

Índios do Nordeste: temas e problemas 2



Luiz Sávio de Almeida
Marcos Galindo
Juliana Lopes Elias

Class and National Formation among the Aborigines

Dr. Hannah Middleton

The ancestors of the Aborigines came to Australia at least 40,000 years ago. They developed a semi-nomadic, hunting and gathering economy based on communal ownership of the main means of production, the land. They lived as an integral and integrated part of the natural environment, rather than alienated from it, not dominating or exploiting nature. They developed relations of production, distribution and exchange, expressed through their kinship system, of co-operation and reciprocity.

In everyday life there was a sexual division of labour in which the hunting work of the men and the collecting work done by the women were complementary (although women provided the bulk of the food) and the products of their labour were shared. In times of localized hardship, extended families could move and exercise secondary rights to live on and use the food and water resources on land belonging to a different local group.

Because of their economic dependence upon and religious ties with the land, the Aboriginal people had (and still have) intensely emotional feelings for it. To be alienated from their land meant loss of a sense of physical and spiritual continuity and psycho-social security. It also led to death, great material poverty and massive socio-cultural destruction.

The effects of British invasion and colonization

From 1788 onwards, British imperialism colonized the Australian continent, seizing vast areas for farming, for sheep after the 1820s, and then later for more agriculture and in the north for cattle. Land was the key to the struggle that developed as settlement was expanded despite the bitter and prolonged guerrilla war fought by the Aborigines.

There was a sharp distinction between settlement of the south, dominated by sheep between the 1820s and 1860s, and the occupation of the north after the 1880s for the pastoral (beef cattle) industry. The former was accomplished by murder, deaths from disease and

starvation and relocation of the indigenous population with enforced segregation on reserves.

In the north, however, different geographical and climatic conditions strictly limited the number of cattle that could be maintained. This, combined with slowly changing attitudes towards Aborigines (much assisted by consolidation of the process of land theft) and a developing appreciation of their labour potential for the pastoral industry, meant that extermination was not carried out to the same extent as in the south and Aboriginal traditional society remained relatively unchanged for a longer period.

The results of the two different forms of colonialism, however, were the same in content. The people were changed from self-determining, semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers into dependent, settled, unskilled labourers held in subjection by monopoly capitalism under conditions more often like slavery than wage labour. Aborigines were subjected to a process of socio-economic integration into monopoly capitalism together with a secondary process of national consolidation.

Both workers and Aborigines

In the 210 years since the invasion began, Aborigines have been forcibly integrated into the capitalist system and the great majority have been transformed into members of the Australian working class.

At the same time, Aboriginal communities have been subjected to discrimination and oppression, segregation and isolation. This situation combined with their resistance to exploitation and discrimination has meant that the Aborigines have not been assimilated into the Australian nation.

Instead, they have kept aspects of their traditional ways of life and thought, including languages, culture and customs, and have developed a consciousness of themselves as a separate people, a pride in their identity, their Aboriginality. They are both Aborigines and workers.

Class formation

With the impact of British colonialism in Australia the socio-economic basis of traditional Aboriginal society was destroyed. The basic means of production, the land, was taken. Farming, sheep and

cattle modified the environment in which the Aborigines had previously lived and worked, and social relationships were disrupted by deaths and relocation.

Aborigines were gradually drawn into and exploited by the money-commodity economy of monopoly capitalism in Australia. In the workforce they were used predominantly as cheap labour or as a reserve army of unemployed workers. With the impact of racial discrimination and oppression, segregation and isolation they came to comprise the lowest stratum of Australian capitalist society under imposed conditions of backwardness, extreme poverty and deprivation. This process of socio-economic integration ("proletarianisation") has resulted in the great majority of Aborigines being transformed into members of the working class.¹

However, this has not been and is not a simple process. In a context of rapid and disruptive social change such as the Aborigines have undergone, the process of class formation is uneven and highly complex and various groups pass through a number of stages before their transition into a particular class is complete.

The process of class formation among the Aborigines has taken two forms, both so far at a low level. Pastoral and other workers, mainly in the north, tend to be in a transitional stage living in traditionally oriented groups or as rural wage workers. In the south they tend to be wage workers but are scattered, often not union organized, lack training and suffer from high levels of under-employment and unemployment.

Thus there is an Aboriginal component of the Australian working class which is at a number of stages of development towards fully-fledged wage labourers: from groups with much of their social organization and ideology still largely traditional through rural workers to urban workers and some members of the industrial working class.

¹ Classes are "large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour, and consequently, by the dimensions of the share of the social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it." Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, Progress Publishers, 1964, p.421.

This process of proletarianisation is not contradicted by the very high levels of unemployment among Aborigines. Objectively employment as a wage labourer is not what defines a member of the working class; such a position is determined primarily by relationship to the means of production and place in the social system of production. A worker does not stop being a member of the working class because the capitalist system forces him or her into unemployment.

In addition, Aboriginal communities in fringe settlements, on stations and reserves, particularly in the north, were used as pools of cheap labour. Among them a high rate of unemployment was maintained in order to ensure a regular supply of replacement labourers (a cheaper way of getting workers than giving wages and conditions adequate for natural replacement). These labour pools also helped to maintain the very low wages and conditions common to the Aboriginal workforce.

Equally, while it is true that class consciousness is not developed among many Aborigines, class position and class interest are not determined by the consciousness of the class but by its position and role in the system of social production. Ideology is a significant but secondary factor.

Some traditional Aboriginal groups at the earliest stage of the proletarianisation process have used a typically working class method of struggle, strikes, giving an indication of the proletarian content of their movements.

The long-running Pindan struggle in Western Australia, which began with a strike on May 1, 1945, is one example. Another is the strike for equal pay by Gurindji cattle workers at Wave Hill in the Northern Territory which involved a walk off and occupation of their traditional land at Dagu Ragu (Wattie Creek). In addition, a traditional religious expression or form of struggle may tend to obscure the real content of that campaign or movement.

Even the so-called religious wars of the sixteenth century involved positive material class interests; those wars were class wars, too, just as the later internal collisions in England and France. Although the class struggles of that day were clothed in religious shibboleths, and though the interests, requirements, and demands of the various classes were

concealed behind a religious screen, this changed nothing in the matter, and is easily explained by the conditions of the time.²

The picture of class formation and differentiation among the Aborigines is incomplete without recognition that the development of middle class elements and ideology are also part of this process. Although clearly quantitatively small at present, there are sufficient examples of small businesses, entrepreneurial activity, employment by government departments and agencies, and other activities to show that an Aboriginal middle class is growing.

National formation

The Aborigines today form a national minority within the Australian capitalist state. This has come about as a result of the following processes.

Ethnic groups³ are small communities, ranging from several hundreds up to several thousand people, often dispersed and without centralized organization. They are identifiable by language, territory, a sense of common origin and a common culture, lifestyle and traditions.

In traditional communal societies, like Aboriginal society before colonization, the dominant tendency was towards the growth and then fission of the basic social units, a process of ethnic division.

In subsequent socio-economic formations, the characteristic tendency has been towards ethnic amalgamation. Amalgamation has taken two forms: consolidation and assimilation.

Ethnic assimilation is most characteristic of countries with a high level of social and economic development. The progress of assimilation is influenced by a number of factors including the size and geographical distribution of the group(s) being assimilated, their social and legal status, the type of employment of the members of the group(s) and their economic ties with the dominant (assimilating) group, and the attitudes of the dominant group.

² Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, Progress, 1956, p.54.

³ The term "ethnic" is given its scientific meaning here and is not to be confused with common Australian usage where "ethnic" is generally used to mean "migrant".

In Aboriginal society under the impact of a history of colonization and integration into monopoly capitalism, the processes of ethnic assimilation and ethnic consolidation have been and are developing in contradiction to each other.

Under conditions of racial discrimination, exploitation, isolation, extreme poverty and backwardness, the process of assimilation to the (white) Australian nation (a process inevitably produced by integration of the Aborigines into the capitalist system) has been significantly retarded.

As a result, Aborigines have retained to a greater or lesser degree many traits of their traditional way of life and thought, culture, languages, customs and institutions although often with new meanings and functions.

While factors such as the small numbers of Aborigines, their scattered distribution and the trend to urbanization have accelerated the assimilation process, the imposed low economic standards Aborigines suffer, the degree of their cultural, linguistic and religious differences from white society, and particularly the prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes and practices of the dominant society have all held back ethnic assimilation.

Involvement in a money-commodity economy has promoted ethnic consolidation among Aborigines. The material basis for contradictions and hostilities between different local groups no longer exists and the resultant consciousness of strangeness and suspicion is fast fading. Individuals and groups have been brought increasingly in contact with each other through forced removals to reserves and other areas and even more through their involvement in the same economic activities.

The new material conditions provide a basis for unity and a consciousness of shared experiences and suffering. Ethnic consolidation reflected in this growing consciousness of common identity and interests also retards (but does not negate) the processes of ethnic assimilation affecting the Aborigines.

The development of a national liberation movement among the Aborigines is both a product of and contributes to ethnic consolidation as well as holding back ethnic assimilation. In their resistance to and struggle against racial discrimination and deprivation the Aborigines developed an Australia-wide common

consciousness of themselves as a people of their own and distinguished from the (white) Australian nation and have organized themselves and campaigned on a continent-wide level.

All this amounts to ethnic consolidation developing to the stage of national formation among the Aborigines. Since they are scattered over the continent either as single local communities or small groups in towns and cities, they do not constitute a nation.⁴ As an integrated part of Australian capitalist society, they have assumed national traits in the form of an oppressed national minority.

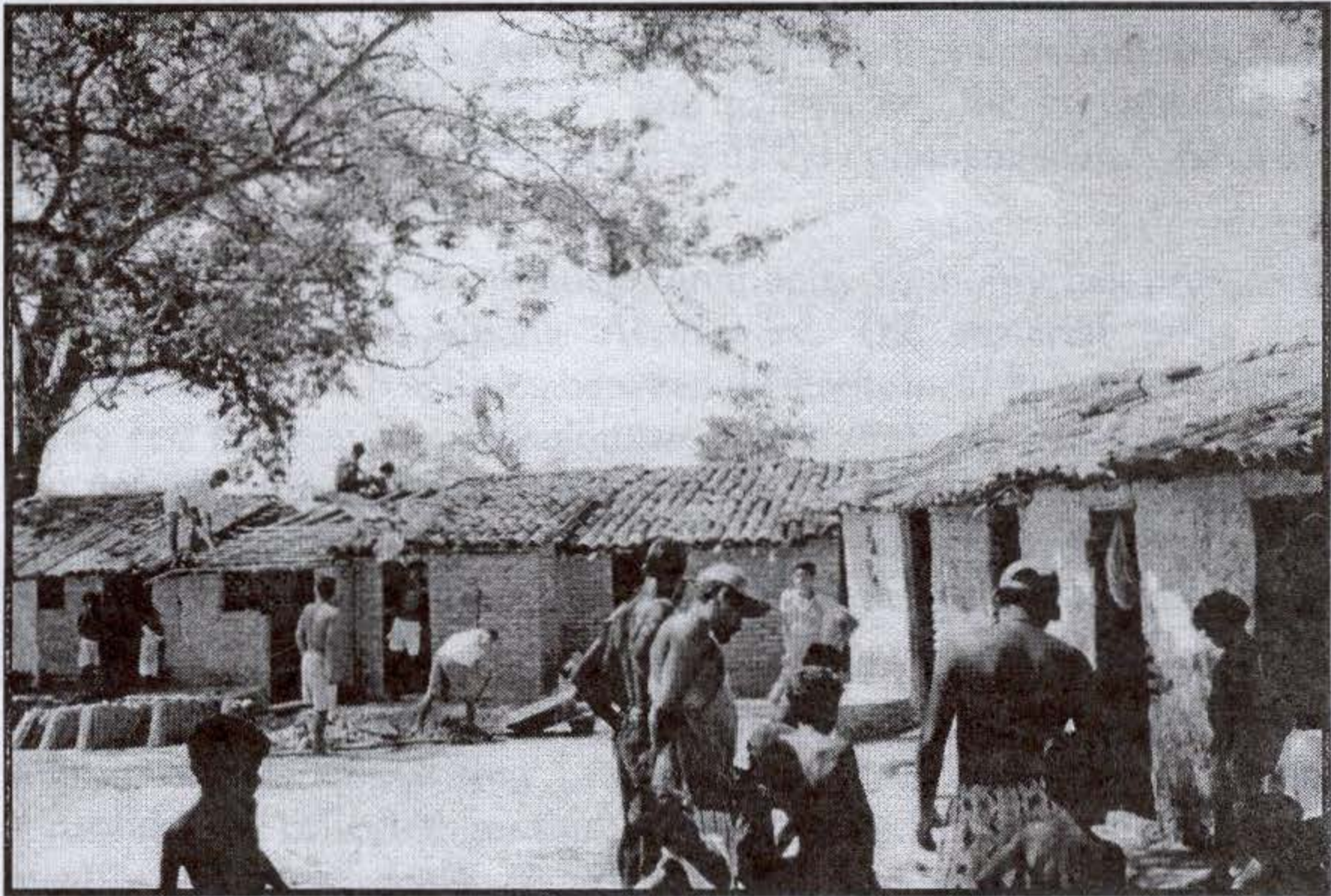


⁴ A nation is a historically formed and stable community of people characterized by a common language, common territory, community of economic life and certain traits of culture and psychology, ways of life and traditions.

... All the efforts to bring about a better life for the Indians of the Northeast have been in vain. The Indian population has not increased, and the Indian community has not become a more cohesive unit. The Indian population has not become a more cohesive unit. The Indian population has not become a more cohesive unit.

As a result, Aborigines have retained to a greater or lesser extent a degree of their traditional way of life and thought, culture, language, customs and institutions. Although often with new meanings and functions.

While factors such as the small numbers of Aborigines, their scattered distribution and the trend to urbanization have accelerated



Cena do Ouricuri Kariri-Xocó

... of ethnic assimilation affects the Aborigines. The Indian population has not become a more cohesive unit. The Indian population has not become a more cohesive unit. The Indian population has not become a more cohesive unit.