Yiman does not have a word for ‘massacre’

Memorial to Yiman leader Bilba at Wallumbilla (Source: Goodbye Bussamarai)

On October 27, 1857, a group of Aboriginal Australians, members of a group known as Yiman carried out a massacre: they attacked Hornet Bank Station, a newly-established large sheep run in Queensland. Three white men, two women and six children were killed in the attack. The women and an 11-year-old girl were raped and one man was castrated before they were clubbed to death. The event is remembered in Australian history as the ‘Hornet Bank Massacre.’

By contrast, there is no name or single term of reference for the events that led up to and that followed the Hornet Bank Massacre. In the lead-up to the event, the Yiman had been dispossessed of their lands on the Dawson Plains by white settlers establishing sheep runs. In the process, they had been subjected to violence and humiliation, including wanton killings and rape. After the event, an irregular paramilitary force, the so-called Native Police, as well as white vigilante groups, engaged in brutal revenge killings. The Yiman decorated themselves with crescent-shaped cicatrices on the chest and people with those characteristic markings were shot on sight. The numbers of those murdered in this revenge killing spree are debated – the most conservative estimate is that 150 Yiman and related people were killed in the 18 months after the Hornet Bank Massacre. Many others were maimed and displaced. Within a decade, the Yiman as a distinct group with their own culture and language became extinct.

No anthropological or linguistic account of the Yiman exists and so we will never know whether they had a word for ‘massacre’ or not. I made the headline up although the idea that they didn’t is not as far-fetched as it may sound. Aboriginal law operated as a redistributive justice system within closely circumscribed limits. Ted Strehlow, the eminent anthropologist of Aboriginal Australia, noted:

[…] in spite of considerable differences in point of language and as regards local customs, no tribe sought to dominate or terrorize its neighbours. […] even if a local totemic group was almost wiped out in a particularly fierce blood-feud, the successful raiders respected the sacred sites and made no attempt to seize the hunting grounds of the vanquished for their own use. No ursurpers would have risked the vengeance of the local earth-born supernatural beings. (Strehlow, T. G.H., The Sustaining Ideals of Australian Aboriginal Societies. Melbourne, 1962, p. 10)

I first became interested in the Hornet Bank Massacre when I read about it in Egon Erwin Kisch’s Australian Landfall (1937). Kisch seems to have been the first to have noticed that by most counts the events following ‘the massacre’ were more of a ‘massacre’ than the event that bears that denomination.

Many people get excited by the fact of linguistic relativity and think it matters hugely in intercultural communication whether a language has a word for something or not. They are wrong. Whether Yiman had a word for ‘massacre’ or not is entirely pointless: what we know is that speakers of that language committed one and suffered a series of massacres that led to their extermination. What is of real interest in intercultural
communication is whose point of view gets recorded, whose voice matters. Dell Hymes has called this communicative relativity:

[I]t is essential to notice that Whorf's sort of linguistic relativity is secondary, and dependent upon a primary sociolinguistic relativity, that of differential engagement of languages in social life. For example, description of a language may show that it expresses a certain cognitive style, perhaps implicit metaphysical assumptions, but what chance the language has to make an impress upon individuals and behaviour will depend upon the degree and pattern of its admission into communicative events. (Hymes, Dell., *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*. Philadelphia, 1974, p. 18)

75 years have passed since Kisch first observed that Australian history was only told from the invaders' point of view and I was curious to see how much that has changed since then. Have aboriginal voices got a better chance now to make an impress? Have they been admitted to Australian history? I'm sure there has been much progress but as far as the colonial war of expansion fought in Queensland in the mid-19th century is concerned, we don't even have a term for it yet.

Wikipedia has an entry for 'Hornet Bank Massacre' but none for 'Yiman massacre' or similar although the latter does appear in a list of massacres of Indigenous Australians. The website *Monuments Australia* categorises memorials to 'conflict' into 14 themes: one of these is 'indigenous' and there is a memorial listed commemorating the Hornet Bank Massacre: it is described as a "cairn at Hornet Bank Station in memory of Europeans killed by the aborigines." No memorial to the Yiman is listed although I've discovered one on another website (of an out-of-print book commemorating aboriginal resistance fighters).

Off the internet, there is an excellent book about the events under discussion: Gordon Reid's *A Nest of Hornets: The Massacre of the Fraser Family at Hornet Bank Station, Central Queensland, 1857, and Related Events*. The book is out of print. My local public library doesn't hold a copy but Macquarie University Library does – in the Automated Retrieval Collection (which means it's not displayed on the shelves but has to be requested). Requesting an item from the Automated Retrieval Collection is easy enough but you have to know what you are looking for. The time stamps in the back of the book indicate that this particular copy is taken out for loan on average every two years. So, there is a detailed fair and balanced account incorporating all available evidence and voices – but its "chance to make an impress" is evidently extremely limited.

One more piece of evidence: according to all records I've read, William Fraser, surviving son and brother of those killed, "never lost an opportunity of shooting a wild blackfellow as long as he lived" (contemporary, quoted in Reid, p. 145). Despite the fact that there were witnesses to many of his murders, he killed with impunity. There never was even an inquiry into his murders despite the fact that simply shouting "Watch out, Billy Fraser is about!" was a common tease of aboriginal people at the time and sent them running away in terror. When he died in 1914, the local newspaper described him as "one of the oldest pioneers of this part of Queensland [whose] death will be received with regret by a large number of old residents in Queensland" (quoted in Reid, p. 153). Has that assessment of his character changed? I looked up the man who is reported to have killed more than 100 people in his life in a list of Australian mass murderers: his name is not there.

As we've remembered the men and women serving in the armed forces once again this Anzac Day, Aboriginal voices are still left largely outside the communicative event that is Australian history: their stories remain hidden.