

Font Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

The New York Review of Books

The Voice of the Shaman

Glenn Shepard Jr.

NOVEMBER 6, 2014 ISSUE

The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman

by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, translated from the French by Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy
Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 622 pp., \$39.95



Amazonas/Contact Press Images

Shaman Davi Kopenawa in the Yanomami village of Demini, settled in the late 1970s near a FUNAI outpost that occupied a barracks from the abandoned Perimetral Norte road project, Yanomami territory, Roraima state, Brazil, April 2014; photographs by Sebastião Salgado, whose exhibition 'Sebastião Salgado: Genesis' is at the International Center of Photography, New York City, until January 11, 2015. The catalog is edited by Lélia Wanick Salgado and published by Taschen.

The Falling Sky, by the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa and the French anthropologist Bruce Albert, takes its title from a creation myth of the Yanomami people, who live in the border region between Brazil and Venezuela. The primordial world was crushed by the collapse of the sky, hurling its inhabitants into the underworld. The exposed “back” of the previous sky became the forest where the Yanomami emerged, and where they remain to this day; they still call the forest “the old sky.” A new sky was erected, held in place by metal foundations set deep in the ground by the demiurge Omama. Yet the new sky is under constant assault by the forces of chaos, and Yanomami shamans work tirelessly with their spirit allies, the *xapiri*, to avert a new apocalypse. A diaphanous third sky already lies waiting, high above, in case the current one collapses and the world once again comes to an end.

Numbering 33,000, the Yanomami are one of the Amazon’s largest indigenous societies, occupying a vast territory centered on the Parima mountain range dividing the Amazon from the Orinoco basin. Isolated until the early twentieth century, their first regular contacts with missionaries and government agents in Brazil began between 1940 and 1960. These relations brought them metal tools and other desired trade goods as well as fatal disease epidemics.

In the 1970s, the Brazilian government began cutting the northern leg of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, causing deforestation and new disruptions to Yanomami life. Highway construction was abandoned after several years but a huge gold rush in the mid-1980s inflicted tremendous suffering and ecological devastation. In 1992 international campaigns by anthropologists and indigenous and nongovernmental organizations resulted in the demarcation of a contiguous territory for the Yanomami totaling 192,000 square kilometers (slightly larger than Florida) shared between Brazil and Venezuela. Both authors of this book, Kopenawa as international Yanomami spokesman and Albert as cofounder of the nongovernmental organization CCPY (Pro-Yanomami Commission), were central figures in this important victory, and both remain active in the ongoing struggle against mining incursions and other threats.¹

The Falling Sky is several things. It is the autobiography of Davi Kopenawa, one of Brazil’s most prominent and eloquent indigenous leaders. It is the most vivid and authentic account of shamanistic philosophy I have ever read. It is also a passionate appeal for the rights of indigenous people and a scathing condemnation of the damage wrought by missionaries, gold miners, and white people’s greed. The footnotes alone harbor monographs on Yanomami botany and zoology, mythology, ritual, and history.

Most of all, *The Falling Sky* is an elegy to oral tradition and the power of the spoken word. We take for granted the superior fidelity and durability of the printed word over speech in transmitting knowledge through time. In his singular voice Kopenawa, talking of *xapiri*

spirits, turns this notion on its head:

I do not possess old books in which my ancestors' words have been drawn. The *xapiri*'s words are set in my thought, in the deepest part of me.... They are very old, yet the shamans constantly renew them.... They can neither be watered down nor burned. They will not get old like those that stay stuck to image skins made from dead trees. When I am long gone, they will still be as new and strong as they are now.

The book was transcribed, translated, and edited from a hundred hours of taped interviews Albert conducted with Kopenawa in the Yanomami language from 1989 through 2001. The project began in late 1989 (the two had already known each other for a decade) when Kopenawa, in an anguished reaction to the invasion of Yanomami lands by gold miners, left Albert an extended audio message on three cassette tapes. Their collaborative translation and publication of this material, "joining shamanism with ethnopolitics," brought the Yanomami cause to international attention. Continuing the process, Kopenawa asked Albert to help him write this book, setting his spoken words on paper (what he calls "image skins" or "paper skins") in the white man's language ("ghost talk") to spread them throughout the world.

As both narrator and first author, Kopenawa addresses the reader directly: "You don't know me and you have never seen me. You live on a distant land. This is why I want to let you know what the elders taught me."

Davi Kopenawa was born around 1956 on the upper Rio Toototobi near Brazil's border with Venezuela, which at the time had not yet been formally demarcated. His Yanomami name is known to his kinsmen but cannot be repeated in polite company: for the Yanomami, pronouncing a person's name, especially that of a dead family member, is offensive and infuriating. Annoyed by outsiders who constantly pester the Yanomami about their names, Kopenawa says simply, "We want to protect our name. We don't like to repeat it all the time."

