

## CHAPTER 6

# GOLD MINERS AND YANOMAMI INDIANS IN THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON: THE HASHIMU MASSACRE

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On August 19, 1993, Brazilian and international news agencies reported the massacre of Yanomami Indians in the Amazon jungle. Initial government figures indicated that nineteen Indians had been killed by gold miners. A week later this number was raised to seventy-three. When it was then ascertained that, in fact, the total of victims was sixteen, the topic disappeared from the news and interest in the event waned. For those who thought sixteen deaths reduced the seriousness of the case; and for those who feared that "only" sixteen deaths would dissolve the attention paid to it, I offer this chronicle as food for thought.

### The Gold Mining Trap

The origin of the Hashimu massacre springs from a situation of chronic interethnic conflict created by the presence of predatory gold mining in the Yanomami area. Since the beginning of the great gold rush in Roraima in August 1987, various Indians have been assassinated, and other murders are likely to occur for the same reasons. A brief account of the social and economic context which has led to such violence will provide clues to this tragic case.

When gold miners first entered the Yanomami area, they arrived in small groups. Since they were few in number, they felt endangered by the more numerous Indians, and they tried to buy their goodwill through the liberal distribution of food and goods. For their part, the Indians had little or no

experience with Whites and considered this attitude to be a demonstration of generosity that they would expect from any group that wished to establish bonds of neighborly alliance. At this early stage of cultural misunderstanding, the Indians did not yet feel the health and ecological impact of the mining activities. From their point of view, the work of prospectors seemed enigmatic and irrelevant. In a tone of irony and condescension, they called the prospectors "earth eaters" and compared them to peccaries snorting in the mud.

As the number of miners increased, it was no longer necessary to maintain the initial generosity. The Indians turned from being a threat to being an annoyance, with their incessant demands for the goods that they were accustomed to receiving. The gold miners got irritated and tried to shoo them away with false promises of future presents and with impatient or aggressive behavior.

At this stage of contact, the Indians began to feel the rapid deterioration of their health and means of subsistence caused by gold mining. The rivers were polluted, hunting game was scared away by the noisy machinery, and many Indians died in constant epidemics of malaria, flu, etc., all of which tended to destroy the economic and social fabric of their communities. Due to this situation, the Indians came to see the food and goods given by the miners as a vital and indisputable compensation for the destruction they had caused. When this was refused, a feeling of explicit hostility welled up within them.

Thus they arrived at a deadlock: the Indians became dependent upon the prospectors just when the latter no longer needed to buy the former's goodwill. This contradiction is at the root of all the conflicts between the Yanomami and gold miners. From there, the possibility of minor incidents degenerating into open violence increases. And since the disparity in force between the prospectors and the Indians is enormous, the scales always tip against the Yanomami.

This type of situation clearly shows the extent to which the logic of gold mining repels the participation of the Indians and even their mere presence. Because they use mechanized techniques to extract gold, the miners have no interest in the Indians as a labor force or anything else. From the miners' point of view, they are, at best, a nuisance, and at worst, a threat to their safety. If gifts and promises do not get rid of them, then the solution is to intimidate or even exterminate them.

## Murder at the Orinoco River

At mid-year of 1993, the relations between the Brazilian gold miners of the Taboca River (a tributary of the upper Orinoco in Venezuela) and the Yanomami of Hashimu had come to such an impasse. The visits by the

Indians to the mining encampments in search of food and other items were getting more and more frequent. On one occasion, two owners of gold prospecting rafts promised to give hammocks, clothes, and ammunition to a young leader of the community. This promise, like many others, was not kept, and one day, this Indian leader went to the storehouse of one of the owners to demand what he had been promised. He had a heated argument with a local employee and ended up scaring him away with shotgun fire. With the storehouse now deserted, the Indian and his companions cut the cords of hammocks, threw tarps and blankets into the bush, and took a radio and some pots. After this incident, the miners decided to kill the Indians if they returned to bother them. In a previous clash, the miners had taken back a shotgun that they had given to the Indians, in order to guarantee their own safety.

On June 15, the situation came to a head and led to a quick succession of tragic events. A group of six Hashimu youths arrived at a different storehouse in the area to ask for food, trade goods, and perhaps, to take back their shotgun, as was suggested to them by their elders. They were only given a little food and a scrap of paper with a note to be delivered to another storehouse upstream, with the promise that they would be given more things.

