

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

ISSN: 2572-3626

Volume 12 | Issue 2

Article 13

11-2-2014

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Recommended Citation

Sponsel, Leslie E. (2014). "The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman - Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert", *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 13, 172-178.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70845/2572-3626.1193>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol12/iss2/13>

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The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman

Kopenawa, Davi, and Bruce Albert.

Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 2013.
622 pp. ISBN 978-0-674-72468-6.

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The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman is a truly unique and awesome masterpiece. It affords the reader the special privilege of entering, understanding, and appreciating the complex and profound mental and spiritual realms of the Yanomami in their forest habitat. It reveals their intellectually rich and complex cosmology and symbolism as well as their mysterious shamanic rituals. Furthermore, the processes and consequences of Western contact are addressed through the unique perspective of the Yanomami shaman and leader Davi Kopenawa. Based on his observations during travels in Brazil and abroad, this book offers a fascinating and penetrating Yanomami critique of aspects of the West.

This monumental work reflects the extensive and penetrating dialogical and collaborative ethnography between an extraordinary Yanomami and an extraordinary anthropologist. Kopenawa initiated the project, is the first author, and dominates most of the text. The additions Bruce Albert, the consciously discrete editor, are obvious only in the extensive endnotes, the final essay titled "How the Book Was Written," and subsequent supplementary components. He reproduced, as faithfully as possible, Kopenawa's oral narrative, speaking style, nonverbal communication, and emotion in written form. Also, this book demonstrates the fact that in anthropology, basic research and applied work can be mutually reinforcing and synergetic.

The book is divided into three parts, each with eight chronological and thematic chapters: I. Becoming Other; II. Metal Smoke; and III. The Falling Sky. The first focuses on Kopenawa's shamanic training and experience; the second on the consequences of the invasion of gold miners; and the third on his leadership in Brazil and internationally on behalf of Yanomami survival, welfare, and rights. These three parts are introduced by two essays, "Setting the Scene" by Albert and "Words Given" by Kopenawa. Included are five detailed maps of Yanomami territory in Brazil and Venezuela. There are concluding essays titled "Words of Omama" by Kopenawa and "How This Book Was Written" by Albert. Four appendices are titled: A. Ethnonym, Language, and Orthography; B. The Yanomami in Brazil; C. *Watoriki*; and D. The Haximu Massacre (*Watoriki* is Kopenawa's current village). The text is expertly elucidated by extensive "Notes," even the appendices. The book ends with an "Ethnobiological Glossary," "Geographic Glossary," "References," "Acknowledgements," and "Index." The first glossary includes a map of the distribution of the four Yanomami languages. Every one of these components contains meticulous detail and is most informative. In this and many other ways, anthropologist Albert's own contributions to this book are only of the very highest quality of science and scholarship. They reflect his profound ethnographic and personal knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the life, society, culture, and language of the Yanomami, grounded through three and a half decades of regular fieldwork.

Not merely a native biography recorded by an anthropologist, the book is the result of an extended intimate dialog and collaboration between both authors. As Albert eloquently states,

In short, this extensive book is the result of a complex collaborative endeavor at the fragile juncture of our two cultural universes.... At a critical time in his life and in the history of his people, Davi Kopenawa decided to entrust me with his words because of my close involvement with the Yanomami, and to put his words in writing so that they would find a path to an audience far beyond the forest where he was born. In doing so he hoped not only to denounce the direct threats affecting the Yanomami and the Amazon rain forest, but to launch an appeal, in his role as shaman against the widespread damage caused by ‘the People of Merchandise’ and the danger it represents for the future of humanity.... The text is an unprecedented narrative endeavor rooted in a life story and personal commitment that give him radical singularity, including within the Yanomami universe (p. 8).

