



Sociedade & Natureza

ISSN: 0103-1570

sociedadnatureza@ufu.br

Universidade Federal de Uberlândia

Brasil

Medeiros Silva, Jeane; Farias Vlach, Vânia Rubia  
TO KILL THE DROUGHT, NOT THE THIRST - THE PERSPECTIVE OF EUCLIDES DA CUNHA  
CONCERNING THE DESERTIFICATION

Sociedade & Natureza, vol. 1, núm. 1, mayo, 2005, pp. 446-456

Universidade Federal de Uberlândia

Uberlândia, Minas Gerais, Brasil

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=321328500056>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in [redalyc.org](http://redalyc.org)

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

# TO KILL THE DROUGHT, NOT THE THIRST - THE PERSPECTIVE OF EUCLIDES DA CUNHA CONCERNING THE DESERTIFICATION

Jeane Medeiros Silva

Mestranda em Geografia pelo Instituto de Geografia da UFU

[jeanegeo@yahoo.com.br](mailto:jeanegeo@yahoo.com.br)

Vânia Rubia Farias Vlach

Profa. Dra. do Instituto de Geografia da UFU

[vaniarubia@nanet.com.br](mailto:vaniarubia@nanet.com.br)

Environmental History and Environmental Evolution

## INTRODUCTION

*Não há aliviar-se outro recurso. As cisternas, poços artesianos e raros, ou longamente espaçados lagos como o de Quixadá, têm um valor local, inapreciável. Visam, de um modo geral, atenuar a última das conseqüências da seca – a sede; e o que há a combater e a debelar nos sertões do norte – é o deserto.*

Euclides da Cunha

Having the geographic space valued as a way of social understanding, conceptions about society relationships and nature concern to the Geography. As we consider the geographicity, conceptions on human interactions with space can be rescued from their significance means, being instituted in a historical and critical vision of the geographic space representations. The proposal of this work is to mediate a reflection between geographic space

and language, focusing the desertification in the work '*Os Sertões*'<sup>1</sup>, by Euclides da Cunha, where in the first part, *A Terra*<sup>2</sup>, the writer presents some approaches directly concerned to the Geography, among which the desertification in the backlands of Brazil.

For a theoretical-methodological contribution, our studies are based on the Discourse Analysis of French current to orientate the reflection on the *corpus* for analysis, (the text '*Como se faz um deserto*'<sup>3</sup>, from now on T1, the text '*Como se extingue um deserto*'<sup>4</sup>, T2, and finally, the text '*O martírio secular da terra*'<sup>5</sup>, T3), starting from the identified object (the fragment '*A terra*', of *Os Sertões*), and also to restore the ideological formation of the conscious subjects during the passage from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what constitutes a certain thought on the Brazilian reality and on the movement of accusation that emerges from that process.

In the section *A terra*, Euclides shows nature as being more than an acting group of forces, that is, decisive, able to sculpt human personality. Paradoxically, the author puts in evidence the human responsibility for the environment, pointing out the anthropic contribution related to burning and deforestation of the vegetation, what can expand deserts and harm human communities, accentuating drought periods and agriculture perimeters, although it is possible, for the human ability, to plan the geographic space, and act in a way to minimize the responsibilities of the environment on human suffering. In other words, to kill the drought, not the thirst.

Therefore the pioneering text of Euclides da Cunha brings out external socio-spatial conceptions which are external to the institutionalization of the geographical science, still not institutionalized in Brazil, what helps us to understand the genesis of the Brazilian geographical thought, as well as, specifically, a centennial thought on the problem of the desertification.

### **Creator and creature: Euclides da Cunha and *Os Sertões***

*Os Sertões* by Euclides da Cunha, first edited in 1902, retakes in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the expeditionary aspect of recognition, found in the first writings about the

<sup>1</sup> N.T. 1902, tr. *Rebellion in the Backlands*, 1944.

<sup>2</sup> N.T. *The Land*.

<sup>3</sup> N.T. *How a desert is created*.

<sup>4</sup> N.T. *How to extinguish a desert*.

<sup>5</sup> N.T. *The secular martyrdom of the land*.

Brazilian territory. An interpretation of Brazil with evident unfolding in the perspective of the Brazilian *intelligence* to understand its own territory is increased to that composition. Differently from those writings, it is a document for Brazilians, a search for the national identity in a global effort: the Brazilian land and the Brazilian man, starting from an inspiring nucleus - the portrait of the events of the *Guerra de Canudos*<sup>6</sup>, whose importance resides in the Euclidian discovery that "...the movement of the Counselor was mainly a violent shock of cultures: the one of the modernized, urbanized, and Europeanized coast, with the archaic, pastoral and stationary one of the interiors"<sup>7</sup> (FREYRE, 1987, p. 35). In synthesis, an impressionist, real and fictional rehearsal, as it would be defined by José Guilherme Merquior (1996).

In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the protection of the Naturalism and the Realism ideas, and also, partly, before that, with the Romanticism, the collection of the national literature had important works which, more than artistic, were of accusation and reflection about the Brazilian reality. Some examples are the realistic works by Machado de Assis and Aluísio de Azevedo – mainly with *O Cortiço*<sup>8</sup> -, from which the social structures and their dynamics emerge. Another important writer was Castro Alves who wrote poetry related to the abolitionism. But none of those works dared to make an approach scale and left a reflection inheritance as *Os Sertões*. The masterpiece of Euclides da Cunha, in that sense, is a confluence of genres, for its instability among "...a historical document, a negative epic poem, an accusation, a gigantic and merciless pamphlet, ' a work of science written as an art work'<sup>9</sup>..." (PICCHIO, 1997, p. 400). It gathers all these production manners generating another one: the regionalist discourse.

The Brazilian literary regionalism is a statement whose principle emerges from the Romanticism, starting in 1850. That regional character penetrates the 20<sup>th</sup> century with emphasis in the exotic man of the interiors, which is surrounded by picturesque cases. *Os Sertões*, though, establishes a project of search and valorization of the man and of the national territory and, as we already affirmed: "In the following decades, the critics will attribute to this book the beginning of the search for the true country, for its people, not considering the

<sup>6</sup> N.T. Canudos Campaign.

<sup>7</sup> From the original in Portuguese: "...o movimento do Conselheiro foi principalmente um choque violento de culturas: a do litoral modernizado, urbanizado, europeizado, com a arcaica, pastoril e parada dos sertões"

<sup>8</sup> N.T. 'O cortiço' by Aluísio de Azevedo, Brazilian writer.

<sup>9</sup> From the original in Portuguese: "...um documento histórico, uma epopéia negativa, uma denúncia, um panfleto gigantesco e impiedoso, 'uma obra de ciência escrita como uma obra de arte'..."

illusion of proclaiming ourselves an European nation, but showing our importance of being Americans<sup>10</sup>" (ALBUQUERQUE Jr., 2001, p. 53).

Any characterization of *Os Sertões* identifies its style which is ruled by a splendid language, the artistic transfiguration of the reality, the perfect and rare vocabulary, the deliberated and complex syntax. In his creation, the author uses terms which are of exclusive scientific domain, opposing to language figures such as irony and antithesis. He founds, indeed, a contrastive discourse, in which definition is done by analogy and opposition. The rhythm of the work has a slow opening, where the reading and the speculation on the landscape fix human and social drama that is established gradually in the work. In this first stage, there is a panoramic flight over the land, and a sharp incursion, although dated on the ethnology of Brazilian people.

It is a triple work, in three sections: I – *A Terra*<sup>11</sup>; II – *O Homem*<sup>12</sup> and III – *A luta*<sup>13</sup>. The first two, predominantly descriptive, configure the stage of the events narration of the last part, evidencing an ideology of the “environmental determinism”. That geographical determinism from the Euclidian perspective of the drought and of the desertification is not incisive but a nature of social subjection to the “geophysical poverty”.

The proposal of Euclides da Cunha was to ally the rigidity of the descriptions and scientific explanations to the artistic expression. *Os Sertões*, therefore, shelter in its greatness, a historical-geographical agreement with wide literary and fictional resources, composing one of the most interesting epic-dramatic works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the proposal of the Euclidian project, it is possible to clearly identify “...a world vision initially based on the positivist and Comtian values, and later on the Spencerian ones<sup>14</sup>” (ANTONIO FILHO, 1997, p. 54). Undoubtedly, this fact identifies the syntony that Euclides maintained with the philosophical and scientific thought of his time.

*Os Sertões* has a wide scientific culture: in this work sociological and geographical knowledge are handled leading Euclides da Cunha “...to fix heroic types due to the landscapes - or better than that, of the ‘landscape’<sup>15</sup>...” (FREYRE, 1987, p. 22). That

<sup>10</sup> From the original in Portuguese: “Nas décadas seguintes, os críticos vão atribuir a este livro o início da procura pelo verdadeiro país, pelo seu povo, tendo posto por terra a ilusão de nos proclamarmos uma nação européia e mostrado a importância de sermos americanos”.

<sup>11</sup> N.T. The land.

<sup>12</sup> N.T. The man.

<sup>13</sup> N.T. The fight

<sup>14</sup> From the original in Portuguese: “...uma visão de mundo calcada nos valores positivistas, comtiano inicialmente e spenceriano posteriormente”.

<sup>15</sup> From the original in Portuguese: “...fixar tipos heróicos em função das paisagens – ou antes, da ‘paisagem’...”.

identity towards the land mixes social Darwinism with geographical Determinism and Possibilism, although such foundations (in the plan of the contradictions that break out from the implied sense to the surface of the Euclidian text) don't get to group themselves along the work: in the enunciation of the drama of *Canudos*, the facts go against the pretension to follow human destiny on this side and besides the political relationships that impose the distribution of goods, the access to techniques, the conditions to life quality.

*Os Sertões* still characterize a certain synthesis, not simple, but a monument based on vast generalizations (perfectly, an epistemological inheritance of the science of his time), what makes his sentences "...hard, without a 'perhaps', without an 'unless', without a 'however' to break them in curves..."<sup>16</sup> (FREYRE, 1987, p. 29).

Euclides' scientific tendency, consequently, is full of incoherence and contradictions. For example there are the ethnic exaggerations, as we affirmed before, by what it is possible to visualize race fatalism, showed along the work, when the author underlines the force of the backland inhabitant, denying any supposition of an *inferior race*. The technical knowledge of *Os Sertões*, although not accurate, doesn't get to reduce the value of this Euclidian work:

In the description of the backlands, a scientist would wander in details of Geography, geology, botany, anthropology; a sociologist, in explanation details and social diagnosis of the backland inhabitant. But to redeem him from the technique mistakes, there was in Euclides da Cunha the poet, the prophet, the artist full of brilliant intuitions. 'The' Euclides that would discover in the landscape and in the backland man, values beyond the right and the wrong of the grammar of the science<sup>17</sup> (FREYRE, 1987, p. 20-21).

In Euclides' conception the land transcends a geographical materialism, because it is a *human ecology*.

<sup>16</sup> From the original in Portuguese: "...maciças, sem um 'talvez', sem um 'a não ser que', sem um 'entretanto' a quebrar-lhes em curvas..."

<sup>17</sup> From the original in Portuguese: "Na descrição dos sertões, o cientista erraria em detalhes de Geografia, de geologia, de botânica, de antropologia; o sociólogo, em pormenores de explicação e de diagnóstico sociais do povo sertanejo. Mas para o redimir dos erros de técnica, havia em Euclides da Cunha o poeta, o profeta, o artista cheio de intuições geniais. O Euclides que descobrira na paisagem e no homem dos sertões valores para além do certo e do errado da gramática da ciência" (FREYRE, 1987, p. 20-21).

The greatness of this work resulted, evidently, in merits and demerits of our culture. Particularly, what interests us, is Euclidian's exhibition of a violent land and the presentation of the palliatives and solutions which are in agreement with a stable human survival in the approached mesology.

We have to point out, concerning the scientism of *Os Sertões* that, behind Euclides' geographical thought, Orville Derby's geology is hidden as well as the collaboration and orientation of Teodoro Sampaio, an important specialist of the Geography in Brazil in the passage from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Os Sertões*, therefore, is not an improvised book; on the contrary, the author studied and researched, went to the field, experienced what he wrote. Besides, he had the help of psychiatrist Nina Rodrigues (mainly to analyze the Counselor's profile and backland\_inhabitants' profile in general). He also had the collaboration of a relative, engineer Arnaldo Pimenta da Cunha.

### **The issue on the desertification in *Os Sertões***

For the one who settles the Northeastern territory, Euclides da Cunha has a defining denomination: "terrible maker of deserts"<sup>18</sup> (T1, p. 85). Under that denomination, the natives (first occupants), the Western settlers and the Brazilian settlers would be included. Euclides recognizes that the northeastern sterility is smaller, i.e., it is a complete ecosystem, although quantitatively inferior to the others that happen in Brazil.

At the beginning, the author raises the thesis that, on the '*caatingueiro*'<sup>19</sup> backland, one could say that "...it is right that a compound of circumstances has a difficult continuous regime, favoring a more vivacious flora" (T1, p. 85). It would be then, possible, to have a more stable natural balance, if such **circumstances** did not act in that ecosystem, that is: the anthropic action. Brazilians would have inherited from the natives the habit of working the wild flora with fire, what would open lands for the plantations. Euclides doesn't disrespect the specificity of the indigenous culture; in other words, the nomadism, although his emphasis is in the spreading character of that practice. Indians' practices would bring, in a thousand years, the same desertification harm caused by the settlers. We believe that there would be some differences: the first one emerges with the use - plantation for the Indians and, more than plantation, pasture for the settlers; the second one would be the natives' nomadic

<sup>18</sup> From the original in Portuguese: "terrível fazedor de desertos".

<sup>19</sup> N.T. Northeastern dry region of Brazil with its typical vegetation.

character with a period of self-recovery of the land, in opposition to the territorial fixation of the Westerners and the continuous use of the land. The disregarding of those terms has chronologic ideological roots, and as Euclides da Cunha affirms, the Indian element would be an ethnological presence which is predestined to perpetual disappearance. Evidently, it had to do with a non-desired presence in the nation project which was a hidden feeling of the intellectuals of the time. Then there was the generalizing conception on the indigenous culture whose particularities are unknown.

There is, therefore, "... the fire freely lit, without firebreaks, enslaving wide spaces, free in the violent *lufadas*<sup>20</sup> of the northeast – the way Northeasterners denominate the weather conditions of the northeast" (T1, p. 86), worsening the climatic instability of a land already fragile due to its natural predispositions.

In that way, the iron of the axes and the fire of the scythes accompany the entrances inside the backlands; besides, the first exploiters feared the attacks of the Indians, and would burn large spaces, what would drive the aborigines away and enlarge the horizon in exploration. Euclides mentions that such practices would be left as a legacy of the settler's practice, to the point that necessary legal interventions of the Crown were necessary in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The causes of desertification provoked by man are pointed out by Euclides to show us a condemnatory vision on the backland inhabitant, for the worsening of the situation. In a wider way, a condemnatory vision on the Brazilian rulers, for the absence of management to solve the problem of the droughts, - the responsible phenomenon for the social poverty that crowns the desertification or semi-desertification of the '*caatingueiro*' backlands:

The evil is old. In collaboration with the meteorological elements, with the northeast region, with the suction of the strata, with the *canículas*<sup>21</sup>, with the Aeolian erosion, with sudden storms - man became a disastrous component among the forces of that devastating climate. If he didn't create it, he transmuted it, worsening it. He helped the storms to degrade it, the axe of the *caatingueiro*; a supplementary to the heatstroke, the burning<sup>22</sup> (T1, p. 88).

<sup>20</sup> N.T. Violent winds.

<sup>21</sup> N. T. Flumes of erosive origin – pluvial erosion.

<sup>22</sup> From the original in Portuguese: É que o mal é antigo. Colaborando com os elementos meteorológicos, com o nordeste, com a sucção dos estratos, com as canículas, com a erosão eólica, com as tempestades subitâneas – o homem fez-se uma componente nefasta entre as forças daquele clima demolidor. Se não o criou, transmudou-o, agravando-o. Deu um auxiliar à degradação das tormentas, o machado do caatingueiro; um supletivo à insolação, a queimada.

After these statements, Euclides da Cunha presents historical solutions to the deficiency of the aquifer deposition that is responsible for the economical ruin and for the social drama of the backland inhabitant - the drought. However, from the evils of the environmental conditions of the Northeastern backlands, the smallest one is the country rain that, obeying the cycles and the occurrence periodicities, is abundant, although pedomorphology is not prodigal in retaining water.

To institute equality among the Brazilians, that is, to consolidate a Brazilian identity, Euclides suggested the need to settle down a bridge among the '*brasis*' identified as: coastal Brazil and backland Brazil. Given the "original addiction of the area" (T2, p. 89), Euclides proposes the retaking of the Roman mills of Tunisia, with which they had won the adversity of rain bad distribution in that region of the African continent:

Romans made it (the desert) to retreat. They chained the torrents; they dammed the strong currents, and that brutal regime, tenaciously attacked and blocked, gave in, submitted entirely, in a net of barrages. Excluded the reminder of too difficult systematic irrigations, they made water to stay longer on the ground<sup>23</sup> (T2, p. 89-90).

As the millenarian efficiency of the Romans is attested, Euclides emphasizes the modernity of those techniques, reminding us that French people still use those cheaper means to irrigate the cultivations in their Mediterranean lands: "France saves the remains of the opulent inheritance of the Roman civilization, after a declining of centuries<sup>24</sup>" (T2, p. 91).

The dams and the irrigation pipes, consequently, are the means by which Euclides da Cunha presents the extinction of the drought, and not a simple palliative of deceiving, temporarily, the thirst of men, the thirst of pastoral and domestic creations, and the thirst of cultivations. A simple way without high costs to settle the *caatingueiro*<sup>25</sup> in the interior:

<sup>23</sup> From the original in Portuguese: Os romanos fizeram-no (o deserto) recuar. Encadearam as torrentes; represaram as correntezas fortes, e aquele regime brutal, tenazmente combatido e bloqueado, cedeu, submetido inteiramente, numa rede de barragens. Excluído o alvitre de irrigações sistemáticas difíceis, conseguiram que as águas permanecessem mais longo tempo sobre a terra

<sup>24</sup> From the original in Portuguese: "A França salva os restos da opulenta herança da civilização romana, depois desse declínio de séculos".

<sup>25</sup> N. T. The backland inhabitant.

In that way the only measure to adopt should consist of the correction of these natural dispositions. Putting aside the decisive factors of the scourge, that are originated from the fatality of astronomical or geographical laws which are inaccessible to human intervention, those are the only ones possible of appreciable modifications. [...] The process that we indicated, in a brief historical review, for its own simplicity dismisses useless technical details (T3, p. 93).

The author recognizes the attention that the Brazilian government had already devoted to the climatic tragedies and to the social suffering that emerged from them. Ironically, to that purpose, he reminds the "...memorable sessions of the Polytechnic Institute of Rio, in 1877..." (T2, p. 92):

Luxurious cisterns of masonries were idealized in that occasion; myriads of artesian wells perforating the plateaus; colossal deposits, or immoderate storages for the accumulated reserves; vast dams, like artificial Caspians<sup>26</sup>; and finally, as to well characterize the complete wastage of the engineering, in face to the enormity of the problem, amazing stills for the distillation of the waters of the Atlantic Ocean!... (T2, p. 92).

Euclides believes that the droughts couldn't, in any hypothesis, obstruct the development of the Brazilian nation, given that the climatic conditions were not decisive: the droughts don't come before enough rain. And, if the problem relied on the formation of the soils (of low percolation), on the rarefied vegetation, on the unfavorable geomorphology (of easy drainage) - incipient factors for the retention of the pluvial waters -, there would be enough historical proofs that the engineering could solve the problem.

Consequently, the recovery of simple and accessible techniques is implicit in Euclides' proposal, together with the fight against fire which is a resource for planting and formation of pastures although, after the immediate benefits would be revealed as a marker of the desertification of the Caatingas<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> N.T. Related to the Caspian Sea

<sup>27</sup> N.T. Northeastern dry region of Brazil with its typical vegetation

Euclides da Cunha presents the idea of an environmental planning, in a global perspective of the problem, because "man's martyrdom is the reflex of a larger and wider torture, embracing the general economy of life<sup>28</sup>" (T3, p. 94). Because of the absence of the State and of the elites in solving the problem of the drought, and the resulting abandonment of that neutrality, at the end of *Os Sertões*, Euclides sees the origins of the social disarray that provided the coordinates to the national tragedy of *Canudos*.

## CONCLUSION

The importance of *Os Sertões*, by Euclides da Cunha is unquestionable. The criticism from what we can learn and better understand Brazilian reality, - having for object this work -, is far away from being ended up. That is especially because the first part of the book, *A Terra*, is not a specialty of the criticism. That being so, we present here something that we intend to have deepened in future researches.

It is important to remind that Euclides' work, when of its releasing, became an editorial success and, as M. Cavalcanti Proença (2003, p. 9) points out, its "...fame overflowed the national limits...<sup>29</sup>". Of course, the ideas of the work integrate the discourses and the proposals of the administrative agencies of the Northeastern territory to the present days; that is, when they center as a key answer just the presence or the absence of water for the development or non-development of the *caatingueiro* backland. As in other areas and Brazilian ecosystems, the issue on poverty is more complex, being related to countless factors. Consequently, we know that the idea that the economical difficulties of the backlands are concerned to water doesn't have a support to explain the political and economical problems of an area or of any other region.

On the other hand, the work reaches a symbolic mark of understanding of Brazil, whose ideological marks help us to understand the formation of the Brazilian thought, in general, and, specifically, the geographical thought. As Freire (1987, p. 21) very well reminds us, the

<sup>28</sup> From the original in Portuguese: "o martírio do homem, ali, é o reflexo da tortura maior, mais ampla, abrangendo a economia geral da vida".

<sup>29</sup> From the original in Portuguese: "...fama transbordou os limites nacionais...".

Message [of Euclides] deformed later by the ones who made the backlands - and not of its communication with the agrarian coast - almost a mystic, a type of Protestant sect that believes to save Brazil with the water of the dams of the Northeast - in which big amounts of money have been employed in disproportion to its social value for the Brazilian nation.

We think on the relevance of reviewing this debate in an including way, once we came across the retaking of the aquifer issue in the Northeast again, through the revitalization and transposition of *Rio São Francisco*<sup>30</sup> - a proposal that in the same way has roots in the Euclidian thought. For that reason, the (re)reading and (re)evaluation of that work should transpose the closed circles of the academy, reaching the Brazilian civil society as a whole.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

ALBUQUERQUE Jr., Durval Muniz de. **A invenção do nordeste e outras artes**. 2ª ed. Recife: FJN; São Paulo: Cortez, 2001. 340 p.

ANTONIO FILHO, Fadel David. O pensamento geográfico e Euclides da Cunha: resgatar é preciso. **Sociedade & Natureza**, Uberlândia, ano 8, n. 18, p. 53-56, jul./dez. 1997.

CUNHA, Euclides da. **Os sertões**. São Paulo: Ediouro, 2003. 767 p.

FREYRE, Gilberto. **Perfil de Euclides e outros perfis**. 2ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1987. 209 p.

MERQUIOR, José Guilherme. **De Anchieta a Euclides**. Breve história da literatura brasileira. 3ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 1996. 313 p.

PICCHIO, Luciana Stegagno. **História da literatura brasileira**. Tradução de Pérola de Carvalho e Alice Kyoko. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1997. 743 p.

PROENÇA, M. Cavalcanti. Introdução. In: CUNHA, Euclides da. **Os sertões**. São Paulo: Ediouro, 2003. p. 9-15.

<sup>30</sup> N.T. A river that crosses the backlands of Northeastern Brazil.

