

ARTICLES

RIVERS THAT WASH MEMORIES: THE WASHERWOMEN OF VITÓRIA DA CONQUISTA IN THE URBAN EXPANSION PROCESS

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between access to water and memory in the city of Vitória da Conquista, in the state of Bahia, from the perspective of washerwomen who reside in the Conquistinha community and rely on the waters of an urban section along the Verruga River. The advancement of urbanization has made it increasingly difficult for these women to remain in their community due to water scarcity and land valorization. This study examines how public interventions in the urban area of the river have reshaped the connection between the riverside residents and the growing city. Using the oral history method, it analyzes interviews conducted in 2020 with two washerwomen alongside documentary sources. The findings highlight changes in how these women perceive the city and its natural ecosystems, with significant impacts on their daily lives.

Keywords

Urban Development; Socio-Spatial Inequalities; Right to the City; Natural Landscape; Water; Urban Memory; Urban Rivers.

ARTIGOS

RIOS QUE LAVAM MEMÓRIAS: AS LAVADEIRAS DE VITÓRIA DA CONQUISTA NO PROCESSO DE EXPANSÃO URBANA

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Resumo

Este artigo aborda a memória relacionada ao acesso à água na cidade de Vitória da Conquista, na Bahia, sob a ótica das lavadeiras residentes na comunidade do Conquistinha que dependem das águas do trecho urbano do rio Verruga. Com o avanço da urbanização, elas têm enfrentado dificuldades para permanecer em suas comunidades em razão da escassez de água e da valorização do solo. O texto explora o significado das intervenções realizadas pelo poder público no trecho urbano do rio e o modo como afetaram a relação entre a população ribeirinha e a cidade em crescimento. Utilizando a história oral como método, analisam-se os depoimentos de duas lavadeiras, colhidos no ano de 2020, contrapondo-os a fontes documentais. Os resultados revelam uma mudança na percepção da cidade e dos ecossistemas naturais por parte das entrevistadas, com impactos significativos na vida cotidiana dessa população.

Palavras-chave

Desenvolvimento Urbano; Desigualdades socioespaciais; Direito à cidade; Paisagem natural; Água, Memória urbana; Rios Urbanos.

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Introduction

In early twentieth-century Brazil, the work of “washerwoman” was relatively common in riverside communities near urban centers. This occupation was often associated with the population of Black women, often former slaves, who relied on the service of laundry washing to support their families. The work of washerwomen, one of the most in-demand services among the upper classes of society, was essential for sustaining the way of life of the urban elites. However, it was also one of the most discriminated against, undervalued, and rendered invisible, thereby reflecting the legacy of slavery within Brazilian society.

In Vitória da Conquista, one of the most important cities in the interior of the Northeastern state of Bahia, the profession of washerwoman endures, despite the challenges posed by the city’s substantial urban expansion over the past century. For these women, access to clean water near their homes is essential for carrying out their daily tasks within the urban fabric. This necessity has historically been the driving force for populations to settle near rivers, thereby ensuring an uninterrupted access to water.

Broadly speaking, human settlements have historically been established in locations that enable easy access to water. However, in present-day urban

1. This article is the result of a research study intitled “Lembranças e esquecimento de um rio urbano [Memories and erasures of an urban river]”, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Estadual do Sudoeste da Bahia (Uesb) under protocol No. 3,771,218 of December 13, 2019.

centers, the neglect of this vital resource is starkly evident in the face of advancing unsustainable urbanization. Throughout the construction of contemporary society, human perceptions of nature have undergone profound transformations. As Gonçalves (2023, p. 25) highlights, “nature is defined, in our society, by that which opposes culture. Culture is regarded as something superior, having managed to control and dominate nature”. Thus, the sense of belonging to nature, once integral to societies now deemed “primitive”, has gradually been replaced by the notion of nature as an “object to be owned and dominated”² (ibid., p. 34).

The pinnacle of this concept was realized during the development of the consumer society, starting with the Industrial Revolution, when the planet’s natural elements began to be viewed as commodities, with the purpose of meeting “human needs through the industrial exploitation of nature”³ (Giddens, 1991, p. 16), with no concern regarding its capacity for regeneration and sustainability in a new territorial context. In Giddens’ analysis, none of the “classical founders of sociology”, who viewed the modern era as turbulent, had “foreseen that the furthering of the ‘forces of production’ would have large-scale destructive potential in relation to the material environment”⁴ (ibid., p. 13).

This behavior left twenty-first-century society with a legacy of scarce ‘natural resources’, essential for human survival, thereby generating conflicts over their use. According to Rodin (2021, p. 5),⁵

[...] studies on environmental conflicts have aimed to clarify that the society-nature relationship is informed by asymmetrical power relations, empirically demonstrating that environmental inequalities are a correlate of social inequalities – thus politicizing the environmental debate. In another sense, their intention has also been to help understand the logic that underlies environmental conflicts and how communities and groups affected by activities that cause social and environmental damage are positioned within them.

The main factor that contributes to the scarcity of drinking water for a portion of the global population is the contamination of rivers and water sources

2. This and all other non-English citations hereafter have been translated by the authors.

3. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of GIDDENS, A. *The Consequences of Modernity*. United Kingdom. Polity Press. (1990, p 12).

4. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of GIDDENS, A. (1990, p 8).

