

Men, Women, and Children in the Occupation of the Purus and Acre River Valleys: Social Aspects in Southwestern Amazonia from 1889 to 1904

Homens, mulheres e crianças na ocupação dos vales dos rios Purus e Acre: aspectos sociais na Amazônia sul-ocidental de 1889 a 1904

Daniel da Silva Klein*

ABSTRACT

This article presents a social panorama of the men, women, and children who occupied the Purus and Acre River valleys at the beginning of the twentieth century, addressing issues related to age, race, and means of resistance. The documentary base comes from files about these workers in the Historical and Geographical Institute of Acre and now in the possession of the Federal University of Acre. The methodology involves the presentation of serial data with case narratives, combining a micro-historical perspective to discuss the investigated themes. Thus, as a backdrop, we hope to confront some silences in Amazonian historiography regarding the expansion of rubber plantations in this part of Brazil, especially in relation to the insufficient use of primary sources to address this issue.

Keywords: Rubber tappers; Rubber plantations; Social panorama; Micro-history.

RESUMO

O artigo discute o panorama social dos homens, mulheres e crianças que ocuparam os vales dos rios Purus e Acre no início do século XX, abordando temas relativos à idade, raça e meios de resistência. A base documental é proveniente das fichas deixadas por esses trabalhadores junto ao Instituto Histórico e Geográfico do Acre, que estão sob a guarda da Universidade Federal do Acre. O método de exposição apresenta os dados seriais com narrativas de casos, aliando uma perspectiva micro-histórica para discutir os temas investigados. Assim, espera-se, como pano de fundo, enfrentar alguns silêncios da historiografia amazônica a respeito da expansão dos seringais nessa parte do Brasil, principalmente no uso insuficiente das fontes primárias para tratar desse assunto.

Palavras-chave: Seringueiros; Seringais; Panorama Social; Micro-história.

* Federal University of São Carlos, São Carlos, SP, Brazil. danieldasilvaklein1984@gmail.com <<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0190-2132>>

PRESENTATION

Some questions still hover in the historiography in relation to the occupation of the Amazon valley in the period when rubber was the main product produced in that region, especially in relation to the social composition of workers who formed its productive base. This investigation intends to dialogue with these silences, presenting serial data about the populations who occupied the Purus and Acre River valleys between 1890 and 1903. Linked to this demonstration, individual narratives give additional profundity to the dilemmas raised by the sources, bringing social experiences to the narrative about the scenario analyzed. It should also be stated that we believe micro-social contexts are used in the actions of socially organized individuals and that the social structures are the result of this network. They can coerce people around them but depend on the historicity of social network to exist. This is a reading inspired by a determined social micro-history (Levi, 2000).

The primary sources used here are the records of the *seringueiros* (rubber tappers) who took part in the uprisings against Peruvian and Bolivian control of the region, now the state of Acre. These movements were aimed at getting Brazil to annex the region. From the 1950s to the 1970s, these files containing the statements given by the *seringueiros* or their direct heirs, daughters, or wives were held by the Historical and Geographical Institute of Acre. They were used as proof in the requisition of pensions given to veterans of those conflicts, in accordance with Law no. 380, dated September 10, 1948.

Altogether, 248 files were read, of which in only one case did a woman request this pension. They were read in alphabetic order and were grouped according to common thematic discourses and, within them, chronologically. In this way there appeared the reasons which led these *seringueiros* to leave their lands of origin and go to the Purus and Acre River regions, as well as racial questions involving the classification of these people, the resistance to labor routines, the selective recognition of combatants who received pensions, and the narratives about the wars over the possession of Acre. The last two themes, due to their scope of political history, will be left aside for the moment, while the others will form part of this analysis.

When talking about the occupation of the Amazonian valley at the end of the nineteenth century a set of numerical assumptions have emerged without any support in research based on censuses or qualitative data in relation to the *seringueiros*. One research project (Klein 2013, pp. 46-47) found that Craveiro Costa, for example, stated that the region which would become the future

Federal Territory of Acre produced 20,000 tons of rubber in 1899. Based on this, he inferred that, to produce 12,000 tons of this product, 40,000 men would be necessary and thus this vast region had 70,000 inhabitants when it was annexed to Brazil. Without citing any sources, Leandro Tocantins stated that at the end of the nineteenth century 10,000 people inhabited the same area. Cleuza Maria Damo Ranzi, in turn, stated that the area attracted more people than both Amazonas and Pará.

In relation to these deductions, inferences, or affirmations without any documentary support, Roberto Santos warned in the 1980s that Celso Furtado and other researchers had inflated the number of emigrants to the Amazon region. He stated that general data about population transfers to this part of Brazil were sparse and localized (Klein, 2013, pp. 46-47).

The geographer, Carlos Walter Porto Gonçalves, did research on some of this sparse data, extracting serial data from an eminently qualitative source, the *Álbum do Rio Acre* by Emílio Falcão. Published in 1906, it contained a set of panoramas on the *seringais* of the region, with descriptions of their landowners, the number of workers, and the total rubber produced by them. Based on this, Gonçalves prepared qualitative and quantitative analyses on the formation of a given *seringalista* territoriality at the beginning of the twentieth century, avoiding any generalities without documentary base (Gonçalves, 2003)¹. This is thus an initiative which reinvents the fields of studies of the human sciences, expanding the possible approaches in relation to themes with documentary absences.

Hoping to avoid falling into the traps of deductions or mistakes, due to the absence of source demonstrations, we aim to explore the occupation of the above-mentioned valleys at the beginning of the twentieth century, starting with the first two censuses carried out there in 1899 and 1903. When José Paravicini was appointed administrator of the Acre Valley by the Bolivian government in 1899, he ordered a demographic census to be carried out along this navigable river course. Altogether, 68 *seringais* were surveyed, which belonged to 56 *seringalistas*, with a total of 4,864 people. Of these, 916 were women and 729 children. Based on this survey, it was calculated that the total residents of the Acre, Purus, and Juruá valleys oscillated between 9,000 and 15,000 people (Paravicini, 1900).

After the incorporation of this territory in Brazil, the second administrator of the *Prefeitura Departamental* of the Acre River Valley, Rafael Augusto da Cunha Matos, ordered a populational survey on the *vilas* of Xapuri and Volta da Empreza, then the administrative seat – now part of the municipality of Rio

Branco. A total of 28 *seringais* were visited, in which lived 1,553 men and 619 women. In all the regions of this new national unit, Cunha Matos said that there were at least 9,000 people and a maximum of 15,000 (Matos, 1904).

The 247 men and the only woman who appeared in the research represent a reasonable percentage of this population. It is not a definitive sample, but one that is partial and has information missing, however, representative. If we approximate these two censuses, in which the population of Acre is around 11,000 people, these files represent around 2.5% of this total. It is a small number, but based on data that is as accurate as possible about these people.

Since the gaps in relation to the workers who came to Acre in the rubber period still persist in historical studies, we will investigate these files, which are diminutive in terms of percentages, but still significant, trying to answer some questions: Where did they come from and at what age? What were the conditions like in these journeys? Why did they come to Acre? In relation to the presence of women, how much did they participate in the chains of *aviamento* (a credit/commerce system)? How were the native people treated? The thesis that guides these problems is that, without micro and macro-social investigations about the *seringueiros*, using primary sources which approximate them, it is impossible to understand the incorporation of Acre into Brazil. This impossibility thus invalidates any deductive analyses without empirical support, therefore a process of re-reading of this context must be undertaken by the historiography.

POOR YOUNG PEOPLE COMING FROM AFAR

An observation which initially occurs in the reading of the records is related to the fact that the workers who went to the various parts of Acre in the nineteenth century were very young. Most were born between 1883 and 1888, reaching the Amazonian valleys between 1900 and 1903; in other words, they were aged between 17 and 20. A little more than half of the 248 workers surveyed were 17 or 18 years old, while only ten of them were born between 1860 and 1870.

Children and young people were accompanied by family members, though some mention godparents as their employers. Antônio José dos Santos was born in 1883 in Pernambuco and emigrated in 1901, in the company of his godfather Virgílio de Souza. He came to work as a *comboieiro* with Souza, transporting commercial goods for *Coronel* José Galdino, and meant to send money to his brothers, who were orphans and very poor. Even during the

conflicts to incorporate Acre in Brazil, he specialized in the transport of supplies, so much so that his colleague in the fighting, Emídio Ferreira Lima, said that remembered him bringing water to the troops, and that he “served in the supply of goods along the Acre River” (Santos, 1979).

Emídio Ferreira Lima was the youngest worker found. He came without relatives, arriving in 1894, with only six years of age, from the municipality of Crato, Ceará. With the consent of his parents, he left home accompanied by his godfather and another eight men to work in the *seringal* called Guanabara. The man who brought him was the owner of Guanabara, *Senhor* Avelino Chaves, who gave the group the task of extracting latex and producing rubber. Emídio Ferreira, despite being very young, helped the others in these tasks. After a while, he also began to work as a *comboeiro*, transporting food and supplies, so much that, during the 1903 fighting, he also carried out this task (Lima, 1974b).

Another group of unaccompanied children and young men were those who came with their uncles, a total of three cases. Antônio Rodrigues came from Syria with his uncles and cousins to work in the Santo Antônio *seringal*; the father of Enéas Euzébio from Ceará was dead and his mother, who lived in misery and found it impossible to raise her children, authorized his brother Ambrósio to bring him as a hired laborer; Francisco Vitoriano left Ceará at the age of 19 for the Capatará *seringal*. He and his uncle came with a group of emigrants, “with the spirit of adventuring into the cutting of *seringueira* for the extraction of latex” and, as research show, they had many adventures. He enlisted as an artilleryman in the fighting and after a few years he became known as Chico Vaqueiro, returning to Ceará a little after 1903. However, in 1923, “missing it, he returned to Acre” (Costa, 1974; Sobrinho, 1960; Souza, 1974a).

Some reports from elderly people discussing their childhood memories show us how children dealt with the travel, the work in the *seringais*, and the fighting at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1899 voyage of the steamship *Prompto* there is an indication of the gaps used by children to resist the *aviamento* chain. Gaspar Mascarenhas told his wife, Amélia Gomes, that he had travelled as a young boy to Acre with his family, and she remembered “that together with him travelled a boy called João Sabino de Paula and that they spent hours playing on the ship’s deck”. It is notable that this was important for him, moments of escaping that world, to such an extent that Mascarenhas, even at an advanced age, remembered them and even where his friend disembarked in Benfica *seringal* (Mascarenhas, 1975).

