O aumento considerável da população urbana gerou novas oportunidades para o crescimento das atividades comerciais e de abastecimento. Multiplicaram-se os estabelecimentos de pequeno e médio porte como armazéns, açougues, adegas, quitandas, vendas, bares e botequins. A participação de mulheres nesse tipo de negócio foi, desde o início, determinante. Vários desses estabelecimentos eram, inclusive, conhecidos pelos nomes de suas proprietárias. No comércio de rua, entre os vários tipos de ambulantes, muitas mulheres comercializavam verduras, legumes, frutas, flores, ovos, batatas, cebolas, aves, carnes, peixes, leite, pão, entre outros produtos. Algumas vendas eram eventuais,

As Priori indicates, in twentieth-century Brazil, women assumed a fundamental role in street commerce, selling a wide variety of goods. Far from being a mere pastime, the street represented an opportunity for labor-market integration, especially in a period marked by intense racial and gender prejudices.

In this context, the street became a space of business and autonomy, enabling women to exercise control over their labor. They were free to produce what would be sold and to choose the place and moment of commercialization, which afforded them a sense of independence and autonomy.⁴

It is evident that the open-air market of Santo Estêvão—much like other markets examined by different authors, particularly Brazilian markets between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—depicts a space predominantly occupied by Black vendors. This fact was observed during fieldwork at the market and confirmed through statements by the eight interviewed vendors from Santo Estêvão, all of whom identified themselves as Black or Brown, corroborating Paim's (2005) observation:

[...] Black men and women were rendered inferior in relation to other racial groups in the country. Thus, one may discern that occupations of lesser prestige, such as those of *ganhadeiras*, *quituteiras*, *quitandeiras*, and market vendors, were relegated to Black women, who, in turn, demarcated territories and inscribed their presence in the informal commercial sphere of Salvador (Paim, 2005, pp. 14–15).⁵

como a oferta de um excedente disponível ou sobras da produção de quintal. Em muitos casos, entretanto, a atividade era regular, como a das verdureiras, na sua maioria imigrantes, que expunham nas feiras livres o que produziam em chácaras existentes nos arredores da cidade [...] Ocupações como essas foram abraçadas por mulheres, não só por conta das dificuldades de inserção no mercado de trabalho, mas por opção de não se empregar numa função regular, com horário fixo e jornada determinada (Priore, 2013, p. 64).

⁴ According to Priori (2013, p. 65): “Many women reproduced their domestic occupations in the labor market—such as washing, ironing, and pressing irons—in an effort to earn extra income or even to try to support their families. In places where the presence of immigrants was significant, Black women had more difficulty finding work because, due to prejudice, employers preferred to hire white women. As a result, Black women ended up concentrating in even less valued and lower-paid positions such as domestic worker, cook, laundress, and scrap collector. Despite the meager earnings, laundress work was one of the most sought-after occupations by women from the working class.”

⁵ Original version: [...] homens e mulheres negros foram inferiorizados perante outros segmentos raciais do país. Assim, pode-se entrever que atividades de menor prestígio, como *ganhadeiras*, *quituteiras*, *quitandeiras* e *feirantes*, foram relegadas às mulheres negras, que, por sua vez, demarcaram territórios e inscreveram sua atuação no comércio informal soteropolitano (Paim, 2005, p. 14-15).

Observing the market and its vendors in Santo Estêvão leads us to reflect on the embodied experiences of these subjects, highlighting issues of gender and class. These individuals work arduously from Monday to Saturday, with workdays beginning at 6 a.m. and extending until 4 or 5 p.m., amounting to excessive hours and granting few or no labor rights.

The open-air market of Santo Estêvão plays a fundamental role in the local economy and serves as a source of income for rural producers. It is in this space that goods from the rural hinterland circulate, valorizing family agriculture. The articulation between countryside and town enables farmers to sell their products—such as beans, corn, cassava flour, tubers, fruits, vegetables, small- and medium-sized animals, and handicrafts.

Women market vendors

The interviewed women vendors reported that they began their activities in the markets at a very young age, some having worked there for thirty years and others for fifty. This means they started working as vendors during adolescence or early adulthood. These women labor intensively in the open-air markets from Monday to Saturday, contributing significantly to the local economy.

Through their work in the market, they were able to raise their children, provide them with education, and today sustain their households with the income earned from market sales. Moreover, many of these women perform double or even triple workdays, since, in addition to domestic tasks, they also tend to crops in the fields. After a long day of work, they still go to the fields to harvest tubers and fruits for sale the following day.

