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REVIEW

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Chico Mendes was murdered because he was trying to halt the destruction of the Amazon rain forest. He was not the first victim of ruthless ranchers and greedy land speculators, but in the billion-dollar battle between commercial exploiters and traditional rubber tappers he had become a symbol of resistance whose killing sent shock waves far beyond Brazil. Alex Shoumatoff went into the jungle to investigate

RAIN FOREST MARTYR

SUE CUNNINGHAM/PILLY COWELL

So much forest around Chico Mendes's home town of Xapuri has already been cleared that I had to travel for 50 minutes in a briskly moving boat to find the nearest patch. Eventually I entered a primeval world, so rich in plant and animal life that numerous species have yet to be identified. There are Indian villages here, it is said, that no modern person has ever seen.

Xapuri is in the Brazilian state of Acre, which straddles the frontier with Bolivia and Peru and is one of the remotest parts of Amazonia. It is here that many of the country's 300,000 tappers live, working the wild rubber trees, gathering Brazil nuts and cacao (chocolate) pods, and respecting the balance of their habitat.

But Acre also has its violent side. It is one of those parts of Brazil where, for instance, when someone calls you up and tells you that you are going to die, it is not so much a threat as a statement of fact. You have been, in the Portuguese term, *anunciado*. The *anuncio*, a Brazilian friend explained, is a kind of torture. You increase the pleasure of killing your victim by first destroying him psychologically. So when Chico Mendes, who had organized the rubber tappers of Acre into a union, and who was emerging as a major player in the fight to save the Amazon, was *anunciado* last May, he knew it was no idle threat. He had already survived five attempts on his life. He had been in danger since 1980, when his mentor, Wilson Pinheiro, the union president in the next town, was gunned down by *pistoleiros* on the steps of the union hall.

Mendes knew that his enemies included not only the ranchers, who hired *pistoleiros* to expel the rubber tappers from the forest and to kill their leaders and sympathizers, but the authorities in Acre themselves. He knew that he was on the list of the secret death squad of the Department of Public Safety. He also knew that 88 union leaders had been killed in Brazil the year before, and that since 1980 land conflicts had resulted in more than 1,000 murders. In Xapuri itself there had not been a jury trial in 23 years. Dozens of murder cases were sitting in the judge's desk drawer because no one dared prosecute them.

After Mendes was *anunciado*, friends appealed to the governor to provide him with protection, and two military policemen were assigned to guard him. But he predicted that he would not live to see the new year, and his premonition was correct: he was killed three days before Christmas. The news of Mendes's murder was greeted by a tremendous international outcry that took the ranchers completely by surprise. The crime had focused a growing anxiety in the United States and Europe about the huge tree-clearing fires in the Amazon, and the effect that the carbon dioxide they are spewing into the atmosphere might be having on the world's climate.

Two days after the murder, 21-year-old Darci Alves walked into the police station in Xapuri and confessed to the killing. His motive, he explained, was that Mendes had been "harassing" his father, Darli, who had recently acquired dubious title to the Seringal Cachoeira, the rubber forest where Mendes had been born and raised, where his family had lived and tapped trees for generations. Darci said he had acted alone, which was clearly a lie. Two men with guns had been seen running from the scene by numerous witnesses, and there was evidence that for days before the murder two men had been camped in the dense thicket behind Mendes's house. Darci did not explain why he turned himself in, but he was widely believed to be the *boi de piranha*, the steer for the piranhas — a scapegoat. The police were almost certain that his accomplice was his mulatto brother-in-law, one of three brothers nicknamed the Mineirinhos, who worked as *pistoleiros* and ranch hands for the Alveses. Darci's father and his uncle, Darli and Alvarino, were suspected of having ordered the killing.