João Sabino said he went to live in Jarinal *colocação*, which bordered

Soledade, where Francisco Carlos de Alencar, who was six in 1900, lived. With the fighting to take control of Acre, the boys' fathers were called up on two occasions and they remained with their mothers, who took refuge in the camp in Forte de Veneza *seringal*. However, when the fathers were called up for the second time, during the fighting at the Orthon River in 1903, he states that

We, João Sabino de Paula and I, helped our mothers until the return of our hero parents. Unfortunately, the father of my colleague and friend died in the fighting in Gironda, close to Porto Rico, in other words, in the passage to the siege of Porto Rico. My father returned later and was very sad due to the loss of our friend and continued to extract latex (Alencar, 1975).

Having been brought to Acre, these children had to deal with contexts of much violence. Despite this, the memories of games and friendships lasted for decades, so much so that Alencar's caring language is a strong indication of how important these moments were for their trajectories in life. Even though he was an orphan, João Sabino was put into service in some message patrols during the war, witnessing the deaths of Lieutenant João Maia and Professor Raimundo da Silva Viana, and transporting the letters of insurrection of Plácido de Castro's troops. José de Souza Medeiros, who was 12 when called up in 1902, saw João Sabino, Manoel Benevenuto, and other boys carry provisions, supplies, and even rubber on journeys of more than two hours, and "the greatest danger was in this crossing, since we were all passing the hidden Bolivian pickets and ambushes in the virgin forest" (Paula, 1973; Medeiros, 1975).

The youth of these boys indicates that *seringalistas* looked for strong workers who could be exploited for long periods, since work in the *seringais* was harsh. A significant number of children unaccompanied by their mothers and fathers is a further indication of the precarious living conditions in Ceará, Pernambuco, or even in other countries, such as Syria. This is significant, because only ten of the men researched were over 30 when they reached the valleys of the Purus and Acre rivers.

However, the most experienced seem to have assumed more strategic positions in the productive organization of rubber. Born in Nice, France, Júlio Romeo landed in Belém at the age of 23 in 1893. Despite speaking Portuguese badly, he was skilled at accountancy and became well known in the *casas avia-doras* – the commercial houses which served the *seringalistas* in Acre. Ten years later, he went to work in the Arapixi *seringal* as a bookkeeper and afterwards moved to Sena Madureira, when he became a notary (D'Anzicourt, 1969).

Arriving at the age of 32 in the *Livre-nos Deus seringal*, Francisco das Chagas became well known among the *seringalistas* in the Purus River, working in the main *barracão* (the administrative center of the *seringal* used to both sell products to the *seringueiros* and collect their production). Due to his fame, he took part in the fighting against the Peruvians as a Sergeant. Manoel Pereira, who went to União at the age of 30, was remembered by all for his rubber production, having been authorized to become a farmer and to supply the *seringal*, a unique fact in the survey, seen as a type of promotion.

Occupying these places did not necessarily mean having material advantage. In the case of José Alves de Souza, it was crucial in forcing him to live “forever” in Itu *seringal*. He arrived there at the age of 31 in 1900, and was sent to Ingazeira *colocação*. Over time he managed to save enough to go to Belém to get married. He returned to Acre and tried, for several times, to return to “Pará, but due to the commitments he had with his employer, Sr. Honório, he never managed to do it and stayed there forever”. Despite his efforts, when he died in 1971, he was buried in the *seringal* cemetery. Someone else with more than 30 years old when arrived was José Gomes Nobre, who had worked in Bom Destino since 1902. However, unlike José Alves, he died in 1924 “without medical assistance, and an unregistered death”.

The oldest person found in the research was Candido Anacleto Galvão, who was born in Catolé do Rocha, Rio Grande do Norte, in March 1860. He went to Vitória *seringal* in 1899, occupying the intermediary position of *aviador* (as sort of clerk) for the brothers Vitor and Antônio Nogueira Maia, in the center of the *seringal*. Due to this work, which can be seen as running a small commercial establishment, he worked in various *seringais* in the Acre River valley until his death in 1940 (Galvão, 1974; Nobre, 1968; Lima, 1971; Souza, 1974b).

Considering that the oldest worker in this group to reach Acre was 39, it can be stated that all of them were very young. However, the exhaustive, physically violent, and heavy work to which these people were subjected during those early years of the twentieth century meant that life expectancy in Brazil was very low. In her doctorate dissertation, Ana Paula Belon Lima noted that in 1800 the average life expectancy of Brazilians was around 30 years old, while some reports state that in 1900, this level barely passed the age of 33² (Lima, 2011, p. 61). For the *seringalistas*, labor at a young age was thus very necessary, since young people could produce for several years. We will see that many of these men would complain in their old age that they were crippled and physically exhausted.