His Christian name, Davi (David), was given by evangelical "New Tribes" missionaries who built an outpost at Toototobi in 1963. The surname Kopenawa he acquired himself, years later, during shamanic initiation. The name refers to *kopena*, a fierce wasp species whose warrior spirits help him battle illness and evil forces.

The Falling Sky is organized thematically rather than chronologically, shifting between details of Kopenawa's life, observations about Yanomami culture, digressions on myth and cosmology, and accounts of dreams and shamanic visions. Though repetitive and sometimes rambling, the reiteration of particular facts and phrases provides rhyme and meter to a text that originated as an oral performance.

The first section of the book describes Kopenawa's initiation as a shaman in the early 1980s, when he was already disenchanted with the white people's world. Yanomami shamans use a powerful hallucinogenic snuff, *yãkoana*, made from the resin of the nutmeg relative *Virola elongata*. By taking it, the shaman "dies" or "becomes other" and experiences the spirit world firsthand. Kopenawa renders these visions with images of haunting beauty:

The *xapiri* float down through the air from their mirrors to come protect us.... Their mirrors arrive from the sky's chest, slowly preceding them. They suddenly stop in the air and remain suspended.... When they arrive, their songs name the distant lands they came from and traveled through. They evoke the places where they drank the waters of a sweet river, the disease-free forests where they ate unknown foods, the edges of the sky where, without night, one never sleeps.

The *xapiri*, enumerated encyclopedically as spirit beings who are identified with particular biological species, are as exuberant and diverse as the rainforest itself:

Once the parrot has finished his song, the tapir spirit begins his, then comes the turn of the jaguar spirit, the giant armadillo spirit, and all the animal ancestors' spirits.... The agouti, acouchi, and paca spirits tear out the harmful things that the evil beings stuck in [the sick person's] image.... The wasp spirits arrow them, the spirits of the *witiwitima namo* kite lacerate them with their sharp blades, and the coati spirits knock them out with their clubs.... The spirits of the *aro kohi*, *apuru uhi*, *komatima hi*, and *oruxi hi* trees bump into them and knock them over. Those of the *wari mahi* tree thrash them. With their skulls split and their bodies covered in wounds, the stunned evil beings eventually stumble.

Kopenawa elucidates the philosophy underlying the Yanomami worldview. The relationship between "image" (spirit essences that shamans perceive and manipulate) and "skin" (physical manifestations) is reminiscent of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. The concept *në rope*, which Albert glosses as "value of growth," can be understood as a Yanomami alternative to Adam Smith's theory of capitalist markets. *Në rope* is the "invisible hand" that regulates Yanomami economy, ecology, and spirituality:

The value of growth remains abundant in the forest and if our gardens take the value of hunger [i.e., do not grow well], our shamans drink the *yãkoana* to bring it back home. And if need be we can also borrow the forest's fertility from a friendly house.... When the forest's richness runs away, the game becomes skinny and scarce, for this richness is what makes game prosper.... To live, their images must feed on the image of the forest's value of growth. This is why shamans also bring down the image of the game's fat with that of the forest's fertility.

Kopenawa's elaboration of shamanic concepts goes beyond ethnography and becomes a new genre of native philosophical inquiry. When an indigenous narrator this articulate produces an original exegesis of his own worldview, anthropology and anthropologists have become almost obsolete. Almost: for it is Bruce Albert's deep knowledge of Yanomami language and culture and his subtle skill as a translator that allow Kopenawa's voice to come through with such directness and power.

The second section of the book comes chronologically first, describing Kopenawa's early life. His father died when he was very young; the death was blamed on sorcery by an enemy warrior, an accusation as serious as homicide. Had he learned of this fact sooner, Kopenawa might have killed the sorcerer to avenge his father according to Yanomami custom. "But today a long time has passed, and I am no longer angry. Anyhow this man already died of malaria when the gold prospectors arrived."

His mother died in a measles epidemic that was brought to the village unwittingly in 1967 by the American missionary Keith Wardlaw, whose infant daughter was infected en route. The missionaries did their best to treat the sick, but the disease spread quickly, leaving 165 stricken, including Kopenawa himself, and seventeen dead.

In Yanomami funerals, the corpse is suspended up a tree within a protective lattice until it decomposes. The bones are then gathered, cremated, pulverized, and consumed in banana porridge in order to release the spirit. Christian burial is considered a "revolting practice": "We think that white people like mistreating their own deceased. They shut them up underground and insult them by mentioning their names at any opportunity."

Yet the missionaries were equally appalled by Yanomami customs, and took advantage of the villagers' physical exhaustion to bury the dead secretly:

I was never able to learn where my mother was buried. The people of *Teosi* ["God," from the Portuguese *Deus*] never told us, so that we could not gather the bones of our dead. Because of them, I was never able to mourn my mother the way our people usually do. It is a very bad thing.

