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Performing Social Cohesion in Rural Communities in the Northeast of Brazil: Religious Celebrations, Reciprocal Labor Systems and Community Life

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Abstract

This article examines social cohesion in a rural community in Northeast Brazil from an ethnographic and oral history-informed perspective. Drawing on open-ended interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation of religious celebrations, it analyzes how cohesion is produced through ritual participation, collective memory, reciprocal labor, territorial belonging, and locally negotiated moral authority. The article conceptualizes social cohesion as a lived, relational, and performative process that exceeds a fixed institutional understanding. The findings show that mast-raising rituals, processions, and communal festivities generate cooperation, sociability, and intergenerational continuity, while shared agricultural labor, exchange-based cattle-raising, as well as other animals, and church-mediated access to land reveal broader moral economies of reciprocity. The article argues that rural cohesion is continuously negotiated through religion, labor, memory, authority, and place-based belonging.

Introduction

In research on social cohesion in rural settings, it is essential to consider how community members themselves perceive and experience social life in their environments. Beyond measurable indicators such as participation rates or network density, cohesion also involves lived, interpreted, and emotionally embedded experience. Residents' perceptions shape their engagement with others, their trust in local institutions, and their sense of belonging, inclusion, or exclusion. In rural contexts — where populations are smaller, relationships are often long-standing, and social roles tend to be more visible — these subjective dimensions become particularly significant. Efforts to strengthen social cohesion frequently fail when they rely primarily on external assumptions rather than locally grounded experiences and meanings. Ethnographic approaches are therefore especially valuable because they enable a closer understanding of how people perceive their community, what they value, where they identify tensions, and which practices sustain social connectedness in everyday life. Such perspectives can contribute to more context-sensitive and socially sustainable forms of analysis and intervention.

Recent anthropological research on rural Latin America provides a useful broader framework for this perspective. Studies from Andean, Amazonian, and other rural contexts show that community life is often sustained not only through formal institutions or explicit political structures, but through everyday practices, embodied knowledge, reciprocal obligations, ritual participation, territorial attachment, and collective memory (De la Cadena 2015; Gómez 2016). This broader regional perspective is relevant for the present study because it situates rural Northeast Brazil within wider Latin American debates on practice, reciprocity, memory, and the everyday reproduction of social relations.

In many rural communities of Northeast Brazil, these broader dynamics are expressed through collective memory and embodied forms of social reproduction rooted in locally shared techniques, rituals, and everyday practices, such as shared meals, religious celebrations, and mutual forms of assistance. According to Rhys Andrews, the historical, socio-economic, and demographic changes that have shaped rural areas over the past century have significantly challenged the vitality and cohesion of rural

communities (Andrews 2011). Although Andrews focuses on rural England, comparable transformations can also be observed in many rural regions worldwide, including Brazil.

Social cohesion in rural communities cannot be understood solely in terms of institutional integration, shared norms, or measurable levels of participation. Rather, it is a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by locally specific social relations, moral expectations, and forms of belonging (Friedkin 2004; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Riazi et al. 2026). Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) identify three central dimensions of social cohesion: the quality of social relationships, identification with a social entity, and commitment to the common good. Recent work in SN Social Sciences similarly emphasizes the multidimensional character of social cohesion, including social relationships and networks, shared identity and belonging, civic participation, tolerance, diversity, and quality of life (Riazi et al. 2026). These dimensions may be expressed through religious, ethnic, local, national, professional, or other forms of collective identification and are always shaped by particular social and cultural contexts. Similar patterns have also been identified in ethnographic research on rural religious communities in Central Europe, where social cohesion is closely connected to shared ritual life, interpersonal trust, and collective participation in religious activities (Uhrin et al. 2024).

Ethnographic research further demonstrates that religion often plays a central role in sustaining social cohesion in small-scale rural communities. Religious rituals, commemorations, collective activities, and local traditions actively reproduce solidarity, cooperation, interpersonal trust, and shared moral frameworks, while also giving symbolic form to existing social ties (Avery et al. 2021; Bahna and Talmont-Kaminski 2022; Uhrin and Horák 2023; Uhrin et al. 2024). In this sense, ritual participation contributes to the performative production of community life by reinforcing shared belonging and patterns of mutual engagement. At the same time, the relationship between religion and social cohesion should not be treated as inherently harmonious, since religious belonging may also produce symbolic boundaries, exclusions, and internal tensions within communities (Andrews 2011, 2015).