In the early morning, around five o'clock, these women purchase and receive goods to be sold at their stalls. Vendor M. S. S. stated:

I get up early. Around five in the morning or in the late afternoon, I go to the fields to pick up sweet potatoes and manioc. In the yard, I gather mangoes, acerola, cashew fruit, jackfruit, umbu, and oranges; if I have these fruits, I bring them to sell. I also raise some chickens and sell them to a few colleagues and neighbors. With the chickens I sell, I make a small profit. I raise chickens because I like it, but from time to time I sell them and get a little extra (Interview granted by M. S. S., April 23, 2024, Santo Estêvão).⁶

⁶ Original version: Eu levanto cedo. Por volta das cinco horas da manhã ou pela tardinha, eu vou na roça pegar batata e mandioca. No quintal, eu pego manga, acerola, caju, jaca, umbu e laranja, caso eu tenha essas

Understanding the daily routines of the women vendors of Santo Estêvão reveals their protagonism and autonomy, which, for Jumara Carla Azevedo Ramos Carvalho (2021), constitute:

[...] actions of autonomy and economic development in the struggle for survival and emancipation, without losing sight of the additional challenges imposed by gender inequality, childrearing, and the confrontation with situations of prejudice, discrimination, and male domination that permeate the social role of these women who, as subjects, develop strategies and tactics of power (Carvalho, 2021, p. 1).⁷

The women vendors engaged in actions that led them toward autonomy, although along the way they faced social, political, and economic challenges. Nonetheless, they devised strategies that enabled them to attain positions of visibility and recognition (Carvalho, 2021).

Working in the market is good! When I'm at home, I do everything—I take care of the house and work in the fields, because on Fridays and Saturdays I spend the whole day here. When I'm at the market, I sell everything, I leave with my money, I do my shopping, and I go home. It is very calm work. Here, I can take care of everything. When I get home, I make dinner and lunch to bring the next day. I have time to tend a small field... But I usually buy goods because it's not always that I can get things from the fields and from the yard (Interview granted by C. A., April 23, 2024, Santo Estêvão)⁸

The protagonism of women vendors goes beyond commerce, since the income they earn is managed by them, and it is through market work that they maintain their households and families (Prestes, 2018):

These women begin their protagonism in agriculture, leading the planting and holding the knowledge of cultivation and harvest. In the

frutas, eu pego para vender. Também crio umas galinhas e vendo para alguns colegas e vizinhos. Com as galinhas que vendo, lucro um pouquinho. Crio galinha porque gosto, mas de vez em quando vendo e recebo um trocado (Entrevista concedida por M. S. S, em 23 de abril de 2024, Santo Estêvão).

⁷ Original version: [...] ações de autonomia e desenvolvimento econômico na luta pela sobrevivência e emancipação, sem perder de vista os adicionais desafios impostos pela desigualdade de gênero, criação dos filhos, enfrentamento de situações de preconceito, discriminação e dominação masculina que perpassam o papel social dessas mulheres que desenvolvem, enquanto sujeitos, estratégias e táticas de poder (Carvalho, 2021, p. 1).

⁸ Original version: Trabalhar na feira é bom! Quando estou em casa eu faço de tudo – faço as coisas de casa e trabalho na roça, porque na sexta e no sábado eu passo o dia todo aqui. Quando estou na feira eu vendo tudo, saio com meu dinheirinho, faço compras e vou para casa. É um trabalho muito tranquilo. Aqui eu consigo cuidar de tudo. Quando chego a casa, faço a janta e o almoço para trazer no outro dia. Tenho tempo de cuidar de uma rocinha... Mas geralmente eu compro mercadoria porque não é sempre que consigo pegar as coisas na roça e no quintal (Entrevista concedida por C. A, em 23 de abril de 2024, Santo Estêvão).

space of the markets, they exercise control over commercialization and money management, and they also advocate for dignified conditions in the marketplace, which constitutes an essential strategy for their families' subsistence (Prestes, 2018, p. 13).⁹

The women vendors of Santo Estêvão play a multifaceted role, not limited solely to their work in the market but also encompassing agricultural activity. They are responsible for planting and harvesting the products they sell, often with the support of family members, such as children and spouses.

In this context, the vendors occupy a central role within their families, taking responsibility for household, family, and work management. Such protagonism and financial independence, however, are not easily achieved. Women vendors face numerous challenges, including the arduous task of managing domestic labor (Sarmiento, 2018).

Despite these obstacles, work in the open-air market offers schedule flexibility, allowing the women vendors of Santo Estêvão—who are also homemakers—to maintain a more substantial economic presence within their families.

Market Day

The open-air market of Santo Estêvão is an important point of attraction for people from neighboring towns such as Ipecaetá, Rafael Jambeiro, Antônio Cardoso, and Cabaceiras do Paraguaçu. Owing to its scale, the commercial sector of Santo Estêvão exerts significant influence, drawing vendors and customers to its market, especially on Fridays and Saturdays, when the diversity of goods is greatest.

As the local historian Claret Marques Fonseca states (1983, p. 118), “Saturday is the city’s busiest commercial day, a festive day of encounters among friends and acquaintances, of business transactions, and of social interaction.” One of the vendors, M. G. J., shared his experience: “I’ve worked here for quite some time. I’ve met many people and made a few friends” (Interview granted by vendor M. G. J., April 23, 2024, Santo Estêvão).

⁹ Original version: Estas mulheres iniciam seu protagonismo na agricultura, a frente do plantio sendo detentoras do saber-fazer em cultivos e colheitas. No espaço das feiras, exercem o domínio da comercialização e gestão do dinheiro, ainda atuam na defesa de um local digno para a feira, visto ser ela uma estratégia essencial para a subsistência familiar destas (Prestes, 2018, p. 13).

The open-air market of Santo Estêvão transcends its economic function, becoming a space of celebration and sociability. It is a setting where knowledge, practices, skills, and affections are exchanged among friends, and where individuals have the opportunity to meet new people from other municipalities.

According to Fonseca (1983), the market was the most important institution in the municipality, as it stimulated the economy of urban merchants and contributed to the income of rural farmers. Goods produced in the fields were brought to the commercial district in the town center, where merchants purchased them and resold them in their shops or stalls.

The market is also an important center for the sale of artisanal products, such as ceramics, which are brought from nearby regions including Sítio Novo, Oleiro, in the municipality of Antônio Cardoso, and the Jacaré farm in the municipality of Ipecaetá (Fonseca, 1983, p. 118).

Fonseca (1983) emphasizes that the flow of people from rural areas and neighboring towns was intense, with buses, trucks, private automobiles, and taxis transporting both people and goods. The open-air market of Santo Estêvão continues to be an important commercial hub, where residents of nearby municipalities and rural zones gather to trade a wide variety of products.

Image 1: Stalls at the open-air market



Caline Oliveira Santos, 2024.

Thus, it becomes evident that the open-air market described by Fonseca (1983) continues to exist with considerable variety, although it has undergone structural changes over time. Moreover, the market maintains its importance for the local economy, offering a diversity of products and, above all, sustaining the dynamic interplay between countryside and town, family-based agriculture, and the open-air market itself.

The market offers a wide array of products, as Fonseca affirms:

On market day, which is Saturday, we find cereals of various kinds, an assortment of vegetables, beef, pork, mutton, and goat—fresh or sun-cured—ceramics, and cassava flour. Meat and cassava flour hold a place of prominence in our market. Handicrafts of nearly every variety, animal tack, costume jewelry, perfumes, fabrics, regional fruits according to each season of the year, freshwater and saltwater fish—fresh or cured—twist tobacco, cachaça, cheese spreads, etc. (Fonseca, 1983, p. 118).¹⁰

This diversity of goods characterizes most markets in the northeastern region. “Since its origins, the open-air market has constituted a territory of buying, selling, and exchanging differentiated goods (food, clothing, animals, local products, etc.), traditionally bringing together populations from diverse social classes” (Souza; Dantas; Matias, 2014, p. 6).

