



Gold, Greed & Genocide in the Americas California to the Amazon

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"The white warriors went across in their long dugouts. The Indians said they would meet them in peace so when the whites landed the Indians went to welcome them ... Ge-Wi-Lih said he threw up his hand ... but the white man fired and shot him in the arm ... (s)he said when they gathered the dead, they found all the little ones were killed by being stabbed and many of the women were also killed by stabbing ... (t)his old lady also told about (how) the whites hung a man on Emerson island ... and a large fire built under (him). And another ... was tied to a tree and burnt to death"

—William Benson, Pomo historian, recounts massacres at Clear Lake, California, May 1850

"A group of loggers and miners near the town of Pontes e Lacerda ambushed and violently assaulted at least 14 Katitaulhu Indians in the Sarare reserve. The loggers subsequently looted the Indians village, damaging a health post and school and stealing money, tools and vehicles belonging to the Indians. Supporters of the Indians, who have attempted to mobilize federal officials to comply with court orders to remove the illegal loggers and miners from the reserve subsequently received death threats and intimidation. The Katitaulhu were also threatened with further violence by the invaders. Medical reports state that 14 Indians were wounded, many by having been tied up and beaten."

— Environmental Defense Fund report from Mato Grosso, Brazil, November 1996

Thousands of kilometers, and almost a century and a half, separate the two violent incidents against the Pomo peoples of California and the Nambikwara peoples of Mato Grosso, Brazil. Yet the root cause for both incidents was exactly the same: settlers in search of gold.

The Clear Lake incident was a direct outcome of the arrival of Charles Stone and Andrew Kelsey, two ranchers who arrived at the lake in 1847, who captured and bought hundreds of Pomo, forcing them to work as slaves. Kelsey forced Pomo men into the mountains as virtual slaves to help him look for gold. Eventually two Pomo cowboys, Shak and Xasis, took the law into their own hands and executed both settlers bringing the wrath of the United States army upon them in the incidents described above.

The Katitaulhu are one of 12 Nambikwara subgroups, whose lands were first invaded in the 1970s when the

World Bank-funded BR 364 road from Cuiaba in Mato Grosso to Porto Velho in Rondonia was opened by Brazil's military government. Decimated by epidemics and forcibly relocated to make way for the road, the Nambikwara died in great numbers making desperate pilgrimages in an attempt to return to their traditional lands. Some 6,000 gold miners invaded the Sarare reservation in the 1990s seriously polluting major watercourses in the area, disrupting local fishing and hunting, spreading malaria and viral diseases. The incident described above is just one of many attacks on the Nambikwara in the last two decades.

Foundation of empire

Gold has been the foundation of empires throughout history and continues to be the root cause of many genocidal attacks against Indigenous people around the world. The Romans founded their empire on Spanish gold, the Spanish founded their empire on Inca gold, the

1849 Gold Rush was the basis of the foundation of the state of California and today the World Bank makes a profit supporting gold mines.

Pizarro, the Spanish conquistador, arrived in Cajamarca (now part of Peru) in 1532 to trick Atahualpa, the last Inca king, into an ambush that led to the collapse of his empire. One of the last acts of Atahualpa was an attempt to buy off the Spanish by offering them a room full of gold and two rooms full of silver. The Spanish accepted the offer but after they got the gold, they murdered Atahualpa and proceeded to raze the rest of the city to the ground.

Today the ransom room is the only surviving monument to the Inca presence but the region is still being raped for gold: it is the site of Yanacocha, the biggest gold mine in Latin America, which is run by Newmont of Colorado and funded by the World Bank. Almost 500 years after the Inca died defending their lands, the peo-

ple of Cajamarca are dying because of the contamination of local waters, and their lands are still being seized.

Yet economists, historians and media alike continue to celebrate the metal. In 1994 World Bank economists lavished praise on Peru for becoming the fastest growing economy in the world by inviting in the new gold mines. In 1998 historians and the media launched into a celebratory frenzy over the 150th anniversary of the founding of the state of California after the famous 1849 Gold Rush.