Occupying the *seringais* along the riverbanks which gave rise to the future

Federal Territory of Acre was thus shown to be an arduous task, which required large numbers of people coming from afar, and over a series of decades. Bertoldo Nunes mentioned that the first occupants of Purus and its affluents reached the place called Campinas in 1857, which could be a plausible approximate date. He was the son of Manoel Nunes Sobrinho, known as Manduca Vaqueiro and owner of Muiraquitã *seringal*, having been born at Porto Central *colocação* on that property in 1883.

Possibly Nunes grew up listening to family stories about the pioneers of those regions, exploring the lands of the indigenous peoples. It should be noted that these landholders quickly registered titles to the land they occupied, trading with the *casas aviadoras* of Belém and Manaus, which gave them legitimacy to face the troops of the Peruvian government, who only arrived in those parts at the beginning of 1903 (Santos, 1975).

Around 1900, the *seringais* had been occupied for almost 40 years by people who had mostly come from Ceará. Of those who declared their origins, 91 workers came from that state, with the municipalities mentioned as birth places including Baturité, Fortaleza, Juazeiro do Norte, Crato, and others. In addition to these, 24 came from Rio Grande do Norte, 13 were from Paraíba, nine from Amazonas, eight were from Lebanon (or from Mount Lebanon in Syria, as registered), seven were from Pernambuco, six from Syria, five came from the Acre valleys, the same number coming from Portugal, four from Pará, two from Bahia – the same number came from Sergipe and Maranhão –, while one was from Campinas (state of São Paulo) and another came from Rio Grande do Sul. In relation to foreigners, one person came from each of the following countries: France, Spain, and Turkey. The rest did not declare an origin.

Children, youths, and mature men came to work in Acre from various places, most from Ceará. There were also a significant number of foreigners. Considering that the distance from Fortaleza to Rio Branco is around 4,000 kilometers, this was a Herculean trip for the 1900s. Some historiographers see this movement as being the most grandiose expansion of Brazilian frontiers, with Acre becoming the “stage of an intense wave of human occupation and the exploitation of natural resources, when the Bolivians had not yet reached there with their pioneers” (Tocantins, 2001, p. 192).

There are also the classical structural assessments of this scenario. Roberto Santos, an economist from Pará, stated that from the times of Grão-Pará in the 1740s, the commercial use of currency was not common in the Amazon. As a result, a system of credit became established itself among landholders and the so-called collectors of the drugs of the *sertão* (i.e., the natural products of that

area). The growth of the use of rubber meant that this network became increasingly complex, coming to be called the *aviamento* chain. It also guaranteed that *seringueiros* could be arrested for debts with their employers (the *seringalistas*), who exploited the *seringais* through funding from the *casas aviadoras* of Belém and Manaus and foreign investors.

The historian Pedro Martinello dialogues with this perspective, adding that the productive control of this chain was not determined by *seringalistas*, but by the large international trusts that emerged in the 1850s, demanding raw materials from peripheral countries to supply their industries. As this exploitation was expensive, in the 1910s these conglomerates would replace the Amazon with Southeast Asia as the main source of the supply of this product, since their rubber plantations were substantially more efficient. Martinello's emphasis resides, such as Santos', on the notion that the *aviamento* chain was characterized by the compulsory work of *seringueiros* (Santos, 1980, pp. 160 and ff.; Martinello, 1985, pp. 251 and ff.). Here the above-mentioned words of José Alves come to mind, namely that he had been imprisoned "forever" in Itu *seringal* due to the commitments he had with his employer, which indicated the strong coercive nature of this chain.

TRAVEL, SHIPS, AND HEADING TO A DISTANT LAND

Reaching the Purus and Acre rivers, having come from so far, was an expensive experience. Access was only possible by river, on small vessels or steamships, which could only go up watercourses when the rivers were full, always at the turn of the year. When a *seringalista* hired a determined worker, bringing him to Acre took some time, ranging from a few months to a year. Born in Maranguape (Ceará) in 1888, Antônio Saturnino left his home in February 1901 and only reached Purus many days later. His report demonstrates both the precarious conditions in which he lived in the middle of drought, and his escapades involving a journey which initially seemed like a great adventure:

I was still very young and since I was living in a precarious situation with many crises, due to the great drought which reigned over the entire Northeast, I was called by the *seringalista* Manoel Fernandes de Melo to come and work as a *seringueiro*. Enthusiastic about this, I did not hesitate and in the company of various young men of my age I left for the Amazon region at the beginning of February 1901, embarking in Fortaleza on a ship called *Brasil*, owned by Lloyd Nacional Brasileiro. Reaching Belém, I waited a few days for the vessel that was going to

this valley, finally embarking on the *Cacianã* until Manaus, and there I moved to one called *Memoriar*, continuing the voyage to Liége *seringal*, soon after beginning to work in the *seringa*, with my boss being Cel. Dantas (Costa, 1969).

He was enlisted by one *coronel*, certainly owing the cost of the trip to him, and delivered to another in the Purus River, immediately becoming a *seringueiro*. In the journey between Fortaleza and Liége, he made some stops in Belém and Manaus, waiting for transport ships. It is possible that he stayed at some port warehouses or boarding houses used as entrepôts for this traffic. The conditions in these vessels were appalling, so much so that Júlio Pereira says that he was the sole survivor of a plague which swept through the steamship *Aripuanã* in 1903. He was only eight when he left Pará on this steamship with his family, but in this journey a disease killed his father and mother, leaving him without a responsible person for him. Then he was handed over to the *coronel* José Ferreira de Araújo, owner of Liberdade *seringal* in Purus (Souza, 1974c).