The market’s clientele is not limited to the lower-income classes; on the contrary, it fosters encounters and cultural exchange across social strata. As Santos (2018) observes:

The experiences of these subjects reveal a rupture occurring in social relations and in the world of labor in the Recôncavo region of Bahia, and many people saw in the market a new possibility within the regional landscape. In addition to its vast capacity and potential for the sale and purchase of goods and merchandise, and its continuous and prosperous commercial development, these elements must be considered alongside a unique prerogative of this universe: the open-air market was a space of freedom, where anyone could enter regardless of status, even though a certain logic of privilege for some individuals and spatial hierarchies based on one’s social condition and relationships did indeed exist (Santos, 2018, p. 129).¹¹

¹⁰ Original version: Na feira, que é no dia de sábado, encontramos cereais de diversas espécies, verduras das mais variadas, carne de boi, de porco, de carneiro e bode, fresca ou de sol, cerâmicas, farinha de mandioca. As carnes e a farinha de mandioca têm lugar de destaque em nossa feira. Artesanatos de quase todas as variedades, arreios de animais, bijuterias, perfumaria, tecidos, frutas regionais de acordo com cada estação do ano, pescador de água doce e de água salgada, frescos e salgados, fumo de corda, cachaça, requeijões, etc. (Fonseca, 1983, p. 118).

¹¹ Original version: As experiências desses sujeitos sugerem percebermos a ruptura que estava ocorrendo nas relações sociais e também no mundo do trabalho na região do Recôncavo da Bahia e muitas pessoas viam na feira uma nova possibilidade no cenário regional. A Feira, além da grande capacidade e

The open-air market is a space of coexistence and inclusion, where people from different social classes and ethnic backgrounds have access to fresh, high-quality, and affordable products. This ensures that all market-goers can acquire the goods they need, guaranteeing healthy and nutritious food for their families.

This reality contrasts sharply with what is encountered in supermarkets, where products are often sold at prohibitive prices, restricting access to healthy and quality food for many. The open-air market, therefore, plays a fundamental role in promoting food security and reducing social inequalities.

Challenges and Strategies in the Open-Air Market

The failure to complete basic education represents a significant obstacle that generates long-term disadvantages and dilemmas. In this context, the vendors interviewed for this study reported that most market workers did not finish high school.

It is well known that the labor market has become increasingly competitive, leading individuals who, for various reasons, did not complete basic education to turn to informal work as an alternative means of subsistence:

The vast majority of vendors, however, consist of a population unable to enter the formal labor market and who have become intermediaries-merchants (buyers of agricultural and artisanal products for resale in the market), or they are small agricultural producers who seek out the market to sell the products of their labor directly to consumers (Souza; Dantas; Matias, 2014, p. 11).¹²

The fact of not completing one's education, unfortunately, exacerbates inequality, significantly impacting the informal labor sector. Larissa Penelu Bitencourt Pacheco

potencialidade para venda e compra de produtos e mercadorias, e de apresentar um desenvolvimento comercial contínuo e próspero, esses elementos devem ser conjugados com uma prerrogativa impar desse universo: a feira livre era o espaço da liberdade onde indistintamente todos podiam adentrar, mesmo sabendo que existia ali uma determinada lógica de privilégios para alguns indivíduos e hierarquias na organização espacial em função da condição do sujeito e de suas relações sociais. (Santos, 2018, p. 129)

¹² Original version: A grande maioria dos feirantes, porém, é constituída de uma população que não conseguiu se inserir no mercado formal de trabalho e transformou-se em atravessador-comerciante (comprador de produtos da agricultura e do artesanato para revenda na feira), ou são pequenos produtores agrícolas que buscam a feira para comercializar diretamente com o consumidor os produtos do seu trabalho (Souza; Dantas; Matias, 2014, p. 11).

(2009) notes that “the living conditions in which they found themselves pushed them toward a mixture of autonomy and subalternization, for they were their own bosses and, at the same time, lacked the most basic social rights accorded to workers” (p. 167):

Our collaborators are elderly individuals who never had medical assistance, transportation, or other benefits enjoyed by those with formal employment. Some retired due to age; others take pride in continuing to work in old age to support their families, as they would have no other source of income. But for the most part, the vendors of fruits, vegetables, sugarcane, and corn (to name a few), and the women who divide themselves between domestic tasks and other forms of livelihood in general services, do not relinquish being market vendors. They know, for generations, that their relatives—parents, grandparents, uncles—lived off that market. They are known in the town square, and interruptions to this way of life have never occurred without trauma. We must consider, in this sense, the extent to which people are pushed into this way of life or choose to enter it as a means of achieving other levels of autonomous survival (Pacheco, 2009, p. 169).¹³

Just as in Pacheco’s research, the vendors of Santo Estêvão chose to continue working in the market as a way to supplement their income. However, it is necessary to investigate additional factors to understand the motivations that led them to choose informal work, which offers no labor rights.