But for Indigenous communities the arrival of gold miners has always meant disease and death, whether it be among the Nomlaki peoples of north-western California in the 1850s or the Yanomami of the Amazon in the 1990s as the two examples below demonstrate.

Deadly diseases

"They (the Native Americans) had been hiding in the hills. There was no rain for three years and fighting going on every day. No clover, no acorn, juniper berries or pepper grass. Nothing for three years. Finally the Indians got smallpox and the Indian doctor couldn't cure them. Gonorrhoea came among the Indians. They died by the thousands." — Andrew Freeman, Nomlaki historian, recounting the story of his peoples in the 1850s.

"The biggest problem for the Yanomami now are the garimpeiro (goldminers) who are in our land, and the illnesses they bring with them. Among them some have illnesses like flu, tuberculosis and venereal diseases, and contaminate my people. Now we are afraid they will bring measles and also AIDS, this illness which is so dangerous that we do not want it among us. But the worst illness for us is malaria, which comes in with the goldminers. The government's National Health Foundation say that 1300 Yanomami had got malaria up until May this year." — statement by Davi Yanomami, August 1997.

Some 60 percent of the estimated 150,000 native peoples of California were wiped out by famine and disease between the years of 1850 and 1870 while another 20 percent were killed by settlers. The rate of destruction of the Brazilian

Yanomami is terrifyingly similar, today there are an estimated 8,000 people left, a 60 percent drop from the estimated 20,000 who lived in the region just 20 years ago.

Mercury Madness

Armed militia and deadly diseases are not the only terror that stalked the Native peoples of California in the 1850s and the Indigenous communities of the Amazon in the 1980s. Mercury, a highly toxic metal, used for centuries by small-scale gold miners to extract the tiny flecks of shiny metal from the ore, has also taken a major toll.

Mercury can dissolve as much as 60 percent of gold out of ore into a physical solution, known as an amalgam. This amalgam can be broken down quickly and easily by heating off the mercury, similar to the way salt can be recovered from sea water. This mercury vapor gets trapped in atmospheric moisture and precipitates down into local water supplies where it can poison fish and animals higher up in the food chain.

The California Gold Rush of 1849, perhaps the most celebrated in history, left a deadly legacy of an estimated 7,600 tons of mercury in the lakes, rivers and sediments of the state while over one thousand tons of mercury are currently being dumped by small miners in the fragile rainforests of the Amazon.

Just one gram of mercury poured into eighty million liters of water would be cause for concern under United States federal human health standards for drinking water and enough to contaminate a small lake. Mercury is a persistent toxin which can destroy fetuses, the human central nervous system, reproductive organs and immune system.

Well over a century after the miners invaded California, decades after the

mines were shut down, fishing is still prohibited in Clear Lake, California, because of the heavy mercury contamination of the lake. Environmental experts on the tribal reservations in north-western California are realizing that they may have to seek help cleaning up the waste that contaminates the Trinity river.

Meanwhile nobody knows the full extent of the problems in the Brazilian Amazon but initial studies have shown that the levels of mercury in Tapajos river fish in 1995 were 3.8 parts per million (ppm), almost eight times the permitted federal maximum of 0.5 ppm. In 1989, fish in the Madeira river tested as high as 2.7 ppm.

Good news, bad news

Fortunately, mercury is no longer used in California and the small-scale miners were recently evicted from the



Carrie Dann, Shoshone traditional elder. "To dig under the earth to get to that gold, to pump out that water to get to that gold, is a crime, it's a crime against humanity..."

Yanomami territory in January 1998 by the Brazilian army. There's more good news, the Macuxi peoples of Roraima, Brazil, blockaded roads in 1997 to successfully demand the removal of gold miners from their territory.

However, today the lands of Native peoples in North America are the subject of a new invasion of gold miners and the Indigenous communities of Latin America are next on the list as described below.

Cyanide: the new terror

In the 1960s, Newmont corporation of Colorado teamed up with the United States Bureau of Mines to perfect a technique to extract 97 percent of gold from ore dug up in the deserts of Nevada using a chemical called cyanide. These desert lands, the sacred and traditional lands of the Western Shoshone, are now the source of half the gold in the United States today.