In part fearing that the epidemic was retaliation for their resistance to Christian teachings (one Yanomami term for measles is *Teosi a wai*, "God's epidemic"), most in the village soon converted. Wardlaw and his wife published excerpts from their diaries in a missionary journal with the disconcerting title *Brown Gold*. They appear more concerned with the fact that "many of our friends had passed on to eternity without knowing Christ" than with the tragedy of the epidemic; indeed, they seem to revel in its power in persuading the Yanomami to accept Christian faith: "God never makes a mistake and now that the crisis is passed we can see how the Lord is working in hearts through the things that have happened.... The power of God is at work and it is a great and marvelous thing to behold."

Indeed.



Amazonas/Contact Press Images

Yanomami protectors of the sacred mountain Pico da Neblina (Mist Peak), which was overrun by gold miners in the late 1980s, Maturacá, Yanomami territory, Amazonas state, Brazil, April 2014

Yet the villagers' adhesion to Christianity was short-lived. Kopenawa's stepfather, a powerful leader who had been among the first to convert, encountered hypocrisy and logical contradictions in the missionaries' teachings. He and most others returned to the old ways. They were especially disappointed by *Teosi's* inability to prevent further epidemics despite their fervent prayers. Drawing on his later shamanic experiences, Kopenawa refutes Christian doctrine with practical reason:

The missionaries deceived us long ago! Too often, I listened to them tell us... "[Jesus] will come down to you! He will come soon!" But time has passed and I still haven't seen him! I finally got tired of hearing these lies. Do shamans vainly repeat this kind of thing all the time? No, they drink the *yãkoana* and instantly bring down their spirits' image.

Kopenawa declares, "[God] is dead and his ghost disappeared beyond the sky."

After his mother's death, Kopenawa became restless. At age fifteen he began working for Brazil's federal Indian agency, FUNAI, as a native guide. Thus began a decade-long period, from the early 1970s through the early 1980s, of extensive travels in Yanomami territory and neighboring indigenous lands, and to cities like Manaus and Boa Vista. He makes fun of his own youthful enthusiasm "to become a white man": "When I saw the white people slip on their pants, I thought: 'I am going to hide my legs just like them!'" Upon first arriving in Manaus, he sees bustling activity in the market and muses, "All this to barter...for some old pieces of paper skin [money]." He observes with innocent candor, "I had never seen so many white people! They were really everywhere! I told myself they must never stop copulating to be so numerous."

His fascination with this world ended when he contracted tuberculosis. After a lengthy stay in a hospital he returned home and "little by little the desire to become a white man disappeared from my mind." He went back to work for FUNAI in the mid-1970s, witnessing the senseless destruction caused by the ill-fated Perimetral Norte road project. No longer naive about white people's ways, he began to understand the threat they pose to the existence of the Yanomami and the forest: "The white people's thought is full of ignorance. They constantly devastate the land they live on and transform the waters they drink into quagmires!"

In the early 1980s, Kopenawa married the daughter of a traditionalist shaman and began the initiation recounted in Part I of *The Falling Sky*. During the late 1980s, however, Yanomami territory was overrun by tens of thousands of gold prospectors, bringing new waves of epidemics and unprecedented cultural and environmental devastation. Kopenawa, drawing on his shamanic insights and unique experience among whites, emerged as the main spokesman for the Yanomami cause.

He remarks: "The things that white people work so hard to extract from the depths of the earth, minerals and oil, are not foods." Drawing on myths and shamanic experiences, Kopenawa develops his own understanding of the destructive forces unleashed by mining. Digging deep underground threatens to "tear out the sky's roots," the metal foundations erected by the creator god Omama to hold up the cosmos. He concludes that minerals are in fact "fragments of the sky, moon, sun, and stars, which fell down in the beginning of time." These hot, dangerous "sorcery substances" were hidden by Omama in the cool depths of the earth. "Tearing these evil things out of the ground" and smelting them unleashes disease-ridden vapors. Epidemic illnesses are represented in the spirit world as cannibal beings living in "houses overflowing with merchandise and food, like gold prospector camps."

These illnesses make not only the Yanomami sick, but the sky itself:

The sky...is getting as sick as we do! If all this continues, its image will become

riddled with holes from the heat of the mineral fumes. Then it will slowly melt, like a plastic bag thrown in the fire.... If the sky catches fire, it will fall again. Then we will all be burned, and we will be hurled into the underworld like the first people in the beginning of time.

The third part of the book recounts Kopenawa's international travels, beginning in the late 1980s, to conferences and events in the US and Europe to represent the Yanomami cause and receive numerous honors, among them Spain's Bartolomé de las Casas Award. Kopenawa examines these experiences to explore the deep cosmological and philosophical divide between his own worldview and that of white people.