Although the period studied by Pacheco differs from the current setting in Santo Estêvão, both markets are located in the same region, only 42 kilometers apart. Moreover, there are similarities between them, suggesting the persistence of unfavorable conditions for market vendors (Pacheco, 2009).

It was observed that some vendors rely on family support, including children and spouses who work at other stalls or at the same stall, assisting in the sale of goods. This family dynamic reveals the continuity of market labor across generations, demonstrating the importance of tradition and familial inheritance in this context.

¹³ Original version: Nossos colaboradores e colaboradoras são pessoas idosas, que não possuíam assistência médica, transporte e outros benefícios de quem tem um ofício de carteira assinada. Alguns se aposentaram, por conta da idade, outros, orgulham-se por ter que trabalhar ainda idosos, para prover a família, quando não teriam outra opção de renda. Mas em sua maioria, os vendedores de frutas, verduras, cana, milho (para citar alguns) e as mulheres que se desdobram entre tarefas domésticas e outras formas de sustento em serviços gerais, não abrem mão de serem feirantes. Sabem desde muitas gerações, seus parentes, pais, avós, tios, viveram daquele mercado, são conhecidos na praça e interrupções nesta forma de vida não foram feitas sem traumas. Temos de considerar neste sentido, em que medida as pessoas são empurradas para esta forma de vida ou escolheram se inserir nela, como forma de adquirir outros patamares de sobrevivência autônoma (Pacheco, 2009, p. 169).

For Pereira (2020, p. 68), the market is an “indivisible unit whose continuity over time is strengthened by kinship and compadrazgo relations.” “There are also those who use the market space to transmit elements of popular culture from generation to generation”¹⁴ represented in a variety of ways [...]” (Souza; Dantas; Matias, 2014, p. 11).

However, it is noteworthy that some vendors have children who completed higher education and chose to pursue different careers. This suggests that, in some cases, a process of social mobility is underway.

Nevertheless, it is reasonable to speculate that, for many, working in the informal market is not a genuine choice. Limited access to formal education can restrict opportunities for employment and income, leading many to work at someone else’s stall until they can gather enough resources to establish their own and become their own employers.

According to Souza, Dantas, and Matias (2014), this reality reveals the open-air market as a space of resistance and class conflict. Furthermore, experiences lived during childhood and adolescence play a significant role in choosing to work in the open-air market:

Thus, becoming a vendor is closely associated with experiences that many men and women had before assuming this occupation and entering the market setting. Many of these experiences were transmitted across generations. Reconstructing the trajectories and experiences of these individuals and interrogating their motivations and choices are fundamental elements for understanding aspects of this type of worker (Santos, 2018, pp. 118–119)¹⁵

Contact with the land, the crops, and the dynamics established between rural farmers and the open-air market contributes to the lived experiences of individuals who

¹⁴ According to Peter Burke, 2010: “Culture” is an imprecise word, with many competing definitions; my definition is that of “a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values and the symbolic forms (presentations, handcrafted objects) in which they are expressed or embodied.” Culture in this sense is part of a whole way of life, but is not identical to it. As for popular culture, perhaps it is best to initially define it negatively as an unofficial culture, the culture of the non-elite, of the “subaltern classes [...]” (Burke, 2010, p. 10).”

¹⁵ Original version: Assim, tornar-se feirante está muito associado às experiências que muitos homens e mulheres tiveram antes de assumirem esse ofício e adentrarem no cenário da feira. Muitas dessas experiências foram transmitidas entre gerações. Reconstituir as trajetórias e experiências desses sujeitos e interrogar suas motivações e escolhas são elementos fundamentais para entender aspectos desse tipo de trabalhador. (Santos, 2018, p. 118 – 119).

observe and participate in the process, even indirectly. The participation of children in work in the fields is a common practice among families whose livelihood depends on agricultural products.

Thus, the experiences and memories accumulated throughout life allow individuals to choose a path closely tied to their roots, as the skills needed to continue the family's work form part of their everyday life, without requiring new forms of knowledge, strategies, or investments.

It was observed that, in the open-air market of Santo Estêvão, young people and adolescents assist their families in selling products, a factor that contributes to their insertion and continuity in market labor.

