

# APAEB: Struggle & Sisal in the Sertão in Brazil



Association members load sisal bales at the Batadeira Comunitária, APAEB's processing plant in Valente, Bahia. Trucks owned by APAEB deliver the sisal directly to the docks in Salvador, from where it is shipped to Mexico, the United States, and Europe. Until APAEB was established, farmers sold sisal fiber at half the export price.

Photo courtesy APAEB

The peasants who live in the *sertão*, the semi-arid region of Bahia in the northeast of Brazil, have a long history of struggle. A mixture of peoples of African, Portuguese, and indigenous American descent, they have made a home in one of the most drought-ridden areas of Latin America. Its severe droughts force *sertanejos* to seek work outside the *sertão* sometimes for two and three years at a time. When not compelled to migrate, the *sertanejos* grow corn, beans, and manioc to eat and sisal, an agave plant processed to produce fiber for rope, as a major cash crop. Called *ouro verde do sertão*, "green gold of the *sertão*," sisal was introduced from Mexico at the turn of the century. Today it employs 80 percent of the region's peasant population. Sisal harvesting and processing involve all family members including children, and rely on the cooperation of neighbors.

Land, drought, migration, and struggle to make this difficult place a home are central themes in the cultural identity of the region. Musicians compose songs about the *sertão*. Storytellers tell its history in cheaply printed chapbooks illustrated with woodblock prints. These contain stories and poems about legendary heroes and events of local interest. The storytellers string the chapbooks on ropes to display them for sale in the marketplace. For sale at the same markets are clay figurines that depict, among other themes, scenes of people migrating and living in temporary exile.

In 1980, a group of small farmers founded the Associação dos Pequenos Agricultores do Estado da Bahia, commonly known as APAEB, an organization set up to break the grip of commercial middlemen and private industries on peasant sisal producers. Over time APAEB has built a self-managed system to collect, transport, process, and directly market its product in Brazil and abroad in Mexico and Europe. Rising in membership from 220 to 2,000 members, it has become the foremost small-farmer organization in this area, helping its members economically and affirming their cultural identities. As one farmer from Subae-Serrinha stated, "APAEB não era só a venda, não, era a luta" (APAEB is not only about marketing but about struggle).

APAEB has evolved into an important grassroots service organization providing basic agricultural and consumer products at lower prices through a network of dry goods stores; introducing sisal production techniques for improved environmental management; channeling financial credit and technical assistance for a variety of crops; and centralizing sisal processing within an industrial complex of 600 part-time workers. APAEB strengthens the organization and its members' cultural identities by fostering festivals, music performances, community storytelling, and other events. It has enabled local farmers to acquire a voice in local politics, helping them to add new dimensions and strategies to their struggle.

— Olivia Cadaval