Corporations around the world have followed suit, using this cyanide technology together with the powerful explosives and massive earth-moving equipment that allows them to blast apart entire mountains, to take over the business of gold mining.

A teaspoonful of two-percent solution of cyanide can kill a adult human. Cyanide blocks the absorption of oxygen

Also poisoned by cyanide are the peoples who live on the Essequibo river in Guyana, where dead fish and hogs were reported in August 1995 after a waste water dam at the Omai gold mine broke and spilt 3.2 billion liters of cyanide-laced waste into the river in what is believed to be the biggest such disaster in history. Studies by the Pan American Health Organization have shown that all aquatic life in the four-kilometer-long creek that runs from the mine to the Essequibo was killed. Suspicious fish, cattle and even human deaths have also been reported among the people of Cajamarca, Peru, where Newmont is using cyanide to extract gold.

Meanwhile a number of other Indigenous and traditional communities throughout Latin America are being targeted for new gold mines like the Maroon community of Nieuw Koffiekamp in Suriname where Golden Star of Colorado

It is high time for people around the world to support these struggles and demand an end to the status of gold as a barbaric custom. As the leaders of the first peoples of the Americas have testified below, pure water, traditional cultures and life are more precious than all the gold dug up from under the ground.

"We have the right to put up opposition because history has made us skeptical of certain white men, because we have lost millions of human lives, millions of hectares of land and millions of tons of gold, silver and copper with no compensation," — Atencio Lopez, Kuna, Panama, August 1996.

"We want progress without destruction. We want to study, to learn new ways of cultivating the land, living from its fruits. We do not want to live without trees, hunting, fish and clean water. If this happens misery will come to our people.



by cells, causing the victim to effectively "suffocate." Adverse impacts of cyanide on fish have been reported at levels of 0.01 ppm, concentrations as low as five parts per billion have been found to inhibit fish reproduction, while levels of 0.03 ppm are known to kill fish.

Human beings can experience decreased respiratory and thyroid functions, cardiac pain, vomiting, headaches and central nervous system toxicity from oral exposure to low levels of cyanide. Short term exposures to high levels of cyanide compounds can cause breathing problems, central nervous system toxicity and gastro-intestinal corrosion.

This deadly chemical is being used today in North America on the lands of peoples like the Pomo in California, the Western Shoshone in Nevada, the Sioux in South Dakota, the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre in Montana. Also under threat are the Quechan in Arizona, the Paiute in Nevada, and the Colvilles in Washington state whose lands are being targeted for new gold mines.

(also the joint operators of the Omai gold mine in Guyana) have reportedly threatened and harassed community members by using live ammunition to frighten them away from areas in which the company is exploring for gold.

In Central America, the Panamanian Natural Resources Directorate reports that 70 percent of the approximately 20,000 square kilometers of Panama deemed to have mining potential is on land claimed by Indigenous groups. The government has already approved extensive copper and gold mining concessions within the Ngöbe-Buglé and Kuna territories.

Yet communities are fighting back across the Americas. The Assiniboine, the Colvilles, the Gros Ventre, the Sioux and the Western Shoshone have gone to court to protest the gold mines while the peoples of Latin America are also putting up a spirited opposition, from road blockades in Panama to complaints to international bodies by the Surinamese Maroons.

I hope that you will help me in this fight" — Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Brazil, August 1997

"To dig under the earth to get to that gold, to pump out that water to get to that gold, is a crime, it's a crime against humanity, a crime against life, the very life upon which all people depend, not only people but we have other things out there— we have the deer, we have the eagle, we have the rabbits, we have all life out there and the gold mining today is going to destroy that, it is destroying that, the life for the future generations is going to be gone" — Carrie Dann, Western Shoshone traditional elder, spring 1997.

The author is mining campaigner for Project Underground, a human rights group based in Berkeley, California. His latest report, "Gold, Greed, and Genocide: unmasking the Myth of the '49ers," is available from Project Underground for US\$5.00.

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