Regarding the representativeness of the open-air market as a social space, Michele Paiva Pereira (2021) sought to identify symbols and forms of resistance present in the market:

[...] the space of the open-air market consists of re-existences of subjects with a singular logic, expressing actions of counter-rationalities in social and economic matters, while simultaneously obeying the dominant rationality. The open-air market, as a place, expresses the spatial dimension of everyday life through existences and re-existences, revealing a range of possibilities in which vendors and patrons express contradictions of contemporary society and the potential for overcoming them (Pereira, 2021, p. 129).¹⁶

Vendors employ a variety of tactics to ensure their livelihood and continuity in the market. These strategies include, beyond the quality of their goods, organization, the stall's location, product exchanges, the use of notebooks and verbal agreements, as well as a low rate of adherence to credit card payments (Pereira, 2021).

During fieldwork in the open-air market of Santo Estêvão, similarities were identified with the market described by Pereira (2021). Vendors accept payment via pix and possess card machines, without adding charges to the final price. Customers may also receive discounts—for example, paying only R\$ 20.00 for purchases totaling R\$ 21.00 or

¹⁶ Original version: [...] o espaço da feira livre é constituído de r-existências de sujeitos que possuem uma lógica singular e demonstra ações de contra racionalidades nos aspectos da questão social, econômica, ao passo que também obedece a racionalidade dominante. A feira livre como lugar traduz a dimensão espacial do cotidiano por meio de existências e r-existências e demonstra uma série de possibilidades, em que feirantes e frequentadores demonstram ações de contradições da sociedade atual é possível possibilidades de superação (Pereira, 2021, p. 129).

R\$ 22.00. In this way, vendors secure their clientele through strategies, product quality, and flexible payment options.

The priority is to avoid losing a sale, which does not necessarily mean the vendor will suffer losses or reduced profit. Alternative payment methods benefit both parties: customers do not forgo purchases, and vendors ensure they receive payment. In the open-air market of Santo Estêvão, one can observe—at the upper right of the image below—credit card brand logos and, at the upper left, the pix key.

The vendors were also asked about the difficulties inherent to their profession. Among the responses, some expressed clear dissatisfaction, particularly regarding the purchase price of goods.

In the market, there are products whose prices may double during periods of drought or heavy rainfall, due to rising acquisition costs. Consequently, vendors are forced to pass these increases on to customers, which is not always financially feasible for them. This often results in decreased sales, as customers either choose not to buy or purchase smaller quantities, negatively affecting vendors' profits.

Image 2: Stall with a variety of payment options



Caline Oliveira Santos, 2024.

Because of these rising costs, vendor G. M. S. stated that one of the main challenges of the profession is “buying and not being able to make a profit” (Interview with G. M. S., April 24, 2024, Santo Estêvão). According to G. M. S., to prevent such outcomes, “the solution is to turn to other suppliers with lower prices and, in some

situations, try not to pass the entire price increase on to the customer” (Interview granted by vendor G. M. S., April 24, 2024, Santo Estêvão). On this point, Araújo states:

The consumers from the municipalities of São Gonçalo dos Campos, Serrinha, and Santo Estêvão stand out for their frequency. Several factors explain this pattern: proximity to Feira de Santana allows these populations to travel in search of services lacking in their own towns, establishing various commercial relations, including the consumption of products such as beans. Another factor is the agricultural production of these municipalities, which occurs only during the rainy season. Once the local harvest is exhausted, consumers seek the product in places such as the Supply Center, where the presence of legumes is constant (Araújo, 2006, p. 115).¹⁷

The vendors’ efforts to avoid transferring price increases to customers reveal their commitment and concern for their clientele. It also highlights the tactics developed to prevent financial loss for either party. However, it is clear that such increases are handled with care and symbolic consideration.

Because vendors maintain constant contact with the open-air market, they understand that price increases may not be well received. For this reason, they strive to find ways to mitigate the impact of price adjustments, taking into account the clients’ social and financial contexts.

Alessandra Oliveira Araújo (2006) conducted a study on the bean market in Feira de Santana. Feira de Santana is a regional reference point, particularly due to its large commercial center that supplies nearby towns, including Santo Estêvão:

Consumers in the municipalities of São Gonçalo dos Campos, Serrinha, and Santo Estêvão stand out for their frequency of visits. Several reasons were considered to explain this occurrence: their proximity to Feira de Santana allows their populations to travel in search of services not available in their cities, leading them to establish various commercial relationships, including the consumption of products such as beans. The agricultural production of these municipalities is another factor contributing to the presence of these consumers; since it only occurs during the rainy season, the local harvest is quickly depleted,