There was widespread speculation that the murder of Mendes was a complicated affair involving drug and arms smuggling, clandestine



Death and destruction: Chico Mendes and the smouldering ruins of a cleared area of rain forest, twin victims of the headlong rush to seize billions of dollars in government incentives intended to promote beef production

tine airstrips, a radical right-wing ranchers' organization called the Rural Democratic Union (UDR), and the secret death squad within the Acre Department of Public Safety. But overshadowing all these wild range-war aspects of the situation were the global resonances of the event. Here in the remote part of a vast, fragile land, the interests of environmental protection and social justice, of the oppressed rubber tappers and the millions of other species that inhabit the Amazon rain forest, coincided — a rare event in Third World conservation. And Chico Mendes had joined the thin ranks of a new kind of saint: the eco-martyr.

The great forest of Amazonia remained more or less intact until 1969, when the government, in an effort to tame and take possession of that vast teeming *terra incognita* to the north and to secure the national borders, enacted its National Integration Programme — an ambitious and expensive road-building and colonization scheme, whose centrepiece was the 3,500-mile Trans-Amazon Highway. The idea was to get some of the 30 million dirt-poor *nordestinos* to settle along the road, and to persuade large investors to clear the forest and produce beef for the First World.

The government offered tremendous incentives to anyone who was willing to come up to the

Amazon and raise cattle: loans at interest rates below the rate of inflation, tax holidays and land concessions. Ranchers from the south and even multinational corporations, lured by the promise of big profits, moved in. Gangs with chain saws and bulldozers started levelling the forest, and some of the largest fires in recorded history were set. In the autumn of 1976, when I arrived in the Amazon to spend eight months collecting material for a book, a fire as big as Gloucestershire was raging out of control in eastern Amazonia. I visited a ranch where the heat from the tremendous walls of flame was so intense that it created local fire storms, complete with thunder, lightning and mini-tornadoes.

The same thing happened in Acre. Ranchers from the south began pouring in as early as 1970, after the completion of a road linking Rio Branco with Porto Velho 300 miles away, the capital of Rondônia, the territory to the east. The tappers, who constituted virtually the entire rural population, and the forest they depended on were just going to have to make way for progress, and the methods were those used in North America to remove the Indians early in the 19th century — fraud and violence.

The tragedy of what is happening in the Amazon might be more understandable if significant amounts of beef were being pro-

duced on the cleared land, but that is not the case. The Amazon imports more beef than it exports. The real reason it is being destroyed is so that the ranchers can get the billions of dollars of government incentives. They can do so by showing "productive use" of the land, and the cheapest way to do that is to clear and burn it and turn a few head of cattle loose on it. And a lot of land is held in speculation. If the government puts a road near or through the land, it can be sold for hundreds of times its original purchase price. This is one of the most criminal land scams, one of the most unconscionable hit-and-run operations, of all time, because in five or 10 years the pasture turns into barren, brick-hard wasteland that may take centuries to recover.

The soils of Amazonia are very thin. The lushness of the rain forest is the result of a delicate balancing act, a frenetic recycling of nutrients and rainwater from the forest floor back up into the trees. Once the trees are taken down, the whole system collapses. The soil soon shrivels in the sun and is blown or washed away.

By 1975 Mendes was beginning to persuade the tappers that they could stand up to the ranchers. He devised a tactic known as the *empate* — a draw or stand-off in chess, but perhaps best translated in this situation as a blockade. When Mendes knew that a part of the forest was about to be cleared, he would round up the two or three hundred families who lived there and get them to form a wall on the edge of it, so the bulldozers and chain-saw crews could not enter. He would put the women and children in front so that the *pistoleiros* would not dare shoot, while he walked the line gently reassuring his *companheiros* — there is video footage of this — "Don't be afraid, nothing's going to happen." Mendes came up with the *empate* intuitively: never having heard of Gandhi or Martin Luther King, he simply took the somnolent passivity of the tappers and turned it into a form of resistance. In 13 years he organized 45 *empates*, and saved nearly three million acres of forest.

But no one except Mendes tried to explain to the tappers that they had rights like other people, and many of them just left the forest as they were told. Twelve thousand families went to Bolivia and

started tapping rubber in an area that has become another time-bomb of social conflict. Others headed for Rio Branco, doubling and tripling its population.

As far as I could tell, there were only three good guys in Rio Branco: the bishop Dom Moacyr

Grech, the president of the Tribunal of Justice, Eva Evangelista — both of whom had been *anunciados* shortly after Chico's murder — and Silvio Martinello, the editor of the *Gazeta*, one of the local papers.