Expecting the vessels for the Amazon, those leaving Ceará waited for it by walking along the beaches in Fortaleza, gathering in squares and, when they boarded, hundreds of people packed the steamships. There were attempts to prohibit those who were sick, baggage were lost, and families were separated, including children. Franciane Gama Lacerda noted that in addition to these precarious conditions, Lloyd Brasileiro was even denounced in the press, but without much effect (Lacerda, 2006, pp. 161-165).

The foreigners who lived in Acre and came to work in the *aviamento* chain declared, when they left records, that they had come on the Transatlantic liner *Speria*. It is plausible that they left their countries and were gathered in some European base port, before leaving for Belém or Manaus. From what it appears, this vessel was not originally a passenger vessel, but an old cargo vessel from the beginning of the 1900s, and which served to transport workers³. Bichara Baher was the first person found to have travelled on this vessel, arriving at Belém in 1901, coming from Mount Lebanon, Syria, and soon afterwards went to Purus as a travelling salesman. Another was Manoel Gonçalves, who left Melga, Portugal, at the age of 18, landing in Brazil in 1903, a voyage that included Isaac Jorge Sarquis and Said Hallack. These two would become street vendors in Pará, and only went to Acre months later (Alatrach, 1970; Caruta, 1974; Gonçalves, 1974; Iunes, 1974; Sarquis, 1969).

A total of 36 vessels were identified as traveling on the Purus and Acre rivers between 1889 and 1903. However, 13 of these only made one trip, meaning that the route had 23 ships working on it. *Índio do Brasil* made 15 recorded voyages,

the *Marary* and the *Aripuanã*, nine; after this, *Tapajós* made seven, while *Cidade do Pará* and *Tapauá* made six, the *Prompto*, five and the *Watrin*, four.

The Acre and Purus rivers were relatively busy, receiving large ships every year. In the records, however, there are some gaps in the arrival of *seringueiros* between 1889 and 1904, with a growth in the 1898-1899 period. The majority reached Acre between 1900 and 1902, an amount that fell considerably in 1903. The number of *seringueiros* who registered the years of their arrivals is as follows: 1889 – three; 1890 – one; 1892 – two; 1893 – three; 1894 – one; 1895 – two; 1896 – three; 1898 – ten; 1899 – eight; 1900 – 41; 1901 – 36; 1902 – 52; 1903 – 14; 1904 – one. As previously mentioned, this sample is partial. It is not conclusive, but demonstrative, and in this sense, it shows a migratory trend of workers to these river valleys during the first two years of the twentieth century. Since there were reports of non-indigenous occupants at the end of the 1850s in the Purus, it can be considered that the flow of *seringueiros* to these regions was low and constant, assuming a brief wave, falling again in a gap of four decades.

PRECARIOUS LIVES

What reason did these people give for working in lands so far from where they were born? The poverty in which they lived led them to leave their homes, to seek alternative sources of income and, who knows, hoping to return one day. Thomaz Carlos, who reached Bom Destino *seringal* in 1895, wrote: “Like all *Nordestinos* who came to this area, the desire of Carlos Machado, father of Thomaz Carlos Machado, was to return to Ceará”. Unfortunately, this objective was not achieved. He remained as a *seringueiro* in the Amazon until his old age. Thomaz Carlos’ statement that the *Nordestinos* desired to return to their places of origin, indicated a very strong feeling of belonging, overcome by misery. Manoel Benevenuto, from Rio Grande do Norte, was an adolescent when he and his father decided to look for better earnings as *seringueiros*, because they lived in extreme poverty. Even for two men alone, life was very precarious in Rio Grande do Norte (Machado, 1974; Melo, 1969).

Another who came with his father was Pedro Ferreira Gomes. They came from Ceará in 1890 to settle in Bom Destino. He declared that they had lived in very precarious conditions, though as *seringueiros* they achieved a high volume of rubber production, “being highly regarded by the *barracão*”, so much so that in 1906, they went to Cruzeiro do Sul where they bought a small plot of land (Gomes, 1971). José Felipe Nery’s report accurately captures this situ-

ation of the *Cearenses*, *Pernambucanos*, and others who, living in poverty, sought more adequate means of survival. His statement demonstrates a sense of opportunity, adventure, and social criticism, more or less explicit in some well demarcated adjectives:

José Felipe Nery, then in Recife, Pernambuco, his native land, without resources to survive, was informed by *seringalistas* who were always in that area, many of them searching for health, visiting relatives, or even to see the 'good land' again, or for tourism, recovering from daily struggles, often enlisting *Nordestinos* to work in the extraction of latex, when he was persuaded to work in Acre, where there were many possibilities to make money, and the potential to return to their native land with some resources (Nery, 1974).

His aim was to return to the 'good land' after making money as a *seringueiro*, something essential for Nery, who wanted to support himself "without being too much of a burden for his relatives". He wanted to follow the example of other contemporaries, "who were here and had returned with capital to establish themselves in Recife or in the inland cities". He stated that he was "enticed by the siren songs of the information he collected" and when he gave his statement in 1974, by the of aged 92, he was still living in Acre and completely lacking resources.

