

Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 7

June 2005

Die If You Must: Brazilian Indians in the Twentieth Century

Donald Pollock

State University of New York at Buffalo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pollock, Donald (2005). "Die If You Must: Brazilian Indians in the Twentieth Century", *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70845/2572-3626.1077>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol3/iss1/7>

This Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

of manhood and the formation of individual psychology” (2001:24). In *Dark Shamanism*, an expansion of that chapter, there is little systematic attention to the latter two themes, and we are told relatively little about gender relations or about the individual *kanaimà* practitioners, their subjective motives, and their relation to his discussion about “serial killers.” Hopefully, these will become topics of his next work about the cultural meaning of *kanaimà* violence.

***Die If You Must: Brazilian Indians in the Twentieth Century.* John Hemming. London: Pan Macmillan, 2003. xxxiv + 855pp., illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes, references, index. \$67.50 (cloth). ISBN:1-4050-0095-3. [www.panmacmillan.com]**

DONALD POLLOCK

State University of New York at Buffalo

John Hemming’s monumental history of indigenous peoples in Brazil began with the celebrated first volume *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians*, which detailed the tragic consequences of the European discovery of South America up to the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1790. Then, in *Amazon Frontier: The Defeat of the Brazilian Indians* he traced the next hundred year trajectory of decline in the (mis)fortunes of Brazil’s Indian populations as Amazonian regions were explored and exploited. His third and final volume in this series opens on 7 September 1910 with a glimmer of “new hope” for Brazil’s Indians—the creation of the Indian Protection Service (SPI) under the enlightened direction and inspiration of Cândido Rondon, a Lieutenant Colonel in Brazil’s military and a disciple of Auguste Comte’s positivism. Indeed, the volume’s title, “*Die If You Must*,” is drawn from the motto of the SPI in its first days, the exhortation never to kill, but die if necessary in the protection of Brazil’s Indians.

Hemming organizes this roughly century-long history as a kind of interplay between governmental or government-sponsored organizations and policies, such as the SPI or large-scale mining interests, and the indigenous populations that were inevitably effected by those entities. This dual history is of course strategic. The fate of indigenous populations in Brazil has, since 1500, been most dramatically influenced by policies and actions of non-Indians, ranging from mining and logging to constitutional definitions of “Indian-ness.” Centralizing the role of the SPI—and later of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI)—gives Hemming a framework for presenting both the history of Brazil’s Indians since 1910 and the history of public policies and popular attitudes regarding Indians.

Hemming’s survey of indigenous history is exhaustively geographic, organized regionally to cover all of the major areas of Brazil. In each of these

areas—the Kaingang and Guarani region in southern Brazil; the Xingu, with its largely successful struggle to forge a peaceful refuge or sanctuary; the Ticuna region of western Brazil, and so on—a kind of historical lesson emerges. Chapters are devoted to several of the Jê groups—the Shavante, the Kayapo, the Panara—reflecting their prominence internationally as well as locally, and the exceptional research and development work that has been conducted among them by several generations of anthropologists. A section on the Yanomami highlights their role in global debates over indigenous rights, and a chapter on missionaries offers an unabashedly critical view of their collusion in the destruction of traditional ways of life. After surveying 500 years of indigenous history in three massive volumes, Hemming is far from naïvely optimistic about the future of Brazil's Indians. However, he manages to conclude his account on a cautiously positive note, citing the demographic gains, and political and economic improvements that many Brazilian Indians have achieved in recent years.

The research on which Hemming bases this and his earlier volumes is prodigious. It combines extensive first-hand experience in Brazil, stretching back roughly fifty years, with a remarkable catalogue of sources, from the major ethnographies to obscure reports buried in government archives. There are 160 pages of bibliography and endnotes. I will leave it to specialists to debate the specific representations and interpretations Hemming develops—his scope is simply too vast for any one reviewer to embrace it critically. Nonetheless, I was impressed by the overall accuracy of Hemming's discussions of my own area of experience, Acre, in western Brazil. His account of the emergence of indigenous rights activism in that region—including the first auto-demarcation of an indigenous area, and the problematic role of FUNAI and the Catholic Church's missionary arm—struck me as completely consistent with my own view of events in that area over the past thirty years. I had only one minor quibble with the facts of the text. Hemming located the FUNAI post of Fronteira on the Iaco River, when it was actually at the confluence of the Purus and the Chandless. This is a small (and irrelevant) error for a book of this breadth and scope.

Hemming himself appears from time to time in this account, in both narratives and photos. His extensive experience in Brazil, his personal relationships with most of the major figures over the past fifty years, including indigenous leaders and government officials, activists and academics, gives this story a compelling, even gripping quality of immediacy that is absent from more academic histories such as Gomes's *The Indians and Brazil* (2000). When I saw John Hemming in Miami at the SALSA conference there several years ago, I urged him to devote his next book project to compiling and publishing his memoirs. The pages of *Die If You Must* hint at a fascinating personal biography, and I will take advantage of this opportunity to repeat my suggestion to him yet again ...