At the next storehouse, they found a group of miners playing dominoes. They were received by the cook who read the piece of paper, threw it into the fire and harshly sent them away with a few items of food and clothing. The slip of paper read: "Have fun with these suckers." Perked by this message and encouraged by the cook, the miners even thought of killing the six youths right there and then, but gave up, fearing that other Indians might be hiding nearby. They decided to attack them along the trail that leads back to the Indians' village.

After walking for less than an hour, the Yanomami stopped to eat the food they had received. As they ate, six armed miners arrived and invited them to go hunting for tapir and then to visit a nearby storehouse. The Indians mistrusted the invitation and refused at first, but they finally accepted upon the miners' insistence. They all walked single file along the trail, led by a Yanomami followed alternately by miners and Indians.

Shortly afterward, the last Yanomami left the trail to defecate, gave the Indians' only shotgun to another Yanomami, and told the others to go on ahead. But the miners stood still. Suddenly, one of them grabbed the arm of the Indian with the gun and shot him at point-blank range in the stomach with a sawed off two-barrel shotgun. Three other Indians were shot at by the other miners. One of the assassins later told a friend that one of the boys knelt down with his hand over his face, trying to escape death, and begged: "Miner, my friend!" He was summarily executed with a shot to the head.

Upon hearing the shots, the Yanomami who was in the bush jumped into

the nearby Orinoco River and escaped. The eighteen-year-old who led the file also tried to run away, but was surrounded by three miners who, standing in a triangle, shot at him as if they were taking target practice. Thanks to his agility and to the thickness of the jungle, he dodged the first two shots but was wounded by the third. As the miners reloaded their guns, he got away and also threw himself into the Orinoco. Still stunned by his wounds, he tried to hide by submerging himself up to his nose. From this position, he saw the miners bury the three victims (the body of the fourth was never found; mortally wounded, he probably fell into the river and was swept away by the current). While searching for bodies, one of the miners turned and walked toward the river, where he saw the hidden boy; he went back to get his gun, but the youth managed to escape.

Meanwhile, the other survivor arrived at Hashimu community with news of the murders. Two days later, he returned with a group of men and women to the locale where their relatives had been shot. Along the way they ran into the injured boy, who told them what he saw, including the spot where the bodies had been buried (this custom is considered by the Yanomami to profane the dead). They dug up the three corpses, looked in vain for the fourth, and took the remains to be cremated at a place an hour-and-a-half walk into the forest. They collected the charred bones needed to officiate their funeral rites and returned home.

During the following days, they organized a ritual hunt, which preceded the ceremony of preparation of the mortuary ashes (the bones are crushed and stored in gourds sealed with beeswax). After the hunt (which lasts from a week to ten days), three allied villages were invited to come: Homoshi, Makayu, and Toumahi. Upon finishing the preparation of the ashes, a group of warriors got together to go on the traditional raid of vengeance against the murderers. It should be emphasized that Yanomami tradition demands that violent deaths be avenged in raids where the targets are men, preferably those who committed the previous murders. Women and children are never killed.

On July 26, after a two-day walk, the war party camped on the outskirts of the mining encampment. At ten o'clock the following morning, under a steady rain, they came close to the kitchen of a storehouse where two miners were chatting around the fire. One of the Yanomami slipped away and from behind a tree fired his gun at the men. One of the miners was struck in the head and killed instantly; the other escaped but was wounded in the side and buttocks. The warriors continued their revenge by splitting open the skull of the dead man with an axe, shooting arrows into his body and, before fleeing, grabbing everything in the storehouse, including shotgun shells and the dead miner's shotgun.

## Preparing for the Attack

The Indian attack infuriated the miners. They buried the dead man, abandoned the storehouse, and carried the wounded man to an airstrip two-days walk away. Then they began to plan their retaliation. Two meetings were held in which they decided once and for all to put an end to the problems with the Indians by killing all of the inhabitants of the two Hashimu communal houses, a total of eighty-five people. They recruited men from all around and gathered arms and ten boxes of shells. The entire operation was sponsored, if not commissioned, by the four main owners of prospecting rafts in the region. These four men, some of whom are well-known figures in the State of Roraima, are JoFo Nehto, rural landowner; his brother-in-law Chico Cear; Eliezo, also the owner of a supply store, and Pedro Prancheta, the author of the note. They had freed their workers, supplied them with ammunition and guns, and hosted preparatory meetings for the attack. Fifteen heavily armed miners (with 12- and 20-gauge shotguns, 38-caliber revolvers, machetes, and knives) set out on the trail to carry out their plan. Among them were several of the men who had participated in the murder of the Hashimu youths, along with four gunslingers contracted to guarantee the safety of the owners.

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Hashimu left their houses and camped for five days in the jungle at a safe distance from the community to guard against any counterattack by the miners. Since they were expecting an invitation from the community of Makayu for a celebration, they headed in the direction of this village. On the way there they spent the night in their own houses. The next morning, they continued their trip and stopped at an old garden between Hashimu and Makayu. As they waited there for a formal invitation brought by messengers from their hosts, as is the custom, three young warriors went back to the miners' encampment to attack them once again because they were dissatisfied with their previous attempt at revenge. The leader of this party, the brother of the missing dead youth, had particular reason to avenge his brother's death, precisely because his body was never found, thus precluding a proper funeral. They arrived at the edge of a gold digging and, protected by the noise of the machinery, slipped up and shot at one of the miners working there. The man, who sensed the Indians' presence at the instant of the shooting, protected his head and was wounded in the arm that served as his shield. The three youths escaped and joined their Hashimu relatives at the old garden where they were camped.

This attack occurred while the fifteen miners were in route to the Hashimu community, a two-day walk from their encampment. The Indian youths and the miners missed each other on the trail only because on war expeditions Yanomami avoid trails and hike through the dense brush. Upon arriving at Hashimu, the miners found the houses empty. They

looked around, found the trail that led to the old garden, and set out in search of the Indians.

On the previous day at the old garden, the Hashimu people had received the formal invitation from Makayu messengers. Since they were at war with the miners, they decided to shorten that visit to a minimum. Only men and a few women without children accompany the messengers to the community, leaving at the garden the women with children, along with three older men. These people are left behind for two reasons: they did not walk as fast as the others, and women and children are never attacked in war raids. The three young warriors who had attacked the miners also stayed behind to rest.

## The Massacre

On the morning of the following day, most women in the camp went out to collect wild fruit far away from the old garden. They took along nearly all of the children; the old leader of one of the communal houses also accompanied them. Nineteen people stayed at the camp, including the three warriors who were still resting.

A few hours later, around midday, the miners arrived at the camp and closed it off on one side. Children played, women chopped firewood, and the others rested in their hammocks. One miner fired a shot and the others began shooting, as they advanced toward their victims. In the middle of the hail of fire, the three warriors, an older man, a middle-aged woman, two six- or seven-year-old children, and a girl of about ten years of age managed to escape, thanks to the complex distribution of shelters and the thickness of the underbrush typical of old gardens. The two small children and one of the warriors were wounded by buckshot in their face, neck, arms, and sides; the older girl received a serious wound in the head from which she later died. From their hiding place, the Indians who escaped continued to hear cries muffled by the sound of gunshots. After a few very long minutes, the miners stopped shooting and entered the shelters in order to finish off anyone still living. Machete blows killed not only the injured but also the few who had not been hit; they mutilated and dismembered the bodies already riddled with buckshot and bullets.

In all, twelve people were killed: an old man and two elderly women; a young woman who was a visitor from the community of Homoshi; three adolescent girls; two baby girls, one and three years old, respectively; and three boys between six and eight years of age. Three of these children were orphans of parents who had died of malaria. The woman from Homoshi, of around eighteen years of age, was first shot from a distance of less than ten meters and then again from a distance of two meters. A blind, elderly

woman was kicked to death, while a baby lying in a hammock was wrapped in a cloth and pierced through with a knife.

The miners realized they had not exterminated all the people of Hashimu. Thus, as a preventative measure, they took away the two shotguns that were in the shelters, shot off a flare to dissuade anyone from following them, and returned to the empty communal houses, where they spent the night. The next day they piled up the Indians' household gear left behind and fired volleys of gunshot into them. They set fire to both houses and quickly headed back to their mining sites. Several weeks later, they heard on National Radio the news of the massacre. They hiked for two or three days to the landing strip of Raimundo Nen. They threatened to kill anyone who informed on them, indicating that any miners who talk "will receive the same treatment that the Indians did." They flew to Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima, and from there most of them scattered all over the country.

## The Cremations

When the shooting finally stopped, one of the three warriors who escaped unhurt ran to where the women were gathering, told them what happened, sent them into hiding, returned to camp, and looked for his shotgun, which was no longer there. He then called back to the women and sent three of them to Makayu to warn the others. They rushed along the trail for several hours. They arrived wailing and in the the midst of great commotion, told of the tragedy, and described in dramatic detail how the women and children had been mutilated and dismembered. The men of Hashimu went immediately to the camp at the old garden in a forced march and arrived at nightfall. They gathered the injured and the other survivors together amidst crying and terror interspersed with angry speeches of bereavement by the leaders. Due to darkness they had to postpone the proper treatment of the bodies. The strong smell of blood forced them to sleep a short distance from the scene of the massacre. At a half-hour's walk, they cleared an opening and erected improvised shelters. At daybreak, they began the cremation of the corpses as required by their funeral rites. Not even the high risk of being attacked again by the miners kept them away from the imperative task of providing a proper funeral for their relatives.

As they began to gather the mutilated bodies, the girl whose skull had been cut open suddenly appeared from the brush, screaming in pain and terror as her mother ran toward her crying in desperation. The cremation began with each body placed in fetal position in individual pyres. The adults were cremated immediately at the camp; the corpses of the young were taken to the clearing where the group had spent the night and were cremated there. As soon as the fire consumed the bodies, the survivors

removed the scalding-hot charred bones and placed them in baskets and even cooking pots. Some teeth and many bone fragments remained in the ashes, some of which showed vestiges of the shooting. The hurry in cremating the bodies was due to the fear that the miners would return to kill the Indian men. It was inconceivable to them that the murder of women and children would be considered by the Whites as appropriate revenge. The urgency in fleeing was so great that the dismembered body of the Homoshi visitor was left without cremation, as she had no relative present to do it. A gourd containing the ashes of one of the youths murdered in the first attack had been split open by the miners and the ashes scattered on the ground. The mother of the youth tried to gather them in leaf bundles, but in her haste she left behind a few bundles. The ashes of the dead are the Yanomami's most precious possessions; they are under the constant care of the women, who carry them even when they travel.

## The Flight

Upon completing the cremations, the people of Hashimu collected all the belongings of the deceased, which would later be destroyed during the funeral rites. They began their flight, which took several weeks, through the dense forest in a wide detour designed to dodge the miners, often walking at night, with hardly anything to eat, while carrying the three wounded girls. After eight days of walking, they stopped at a friendly village, Tomokoshihu. That night, the girl with the wound in her head died. Her parents carried her body through the jungle for one more day before cremating it at the locale where they camped for the night. Without delay, the fleeing Indians crossed the trails leading to two other villages, Ayaobe and Warakeu. They stop at a fourth, Maamabi. They had crossed the Orinoco River and, heading south, approached the border of Brazil near the Toototobi River, in the State of Amazonas. They finally arrived at Marcos' village along the upper Pashotou River, a tributary of the Toototobi. It was August 24, 1993, nearly a month after the massacre.

The survivors of Hashimu chose the Toototobi region for several reasons: it is an area without gold miners; its inhabitants are friends with whom they had frequent contact; and it also has a health clinic to which they had gone for treatment of malaria epidemics on various occasions in the previous years.

## The Funeral Rites

When they stopped at the two friendly villages on the Venezuelan side of the border and afterward at Marcos', the Hashimu Indians began to grind





the charred bones of their dead relatives, keeping them in sealed gourds carried in open baskets or wrapped in cloth.

In the great intercommunity funeral ceremonies that will be organized in honor of the dead, the ashes of the adults will be buried in the hearths of their relatives, and the ashes of the children will be drunk mixed with plantain soup. On this occasion, the gourds, baskets, and the deceased's possessions will be burned or destroyed.

The belongings of the dead have to be disposed of, their personal names obliterated, and their ashes either buried or ingested during Yanomami funeral rites. This procedure guarantees that their specter travels to and remains in the world of the dead on the "back of the sky," thus barring their return to torment the living. For this to happen, it is necessary that the deceased's relatives repeatedly commemorate them until all the ashes are used up during successive mortuary ceremonies. This is the reason why the people of Hashimu had to recover the remains of their dead, even under the imminent threat of another attack by the gold miners. To not do so would condemn the specters to wander between two worlds, haunting the living with an interminable melancholy even worse than death.

The sixty-nine survivors of Hashimu, refugees at Marcos' village, are now trying to rebuild their lives, with plans to make new gardens and new homes. In the coming months, and the better part of next year, they will also be busy organizing the funerals of their relatives killed in the massacre, and of several others who have recently died of malaria spread by the gold miners. Their mourning will last until the ashes are gone, and only then will their lives return to normal. Even then, they will never forget that the Whites are capable of cutting up women and children, just like "people-eating spirits." The warriors of Hashimu say that they have given up revenge on the miners. They would do so if they considered these Whites to be human beings with a sense of honor. Now they doubt it. The miners are not even fit to be their enemies. It is their hope that the murderers will be "locked up" by other Whites so that they will never return to Indian lands.

#### Note

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1. The integral version of this text was published in *Folha de São Paulo*, Brasília, Brazil, edition October 10, 1993. Text was translated from Portuguese by Paul E. Little.

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