In his discourse, this old man made a retrospective assessment exploring the opulence in which the *seringalistas* lived, walking along the beaches, visiting relatives, or as tourists. They chose young people precisely because they were fearless, but also imprudent, falling into these enticing siren songs, inventing success stories accessible to any adventurer. A big mistake. Nery never returned and it appears that he died before getting the pension owed to those who fought for the incorporation of Acre in Brazil.

All of Cícero Ferreira's family left Juazeiro do Norte at the beginning of 1900 to look for new opportunities. He says that they were all influenced by the "Amazonian Eldorado", hearing stories similar to those which enchanted Nery. This enchantment was partial, because those workers only had partial information about the Amazon, but also because they did not see many options considering the social conditions in which they lived. Antônio Severiano de Lima says that to escape poverty, in 1901 he went to Bom Destino to work as a *seringueiro* producing rubber, "for export to the United States of North America and the European market". He continued doing this for many years and despite

manufacturing for export, remained poor and broken by the years of heavy work (Aguiar, 1974; Lima, 1974a).

Even the foreigners reported the material difficulties which compelled them to cross the Atlantic in search of opportunities. The Palestinian Tufic Salim Abuaiche was very poor when he came to Belém with his parents. After seeing his family helpless, he decided to go to Vitória *seringal*, where he worked in the kitchen in the main *barracão*. Azar Hadad came with his father, João, and mother, Dibe, to Brazil in 1889. They were poor and stopped for a while in Manaus, where they began to work in José Fadul's shop. A few years later Fadul sent them to be *seringueiros* in Acre, and Azar, despite still being a child, had to work as a clerk for his employer. On the other hand, the Portuguese Manoel Joaquim Lopes underwent an intercontinental journey to reach Santa Fé *seringal* in the Acre River, in 1899. He left Portugal at 16 years old, lacking any resources, and went to Rio de Janeiro. Without managing to get any settlement in the then Brazilian capital, he then went to Belém to try his luck in the rubber trade and left to become a *seringueiro*. As a result of his hard work, he became a manager, but apparently without success, reaching old age in economic penury (Abuaiche, 1971; Lopes Filho, 1974; Hadad, 1980).

Although in the naturalist historiography the drought in the Northeast appears preponderant, few reported it⁴ as a determinant factor in their decision to emigrate to the Amazon. Rather the primordial factor was the condition of material precariousness in which they lived and, from what can be seen, this was not healed by the opening of distant rubber plantations. Arriving from various locations, these poor young men from far away occupied immense regions and, notwithstanding the difficulties with movement, in 1906 there was no unoccupied area.

GENDER IN THE *SERINGAIS*

Where were the women in the *seringais* in the Purus and Acre valleys? It is known that wives, daughters, and relatives of *seringalistas* lived in the *barracões* in this region, but no information was found about them in the files. However, we have the reports of children who came with their mothers. The majority were single, with one or more children, and left Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, etc., on steamships, looking for work in the distant *seringais*. In 1898, Dona Maria Antonieta Pereira from Ceará reached Bom Destino *seringal* with her child, Pedro Xavier.

He states that “we were there working at the main *barracão*, where my

mother was a cook's assistant, washing and ironing the clothes of her employer's family, and I was a water carrier". Xavier also specialized in the hunting of wild animals and in fishing, which was part of their diet, and the two remained in these tasks, even during the fighting. His mother washed the clothes of the Acre army and he had to flee from the Bolivian pickets, stating in his report that he would like both of them to be recognized as soldiers of the revolution for these tasks (Teixeira, 1973).

In his September 1973 report, the then elderly Pedro Xavier showed how women carried out essential functions with their children, but they were not recognized for this. In a similar manner, but in the Muiraquitã *seringal*, in Purus, Antônio Victor Pereira was a water carrier and hunter, while his mother was a domestic servant in the *barracão* which they arrived in 1903, coming from Rio Grande do Norte. He was a little older, 17, and when the hostilities ended, he went with his mother, Dona Jardimina, to a completely new *colocação* where they built a house, naming it *Esperança* (meaning "Hope"). In relation to his father, he says his fate was unknown. Finally, Virgílio Felix stated that he came from Rio Grande do Norte in 1902, at the age of 18. He was made a *comboieiro* for the *seringal*, while his mother, Umbelina de Lima, became a cook, cleaner, and domestic worker in the *barracão*. She had travelled to the Amazon with her son because she had recently become a widow (Pereira, 1975; Souza, 1975).

These women and their children, seeking survival in distant land, worked in preponderant areas in the *seringais*. Although they did not receive the due recognition, they expressed their resistance and hopes for better days (the name of the *colocação* opened by Antônio and Jardimina is a strong indication of this). Cristina Scheibe Wolff, looking retrospectively in her doctoral dissertation at women's movements in Acre at the end of the 1990s, stresses the considerable importance of the division of labor between men and women in the formation of the *seringais* at the beginning of the twentieth century.