5. RODIN, P. Intersectionality in a sacrifice zone of capital: the experience of Black women, quilombolas and gleaners, on Ilha de Maré, in Todos os Santos Bay (Bahia, Brazil). *Revista brasileira de estudos urbanos e regionais*. v. 23, E202133en, 2021. DOI <http://www.org.br/10.22296/2317-1529.rbeur.202133en>. Translated by Brian Honeyball.

that once supplied local communities, combined with deforestation, siltation, and soil sealing, all of which compromise the springs of watercourses. According to the United Nations 2023 World Water Development Report, “Water scarcity is becoming endemic as a result of the local impact of physical water stress, coupled with the acceleration and spreading of freshwater pollution” (United Nations, 2023, p. 14). For Herzog, “we consume and pollute more water than the biosphere can regenerate” (Herzog, 2013, p. 90). She explains that:

Rivers, lakes, and oceans are being polluted by human activities [...] At the same time, natural ecosystems that infiltrate, retain, and filter water are being eliminated, as well as those that protect the shores of water bodies from erosion to prevent siltation and degradation. As a result, there is widespread contamination of the planet’s water resources [...], along with changes in hydrological cycles (ibid., p. 91).

Humanity’s growing awareness of the need to preserve water amid its increasing scarcity highlights the relationship established with watercourses during the expansion and development of cities throughout the twentieth century. Today, it has become evident how principles of urban planning, once deemed innovative a century ago, have affected natural hydrological processes and, consequently, impacted both the availability and quality of water.

From this perspective, the present article examines the memory of water access among the community of washerwomen residing in the Conquistinha area of Vitória da Conquista, a city in the Northeastern state of Bahia, and how changes in water supply over the past century have transformed their way of life. An analysis of the activities of these women serves as both a benchmark and an indicator of the community’s relationship with the watercourse, underscoring the need to reclaim the river as a vital element for life – whether in terms of landscape, recreation, or water supply – within a balanced relationship with urban development.

Vitória da Conquista is located in the northeastern semi-arid region, occupying a plateau in the south-central part of the state of Bahia, approximately 518 km southwest of the state capital, Salvador, via highway. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), in 2022, the municipality had a population of 370,879 (IBGE, 2022) and is classified as a regional capital, serving a population of 2,015,833 within its area of influence (ibid., 2020). The central urban area of Vitória da Conquista is home to the main headwaters of the Verruga River.

The city is located in a geographic area with extreme water vulnerability (Bahia, 2013) and over recent decades, has faced the need to implement water rationing. Between 2015 and 2017, the municipality experienced its most severe water crisis, prompting the introduction of a strict rationing system in May 2016,

which remained in effect until July 2017. Even after the water supply was restored, studies indicated that “even with the catchment basin of the Água Fria II dam at its peak usable volume, the situation remains unstable due to various factors, such as irregular rainfall patterns, thereby making another period of drought possible at any moment” (Conceição, 2018, p. 67).

Until the early 1970s, Vitória da Conquista lacked a treated water supply system with a distribution network allowing household connections. At the time, the population relied solely on surface and subsurface water extraction from the Verruga River bed. Currently, the city’s public water supply network has reached a significantly high number of households. According to the Water and Sanitation Company of Bahia (Embasa), which manages the system, 97.18% of the municipality is served by the water supply network, while 82.90% has access to the sanitation system (Embasa, 2024). However, despite these advancements, concerns persist regarding the quantity, quality, and reliability of the supply across different areas of the city.

According to the Municipal Basic Sanitation Plan, developed between 2019 and 2020 by the Fundação Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas (Fipe), the levels of per capita water consumption recorded in the municipality “are low compared to the literature, indicating unmet demand caused by deficiencies in service provision” (Vitória da Conquista, 2019b, p. 62). In terms of sanitation, the 2020 Report on the Integrated Diagnosis and Scenarios of the Urban Development Master Plan (PDDU), prepared by the Fundação Escola Politécnica da Bahia (FEP), found that “although the sanitation network has expanded in the urban center, user adherence to the system remains incomplete” (Vitória da Conquista, 2019a, p. 261), thereby resulting in unsanitary conditions and compromising the quality of local ecosystems.

This article aims to examine how the washerwomen living along the banks of the Verruga River interact with its waters. The analysis adopts a memory-based perspective, focusing on the presence of water and employing the oral history methodology. Testimonies were collected in 2020 from two washerwomen who, at the time of the interviews, had lived in the area for 75 years and had witnessed the major transformations that have reshaped the region.

The oral history methodology emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a means of expanding the possibilities for interpreting the past in contemporary historical studies (Alberti, 2008, p. 155). Since then, it has been widely used to document the histories of populations previously marginalized in the construction of traditional historiography, providing “a space for interdisciplinary contact and influence; social interactions at local and regional scales and levels; with an emphasis on phenomena and events that, through oral narratives, allow for qualitative interpretations of historical-social processes” (Aceves Lozano, 2006, p. 16).

To build the corpus of this research, women who worked as washerwomen and had resided in the Conquistinha locality since before 1960 were identified. Testimonies were collected⁶ using a mobile phone with a voice recorder and a field notebook for additional notes.

In this article, the interviewed washerwomen are referred to by the fictitious names of Flor and Margarida in order to ensure their anonymity and privacy. Both were born in 1945 in the Conquistinha area, where they still reside, and are daughters of the first washerwomen who migrated to the region. The data collected in the interviews were cross-referenced with primary documentary sources and bibliographical references.

The oral history methodology offer insights into individual experiences related to collective themes, providing diverse perspectives that enrich the research and are crucial to understanding how the study object is embedded in the population's memory, revealing the varying expectations surrounding the topic of research. As Alberti noted, "oral history has the great merit of making subjective phenomena intelligible, i.e., it recognizes a status within them as being concrete and just as capable of impacting reality as any other fact" (Alberti, 2004, p. 9).

From the perspective of memory, it is important to consider in the analysis of the interviews that "each memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory, that this viewpoint changes as my position changes, that this place itself changes as relationships to other milieus change"⁷ (Halbwachs, 1990, p. 51); it is, thus, a form of social representation.

According to Halbwachs (1990), human recollections operate within "social frameworks" and, although they occur within individuals, they have an essentially collective nature. This is because, for the recollection of a past event to take place,

[T]hat reconstruction must start from shared data or conceptions. These are present in our mind as well as theirs, because they are continually being passed back and forth. This process occurs only because all have been and still are members of the same group (Halbwachs, 1990, p. 34)⁸.

6. The interviews were conducted in person due to the technical infeasibility for the interviewees to participate in remote interviews. To make this possible, all necessary precautions were taken, following the health guidelines in place during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

7. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of HALBWACHS, M. *The Collective Memory*. New York. Harper and Row Publishers Inc. (1980, p 48). Translated from the French by Francis J. Ditter and Vida Jazdoi Ditter.

8. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of HALBWACHS, M. (1980, p. 31).

Building on Halbwachs' concept, the aim here is to identify the collective memories embedded in the individual memories and transmitted through the interviews. It is important to emphasize that choosing the pathway that the mnemonic thought process should take is shaped by the teachings of the groups. The sharing of spaces by society provides a sense of reference to the group, which in turn fosters the recognition of its history.

In this theoretical context, it is important to stress that space is a structuring factor of socio-human experiences. Pesavento (2008, p. 9) stated that urban dwellers transform and produce the city over time as they interact with space in their daily lives. In this relationship, according to this author,

[...] Each citizen chooses their points of attention and reference to position themselves in urban time and space. *I know a place*, we say, implying that we refer to a corner of the city that is special to us, one that touches us in a particular way. But we may also have been guided, educated, and taught to identify places in a city, sharing the same reference points of meaning, in a process of living the collective urban imagination (Pesavento, 2008, p. 4. Emphasis in the original).

According to Ricoeur (2016, p. 27), “[I]t is mainly in the ‘configuration’ of the city, through its space organized in a representative way that the history sedimented in cultural forms can be read”⁹. Therefore, to more effectively understand the relationship of the urban population with water, it is necessary to understand the flows and contexts experienced by the washerwomen at different moments in the city's history.

1. The forms that washerwomen accessed water during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

The city, now known as Vitória da Conquista, was politically emancipated in 1840 under the name Imperial Vila da Vitória. A few years earlier, the settlement consisted of “about forty low houses and a church under construction” (Wied-Neuwied, 1940, p. 409), according to the travel account of Prince Maximilian Wied-Neuwied, dated 1817.

The first references to the settlement of the Conquista area date back to the late eighteenth century (Sousa, 2001, p. 164). In this regard, the memoirist Mozart Tanajura recalled that the inhabitants “obtained drinking water from the stream

9. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of RICOEUR, P. *Architecture and Narrativity*. Études Ricœuriennes. Ricœur Studies, v. 7, n. 2 (2016), ISSN 2156-7808 (online). DOI <http://www.doi.org/10.5195/errs.2016.378> <http://ricoeur.pitt.edu>

that came from Poço Escuro [Dark Well], just below Rua Grande, now Ernesto Dantas street. This was the same source where the indigenous people, who lived in the nearby forests, also fetched water” (Tanajura, 1992, p. 169-170). The street referred to by the author, Rua Grande, was the initial nucleus of the settlement, and in 1817, Prince Wied described it as follows:

The situation in Conquista is not unpleasant, especially because, from the bottom of the valley, surrounded by gently sloping hills, one can see the flanks and summits of these hills covered in forests. On one of the slopes, shaded by dense forests, Conquista forms an elongated rectangle. The church, built on the highest point, occupies the center of this area. The thick forests that fill the entire area around the rectangle give it the appearance of a light green meadow, making the village’s appearance quite pleasant. (Wied-Neuwied, 1940, p. 410).

Located in a region with a slightly higher altitude, at the base of the southwestern escarpment of the Serra do Periperi, the settlement was situated just beyond the main spring of the Verruga River, known as Poço Escuro, in a strategic location to ensure the supply of water to the population, as presented in Figure 1. The old Rua Grande extended throughout the area that currently includes the Tancredo Neves and Barão do Rio Branco squares.

Historian Durval Vieira de Aguiar, in a work dated 1888, cites a description made in the same year by Tranquilino Leovigildo Torres, the first president of the Instituto Geográfico e Histórico da Bahia, of the “Imperial Villa da Victória”, emphasizing that “all the lands are very fertile for all types of crops, nourished by various rivers and streams, and covered by large, dense forests, suffering little from the harshness of the annual droughts” (Aguiar, 1888, p. 195). In the 1895 revision of Tranquilino Torres’ work, it is described that the “Vitória stream, which originates from the Serra do Periperi”, was the most important among the streams and brooks of the then municipality of Vitória, “with permanent, crystal-clear water, that supplies the population” (Torres, 1996, p. 31).

The expansion of the city’s urban structure began only in the early decades of the twentieth century, following the banks of the Verruga River, in an area where several springs are located. Currently, the urban grid extends over a plateau region adjacent to the mountain range.

After crossing the city center, the initial stream of the Verruga River meets other small watercourses that feed into it, in an area naturally shaped as a floodplain. In this location, the municipal superintendent João Diogo de Sá Barreto, who governed the city in 1906 and 1907 (Menezes, 2010, p. 236), built a dam to

contain the river's waters, thereby creating a permanent reservoir known as the "Aguão" [The Big Water] (Viana, 1982, p. 127). The purpose of the new reservoir was to serve as a water reserve for the municipality, which has always experienced long periods of drought.

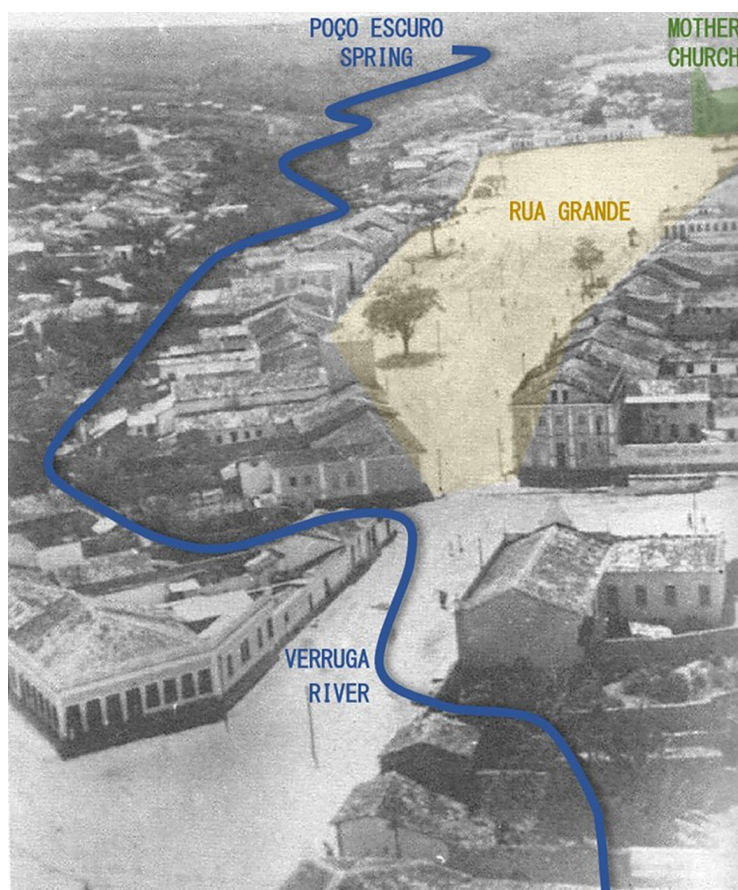


Figure 1. Panoramic view of Vitória da Conquista identifying the main constitutive elements (1937)

Source: Photographic archive of the Museu Regional de Vitória da Conquista, including added notations by the authors.

The urban landscape described by the early historians, closely tied to the river, underwent a radical transformation in Vitória da Conquista during the last century, due to urban expansion and interventions by the municipal government, which focused on establishing infrastructure based on sanitary drainage techniques. The first stretch of the riverbed, where the urban grid had already been established, was straightened, channeled, and covered during the first half of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, the delayed sewage system contributed to the intensification of river pollution until the late 1970s. At that time, environmental concerns were still in their infancy in Brazil, even within the public sphere, and policies aimed

at river preservation and the integration of society with these environments were limited. Consequently, over the following decades, the Verruga River went from being a vital source of sustenance to having its existence denied; the population began referring to it as a sewage canal rather than a natural watercourse.

In a report on the city of Vitória da Conquista, published in the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil* in 1949, the public interventions ensuring water supply for the population are described as follows, based on data from 1947:

The water supply service offered the following characteristics: one captured water source, with a total capacity of fifty thousand liters in 24 hours; a 1,400-meter-long adduction line; two reservoirs with a total capacity of 35 cubic meters; a total distribution network of nine hundred meters; 22 supplied buildings; one public fountain; and six public taps (Vitória da Conquista, 1949).

At that time, outsourcing domestic laundry services was common practice. However, access to water, which should have been widely available to all, was restricted for the washerwomen of Vitória da Conquista.

Until the early twentieth century, the city's washerwomen relied on water that flowed from the taps of the municipal public reservoir, built below the Poço Escuro spring, or by digging small pools, known as *cacimbas* [shallow wells], along the riverbanks. However, their presence in these spaces became a source of discomfort for certain residents. Citing sanitary concerns, the municipal administration prohibited washing clothes in the area, arguing that both the activity and the occupation of the space contributed to the contamination of the city's water supply (Rocha, 2011, p. 144). These hygienist measures also reflected social dynamics, as they sought to displace this activity – generally carried out by formerly enslaved women – away from interactions with the “urban elite”. Members of this elite associated these “free workers” with prostitution, as they were not destined for marriage and domestic life, and sought to expel them to peripheral areas.

Starting in 1930, the washerwomen of Vitória da Conquista relocated to the reservoir area formed by the damming of waters in the floodplain, which was then located at the city's outskirts (Figure 2). This displacement made their daily commutes more arduous as they continued to serve residents in the urban center. Criticizing the municipal government's decision to expel the washerwomen, the newspaper *Avante* published an article on December 20, 1931:

The water from the reservoir is truly unusable, muddy, and fouled by animals that drink from it. Moreover, for residents from the upper part of the city, it is half a league away. The distance would be the least of the problems if the filth and impurity of the water did not hinder

the work. How these poor women suffer! One of them, on Rua dos FONSECAS, carried 30 cans of water to the Water Tank to wash clothes at home – have you any idea how much she earned? Two thousand and five hundred réis (Avante, 1931, apud Rocha, 2011, p. 146).

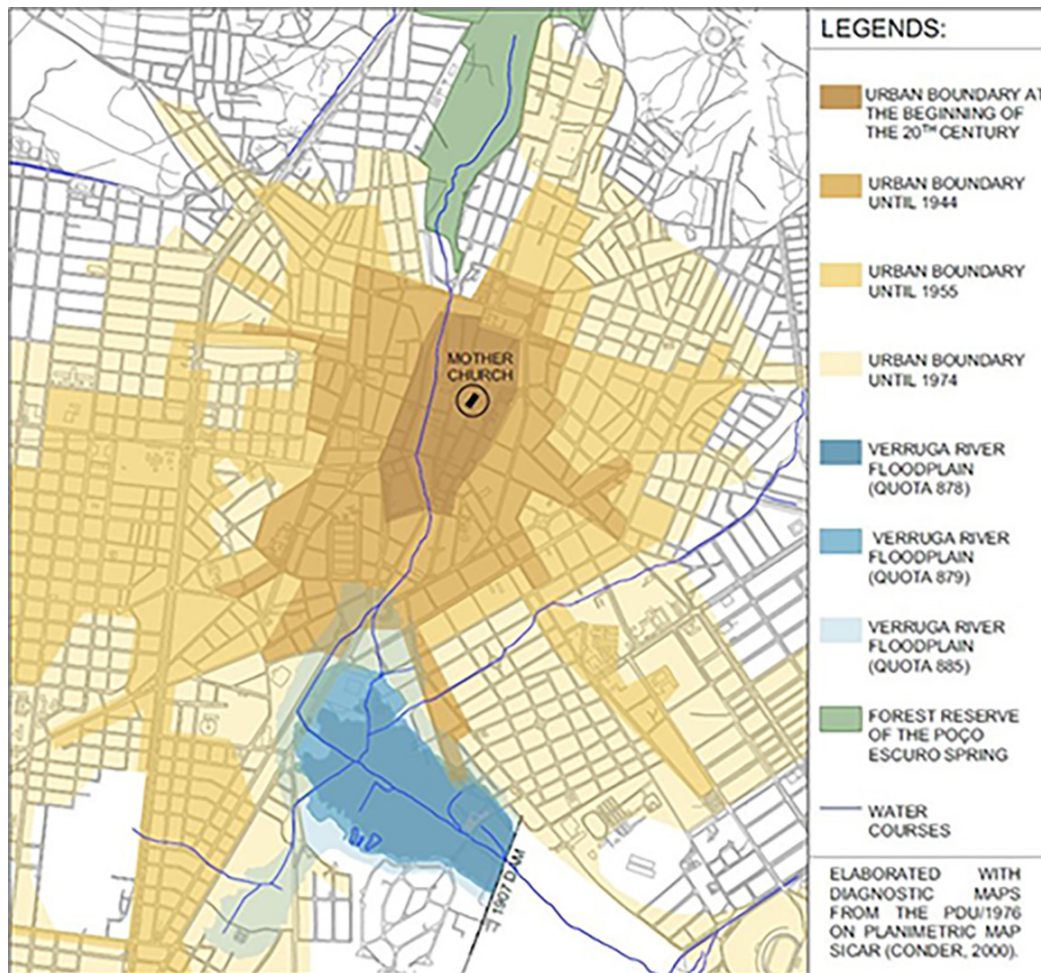


Figure 2. Urban evolution of Vitória da Conquista during the twentieth century

Source: Own elaboration based on historical documents and planimetric data provided by the Bahia State Urban Development Company (Conder, 2000).

It is evident that this transition of the washerwomen to the *Aguão* reservoir did not occur spontaneously; however, many of them settled there and occupied the area now called Conquistinha. Flor, a washerwoman and daughter of a washerwoman, born in 1945 in Conquistinha, recalls in an interview the presence of the reservoir in her childhood, as well as her daily relationship with the facility, and the use of water from the wells dug along the edge of the reservoir, which also served as a water source for her home: “[T]he well was down there, we would go fetch water there, good water!”. When asked about the quality of the water in

the wells, Flor emphasized that the water was very clean, contrary to what was criticized in the article from the newspaper *Avante*:

The water was like a coconut, my dear! We drank well water! [...] We'd get the water, it had those little frogs, we'd strain it, strain it twice to drink, and we never had any problems it. We were raised on well water, I was! And from the cistern too, because here at home we had a cistern, but it was closed some time ago (Flor, 2020).

The interviewee added that the water from the reservoir was used both for drinking and for playing, as well as for irrigating the garden at her residence: “[T] hose excellent vegetables, all from good water!” (Flor, 2020).

Margarida, also a washerwoman and daughter of a washerwoman, born in the same year and place as Flor, recounted in an interview that the water used by her family from the 1940s until the public treated water system was made available in her street “was spring water, it was used for washing clothes, for everything [...] we used to get water sitting by the wells” (Margarida, 2020).

Throughout its existence, the reservoir (Figures 3 and 4) served as a landmark for the city's population. According to journalist Bruno Bacelar, in an article for the newspaper *O Sertanejo* published on October 26, 1963, the reservoir became an important asset for the municipality, as evident in the excerpt below.

The reservoir built by Sá Barreto provided the greatest and best benefits to the cattle drivers of this municipality and neighboring municipalities in Minas Gerais, in addition to becoming, many years later, a popular recreational spot for the families of Vitória da Conquista on Sunday afternoons.

The reservoir had plenty of fish, a lot of space, it was beautiful, pleasant, useful, and interesting (Bacelar, 1963).

The Conquistinha region was located approximately 1 km from the central nucleus of the city, and its occupation began gradually during the 1930s. Margarida recalls that when her mother moved there, during the administration of Régis Pacheco – between 1938 and 1945 – there were only between three and five houses in the region:

There were only five houses here, older ones, it was all jungle, a mangrove in front, and a paddock at the back to plant coffee, seedlings, right? They used to make coffee seedlings. And on the street, where we pass, a corridor, they would slaughter cattle there, because they didn't go to the slaughterhouse, they slaughtered them there to take them to the butcher shops (Margarida, 2020).



Figure 3. The Vitória da Conquista Reservoir (1945)

Source: Photographic collection from the Museu Regional in Vitória da Conquista.



Figure 4. The same dam during a period of low water levels and significant drop on the bank

Source: Photographic collection from the Museu Regional in Vitória da Conquista.

The *Aguão* dam provided water for the washerwomen community for around thirty years. Once the Conquistinha community was established and the urban fabric expanded toward the area, the municipal administrations sought to integrate this facility into the city and, once again, imposed challenges to the survival of these workers.

With the rapid urban expansion and the fact that the city lacked a sewage system, in 1963, the then-mayor José Fernandes Pedral Sampaio breached the *Aguão* dam, draining its waters. This public action once again aimed to implement a sanitary measure, still influenced by the hygienist movement of the first half of the twentieth century in Brazil. Through Decree No. 10 (Vitória da Conquista, 1963), the City Hall justified the measure based on the following points:

Considering that the reservoir known as “Aguão” is no longer being used as a source of water supply for the city and no longer serves the purpose for which it was built – as a watering hole for animals;
Considering that, currently, the mentioned reservoir is nothing more than a significant source of diseases and mosquitoes, and that its sanitation is virtually impossible, since the waters from all the city’s sewage flow into it;
Considering, also, the advantage of constructing a park, where tropical trees will be planted and cultivated, as the city’s green space is minimal; [...]
Article 2 – The City Hall will promote the occupation of the land located in the area defined in Article 1 of this Decree, after fulfilling the legal formalities, in order to build various public interest works in the area, as well as plant tropical trees (Vitória da Conquista, 1963).

In seeking out the memories of the washerwomen regarding the reservoir, it becomes evident that there was a very close relationship between this population and the waters of the reservoir, which served for leisure, sustenance, and consumption, contrary to what is stated in the decree. It is clear in the words of interviewee Flor that rupturing the dam was not a decision made with the participation of the local population. When she refers to the draining of the reservoir water during José Pedral’s administration, she reveals that the action was, in fact, imposed: “But he ordered it to be destroyed, right? What could we do?” (Flor, 2020).

The construction of collective memory linked to the space where the washerwomen gathered along the banks of the *Aguão* reservoir between the 1930s and 1960s was not limited to the Conquistinha community. According to Margarida, the reservoir was also used by many washerwomen residing in other neighborhoods, forming a collective urban imagery for these women:

A lot of washerwomen would come, it was packed with washerwomen, washing clothes in the Alto Maron district, from there up there was

no water available, they'd all come here to wash clothes. [...] It was peaceful! People came from Alto Maron, people came from Guarani, everyone washed clothes here freely, it was great! A lot of kids there, wash basins, everything. (Margarida, 2020).

Thus, it is understood that, more than an essential element for consumption and hygiene, it was the shared use of the reservoir's water that fostered the sense of community. For Margarida, washing clothes was a central part of her life story and that of her family:

That's why I say I didn't have a childhood. My mother had four daughters, and she didn't have a husband, nor any sons. There were five women in the house. So, her life was all about washing clothes to survive, you know? She would go out to work, and at home, it was just me, my sisters, and my grandmother. My grandmother would look after us, and so we would go and wash clothes. I started working when I was eight. Today I'm seventy-five, still struggling (Margarida, 2020).

For urban agents, areas inhabited by low-income populations are typically associated with unhealthy environments. Hygienist urban reforms have consistently sought to enforce the spatial segregation of these communities and to cover all watercourses in areas where they might settle within the urban fabric. The rivers running through the city's poorer neighborhoods were regarded "as sources of infections, miasmas, and epidemics, as well as obstacles to progress and civilization" (Gomes, 2018, p. 66).

Until the 1970s, Vitória da Conquista depended on the small course of the Verruga River for its water supply, drawing water directly from its source or through the construction of small cisterns and wells. In 1965, Resolution No. 72/65 established a "partnership with the Department of Sanitary Engineering of the State of Bahia – DESEB, to manage the operation of the water supply and sanitation services of the municipality of Vitória da Conquista" (Vitória da Conquista, 1965). The treated water supply system, sourced from a dam located in the neighboring municipality of Barra do Choça, was inaugurated in 1971 (Viana, 1985). This transition in water access occurred gradually, as the distribution network expanded throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

2. The impacts of urban expansion and environmental neglect on the availability of water for washerwomen

The Conquistinha region was considered peripheral and undervalued until the 1980s, when occupation began to evolve rapidly, particularly after the municipal

government approved the upscale residential development called Caminho do Parque, located adjacent to Conquistinha, to be implemented by the construction company Odebrecht.

The park, envisioned by the 1963 decree in the area of the former reservoir, was never realized, and as early as the 1970s, reports began to surface regarding the private appropriation of public land previously covered by water. On January 15, 1972, the local newspaper *O Jornal de Conquista*, reported that, in the city council, Councilor Waldemar Porto had denounced “an invasion of the land adjacent to the former ‘Aguão’”. The article further stated that the councilor reported that “According to the plan, the land was originally intended for a zoological park or even a forest park, but the area has been entirely occupied, fully enclosed, leaving not even a meter for municipal property” (Invasão [...], 1972). Figure 5 illustrates the expansion of settlements across the former reservoir site over the past 42 years.

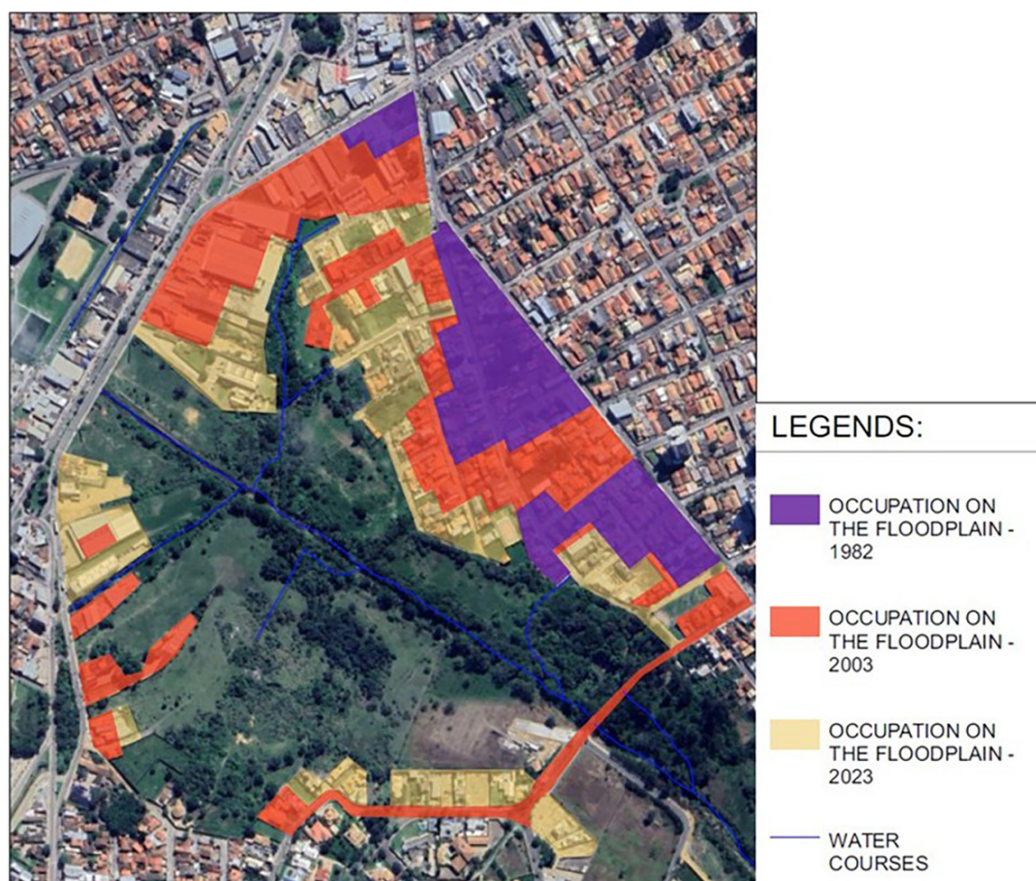


Figure 5. Expansion of the urban area of Conquistinha

Source: Own elaboration based on satellite images (Google, 2024) and urban cadastral maps (Vitória da Conquista, 1978; 1982; 1992).

According to Margarida (2020), this growth of the settlement led to a shift in the demographic profile of the region's inhabitants: "[B]ecause they say this is an upscale area. Many of us poor folks wouldn't have lived here, not by choice". This change in land occupation patterns unfolded gradually, driven by the sale of plots by former residents and by the regularization and commercialization of lots that had previously belonged to the municipality. Regarding this occupation, Margarida (ibid.) reported: "The paddock area, which was separate, had already been set apart from the city hall. It was measured, everything legalized. Then Coeduc [a private school located in the Conquistinha region] bought it, and no one could wash clothes there anymore, because they had bought it and didn't want to allow it".

However, after the rupture of the reservoir, water ceased to flow for the washerwomen: "Even the well we had dug dried up!" (Flor, 2020). As a result, they had to find new ways to obtain water and ensure the survival of their families. Flor also stated that, in her view, the absence of the reservoir had affected the region's rainfall levels: "[A]fter it was all over, the rain now takes forever to come, whereas before, it rained all the time! It used to rain a lot here" (Flor, 2020). While changes in rainfall patterns could be attributed to various local and global factors, the connection that Flor draws in her memory demonstrates the significant effect that the rupture of the dam had on the water supply for that community.

Flor's emotional connection to the area of the former reservoir and her concern regarding interventions that may alter the natural shape of the land are evident in her speech. For her, the loss of direct contact with water represents an environmental issue that impacts the region's natural ecosystem:

[...] you knew it was going to rain when the frogs started croaking all at once! Wow! Back then it was frogs! The frogs down there would croak! [...] After the reservoir was gone, everything ended, and the poor little frogs were left without shelter... they were really left without shelter! Once in a while, a big one shows up... oh, I can tell you, those little creatures are still missing the water they used to live in down there. Drinking and swimming, and croaking... under those baroness plants (Flor, 2020).