¹⁷ Original version: Já os consumidores dos municípios de São Gonçalo dos Campos, Serrinha e Santo Estêvão destacam-se pela frequência. Alguns motivos foram considerados para explicar esta ocorrência: a proximidade destes com Feira de Santana permite suas populações deslocarem-se à procura de serviços não existentes em suas cidades e terminam por estabelecer relações comerciais diversas, dentre elas, o consumo de produtos como o feijão. A produção rural de seus municípios é outro fator para a presença desses consumidores, por ocorrer apenas no período chuvoso, a safra local é logo esgotada, o que os leva a procurar o produto em espaços como o do Centro de Abastecimento, onde a presença da leguminosa é constante (Araújo, 2006, p. 115).

leading them to seek the product in places like the Supply Center, where the legume is constantly available.(Araújo, 2006, p. 115).¹⁸

As Araújo (2006) notes, the Supply Center receives vendors from Santo Estêvão who go there to purchase beans. These vendors work directly in the open-air market. Araújo states: “[...] the large number of people who seek out the city, particularly the Supply Center, due to the variety of products and prices.” In other words, the vendors are continually searching for high-quality, diverse products at prices that remain accessible to their clientele.

To avoid losing customers, vendors develop various strategies. Beyond the practical skills developed over time, Walkiria do Nascimento (2018) highlights one method frequently used to ensure successful sales:

Tasting fruit is a common practice among customers before purchasing, as a way to confirm product quality; when not initiated spontaneously by the customer, it is suggested by the vendor. The contact and selection of foods engage nearly all five human senses: customers evaluate products by looking, touching, smelling, and, depending on the item, tasting. At a fruit stall, the customer may squeeze a grape and taste it, and the vendor promptly confirms the product’s quality, saying: “The grape is good, you can take it without worry.” Thus, tasting also functions as a sales strategy—one in which the vendor suggests tasting so that the customer may confirm the quality and feel confident in purchasing (Nascimento, 2018, p. 98).¹⁹

Tasting is a voluntary practice used by customers to evaluate product quality before purchasing. It allows them to ensure the quality of what they are acquiring, thereby

¹⁸ Original version: Já os consumidores dos municípios de São Gonçalo dos Campos, Serrinha e Santo Estêvão destacam-se pela frequência. Alguns motivos foram considerados para explicar esta ocorrência: a proximidade destes com Feira de Santana permite suas populações deslocarem-se à procura de serviços não existentes em suas cidades e terminam por estabelecer relações comerciais diversas, dentre elas, o consumo de produtos como o feijão. A produção rural de seus municípios é outro fator para a presença desses consumidores, por ocorrer apenas no período chuvoso, a safra local é logo esgotada, o que os leva a procurar o produto em espaços como o do Centro de Abastecimento, onde a presença da leguminosa é constante (Araújo, 2006, p. 115).

¹⁹ Original version: A degustação de frutas é uma prática frequente entre os fregueses antes da compra, com o intuito de certificar-se da qualidade do produto, e quando não é um ato espontâneo do freguês e sugerido pelo feirante. O contato e escolha dos alimentos acionam quase todos os cinco sentidos do corpo humano, os fregueses analisam os produtos olhando, tocando, cheirando e, dependendo do produto, provando. Num banco de frutas o freguês apalpa uma uva e experimenta o feirante logo confirma a boa qualidade do produto dizendo: “a uva é boa, pode levar tranquilo”. Sendo assim, a degustação aparece também como estratégia de venda em que o feirante sugere a prova ao cliente para garantir a boa qualidade do produto para assim conseguir vendê-lo (Nascimento, 2018, p. 98).

avoiding low-quality goods. Vendors strategically encourage this practice, since once quality is confirmed, customers feel more confident in their purchase. This approach enhances customer satisfaction and strengthens the relationship between vendor and consumer.

Vendor C. R. C. reported:

The sale needs to be good for me and for the customer, right? But I'm not going to sell so cheaply that I make no profit. I have a family and I need to support them and provide our daily bread. At the end of the day, when I still have goods left, sometimes I lower the price to avoid losing vegetables and cilantro, but when they spoil, I suffer a loss. When something spoils, I take it home to feed the animals. Losing merchandise hardly ever happens because I buy every other day or every two days, depending on demand. The secret is not to buy anything too ripe (Interview granted by C. R. C., April 23, 2024, Santo Estêvão).²⁰

Alongside the challenges inherent to the profession, it was reported that:

The hard part is waking up early to buy the goods. Sometimes I wake up at four in the morning to buy goods in Feira. Not just me—everyone here. We buy there and sell here. It's exhausting! And we still have to be kind, energetic, and receive customers well. (Interview granted by M. S. S., April 23, 2024, Santo Estêvão)²¹

In addition to the challenges of rising early and purchasing quality products, profit remains uncertain. Regarding income, interviewees stated that “working in the market is enough to maintain the household and support the family” (Interview granted by vendor E. G. S., April 23, 2024, Santo Estêvão). They also noted that “there are vendors here who, although retired, still work in the market; and others have an additional source of income” (Interview granted by vendor G. M. S., April 23, 2024, Santo Estêvão). Another interviewee reported: “I receive government assistance because of health problems—I

²⁰ Original version: A venda precisa ser boa para mim e para o cliente, né? mas não vou vender barato a ponto de não lucrar. Tenho família e preciso sustentar e levar o pão de cada dia. No final do dia, quando ainda tem mercadoria, às vezes, faço um preço menor, para não perder algumas verduras e coentro, mas quando estraga saio no prejuízo. Quando estraga levo para casa para dar de comer aos animais. Perder mercadoria dificilmente acontece, porque compro um dia sim e dois dias não. A depender do movimento. O segredo é não comprar muito maduro. (Entrevista concedida por C. R. C., em 23 de abril de 2024, Santo Estêvão).

²¹ Original version: O ruim é acordar cedo para comprar as mercadorias. As vezes, acordo quatro horas da manhã para comprar as mercadorias em Feira. Não só eu, mas todos aqui. A gente compra lá e vendemos aqui. É cansativo! Ainda tem que ser gentil, ter disposição e receber bem os clientes. (Entrevista concedida por M. S. S., em 23 de abril de 2024, Santo Estêvão).

have spinal issues—and to supplement my income, I work in the market, since the benefit is not enough” (Interview granted by vendor P. A. C., April 23, 2024, Santo Estêvão).

Based on the answers provided, work in the open-air market is essential for the livelihood of most vendors. June is the most profitable month due to the influx of visitors from various locations for the June festivities—São João and the traditional saints’ celebrations—widely observed in the Brazilian Northeast.

This influx boosts market activity, increases sales, and generates significant economic returns for the local economy and greater profit for market workers.

Regarding the security of vendors and their goods, it was mentioned that monitoring cameras and guards are present. Additionally, only vendors with fixed stalls or permanent structures pay monthly taxes to the municipal government for the use of public space. However, during fieldwork, no registration database of vendors was found.

Final Considerations

In sum, the open-air market of Santo Estêvão emerges as a space that transcends the mere purchase of goods. It represents a social construction rich in lived experiences, histories, beliefs, emotions, forms of resistance, and strategies that together shape the environment of the market. This social dynamic interacts closely with the economic and social issues present within the community.

The products sold in the market originate from diverse sources, including the fields of vendor-farmers, family-based agriculture, and small producers who commercialize their goods directly. In addition, some merchandise is acquired in other cities for resale at the Municipal Market of Santo Estêvão.

The open-air market serves as a meeting point for people from various rural areas of the municipality, from the town center, from neighboring municipalities, and even from other states and regions of Brazil. Indeed, visiting the market is considered a “mandatory stop” for anyone traveling to Santo Estêvão. Whether locals or visitors, all have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits, scents, flavors, and delights found in the open-air market.

The open-air market of Santo Estêvão presents unique and diverse characteristics. At the Municipal Market, one finds a wide variety of products, including meats, flours,

beans, corn, medicinal herbs, fish, restaurants, handbags, clothing, footwear, hats, handicrafts, and, above all, vegetables, greens, produce, and tubers.

Market labor unfolds across generations, with children, grandchildren, and nieces and nephews continuing the family trade. This work requires strategy and dedication to achieve satisfactory sales, generate profits, and cultivate a weekly or biweekly clientele. Fixed stall locations facilitate customer loyalty and increase vendors' earnings.

The open-air market is a space rich in history and lived experience, constructed daily through the interactions of vendors and customers of all ages. It represents a cultural gathering, an ethnic diversity, and an existential form of resistance for the groups that comprise it. Vendors regard the market as their livelihood, and many have raised their families through the arduous labor of planting, harvesting, purchasing, and selling. Despite the uncertainties inherent to informal labor, vendors persist, employing strategic skills to keep the open-air market active.

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