Kopenawa is one of the 16,000 Yanomami living in over 230 local communities in Brazil. He was born around 1956 in the village of *Marakana* in the upper Rio Toototobi, and in the early 1980s, he moved to the village of *Watoriki* after marrying the daughter of its headman, the latter his mentor for learning to become a shaman. Kopenawa has six children and four grandchildren. Albert succinctly encapsulates the character of his colleague:

Davi Kopenawa is a complex man, alternately tense or welcoming, introverted or charismatic. Every episode in his personal trajectory attests to his remarkable intellectual curiosity, his unfailing determination, and his great personal courage.... Despite his fame, he remains utterly detached from material things, and he takes pride only in challenging the arrogant deafness of white people. In the forest, his passion is to respond to the songs of shamanic spirits; in the city, to advocate for his people. A tireless defender of Yanomami territory and rights, he remains a zealous partisan of the tradition of his elders and especially their shamanic knowledge (p. 5).

The extraordinary friendship and collaboration between Kopenawa and Albert gradually developed over several decades. Their book is the result of 93 hours of interviews, most during 1989-2001. Albert transcribed the recordings into over 1,000 pages, all in the Yanomami language. The final revision of the book was completed during March, 2008 in *Watoriki*. Albert asserts that “I sought to keep together ethnographic accuracy and aesthetic concerns, make the text readable, convey the poetic and contrastive conceptual effects of Yanomami speech, and bring out the voice of the narrator, at times indignant, jovial, or poignant” (p. 453). Both agreed completely on the final text. Albert started his field research with Yanomami in March, 1975. He writes that

The Yanomami charmed me immediately with their elegance and mocking pride as they wove their way among giant bulldozers opening the road, or humorously outsmarted the intrusive good intentions of a local Italian priest (p. 5).

Albert decided to make a permanent commitment to basic and applied research with the Yanomami as an engaged observer and as a way of life (pp. 5-6). Kopenawa entrusts his friend and colleague Albert with communicating in writing to the outside world what the Yanomami world is all about, the awesome beauty of the forest, what the Yanomami themselves actually think, their knowledge and wisdom, the experience of the shaman in communicating with the spirits of the forest, and the vital necessity of defending the forest for the Yanomami and for all humankind and the planet as a whole. Kopenawa celebrates the spiritual ecology of the Yanomami and their forest home while warning about the existential threat to them and the planet of the rampant materialism and consumerism of industrial capitalism.

The *xapiri*, or spirits, reside in the hills and mountains. Every being in the forest has a spirit image. As a child, Kopenawa saw spirits in his dreams, thus already he was predisposed to become a shaman. A shamanic apprenticeship is described in Chapter 5 in unprecedented detail. The apprenticeship is a most serious, very long, and quite arduous process, not something for anyone to play with as a trivial experiment which would be grossly disrespectful and hazardous. While children are encouraged to imitate adults, they are warned that it would be dangerous to imitate shamans as the spirits might become irritated

and take revenge. Blowing the hallucinogenic drug through a tube into the nostrils introduces the very “breath of life” and transforms the recipient into a spirit. Forest spirits can be awesomely beautiful and powerfully helpful, in curing, for example, yet they can also be terribly frightening, dangerous, and malevolent under some circumstances. Kopenawa claims that long before he went to the white people’s land, he had visions about it, and he was told by elder shamans that they did too.

The chapter titled “From One War To Another” describes aggression among the Yanomami. Kopenawa mentions that raids occurred in earlier times during his childhood, but have mostly ceased. He asserts that “We never attack other houses first because we fear there will be no end to reprisals. But if their inhabitants attacked our people, we would not hesitate to seek revenge by sending them our own flesh-starved *xapiri*!” (p. 125). When an enemy is suspected of causing a death through sorcery then this may be avenged either through counter sorcery or an actual raid. It may take a long time to avenge a death and attempts are not always successful. The *onokae* ritual status applies to an individual who has killed another with his spirits as well as to someone who has done so physically. Kopenawa states that “The white people may call this ‘to make war,’ but we only say *niyayuu*, to arrow each other” (p. 365). Kopenawa exposes the hypocrisy in some white people:

During my distant trips to the white people’s lands, I sometimes heard them claim that we are warlike and that we spend our time shooting arrows at each other. Obviously, those who say such things do not know us, and their words are false or are just lies. It is true that our long-ago elders engaged in raids, just like the white people had their own wars. But theirs proved far more dangerous and fierce than ours. We never killed each other without restraint, the way they did. We do not have bombs that burn houses and all of their inhabitants. When in old times our warriors wanted to arrow their enemies, it was a truly different thing. (p. 357).

He states categorically: “We are not a fierce people!” (p. 364). Albert affirms that: “... the term *waitiri* is quite ambivalent as it can affirm a quality (‘valor, courage, endurance’) or denounce a rejected behavior (‘aggressive, violent’), depending on the context” (p. 553, Note 5). Moreover, considering the nature of war in the white world, Kopenawa asserts: “This is why they are the ones who are truly fierce!” (p. 360).

Kopenawa also says: “... they continue to lie about us by saying: ‘The Yanomami are fierce. All they think about is warring and stealing women. They are dangerous!’ Such words are our enemies and we detest them. If we were so fierce, no outsider would ever have stayed with us” (p.24). Kopenawa implies that the aggressive characterization of the Yanomami is used as an excuse to invade their land for exploitation. In his own community and when visiting others, he admonishes people to not fight among themselves and instead to fight with words the outsiders who threaten them and their land.

According to Kopenawa, generosity is one of the foremost values for Yanomami. They do not hoard trade goods, but readily give them away. Goods do not create jealousy and competition. If a visitor asks for some goods they are not refused. As a result trade goods spread far and wide throughout the forest.

In 1958, Kopenawa first saw white people. Part II of the book documents successive encounters with the encroaching frontier in Brazil, including the military and Boundary Commission, evangelist missionaries like the New Tribes Mission, government agents such as from the infamous FUNAI (National Indian Foundation), road construction workers, illegal wildcat goldminers, and various non-governmental organizations fighting for Yanomami survival, well-being, and rights.

Kopenawa narrates that before strangers arrived from the outside, most Yanomami died when they were very old with white hair and maybe also blind. It was rare for enemy raiders to ambush and kill one or two people at dawn. However, since contact, the Yanomami have been repeatedly plagued by diseases like malaria, influenza, pneumonia, measles, and tuberculosis. Clearly, Kopenawa is preoccupied with disease far more than anything else, most introduced by outsiders, especially the road construction crew and subsequent mining invasion. He became a shaman primarily to cure sickness. He says, “I never forgot the sadness and anger I felt when my people died when I was a child” (p. 315).

Kopenawa never knew his father, who died while he was still a baby. He doesn't even know his father's name. This is because, as he repeatedly notes in the book, it is most disrespectful to mention a personal name in front of that individual or members who know him or her, and a breach of this taboo arouses intense anger. He asserts that missionaries bribed Yanomami with trade goods to engage with their alien religious beliefs and practices. Missionaries even terrorized them with angry words and the promise of burning in hell for eternity if they did not convert and conform. Initially, the people of his birth village, *Marakana*, gradually started to accept Christianity. Shamans even stopped practicing as missionaries condemned them for their association with the devil. However, eventually villagers became disillusioned and angry with the missionaries as they observed their hypocrisy and lies.

During one epidemic, Kopenawa's mother died. She was buried by the missionaries, contrary to Yanomami customs and a great offense. He never found out where his mother was buried and could never grieve appropriately which remains a deep sorrow and still makes him angry.

Chapters 15 and 16 are devoted to the devastating epidemics and numerous deaths from road construction in the 1970s and then by miners in the 1980s and beyond. Where the road construction occurred, and then with the subsequent spread of farming and ranching, the subsistence, sanitation, health, and society all deteriorated among the affected Yanomami. This continues more than four decades later. Kopenawa comments that "These white people's thought is obscured by their avidity for gold. They are evil beings" (p. 263). Miners become the greatest danger for the survival, well-being, and rights of the Yanomami. During the late 1980s, an estimated 40,000 miners invaded Yanomami territory in Brazil. This illegal invasion caused the deaths of more than a thousand Yanomami, more than 13% of the population, mostly from introduced diseases, but some from violence. Kopenawa responded to this catastrophe by starting an international campaign to defend his people and their forest. Kopenawa says that outsiders are the dangerous and fierce ones, exemplified in the terribly brutal massacre at Hashimu by the dismemberment and mutilation of the elderly, women, children, and infant Yanomami by miners and hired professional murderers. In the investigation of the aftermath by federal agents, Kopenawa served as a Yanomami observer and Albert as an interpreter and anthropological advisor. Appendix D reproduces the final report of the horrific details of the massacre and terrorism which has been recognized legally as attempted genocide.

The chapter called "The Spirits of the Forest" offers an extraordinary lesson in Yanomami spiritual ecology. Kopenawa asserts that what the white people call ecology, Yanomami know and understand themselves. The Yanomami, forest, and spirits are ecology. He says that "What the white people call 'nature's protection' is actually us, the forest people, those who have lived under the cover of its trees since the beginning of time.... We have friendship for the forest because we know that the *xapiri* spirits are its true owners" (p. 398).

In several places in the text, it is clear that Kopenawa is well aware of the environmental consequences of deforestation as a result of his travels in Yanomami areas devastated by miners, and beyond by airplane to Boa Vista and Manaus in Brazil. For example, he observes that "The forest is alive. It can only die if the white people persist in destroying it. If they succeed, the rivers will disappear underground, the soil will crumble, the trees will shrivel up, and the stones will crack in the heat. The dried-up earth will become empty and silent" (p. xvii).

Kopenawa's introduction to Western environmentalism developed when he worked with FUNAI and the federal police to stop illegal trade in animal skins. This was an early catalyst for his involvement in defending the forest even before the miners and prior to his collaboration with the Pro-Yanomami Commission. Later, he started talking about ecology on his own accord when he realized that it could be useful in defending his people and their forest territory. He states:

The *näpenäperi* spirits also mentioned the places where the white people build their machines and motors, on distant lands full of soiled waters, incessant noise, and epidemic fumes.... This is how the spirits made me understand that the forest was not endless, as I once thought it was.... If we did not know anything of the *xapiri*,

we would also know nothing of the forest, and we would be as oblivious as the white people. We would not think to defend it. The spirits worry that the white people will devastate all its trees and rivers (p. 257).

The Yanomami value as most virtuous cooperation, reciprocity, and generosity— just the opposite of those of many individuals and groups in capitalism, from Kopenawa's observations. In the chapter titled "Merchandise Love" and elsewhere, he offers a most systematic and explicit critique of Western industrialism and rapacious capitalism with its obsessive and cancerous materialism and consumerism. He observes:

But the white people are other than us.... Their thought remains constantly attached to their merchandise. They make it relentlessly and constantly desire new goods. But they are probably not as wise as they think they are. I fear that this euphoria of merchandise will have no end and that they will entangle themselves with it to the point of chaos. They are already constantly killing each other for money in their cities and fighting other people for minerals and oil they take from the ground. But they do not seem concerned that they are making us all perish with the epidemic fumes that escape from all these things. They do not think that they are spoiling the earth and the sky and that they will never be able to recreate new ones (p.281).

In 1983, Kopenawa first spoke outside of his own cultural context when he was invited to a conference in Manaus by leaders of the Union of Indigenous Nations. There he learned from other indigenes like Makuxi and Wapixana. Subsequently, he organized an intercultural indigenous meeting in his home village of *Watoriki*. Next, he traveled to Brazilia to speak with then President Jose Sarney about the miners, but claims that he only heard lies. Also he spoke out about the plight of the Yanomami on radio and television, as well as in speeches and papers. Kopenawa became acquainted with personnel of the Pro-Yanomami Commission. He states:

The white people who had become my friends encouraged me to speak, it is true. But they never taught me how to do it! Among my people, the elders teach us the way to utter right and wise words from childhood with their *hereamuu* speeches. Yet it was not my elders or white people who taught me how to speak to protect the forest. I really figured it out alone, though at the beginning I had no idea how to go about it! (p. 254).