During the 1960s and 1970s, before treated water was available in the homes of Conquistinha, some washerwomen obtained water from open cisterns either at their own homes or at their neighbors', but the volume became increasingly smaller due to the city's growth and the consequent removal of vegetation and soil sealing. The difficulty in obtaining water caused numerous inconveniences for this population, as Margarida reports:

Because, my dear, when there was no water, there was one time when it was a real struggle, because the neighbor – well, the water from the back wasn't very good anymore, from the paddock, they put cattle there, the wells were too shallow. The cattle drank it all, so there wasn't enough for us. We'd get water from the neighbor's cistern, from the well up front. Then the neighbor – I was on maternity leave, had just had a baby – my two kids went to get water, and he wouldn't let them. So, at dusk – the kids always went to fill the pot at dusk – he wouldn't let them. The kids came back crying. I asked then what had happened. "No, the [neighbor] wouldn't let us get any water." "Don't worry, it's nothing. [When] dad gets home, he won't let that happen". Then when [my husband] got home, I told him: "look, the [neighbor] wouldn't let the kids get any water, now what?" He said: "early tomorrow, I'll get up at dawn and open the well where he works". He opened the well out there in the paddock, we started using that water, but our neighbor said: "no, get water at my house". We went and got it. Every day we'd go get water, but it was very little, because the cistern gave very little water (Margarida, 2020).

The difficulties expressed by the washerwomen highlight the perceived scarcity of water for that population, which relied on an abundant supply of water to carry out the activity that ensured their livelihood. While access to drinking water became progressively more difficult and a source of local conflict, rainwater, when it came, arrived with increasing intensity. This caused damage and fear among the population due to the soil sealing in the floodplain area, leading to infrastructure damage.

After decades of struggling to maintain their activities, in the late twentieth century, a treated water supply network was made available to the homes in Conquistinha. However, for a population already facing significant financial difficulties, having to pay for access to water that, a few decades earlier, had flowed at the back of their houses, was not easy. In Margarida's case, it required the effort of the entire family:

[...] I was down at the spring washing clothes, when my mom came over and said: "Look, there are some men there wanting to connect the water, do you want it, or not?" I said: "I earn so little, I can't afford it". Then she said: "Oh, get it, and whenever you can't pay, I'll pay for you" My mom. So I said: "I'll think about it". She said: "Come on, leave the clothes at the swamp". So I left the clothes there and came here, to see if the man was still about – she'd come to tell me later. The man was here, we talked, and arranged it, he said he'd split it, so I made the arrangement with her – it was just me and her who had water, from Embasa [Bahia Water and Sanitation Company]. We spent five years paying that fee so we wouldn't be without water. (Margarida, 2020)

Currently, despite financial difficulties and threats of eviction from her home, where she has lived her entire life, Margarida, when recalling the difficult years without access to water, expresses gratitude for the water supply in her home through the Embasa distribution network: “And I always tell my children: today we have a river running inside the house, and they don’t appreciate it, and there are so many out there who have to carry cans of water on their heads” (Margarida, 2020). Margarida’s constant assertion of gratitude for having easy access to water today comes from the need to make her children understand that the scarcity of this natural element can be inherent.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, a public laundry was inaugurated in Conquistinha, which remains in operation today. It is frequented by many washerwomen who continue to resist, advocating for the permanence of their community.

Final considerations

The urban expansion of Vitória da Conquista during the second half of the twentieth century, continued to follow the principles of industrial society, characterized by the commodification of nature and its deterioration within the urban environment. Throughout this process, the washerwomen in the urban area of the municipality experienced significant losses, both economically and in terms of their quality of life. As the city has incorporated the area where the Conquistinha community of washerwomen is located into its urban dynamic, there is a growing risk that these women, who still reside in the region, will gradually be displaced due to land valorization and real estate speculation, as the area has undergone significant changes in both its spatial and economic configuration.

By delving into the memories of these washerwomen, it became evident that the presence of water in their place of residence played a significant role in shaping both the individual and collective memories of that community. This history reveals that, despite its nostalgic nature, the practice of washing was able to establish a more harmonious relationship with the urban watercourses. Given the physical and historical characteristics of the region where Vitória da Conquista is located, it may be concluded that the relationship these workers have had with water, since the early twentieth century, has been based on a constant awareness of how this vital resource is used in the face of impending supply shortages, since they depend on it to carry out their work and secure their livelihoods.

It is also clear that the washerwomen now feel the need to establish, in their children’s memory, a connection between the origin of water collection in a natural river and its delivery through the taps in their homes. They understand this as the

starting point for fostering a commitment to the sustainable use of this natural element. Broadly speaking, the connection between society and watercourses has been lost due to the indiscriminate growth of the city and the neglect of the environment and urban waters. The solution of water supply through a distribution network sourced from a reservoir far from the urban core has further intensified the disregard among the Verruga River by the people of Vitória da Conquista, limiting their opportunities for interaction with its waters.

Today, there is a greater global understanding that special attention must be given to the public management of water, both from the perspective of preserving water sources and ensuring their proper handling. This management also involves the adoption of public policies aimed at raising awareness on natural water processes, establishing a commitment from both political decision-makers and civil society. Thus, it becomes essential that responsibility for water be understood more broadly by the entire population, as it is individuals who make up and shape life in society.

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