At her office, Eva Evangelista

told me that on January 3 the phone had rung at her home. She was working late and her daughter answered it. A man's voice said: "Tell your mother not to go to the tribunal tomorrow, because when

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Fall guy: Darci Alves escorted by armed guards after confessing to the murder alone; but witnesses saw two men running from the scene

she walks up the steps her head will roll down them just as Chico Mendes's did." Her daughter was taken to hospital and treated for nervous collapse, but Evangelista, the first female judge in Acre and a granddaughter of tappers, was not intimidated. "It wasn't a

simple *pistoleiro* who killed Chico Mendes," she told reporters the next day. "There are more people behind this."

Evangelista is a tiny woman with a throaty voice and a gutsy manner. She got up to greet me in front of a huge desk, with a Bible open on a stand nearby and the Brazilian flag in the background. We

talked about the *anuncio*. In a few days, she said, 12 tribunal presidents were coming from all over the country to demonstrate their solidarity with her. "I have four children and a loving husband, but I also have a job to do. We have to discover the authors not only of this murder, but of all the murders related to problems

with big land-owners." She and her husband escorted me to the steps of the tribunal and, with nervous glances at the street below, went quickly back inside.

I took a cab to the offices of the *Gazeta*. The lead story in that morning's paper was that Darli Alves had come out of the forest, barefoot and armed

with a .38 pistol, and had surrendered to the police. The editor of the paper, Silvio Martinello, a bearded man of about 40, had his feet up on the desk and was listening to a tape of an interview with Darli in jail. "What I don't understand is why they didn't go in and get Alvarino and the Mineirinhos," he complained. "They had dogs. But I guess we shouldn't expect too much from our local police. Considering Acre's history of impunity, this arrest is impressive."

Darli had denied any involvement and claimed that his son had murdered Mendes entirely on his own initiative. But Darci and Darli Alves were subsequently both charged with the murder of Mendes, and are currently on trial. What was Darli's connection with the UDR, I asked Martinello. "Close," he replied. "We know from Darli's photo album that Joao Branco, the local president of the UDR, was at his ranch for a barbecue." And Gaston Mota, an arms smuggler who was Darli's partner, purportedly heads the UDR's executive committee in Acre. Mota was picked up immediately after Mendes's murder, but released 24 hours later for lack of evidence.

The UDR has some 230,000 members with 200 chapters in 19 states, and is capable of marshaling 40,000 people to march on Brasilia. It is run by the rural oligarchy, the 2,000 men who own 96 million head of cattle and are the force behind Amazonia's incredibly distorted development policies, and the beneficiaries of the billions of dollars of government incentives. Since the UDR was founded, there has been a tremendous increase in rural violence: 700 killings in the past four years, compared with 900 in the previous 21.

By the end of the 1970s, Acre had become, in the words of a reporter from the *Fôlha de São Paulo*, "a state in agony". The big banks, holding companies and consortiums of investors had bought up huge tracts of the forest and were starting to burn it off — the Banco Real picked up half a million acres, the Grupo Bradesco 750,000. The Caxinauá Indians were expelled from their traditional homeland after FUNAI, the agency officially in charge of protecting them, issued "negative certificates" saying they were not there so that the Companhia Novo Oeste could move in with bulldozers and chain saws. Twenty-five thousand acres were being cleared annually in the municipality of Xapuri alone.

By then 20,000 tappers had joined the Rural Workers Union, and with Wilson Pinheiro dead, Mendes was their leader. He was fighting alone, with no government or police protection, at great personal risk. But in 1981 he made an important new friend, the anthropologist Mary Allegratti, who would help propel him to the third and final phase of his short career, from union leader to internationally acclaimed environmentalist.

Allegratti had the contacts and know-how to organize, in October 1985, a national conference of rubber tappers in Brasilia. Here Mendes and 129 *companheiros* from all over the Amazon were able to tell their problems for the first time to an audience of sympathetic anthropologists, policy-makers and environmentalists. A film crew had started to follow Chico around. The footage of his 1986 campaign to be state delegate on the

Workers' Party ticket captures a rather short man of about 40 with wavy hair, a thick moustache, and a genial, humorous face. Allegratti had her own reason for getting him as much exposure as she could. "We were always aware that he was in danger. My way of protecting him was to make him an international figure."

In 1987 Mendes was flown up to Miami to address a meeting of the directors of the Inter-American Development Bank, who were reconsidering funding a road, the BR-364, from Porto Velho to Rio Branco. The American, British and Scandinavian directors were very receptive to his presentation; the Brazilian director did not want to hear about it. Mendes made another presentation in Washington, to members of the Senate Appropriations Committee, which decides whether or not to release funds to the multilateral banks. Mendes went over well with them; the

IDB, the World Bank and the Congressmen came around, and in January 1988 the paving of the BR-364 was virtually stopped. (This action may, however, prove to be too late to save Acre. The Japanese, who are not known for their environmental scruples, have agreed to finance the paving of BR-364 and continue the road all the way to Peru.)

I visited Chico's house in Xapuri, a simple shack with blue-painted plank siding and a red tile roof, no more than 50 yards from the civil police station down one street and 100 yards from the military police station down another. As I opened the gate to the yard a young woman came to the front window — Ilza, Chico's wife.

She showed me into the front room, where her brother Raimundo, a cousin, an Indian tapper who was helping keep an eye on the place, and her two children, Elenira, four, and two-year-old Sandino, were watching television.

On a shelf next to the TV there was a display of Chico's plane ticket to New York, his passport, his medal from the Better World Society "for your leadership in defending Brazilian Amazonia from deforestation and unsustainable commercial development", the framed testament inducting him into the United Nations' Global 500 roll for "outstanding practical achievements in the protection and improvement of the environment", and his key to the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Three days before Christmas, Mendes came home after a trip to the town of Sena Madureira, way back in the forest, where he had brought 500 more tappers into the union's fold. He played dominoes with his guards and then went in for supper. The family was watching a television soap opera called *Anything Goes*, about the corruption and decadence of the rich in Rio.

Chico wasn't interested in *Anything Goes*, and throwing a towel over his shoulder, he went to take a shower. The shower was in an outbuilding in the back yard. He had opened the kitchen door about two-thirds of the way and was about to step outside when a blast from a long-barrelled shotgun caught him on the right side of his chest and shoulder, riddling the towel with buckshot holes. Chico staggered back into the kitchen, crashed against the table, reeled into the bedroom, and died on the floor.



Shared grief: the procession of mourners at Mendes's funeral

RAIN FOREST MARTYR

1944 Francisco "Chico" Mendes Filho born on December 15, two days walk from Xapuri. Grows up in the forest and joins his family tapping rubber — "I became an ecologist long before I heard the word," he would say later.

1962 Meets Brazilian revolutionary Euclides Fernandes Tavora, who is hiding in the forest. Tavora teaches the young Mendes to read, and he teaches him politics.

1975 Mendes begins to persuade the tappers to stand up to the ranchers — the start of a 13-year campaign to save the rain forest from destruction.

1979 Four hooded men beat up Mendes at Rio Branco. Over the next 10 years there are five attempts on his life.

1980 Rural Workers Union leader Wilson Pinheiro murdered.

1981 Mendes meets anthropologist Mary Allegratti, who recognizes his international potential as a charismatic spokesman for the forest people.

1985 At Allegratti's invitation, Mendes addresses conference of rubber tappers in Brasilia.

1986 Stands as Workers Party candidate in state elections, but does not win seat. British film-maker Adrian Cowell covers his campaign.

1987 Mendes goes to Miami to speak against development of road through Acre at meeting of directors of Inter-American Development Bank, and to Washington to address the Senate Appropriations Committee.

1988 January, work on the BR-364 road comes to a virtual standstill as banks withdraw funding. May, Mendes receives *anunciado* death threat, after rubber tappers granted extraction rights against the interests of the ranchers in the forest near Xapuri. He predicts he will not live to see the new year. December 22, Chico Mendes is murdered at his home.