She says that in the region's imagery these productive units had no place for women. In other words, there were no women, only the employer and his employees, as expressed in the positions of *Coronel* Cipriano, in the *Coronel de Barranco*, who stated that he did not want women or animals in his *seringal*. With women, how would the *seringueiro* work in the production of rubber, he asked, because in this way they would become farmers.

In 1905, in the Juruá River valley, women represented 27% of the population, not including the native peoples, with a large part residing in the city of Cruzeiro do Sul. Within the *seringais*, most of them resided in the main *barracões* of the properties. It should be noted that the first implemented *seringais*

had the exclusive objective of rubber production and its exchange for imported commodities, which generated large profits for the employers and the *aviadora* companies. The previously mentioned 1903 census of Cunha Matos found that women formed around 36% of the population in the Acre River valley between Xapuri and Volta da Empreza, town that would give rise to the capital of Acre, Rio Branco. Paravicini's survey, carried out three years before and covering a much greater area, found that women formed a little more than 18% of the total population in the Acre valley.

With the crisis of the *aviamento* chain in the 1910s, the *seringal* stopped being a *seringalista* company. It was a group of people formed by the employer and the *seringueiros*, along with other employees, functioning as a rubber factory. However, at this time the employer figure lost strength and the productive unit came to be the *colocação*, in which families managed production with their own divisions of labor between men and women. Hunting, fishing, and vegetal extractivism have diversified beyond the rubber factory (Wolff, 2001, pp. 247-248).

A woman who went against this representation which denied the role of women in the *seringais* was Maria Antas Pereira, and, according to our research, she was the only woman to request a pension as a veteran of the wars for the annexation of Acre in Brazil. She was black, from Paraíba, born in 1887, and arrived at Acre with her uncles in 1902. Like others mentioned above, she also settled in Bom Destino, working as a domestic worker for her relatives. However, when

The Acrean revolution exploded, led by Cel. José Plácido de Castro, myself and many other *senhoras* were led to the *barracão* and there we were presented to Sergeant, later Lieutenant, José Inácio, and we remained under his orders washing clothes and serving in the *rancho* of the *barracão*, which was transformed into a barracks (Pereira, 1969).

Shortly after the conflicts ended, she left for Ceará. She married, had children, and returned to Acre in 1942. In 1969, at the age of 82 and a widow, she submitted a request to be recognized as a former combatant in the revolution by the Ministry of Justice, "very respectfully" requesting the lifelong pension. It is not known whether Dona Maria Antas achieved her objective, but she probably did not, because her file only contained the initial documents, without mentioning her advanced age. As Antas observed, domestic work activities classified her as a legitimate combatant and, in addition, her position indicates that the other women in these activities could be understood as such, because

they literally formed a battalion, with ranks and hierarchies. This was only one further area of resistance of women in Acre at the beginning of the twentieth century. Fabiana Nogueira Chaves and Maria Rita de Assis César observed that they had to deal with many physical atrocities, such as recurrent rapes by *seringalistas* and *seringueiros*, as well as psychological aggressions (Chaves; César, 2019, p. 151).

These contexts of multidimensional aggressions against women lasted a long time in Acre, establishing a patriarchal society, so much so that in 1951 a case can be found, which, among many others, confirms that. That year, a young woman Sebastiana Santos made an accusation in the capital Rio Branco against Manoel Francisco Braz, with whom she had a relationship. She stated that the last time they had met, he had assaulted her, leaving her bruised. She was pregnant and he had abandoned her. Rejecting her arguments, Braz stated that he had become her fiancé, that she had had numerous boyfriends and was always accompanied by women of dubious morals.

Raif Cunha Lima, the local prosecutor, began an investigation. However, at a certain time he was replaced by José Potyguara. The latter declared that these measures taken made no sense, since they were dealing with a “pseudo-victim” lacking any credibility. He declared that since Sebastiana was a libertine, her statements could not serve as evidence and therefore he absolved the defendant. What can be seen here is a gender commitment expressed in the discourse and position of men who mutually defended themselves, irrespective of their social conditions. Potyguara and Braz are not from the same social class, perhaps they did not even know each other, but the prosecutor obstinately defended a man in the name of certain morality (Klein, 2020, pp. 279-281).

CATECHIZING THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The traditional peoples from the river valleys in Acre appear in reports at a given moment as savages, as wild animals, or most often as objects to be catechized. Indians as fierce adversaries who had to be exterminated are cited by Manoel Gonçalves, a Portuguese man who arrived at the Purus river in 1902. He says that in that year the *seringueiros* already held the river and its affluents, establishing “residences, fighting against Indians and wild beasts during the time they were there”. He also reports that since the arrival of Manoel Urbano da Encarnação, the first non-indigenous person to reach the region, the indigenous peoples had been systematically defeated (Gonçalves, 1974).

In *Efemérides Acreanas*, a set of historiographical notes in which chrono-

logically organized facts on the occupation of Acre are mentioned, it is reported that the Purus was first valley reached in 1857, in an expedition led by Serafim Salgado. In relation to Manoel Urbano, he reached the mouth of the Chambuyaco, in Peru, in 1861. Occupation up to the Iaco occurred in 1880 and to the mouth of the Breu in 1891, when João Dourado and Balduino de Oliveira established a *seringal* there (IHGA, 1971, pp. 2-3). Research has shown that these journeys and others aimed at exploring that large area and pacifying the peoples living there (Araújo; Sugizaki, 2020, p. 639).