In December 1989, Kopenawa traveled for the first time outside of Brazil at the invitation of Survival International in London to represent them in Stockholm and receive the Right Livelihood Award, the alternative Nobel Prize. This provided the first important international venue for him to speak out in defense of his people and the forest against the mining invasion. As he movingly says that "We do not want to tear the minerals out of the earth nor make their epidemic fumes fall back on us. We just want the forest to remain silent and the sky to be clear so that we can see the stars when night falls" (p. 340). On October 12-16, 1990, he participated in Paris at the People's Permanent Tribunal about the Brazilian Amazon. Then, in April, 1991, he visited the United States, supported by Survival International. There he met with then UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar as well as representatives of the Organization of American States, U.S. State Department, and World Bank. Furthermore, he visited the Onondaga people of New York where he learned that the indigenous inhabitants of the area suffered the kind of gross mistreatment that the Yanomami have been experiencing in more recent times.

It is important to note that beyond trying to inform and alert the outside world, Kopenawa has visited many Yanomami communities to help them become better informed about the ills and dangers of the outside, encouraged by elders of his village. He reveals his ultimate motivation: "I want my children, their children, and the children of their children to be able to live in [the forest] quietly, like our ancestors could before us. This is my entire thought and work" (p. 259).

As Albert writes: "His unique experience with white people, his extraordinary firmness of character, and the legitimacy that came with his initiation as a shaman made him the most

influential spokesperson for the Yanomami cause in Brazil and abroad” (p. 4). By the 1980s, Kopenawa’s campaign in defense of the Yanomami and their forest was communicated to the public by all of the major media in Brazil and internationally. His knowledge, understanding, and insights are the result of many contributing factors: his shamanic practice and shamanic colleagues including his father-in-law; his non-Yanomami colleagues like Albert and those in the advocacy and human rights communities, especially the Pro-Yanomami Commission and Survival International; and his own practical experience and observations from travels in much of Yanomami territory, parts of Brazil, Europe, and the United States.

He has won recognition nationally and internationally for his character and campaign: in 1988 the UN Global 500 Award, 1989 the Right Livelihood Award, 1999 Order of the Rio Branco from the president of Brazil, 2008 Bartolome de las Casas Award from Spain, and 2009 Order of Cultural Merit in Brazil. Then, in 2004, he became the founding president of the Hutukara association representing the majority of the Yanomami in Brazil. (See the websites of Hutukara, Pro-Yanomami Commission, and Survival International).

Kopenawa says “The shamans clearly see that the forest is suffering and sick. They fear that it will finally return to chaos and that all the human beings will be crushed, as it happened once before.” (pp. 255-256). He believes that if the shamans died, then they could no longer protect the Yanomami, the forest, the whites, and the planet. There would be a global apocalypse, although he doesn’t use that term. He asserts that if the Yanomami disappear, then later the whites will as well. This reflects the book’s title “The Falling Sky,” which refers to a traditional account of the cataclysmic end of the first humans. The Yanomami believe that this may again be the fate of the world because of the destruction of the forest and its people by the miners.

Kopenawa appears to recognize phenomena of global climate change. For example, he notes the droughts and floods in distant lands and says “There is only one sky and we must take care of it, for if it becomes sick, everything will come to an end” (p. 410).

It is most appropriate to conclude with Kopenawa’s reflection: “I often listen to the words of my spirits who angrily ask themselves: Why are the white people so hostile to us? Why do they want us to die? What do they have against us who do not mistreat them? Is it simply because we are other people, inhabitants of the forest?” (p. 408).