This article approaches social cohesion as a lived and relational process enacted through shared practices, oral narratives, ritual participation, and socially mediated forms of emotional and symbolic belonging. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in a rural community in Northeast Brazil, the study examines how cohesion is produced and reproduced through traditions, religious celebrations, reciprocal labor, everyday community life, and perceptions of generational change. The aim of the research is to analyze how community members themselves experience, narrate, and perform social cohesion through ritual participation, collective memory, reciprocal labor, and place-based forms of belonging. The article demonstrates that social cohesion in this context is not simply maintained by formal institutions or shared values, but is actively produced through ordinary practices, moral economies of reciprocity, and locally negotiated forms of religious and territorial authority. In this way, the study contributes to a broader anthropological understanding of social cohesion as a process that is continuously shaped and negotiated through everyday activities, participation in religious ceremonies, and rituals rooted in local traditions.

Social Cohesion in Rural Brazil

Anthropological research in Latin America has long shown that rural community life cannot be understood only through formal institutions, economic structures, or explicit political organization. Across Andean, Amazonian, and other rural contexts, social relations are often produced through everyday practices, embodied knowledge, reciprocal obligations, ritual participation, territorial attachment, and collective memory (De la Cadena 2015; Gómez 2016). Drawing on Bourdieu's conception of practice as a principle of social reproduction, these studies suggest that reciprocity and gendered labor relations are not merely forms of exchange, but practical and embodied processes through which social order is reproduced (Bourdieu 1990).

In this broader Latin American context, rural Brazil offers a particularly relevant setting for examining social cohesion as a lived and negotiated process. In rural Brazil, especially in the Northeast and adjoining Cerrado transition zones, cohesion is produced within historically situated relations among land, memory, labor, kinship, religious life, and collective forms of resistance (Pereira Santos et al. 2020; Barroso et al. 2021; Wagner et al. 2023). Community life is therefore understood as a relational and symbolic process through which people reproduce belonging, negotiate change, and respond to external pressures.

This perspective is especially relevant in regions marked by agrarian transformation, extractive economies, environmental degradation, and the expansion of agribusiness. Research on the so-called MATOPIBA macro-region has shown that the rapid growth of soybean production across Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí, and Bahia has intensified socio-territorial conflicts and threatened the livelihoods of rural and traditional populations. In the Chapadinha microregion of Maranhão, processes of land concentration and pressure on peasant territories have reconfigured local livelihoods, making social cohesion inseparable from struggles over land, labor, and territorial continuity (Almeida et al. 2019). These dynamics show that cohesion extends beyond internal community relations and is continuously negotiated in response to broader structural transformations.

At the same time, rural communities in Northeast Brazil should not be represented exclusively through vulnerability, marginalization, or dispossession. Research on *babaçu* (a type of palm tree that produces coconuts that can be used to make cooking oil) coconut breakers in Maranhão highlights the political, social, and cultural agency of traditional agroextractivist women, whose practices connect subsistence, collective identity, environmental preservation, and everyday forms of resistance (Barroso et al. 2021). Their experience illustrates how cohesion may emerge through shared labor, mutual support, collective access to natural resources, and the defense of locally grounded ways of life. In this sense, social cohesion can also be understood as a practical capacity to sustain community life under conditions of structural pressure.

Comparable dynamics are evident in studies of rural and Indigenous women in the Cerrado, whose oral testimonies describe the effects of agribusiness expansion, deforestation, pesticide use, land grabbing, and violence on local communities (Pereira Santos et al. 2020). These accounts emphasize territorial

attachment and critically challenge development models that disregard the social and environmental conditions of local populations. They further connect social cohesion with embodied experience, environmental belonging, and the moral defense of territory — dimensions that resist reduction to purely institutional or quantitative interpretations.

Oral history provides a particularly productive framework for examining these processes. Rather than treating narratives as transparent records of past events, oral history approaches understand memory as constructed, mediated, and performative, shaped by present concerns, social relations, and narrative conventions (Portelli 2016; Thompson 2017). Oral testimonies are therefore valued not primarily for their factual accuracy but for the meanings they convey, the silences they contain, and the ways they articulate individual experience within collective frameworks. As Portelli (2016) argues, discrepancies, inconsistencies, and subjectivities should not be regarded as methodological limitations but as analytically productive dimensions of how communities interpret and narrate their own histories.

Research from the *sertão* (a subregion known for the dry climate that spreads across much of Northeast Brazil, including the area where this community is located) of Pernambuco further demonstrates how memory, ritual commemoration, kinship, and the public celebration of ancestors contribute to the symbolic reproduction of family and community belonging (Villela 2020). Studies of *quilombola* communities (Afro-Brazilian settlements originally established by escaped and formerly enslaved people) similarly demonstrate that oral narratives are arenas in which memory, identity, conflict, and recognition are continuously negotiated (Moreira et al. 2021). In the case of *Helvécia*, competing memories surrounding the community's struggle for *quilombola* recognition revealed internal tensions through which collective memory could simultaneously sustain cohesion and expose fracture, demonstrating that narrative practices are not necessarily unifying but may also constitute sites of ongoing social negotiation (Moreira et al. 2021).

Recent contributions have further expanded this perspective. Research on oral history and everyday labor in riverine communities of Piauí shows how memories of practices related to fishing, cultivation, gendered labor, and ecological knowledge contribute to the reproduction of collective identity and cultural continuity across generations (Braga 2025). Studies from Amazonian contexts similarly argue that orality is not a residual or secondary form of knowledge but a primary mode of transmitting experience, cosmology, and social values, constitutive of social worlds rather than merely descriptive of them (Wagner et al. 2023). In this way, the study highlights how social cohesion is continuously produced and reproduced through traditions, religious celebrations, everyday community life, and perceptions of generational change, offering a contribution to a more processual understanding of cohesion in rural contexts of Northeastern Brazil.

Methods

This study is based on qualitative ethnographic research conducted in a rural community in Northeast Brazil. Drawing on open-ended interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation of

religious celebrations, it examines how social cohesion is experienced, narrated, and enacted in everyday community life. Methodologically, the research combines interpretive ethnography with an oral history-informed analytical perspective, enabling an emic analysis of the relationships between ritual practice, collective memory, reciprocal labor, territorial belonging, and local forms of social organization. The following section presents the procedures of data collection, describes the research sample, and outlines the interpretive and inductive analytical strategy used to examine the empirical material.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through open-ended interviews and extended ethnographic fieldwork (Bernard 2006; Spradley 1979, 1980). These qualitative methods were selected for their capacity to capture contextually embedded meanings and to enable an emic understanding of social life, allowing participants to articulate their own interpretations and experiences in their own terms (Pike 1967; Harris 1976; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019; Tracy 2020). The study foregrounds the everyday, narrative, and symbolic processes through which cohesion is produced and reproduced, particularly in relation to traditions and religious celebrations.

As already indicated, the empirical material consists of open-ended interviews with community residents, complemented by recordings of informal conversations. These narrative forms provide access to temporally layered accounts of local traditions, shared memory, and processes of social change. Open-ended interviews were preferred over structured or semi-structured formats to maximize narrative flexibility and to capture how memory, meaning, and social experience are discursively organized by participants themselves (Brinkmann 2018; Kallio et al. 2016). Rather than following a fixed sequence of questions, interviews were guided by broad thematic prompts — including community life, past practices, and religious celebrations — so that participants could define relevance and significance within their own interpretive frameworks.

Participant observation of religious events constituted a central methodological strategy for examining how social cohesion is enacted in practice. Two specific celebrations were selected as focal sites of analysis, approached not as isolated events but as socially dense situations in which collective life becomes intensified and publicly articulated. Through sustained *in situ* observation, the study analyzed patterns of participation, role distribution, forms of cooperation, and the mobilization of shared symbols and collective memory. Ritual celebrations of this kind can be understood as temporal condensations of social relations, bringing together different generations and social groups while simultaneously revealing continuities and tensions within the community (Pink et al. 2016; DeWalt and DeWalt 2018). Observing interactional dynamics in these contexts enabled a grounded understanding of social cohesion as a lived and performative process, embedded in ritual practice, affective ties, and shared experiential frameworks.

Beyond its observational dimension, the ethnographic process was approached as a relational and temporally situated form of knowledge production. In this perspective, fieldwork is not understood as a

neutral technique of data extraction but as an ongoing process shaped by proximity, affective engagement, and the gradual development of social relations within the community. Ethnographic knowledge emerges through sustained interaction and through the researcher's immersion in locally meaningful temporalities, practices, and forms of communication (Vianna 2021). Attention was therefore directed not only to what participants narrated explicitly, but also to the ways meanings were produced through rhythms of interaction, recurring encounters, shared situations, and the situated contexts in which narratives became possible. This relational understanding of ethnography informed both the collection and interpretation of empirical material, particularly in relation to memory, ritual participation, and community life.

All interviews and informal conversations were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and securely stored throughout the research process. Recordings were transcribed using digital tools and subsequently subjected to a combination of systematic coding procedures and close interpretive reading. The analytical strategy integrated categorization and thematic mapping with detailed attention to narrative structure and meaning-making processes (Braun and Clarke 2021; Saldaña 2021). This combined approach enabled the identification of cross-case patterns while preserving the contextual depth and internal coherence of individual accounts.

Ethical considerations were observed at every stage of the research. As a consequence, all participants were anonymized, and identifiable information was removed from the material, with particular care given to sensitive topics including land use, community transformation, and local conflict. Consistent with the epistemological orientation of the study, narratives are treated as situated and partial accounts rather than as representative generalizations. The analysis, therefore, aims not to produce totalizing descriptions of the community but to understand how individual and collective narratives contribute to the ongoing construction and negotiation of social cohesion (Tracy 2020).

Research Sample

The empirical material analyzed in this study was collected between November 2025 and April 2026 through individual interviews and group conversations. Purposive sampling was used in the preparation of the study. Participants included current residents of the community as well as individuals who were born there, had previously lived there, and now divide their time between the community and the city. The priest responsible for the local church was also interviewed, given the central role of the church in the community's collective life. Participants were between 50 and 90 years old, reflecting the average age of residents living in the community. Both men and women were included in the sample, and most participants had spent the majority of their lives either living in the community or maintaining long-term connections with it. At the time of data collection, none of the informants, except for the priest, were employed in formal occupations. Some engaged in informal work, such as house construction within the village, while most were primarily involved in domestic activities. Several participants were also retired and receiving pensions.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the empirical material was conducted within an oral history-informed framework and guided by interpretive qualitative analysis. In this perspective, narratives are treated as socially situated reconstructions through which individuals produce meaning, negotiate memory, and articulate their position within the community. Oral testimonies are thus approached simultaneously as accounts of experience and as culturally embedded forms of expression, shaped by narrative conventions, temporal distance, and social context (Abrams 2016; Tracy 2020).

The analytical process combined close interpretive reading with systematic data organization supported by Atlas.ti software. The use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) did not determine the epistemological orientation of the study; rather, it functioned as a technical resource for structuring, coding, and retrieving material. In line with the interpretive framework adopted, the software facilitated analytical transparency and consistency without compromising sensitivity to narrative complexity and contextual meaning (Saldaña 2021; Tracy 2020).

The analysis proceeded iteratively across several stages. In the first stage, all interviews and recorded conversations were transcribed and subjected to repeated, in-depth reading. This initial phase focused on identifying narrative structures, temporalities, and recurrent motifs, with particular attention to how participants organize their accounts, position themselves within the social world, and relate past experiences to present conditions. Analytical attention was directed not only to thematic content but equally to narrative form — including evaluative language, silences, and implicit assumptions — treating these as meaningful dimensions of the data rather than incidental features.

In the second stage, an inductive coding process was carried out. Codes were generated from the material rather than imposed *a priori*, capturing key dimensions of social cohesion as articulated by participants — such as cooperation, reciprocity, religious participation, shared memory, and perceptions of social change. Coding remained reflexive and provisional throughout, with categories continuously revised in response to emerging patterns and interpretive insights (Braun and Clarke 2021; Saldaña 2021).

In the third stage, codes were grouped into broader thematic constellations through a process of interpretive abstraction. Rather than reducing narratives to discrete variables, this phase sought to reconstruct patterns of meaning across accounts while preserving their contextual embeddedness. The analysis moved iteratively between individual narratives and cross-case comparison, attending to both convergences and divergences in how social cohesion is experienced and represented (Braun and Clarke 2021).

Throughout all stages, the analysis remained attentive to the interpretive principles of oral history and narrative inquiry. Narratives were understood as performative acts that do not simply reflect social reality but actively contribute to the construction of meaning and collective memory. Accordingly, differences,

inconsistencies, and tensions between accounts were treated as productive resources for understanding the symbolic and relational dimensions of community life (Abrams 2016; Tracy 2020).

The overall interpretive process followed an abductive logic, moving iteratively between empirical material and theoretical concepts of social cohesion. This approach enabled the integration of emic perspectives with analytical interpretation, avoiding both purely descriptive accounts and overly abstract generalizations. Taken together, these analytical choices reflect a conception of social cohesion not as a fixed structural property but as an ongoing, relational, and meaning-making process — enacted through narrative practices, everyday interactions, and ritual life. In broader terms, this analytical perspective contributes to a more process-oriented understanding of social cohesion by emphasizing its everyday development through specific practices, narratives, and ritual activities in rural settings.

Results

The interviews reveal that social cohesion in the community is produced through a continuous articulation between religious traditions, collective labor practices, mutual aid, and shared forms of territorial organization. Rather than appearing as separate social spheres, religion, work, and everyday life emerge in the narratives as interconnected dimensions through which community ties are maintained and reproduced. The narratives repeatedly associated social cohesion with ritual continuity and collective memory, particularly as enacted through religious festivities, as illustrated by the following testimony:

In the past — nowadays it's more diluted by modernity — but when I was a child, I remember that in here we were very attached to traditions, to regional festivities, like the Divino celebration (a festivity held during the daylight in homage to the Holy Spirit, represented by a dove, and consists of a resident fulfilling a vow by hiring singer to go to all the houses in the community to bless them with their songs and also a feast at the end open to whoever wishes to participate) that took place every year, always with singing, and also the Reis, the Santo Reis (the same dynamics as the *Divino*, but held during the night, and in homage to the Three Kings' Day), which happened a lot in January too. Every year someone would come to fulfill some vow [4:13 p 5].

The first testimony emphasizes the centrality of religious celebrations in the constitution of collective identity and local memory. One resident states that, although these traditions have become "more diluted by modernity," the community used to be "very attached to traditions" such as the *Divino* and *Santo Reis* festivities. The narrative establishes a contrast between past and present, suggesting that religious celebrations were not merely symbolic events, but structuring elements of social life itself. The annual fulfillment of vows, the circulation of singers, and the recurrence of festivities created ritual cycles that periodically gathered dispersed families and reinforced collective belonging (Bahna & Talmont-Kaminski 2022). Comparable dynamics of memory, ritual commemoration, and kinship-based belonging have also been described in the *sertão* of Pernambuco, a vast inland region of Brazil, where religious celebrations function as mechanisms for reinforcing family continuity and communal identity

(Villela 2020). The organizational and cooperative dimensions of these celebrations are further illustrated in the following account describing the role of the *mordomo* (portuguese word for butler) in the mast-raising ritual:

Then there is the *mordomo* for the raising of the mast — here we call this person the *mordomo*. It is a person who is chosen and becomes responsible, during that year, for the "taking out" of the tree, finding a tree with a good suitable height and bringing it back. He is responsible for the whole process, this process I explained before. It means bringing the log, hiring the singers, putting the pole up there, and taking the pole down afterwards [4:18 p 6].

The collective dimension becomes even more visible in the descriptions of the *mordomo* and the organization of the mast-raising ritual. The role of the *mordomo* is not limited to a ceremonial function; it involves coordinating labor, mobilizing participants, organizing singers, and managing the symbolic and material dimensions of the celebration. Religious practice therefore appears deeply embedded in forms of cooperation and shared responsibility (Uhrin et al. 2024). The ritual depends on collective participation, and its continuity relies on the transmission of obligations and responsibilities across generations. The communal character of the procession is also reflected in narratives describing the active participation of women in organizing and sustaining the celebration:

And this year, for example, the ones who are going to take on this role are us women. My sister is organizing it, and it's going to be something nice, because everybody is going to have shirts made — blue shirts of Our Lady of the Conception, with names on them — and we are going to be responsible for it. We are the ones who are going to organize the celebration on the 28th. It's like a celebration, because for all the people who carry the pole, we have to bring water, we have to bring snacks and accompany them, so it becomes like a procession. When the pole comes all the way to the church, it's a procession, many people come along following it, it's really beautiful [4:19 p 6].

At the same time, the interviews demonstrate that these festivities are dynamic rather than static traditions. This adaptability reflects broader patterns observed in rural Brazilian communities, where traditions are continuously reinterpreted in response to social change while preserving symbolic continuity and collective belonging (Ferreira 2024). Several narratives simultaneously suggested concerns about declining participation among younger generations and the gradual weakening of certain ritual obligations. In this testimony, the narrator highlights the participation of women in organizing the celebration, describing how they collectively prepare food, water, clothing, and logistical support for the procession. The statement suggests not only the persistence of the ritual, but also the community's capacity to reinterpret and reorganize traditional practices according to contemporary social arrangements (Barroso et al. 2021). The procession itself becomes a moment of intense social aggregation, bringing together different generations and social groups through a shared ritual experience. The importance of festivities as spaces of sociability and collective participation is further emphasized in the following testimony, given by the local priest, who have been designated for the

community for decades, which mentions celebrations held in the community on the other side of the river, creating a sharp contrast to their own:

They prefer coming here [than to the celebrations held in the other community nearby]. When we finish the mass over there, they come here. There is more… There are those little stalls, there are celebrations, barbecues, drinks, because people want a celebration. It's natural that they should have the right to celebrate, isn´t it? That's tradition too. If you take away the festivities, people will stop coming as well [5:3 p 6].

The importance of celebrations also extends beyond strictly religious aspects. Beyond their religious dimension, such festivities function also as spaces of sociability, collective recognition, and affective proximity within rural communities (Ramalho 2021). As indicated in the priest's testimony, festivities involving food, drinks, music, and informal sociability are fundamental to maintaining participation in the religious event. His statement that "if you take away the festivities, people will stop coming" reveals that the sacred and the festive are not perceived as contradictory dimensions. Instead, celebrations function as spaces of coexistence, encounter, and collective leisure, reinforcing social bonds through both devotion and conviviality (Avery et al. 2021). The interviews also reveal that social cohesion was historically reinforced through systems of shared agricultural labor and reciprocal access to land, particularly to small-scale agricultural plots locally referred to as *roças*:

Back then, it was my father, — but before him there were people who were better off, like him, and we had the Tapera (brazilian word for an abandoned house in the middle of nowhere). So, my father cultivated many types of *roças*, we had huge *roças*. He would give plots of land to people in here who wanted land. If a person wanted to plant, he would give them a piece of land, and the person would make their *roça*. And there, he planted a lot, really a lot — a lot of rice, a lot of beans, a lot of corn. Then, when planting and harvesting time came, those people from here who did not plant, who had no means, who had no land, and sometimes not even the courage to make a *roça*, would go there to Tapera to harvest these foods. The way my father paid them worked like this: if you harvested four sacks of rice, for example — and two, three, even five people from the same family could go — those people would gather together and harvest the corn, the rice, the beans, filling the sacks, and out of every four sacks, one would be theirs as direct payment. If you gathered four sacks, you earned one. It was always like that [4:30 pp 8–9].

These forms of agricultural labor and land access need to be read against the broader transformation of the surrounding landscape, where areas formerly covered by native vegetation have been converted into cattle ranching pastureland (see Fig. 1).

The interviews further demonstrate that community cohesion is also sustained through longstanding systems of reciprocity and collective labor. In this testimony, agricultural production is described not as an individualized economic activity, but as a network of mutual support involving land access, family labor, and shared harvesting arrangements. Access to cultivation depended not exclusively on private ownership, but also on interpersonal relations and moral obligations mediated by local landholders. Payment through portions of the harvest rather than monetary wages reinforced relations of

interdependence among families and contributed to the circulation of food and labor within the community (Barroso et al. 2021; Braga 2025). Similar principles of reciprocity also structured cattle-raising practices, as illustrated in the following account:

That person stayed there taking care of things. Taking care of the cattle, of the animals in general. And the person earned through this exchange system. This exchange system, how should I put it — let's say a man had one hundred cows, right? That person would take care of those one hundred cows, and those cows would give birth. At the end of the year, there would be fifty new heads of cattle. Then he would take those fifty heads, and for every three, the worker would earn one. Everything worked like that, everything was based on exchange. It wasn't money, it was all like that — the person worked and earned food, earned whatever they wanted [4:31 p 9].

Similarly, this account describes cattle-raising arrangements based on exchange rather than monetary remuneration. Labor relations were, and still are, structured through systems of sharing offspring and production, in which workers receive animals or food provisions instead of salaries. These practices reveal an economic logic strongly rooted in reciprocity and negotiated obligations, where work was embedded in social relations rather than organized exclusively through market mechanisms (Pereira Santos et al. 2020; Braga 2025). Such arrangements contributed to strengthening bonds of trust and long-term cooperation among community members. The collective regulation of land access and settlement practices is illustrated in the following testimony:

And everybody who lives here, everybody who arrives here and wants to build a house, just has to speak with the priest or with the person responsible at the church. And if there is free land available — and there is still a lot of free land here — anyone can come and ask for a small piece of land and build on it. You do not need to pay anything. The priest, who is the one responsible, is the one who decides. You can choose wherever you want as well. As long as the land is free and not fenced off, anyone can come here and settle down [4:2 p 1].

Finally, this testimony demonstrates that the principles of reciprocity and collective organization also extend to territorial occupation and housing access. The possibility of settling in the community without purchasing land, mediated instead through authorization from religious authorities and the availability of unfenced land, suggests forms of territorial management grounded less in formal private property than in communal recognition and negotiated belonging (Pereira Santos et al. 2020; Moreira et al. 2021). The church emerges not only as a religious institution, but also as a central moral authority regulating access to land and mediating social coexistence within the settlement (Uhrin & Horák 2023). Its material centrality within the community reinforces this role: the Roman Catholic church functions as the main site of religious celebrations and as a historical-symbolic anchor of local collective life (see Fig. 2).

Discussion

The findings show that social cohesion in the studied community cannot be reduced either to religious participation or to interpersonal solidarity alone. Rather, it is produced through the articulation of ritual

continuity, reciprocal labor, territorial belonging, and locally recognized forms of moral authority. This interpretation supports approaches that understand cohesion as a multidimensional and relational phenomenon, composed of social relationships, collective identification, and commitment to shared forms of life (Friedkin 2004; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017). At the same time, the empirical material suggests that these dimensions are not abstract properties of a community but are enacted through concrete practices: preparing religious celebrations, organizing processions, sharing agricultural work, exchanging labor and food, and negotiating access to land.

In this respect, the article contributes to discussions on ritual and social cohesion by showing that religious celebrations operate simultaneously as symbolic, organizational, and affective infrastructures of community life. The mast-raising ritual, the role of the *mordomo*, and the collective preparation of food, water, clothing, and logistical support demonstrate that ritual participation is productive as well as expressive. It generates cooperation, assigns responsibilities, and periodically reactivates social ties. This finding corresponds with studies that emphasize the capacity of ritual practices to produce and stabilize social relations (Bahna and Talmont-Kaminski 2022; Uhrin et al. 2024). Yet the material also complicates any overly harmonious understanding of ritual cohesion. Narratives about the dilution of traditions and declining participation among younger generations indicate that cohesion is not automatically reproduced but must be continually renewed, negotiated, and adapted.

The comparison with Villela's analysis of memory and ritual commemoration in the *sertão* of Pernambuco is particularly productive. Villela (2020) shows how religious celebration, kinship, ancestry, and public memory can contribute to the symbolic production of family and community belonging. The present study confirms the relevance of these connections, but it shifts the focus from the public celebration of ancestors and family continuity to the everyday reproduction of community ties through recurring religious festivities. In both cases, ritual creates a public form through which belonging becomes visible. However, in the community analyzed here, ritual cohesion is less centered on genealogy or the memorialization of the dead, as it is more strongly connected to collective participation, shared labor, and the practical organization of celebration.

Ferreira's concept of "circuits of solidarity" also offers an important point of comparison. Her analysis demonstrates how solidarity emerges through pre-existing associative relations, economic exchanges, political meanings, and collective responses to crises (Ferreira 2024). The present findings resonate with this relational understanding of solidarity, especially in the descriptions of shared agricultural labor, exchange-based cattle-raising, and mutual access to land. However, the community examined here differs from Ferreira's case because solidarity is not primarily organized through formal campaigns, urban-rural political networks, or explicitly named collective action. Instead, reciprocity is embedded in long-term moral economies of kinship, neighborly obligation, religious authority, and territorial belonging. The circulation of food, labor, animals, and land access therefore functions less as an emergency response than as a historically sedimented mode of community reproduction.

Ramalho's work on maritime fishing culture further helps clarify the role of labor in the production of cohesion. His analysis of artisanal fishing highlights how work, knowledge of techniques and practices, hierarchy, apprenticeship, reciprocity, and belonging are incorporated into a specific culture of occupation (Ramalho 2021). Although the empirical context of the present article is agrarian rather than maritime, a comparable analytical insight applies. Labor is not merely an economic activity but a social and moral practice through which people learn obligations, reproduce relationships, and recognize one another as members of a shared world. The boats along the community's riverbank illustrate this connection between work, mobility, subsistence, and leisure in everyday life (see Fig. 3). The accounts of *roças*, harvest payments, cattle-sharing arrangements, and land access show that work is embedded in relations of trust and reciprocity rather than organized exclusively through wages or market exchange.

The findings also extend recent research on rural Brazil by connecting social cohesion to territorial belonging and moral economies of land. Studies of *babaçu* coconut breakers, rural and Indigenous women in the Cerrado, *quilombola* communities, and riverine labor histories have shown that rural collective life is shaped by land, memory, gendered labor, ecological knowledge, resistance, and territorial attachment (Pereira Santos et al. 2020; Barroso et al. 2021; Moreira et al. 2021; Wagner et al. 2023; Braga 2025). This interpretation also resonates with recent work by Ganugi and Prandini (2023) showing that social cohesion is produced through belonging, place attachment, commoning practices, and negotiated relationships between community members and local institutions. The present article adds to this literature by showing how territorial belonging may also be mediated through religious authority and informal systems of communal recognition. The priest and the church appear not only as religious actors but also as moral authorities involved in regulating settlement and access to unfenced land. This finding suggests that rural cohesion is sustained through institutions that are at once religious, territorial, and social.

At the same time, the analysis avoids treating cohesion as a purely integrative or consensual condition. The narratives reveal continuity, cooperation, and belonging, but also point to fragility, generational change, and dependence on specific forms of authority. Recent research in SN Social Sciences has similarly argued that social cohesion should not be understood only through European or institutionally centered frameworks, since locally embedded associations and social connections may provide crucial forms of support, solidarity, cooperation, trust, and shared knowledge in non-Western contexts (Tsegaye 2025). The fact that access to land is mediated through religious authority, for example, indicates a communal logic of belonging but also raises questions about asymmetry, legitimacy, and exclusion. Similarly, the participation of women in organizing the celebration shows the adaptive capacity of tradition, but it also suggests that ritual continuity depends on unevenly distributed forms of gendered labor. These tensions are analytically important because they show that social cohesion is not the absence of difference or hierarchy. It is a negotiated process through which community members continuously manage obligations, memories, resources, and forms of participation.

Overall, the article argues that social cohesion in the studied community is best understood as a lived and performative process. It is enacted through ritual practices, narrated through collective memory,

maintained through reciprocal labor relations, and territorialized through locally recognized forms of belonging. In contrast to approaches that measure cohesion primarily through institutional participation or social networks, the ethnographic material demonstrates that cohesion may be most visible in ordinary practices: preparing a procession, carrying a mast, distributing food and water, sharing harvests, caring for cattle, or granting access to land. These practices are not secondary illustrations of social cohesion; they are the very means through which cohesion is produced, challenged, and reproduced over time.

Conclusions

This article has examined social cohesion in a rural community in Northeast Brazil as a lived, relational, and performative process rather than as a fixed institutional condition. The findings based on the field research demonstrate that community cohesion is produced through the articulation of religious celebrations, collective memory, reciprocal labor, mutual aid, and locally negotiated access to land. Ritual practices such as mast-raising, processions, and communal festivities are not merely symbolic expressions of belonging. They actively organize cooperation, distribute responsibilities, and periodically renew social ties.

The analysis also demonstrates that social cohesion is inseparable from everyday moral economies. Shared agricultural work, exchange-based cattle-raising, and informal access to land reveal forms of reciprocity that exceed monetary relations and formal property arrangements. In this context, the church emerges not only as a religious institution but also as a moral and territorial authority involved in mediating coexistence, settlement, and communal recognition.

At the same time, the article has shown that cohesion should not be understood as a harmonious or conflict-free condition. Narratives of declining ritual participation, generational change, gendered forms of organizational labor, and dependence on religious authority indicate that cohesion is continuously negotiated and remains open to tension, asymmetry, and transformation. These ambivalences are central to understanding how rural communities sustain continuity while adapting to changing social conditions.

As a result, the study contributes to anthropological debates on social cohesion by showing that, in rural Northeast Brazil, belonging is enacted through ordinary practices: preparing celebrations, carrying the mast, sharing food and water, cultivating land, caring for animals, and negotiating access to territory. Social cohesion is therefore best understood as something repeatedly produced through ritual practices, reciprocal labor relations, collective memory, and place-based forms of social life.

Declarations

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Ethics Approval

This study was approved by the Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa em Seres Humanos (CEP-UFSCar), Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar), Brazil. All procedures performed in the study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participant anonymity. Anonymized excerpts relevant to the findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Figures



Figure 1

Road leading to the village through pastures for cattle raising. The area, now converted into grazing land, was previously covered by native forest vegetation (source: own processing).



Figure 2

The community’s Roman Catholic church, where most religious celebrations take place. Although residents cannot state its exact origins with certainty, it is estimated that the church was built more than three hundred years ago by enslaved people during the period of Jesuit presence in the region (source: own processing).



Figure 3

Boats used for transportation and fishing activities along the community’s riverbank. The river constitutes a central environmental resource for residents, providing food, leisure, and an important source of income, especially during the dry season, when tourism increases in the area (source: own processing).