Of the "Merchandise Love" that he sees at the root of white people's greed and destructiveness, he states with prophetic moral clarity: "Merchandise does not die.... When a human being dies, his ghost does not carry any of his goods onto the sky's back, even if he is very greedy." Kopenawa also perceives how the shamanic path has set him apart from ordinary Yanomami: "If you do not become other with the *yãkoana*, you can only live in ignorance. You limit yourself to eating, laughing, copulating, speaking in vain, and sleeping without dreaming much."

The anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, author of *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*,² is mentioned briefly at the end of the book. However, especially in Chapter 21, where Kopenawa contrasts Yanomami traditional revenge killings with the Western phenomenon of total war, Chagnon's controversial legacy³ looms large, as does Albert's own editorial hand. This chapter seems to recapitulate, in Kopenawa's voice, the same arguments Albert has raised against Chagnon in heated scholarly debates.⁴ As a cultural anthropologist, Albert sees Yanomami warfare from the native point of view: an integral part of mourning practices that aim at erasing all traces of the dead person (including cremated bones) and quickly satiating grief-fueled rage through revenge on the individual killer or sorcerer. Chagnon's widely cited sociobiological theory reduces Yanomami warfare to a Darwinian contest among males to capture women and procreate.⁵ Albert and others⁶ have used Chagnon's own data to refute his central claim that the "fiercer," more homicidal Yanomami men have more offspring.

Yet the overall picture Chagnon paints of Yanomami society during the 1960s in his notorious ethnography is not altogether different from that described by Kopenawa for the same period: "At that time, our elders did not hesitate to kill the enemies who had eaten [a Yanomami expression for 'killing in warfare', not actual cannibalism] their kin. They were very valiant." Albert quibbles about the nuances of the Yanomami term *waithiri*, glossed by Chagnon as "fierce" but qualified by Albert as "ambivalently...both 'aggressive' and 'valiant.'" There is little doubt from Kopenawa's own words that the Yanomami value bravery, revenge, and the warrior ethos, though many other things besides. In his frank

language, Kopenawa refers often to his kinsmen's preoccupation with "eating vulvas"; the fact that the verb "to eat" is a euphemism for both intercourse and killing suggests that the Yanomami, like many people, see sex and violence as somehow related, if not in the casual sense suggested by Chagnon's hypotheses.

Kopenawa concludes by reflecting on the profound cultural changes that have turned this warrior ethos outward toward new threats: "The words of warfare have not disappeared from our mind, but today we no longer want to harm ourselves this way."

He describes with sincere regret how he lost an especially powerful bird spirit after a long airplane flight: "Some of my *xapiri* were carried away as down feathers by the blast of the airplane motors.... The paths of my new *ayokora* cacique bird spirits must have been severed without my knowledge." And yet various uncanny experiences and dreams during overseas trips reinforced his conviction that the *xapiri* are indeed present in these distant lands, and that they "also work to protect the white people who live under the same sky." He finds echoes of Yanomami notions in Western environmental thought, but with an important caveat: "Since the beginning of time, *Omama* has been the center of what the white people call *ecology*.... In the forest, we human beings are the 'ecology.'"

Absorbing global discussions of climate change and the environment, Kopenawa finds a universal application for his shamanic calling: "There is only one sky and we must take care of it, for if it becomes sick, everything will come to an end."

The hybrid "written/spoken textual duet" Albert has created with his Yanomami friend rescues what Marshall McLuhan calls the "resonating diversity of spoken words" on the typographic page. Like his ancestors, whose voices will continue to echo in shamans' songs after his death, Davi Kopenawa has made sure that his own powerful words will be preserved:

Even if they do not listen to my words while I am alive, I am leaving the drawings of these words on this paper skin so that their children and those who are born after them can one day see and understand them.

1 Kopenawa's Hutukara Association posts frequent online updates at www.hutukara.org. ↩

2 Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968. ↩

3 For my own discussion of the controversy, see "An Ax to Grind: Napoleon Chagnon, the Yanomami and the Anthropology Tribe," *Notes from the Ethnoground*, March 30, 2013, at ethnoground.blogspot.com. ↩

4 See Bruce Albert, "Yanomami 'Violence': Inclusive Fitness or Ethnographer's Representation?," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 20, No. 5 (1989). ↩

- 5 See Napoleon Chagnon, "Life Histories, Blood Revenge, and Warfare in a Tribal Population," *Science*, Vol. 239, No. 4843 (1988). ↗
- 6 See Brian Ferguson, "Materialist, Culturalist, and Biological Theories on Why the Yanomami Make War," *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 2001). ↗

© 1963-2014 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved.