Yanomami: history returns as a tragedy foretold

In recent decades, the people of the Brazilian Amazon have lost the tranquillity that the jungle offered them. Illegal gold mining is the main factor affecting their social life, their culture and their well-being. The garimpeiros plunder their natural resources, pollute their rivers with mercury and transmit diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. With the approval of the Yanomami Indigenous Land in 1992, the territory experienced a peace interlude until Jair Bolsonaro came to power. The new president, Lula da Silva, has promised that illegal mining will no longer exist, but the past keeps repeating itself in the present.

By Alcida Rita Ramos - May 1st

The great Yanomami language family straddles the border between Brazil and Venezuela in the northernmost part of the Amazon Forest. The Yanomami population is estimated to stand at around 37,000 people, 27,000 of them on the Brazilian side (in 2023). In Venezuela, they live in the Biosfera Alto Orinoco-Casiquiare Reserve; in Brazil, their home is the Yanomami Indigenous Land (TIY), demarcated and ratified in May 1992 across approximately nine and a half million hectares.

Recent studies identify six distinct languages and 16 dialects. Mutual intelligibility varies considerably, reflecting the centuries-long process of separation of the subgroups due to multiple migrations. The 20th century revealed the Yanomami to the world. Missionaries first arrived in the 1950s and settled at various sites in the Indigenous territory, unlike previous travellers and naturalists who passed through the area and left few and uncertain records of the peoples we now identify as Yanomami. In the 1970s, invasions began on the Brazilian side of the Yanomami territory. A short chronology will highlight the main events of the past three decades.
The highway and the gold rush

The first large invasion occurred during the military dictatorship, between 1973 – 1975, with the construction of the North Perimeter highway in the states of Roraima and Amazonas. The plan was to cut through the Amazon forest from east to west. The work lasted less than three years and stopped abruptly when 200 kms had been opened in Yanomami lands. However short, three years were enough to wreak havoc on the lives of whole communities. Measles, the common cold and other pestilences devastated families, destroyed their subsistence, killed more than 22 per cent of local communities, and nearly tore their social fabric apart.

In 1975, a survey carried out by Project Radambrasil disclosed information about the soil and subsoil of the Yanomami territory. Soil fertility is poor but the subsoil is rich in minerals. This news did not stimulate an interest in agribusiness but did trigger a number of invasions by placer miners in search of tin. Shortly afterwards, the Surucucu hills, at the heart of Yanomami lands, witnessed a series of armed conflicts between Indians and miners, provoked by the theft of garden produce and sexual abuse of Yanomami women.

In 1980, another assault began, now for gold, on the Upper Uraricoera River. Some 2,000 placer miners –who nine years later had become 50,000– took over most of the central part of the Yanomami lands in Brazil, crossed over to Venezuela and caused some diplomatic hassles between the two countries. The situation reached a critical point in August 1989, when thousands of miners descended upon the Yanomami territory. Mercury and silting, part of their mining operations, polluted the entire course of several rivers, including the Mucajáí, Uraricoera, Catrimani and Couto de Magalhães. Incessant landings and take-offs of aircraft and helicopters on more than 80 clandestine runways chased away game animals, bringing famine to the Yanomami and the consequence humiliation of depending on food handed out by the miners.

Epidemics quickly spread. Tuberculosis, malaria and other foreign diseases injured and killed, some with fulminating speed, others slowly, corroding the demographic balance of whole communities, leaving behind stray orphans, seriously threatening the
production of material and cultural goods and even social reproduction. Each new runway they opened, each gully they demolished, each new camp they set up contributed to destroying Yanomami life.

We will never know how many Indians perished during that gold rush because, in August 1987, the National Indian Foundation (Funai), the National Security Council and the Governor of Roraima at that time, Romero Jucá, barred researchers, health workers, Catholic missionaries, journalists and other observers from entering Yanomami territory. That prohibition protected clandestine actions from denunciations, thus leaving the job of clearing the land of their Indigenous inhabitants in unwitnessed chaos.

The health crisis of the sanumás of the Auris River

I did my first fieldwork among the Sanumá subgroup in the Auaris River valley, a watershed between Brazil and Venezuela. In the late 1960s, that region was a remote, tranquil corner of the Amazon forest, a veritable ethnographic paradise free from pressures, invasions and epidemics. However, the transformation of that paradise into an inferno was just a matter of time.

In 1991, with no mining nearby, the Upper Auaris region in the state of Roraima seemed clear of malaria infestation. Nevertheless, it suffered one of the most severe health crises recorded in Yanomami territory. Successive malaria epidemics hit the Kadimani community, paralysing its social life for months on end. With most of its members incapacitated, subsistence was seriously jeopardized. Cases of serious anaemia required immediate blood transfusions. The patients received treatment at the outpost of the Unevangelized Fields Mission. Nine transfusions took place with local Sanumá donors. Extreme malnutrition affected children and adults. Health assistance was urgent and efficient.

Late that year, the medical teams with whom I was working as an interpreter finished their work in Auaris. They had cured the sick and prevented deaths but the mining invasion persisted and malaria continued to kill until, one year later, the TIY was demarcated and ratified and most intruders were expelled. An interlude of relative
peace followed, albeit with ups and downs, until Jair Bolsonaro came to power after the 2018 presidential elections. Between 2019 and 2020, malaria cases in Auaris jumped 247 per cent!

A new gold rush and the Covid-19 pandemic

The somewhat burlesque but lethal 20th century gold rush turned Dantesque as crimes against the Yanomami escalated to unprecedented levels. Aggravating already extreme conditions, the Covid-19 pandemic (2020) contributed to the all-out war the federal government launched against these people. The fury with which the 2019 gold rush attacked the lands and lives of the Yanomami unveiled an orchestrated genocidal campaign with the purpose of exploiting the long-coveted natural resources of the TIY. The official discourse proposed, in no subtle terms, to eliminate any ethnic groups that got in the way of “development”. Mining invasions are not new to many Yanomami or their neighbours, the Carib-speaking Ye’kwana. What was unusual was the ruthless and determined assault of the federal government on their constitutional rights. As a House Representative in the 1990s, Bolsonaro had unsuccessfully proposed a bill to extinguish the demarcation of the TIY.

As President of the Republic, he chose unlawful tactics in his attempt to achieve what he had failed to do as a Member of Parliament. He repeatedly made unconstitutional manoeuvres, challenged due process, stirred up the spread of fake news and openly encouraged acts of plunder and violence in defiance of Supreme Court decisions defending the Yanomami. Such is the mark that Bolsonaro leaves in his inglorious passage through the country’s history.

Thirty years after the TIY’s official demarcation, the Sanumá survivors of the 1991-92 scourge returned to the centre of shocking news. On 24 June 2020, journalist Eliane Brum described the terror of three young mothers who were sent with their babies for treatment in Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima. At the hospital, their babies died. Suspected of having contracted Covid-19, they were buried clandestinely in town. Their mothers, infected with coronavirus, and not knowing where their babies’ bodies were, demanded they be returned to them.
One of these mothers cried: “I must take my baby back to the village. I can’t go back without my son’s body.” It was vital to take the dead children back to the village for cremation and a proper funeral. The scandal the case provoked forced those responsible to exhume and test the babies. There was no Covid-19! The clandestine burial of those Sanumá children was nothing but a sordid act of aggression disguised as ignorance against the mothers and, by extension, against all Yanomami. As anthropologist Bruce Albert explained, “There is no worse affront and suffering to the Yanomami than to have their dead ‘disappear’”.

The advance of the *garimpeiros* on the Yanomami lands

The report *Yanomami sob ataque* was published in April 2022 with 2021 data from the System to Monitor Illegal Mining in the TIY (Hutukara and Wanasseduume 2022). Text and images expose the magnitude of the crimes committed in four years—and still ongoing—against the TIY environment and residents. It cites the (conservative) estimate of a 3,350 per cent increase in mining sites from 2016 to 2020 compared to previous estimates.

The report attributes this escalation to the dismantling of regulatory agencies and protection of Indigenous Peoples since the onset of Bolsonaro’s term. On the front line of the gold rush, miners were able to act freely and illegally while government agencies in Brasilia cleared the political ground that would enable mining activities to expand unfettered by control agencies, thus consummating the full-scale invasion of Indigenous lands.

Without Bolsonaro’s shrewdness, placer miners began to use force to eject the Yanomami from their legal lands. Times had changed. The aggressors no longer had to hide. In the Palimiu region, the Yanomami could perceive signs of these changes—stronger verbal aggression, more forays at gunpoint, more high calibre weapons, more daring raids. There are strong signs that members of the PCC (*Primeiro Comando da Capital*) criminal faction participated in an attack of “four shots against women who were searching for a relative who had disappeared in the river”. In the midst of the shooting, two children drowned.
In an invariable repetition of history, as if Covid-19 were not enough, malaria returned with a vengeance. The average rate of transmission throughout most of the TIY in the past four years has been about two cases per person. The spiral of tragedy continues.

The past becomes present

In January 2023, 20 days after the inauguration of President Lula’s third term, he travelled to Boa Vista with three of his new ministers to see the Yanomami tragedy more closely. Apparently flabbergasted, he promised: “There will be no more illegal mining.” His visit triggered an unprecedented paroxysm in the media. Boa Vista turned into a Mecca for national and international journalism. Legions of flustered and hurried ministerial staff, police officers, health workers, marched to expel the placer miners and stop Yanomami mortality. Less than four months later came the anti-climax.

After the first hundred days of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s third presidential term, illegal placer miners continue to extract gold, tin and other minerals from the TI Yanomami. They are oblivious to the fact that, in the largest Indigenous territory in the country, an emergency operation of humanitarian aid is underway. To dodge Ibama [Brazilian Institute of Environment] and Federal Police control, they now mine at night, when finding them is more difficult. Despite the efforts, 61 Yanomami persons, including children, young people and adults, have died this year due to various diseases, some preventable, such as malnutrition and malaria.

The Yanomami seem to be caught in an apparently infinite fluctuation between prolonged lethal crises and short periods of peace. One more past with no end!

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