Alongside the ambushes of traditional people and concomitantly to them, pacification was carried out through trade and catechization. In a fundamental study on this topic, Antônio Cardoso shows that Manuel Urbano was an adept to coercively catechize these populations, a preferable method of contact to pure and simple extermination (Cardoso, 2017, p. 148). This less invasive method of contact spread to the point of some *seringueiros* who fought for the incorporation of Acre declaring themselves catechizers of the Indians.

One of those who declared themselves a catechizer was Antônio Rodrigues, who arrived at the Juruá River from Ceará in 1902. He learned his profession working with another 30 men under the command of Felizardo Avelino Cerqueira (Rodrigues, 1969). Cerqueira practiced *correrias*, in other words, he exterminated Indians in ambushes, catechized them and in many cases those who worked for him, especially the Kaxinawá, were branded with his initials in hot iron (Iglésias, 2008). However, the focus of the catechizers was the Jamamadi people, who lived in a large area in the middle Purus between Amazonas and Acre, rich in natural resources for the extraction of rubber.

Catechizers took part in expeditions during which the population was contacted to liberate rivers and tributaries of Purus. Vicente de Queiroz from Amazonas states that in 1915, he led one of these expeditions, helping to open the navigable course of the Capanã river. After this work, he went to live at the mouth of the Iaco, where he remained in contact with the Jamamadi, receiving a certificate of catechization (Queiroz, 1975). Another catechizer of this population was Vicente Curunil, who lived in São Miguel *seringal* in 1902. There he led two tribes together with the Tuxaua Antônio José dos Reis. That year these two men presented themselves as the leaders of the revolts against the Bolivians and fought alongside the *seringueiros*. When the fighting ended, Curunil returned to the *seringal* and the Indians to their villages, continuing their catechization (Curunil, 1968).

Ingrid Daiane Pedrosa de Souza reminds us of the difficulties in establishing a precise history for the many locations and groups of the Jamamadi at the

beginning of the twentieth century, emphasizing the need to overcome pre-established ethnological frameworks. This is because the actual memories of this people contain reports that in other years “other peoples” were being incorporated through shelter and marriages, since they wandered around the forests, lost due to the conflicts. These were the times of their grandparents, years of generalized war, with forced migrations, the imposition of prohibitions, internal conflicts, and settlements in the *seringais*. Many of them worked sporadically, carrying out seasonal tasks, receiving some products through barter, and returning to their villages. Since many reports show a nostalgia feeling towards the employers of the rubber epoch, indigenous persons today understand their leading role in the extractive economy of this product (Souza, 2015, pp. 12; 109-118). It can be seen that the catechizing reductions had a role of mitigating greater violence, relativizing certain violations and guaranteeing less bloody conflicts between *seringalistas*, *seringueiros*, and Jamamadi.

For the traditional peoples, this process of occupation projects “a reasonably clear image of the brutality with which the *seringal* invaded the Apurinã region”, as a researcher accurately stated (Schiel, 1999, p. 28). Despite this paternalist characteristic of missions, they were localized, because the social experiences of the occupation of river valleys studied consisted of extreme violence towards these first peoples, the overwhelming exploitation of *seringueiros*, and an entire set of factors connected to the attraction of workers.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The first theme to be raised in these considerations is that labor was the main problem in the trajectories of *seringueiros* since the search for adequate maintenance in materially impoverished worlds and with strong exploration networks made living conditions precarious for those workers. The frontiers opened by the *seringais* in the Acre and Purus River valleys were new spaces, in which some opportunities could be glimpsed, but they proved to be weak in the sense of providing economic security.

When we understand that people construct their own contexts in life and are equally determined by them, the research focus must be changed and we must look for a qualitative research. This article intended to elaborate this change, aiming to deeply focus on it as much as possible. Therefore, we could face difficult subjects often left aside. The confrontations of women, their search for better lives, and for the recognition of their work have to be discussed by the historiography. In this sense, there can also be found in the val-

leys of Acre, the phenomena of the violent pacification of the traditional peoples through catechization, a theme which must be added to the more direct extermination.

The perspective is that the many Amazons still generate discussions, even in apparently resolved questions, as is the case of the *aviamento* chains for rubber. As a contribution, we have sought to highlight that the historiography has must be open to the voices of the past, and this is not possible with generalizations and without documentary empirical support.

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NOTES

¹ According to him the *seringais* (rubber plantations) and their productive forces were determined by this territoriality, controlled by *seringalistas* until the 1940s. After this, it began to decline, opening space for a *seringueira* territoriality, which was found with greater emphasis between the 1970s and 1980s, when these workers assumed a collective experience of resistance and their ways of life against the expansion of cattle rearing in the Amazon.

² Report taken from *Da Escóssia* (2003). Ana Paula Belon Lima (2011) tells us that in 1940s life expectancy reached 44.9 years, increasing to 68.6 in 2000.

³ *O Speria* appears in a digital research database, the English National Archives (n.d.).

⁴ I will not go further in the debate about the invention of the Northeast, but it exists. In relation to this, see Albuquerque Júnior (2006).

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