

The fold behind the knee

review by Stephen Corry of

'The Falling Sky: words of a Yanomami shaman'

by Davi Kopenawa & Bruce Albert

This should become one of the most important books of our time. Davi Kopenawa has several stories to tell; one is that the Amazonian Yanomami aren't impressed with our society, and that's putting it mildly. The Indians have a way of looking at the world which could hardly be more different than ours, and they want to keep it that way, or at least some do. It's a slap in the face to the West's creeping, and markedly adolescent, view that if we don't yet have quite *all* the answers, we're well on the way to finding them.

We've failed to convince the Yanomami that ours is the only correct way, and irrespective of whether you believe that's romantic fantasy, or at least food for thought, Kopenawa's book is destined to become a seminal work in anthropology, and hopefully much more widely.

'The Falling Sky', the first book by a Yanomami, is best described as four volumes in one. It was constructed by the French anthropologist Bruce Albert, who recorded many dozens of hours of Davi talking, over a period of decades. He arranged and transcribed the result, went through the edit step-by-step with Davi, who made amendments, and translated the book himself, directly from Yanomami into French. (The English translation by Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy is excellent.)

Albert writes additional chapters, glossaries and notes, explaining his role and providing a wealth of background material – all this comprises the final part of 'The Falling Sky'. The whole is an impressive monument to a lifetime's collaboration, work, and friendship.

The opening volume is Davi's detailed account of Yanomami cosmology, and it uncovers a worldview as complex as any major religion. Tribal beliefs are not a simple matter; this is no primitive nature worship, nor is it for the squeamish. It's a multicolored vision, vaguely reminiscent of a Hieronymus Bosch triptych, of beauty and love, but also of dismemberment, 'cannibalism', death and destruction. Vulvas are 'eaten', which is how the Yanomami describe sex, and a bad-smelling penis incurs the disdain of spirits and leads to nowhere good.

The universe is multifaceted and multilayered, an ever changing place, full of hidden forces, helpful, mischievous, or murderous, all shifting and mutating depending on how they're treated, and even on what mood they happen to be in. However unpredictable, they do stick to certain conventions – and that's a point I'll come back to.

What ordinary folk perceive of all this is just the tiny tip of a deeply esoteric and exotic reality. The

skillful and highly trained shaman 'drinking' *yakoana* snuff (it's actually blown up his nostrils), takes on the strength to enter this hidden cosmos. He becomes not only aware of its forces, good and ill, but can – indeed must – enlist them to try and defend his community.

Actually, the shaman's role is even more important. The hidden universe of the *xapiri* and many other 'spirits' requires constant intervention to maintain balance: the shaman has no option but to work ceaselessly to keep life bearable, not only for his own people but – astonishingly – for everyone, everywhere. As Davi says, *'We shamans simply say that we are protecting 'nature' as a whole thing. We defend the forest's trees, hills, mountains, and rivers; its fish, game, spirits, and human inhabitants. We even defend the land of the white people beyond it and all those who live there.'*

The snuff is hallucinogenic. Though not the same as the famous *ayahuasca* or *yagé*, it's certainly powerful enough to ensure that what you see when you 'drink' it defies rational analysis (though doubtless many will try). That's another significant point: we might have persuaded ourselves that science and industry, based on numbers, Cartesian thinking and replicable proof, are *the* key factors in human life. The shaman, on the other hand, believes that all the 'merchandise' we produce as a consequence is not as conducive to our wellbeing as is human society – the resolutely complex and logic-defying ways we treat ourselves and each another.

The Yanomami are far from unique in discovering how to trigger the brain into something other than the 'ordinary'. Similar transcendence is of course embedded in humanity's expression, its art and beliefs everywhere, and to dismiss its importance is surely shortsighted (unless we really *want* to be controlled, rather than served, by machines and computers).

'The Falling Sky' is without doubt the most authentic account of Amazonian shamanism ever recorded. It's the nearest thing to sitting around a fire in a communal Yanomami dwelling (round, thatched, and open to the center, a bit like the Elizabethan Globe theater viewed from above) and just listening, uninterruptedly, to a shaman's words. That's best done around dawn or dusk, those edgy times when the world really does mutate, more magically of course when there's no electric light to blunt the daily drama.

Davi's explanation of the Yanomami universe is a brilliant illustration of how people's worldviews merge such everyday reality with other dimensions, which themselves are seen as equally real. That may be less understood in industrial societies than it once was, but it remains demonstrably true: in spite of the current attempt to reduce everything to monolithic certainties, our 'reality' *really* is that much of what happens takes place inside us. Even when unnoticed to all except the person affected, such things (love, is one example) can be the most important and life-changing aspects of our existence. As psychotherapist Carl Jung said of his autobiography, his memories of what had actually happened were

mere 'phantasms' of little importance compared to his recollections of 'inner' experiences.

Davi's shamanic drawings are scattered through 'The Falling Sky', and his own autobiography comprises the second book in it. It's another first: that of an Amazon Indian whose life uniquely straddles three worlds. Davi is an occasional, though reluctant, world traveler; he's also a spokesman and internationally recognized activist for indigenous rights, who has already played the key role in saving his people. However, first and foremost he's a child of the rainforest, who saw his people die of epidemics brought in by government agents and missionaries, later embarking on his long shaman's apprenticeship as a response. Unlike many indigenous activists nowadays, he's unschooled and has always lived in the forest. Close to sixty (his exact age is speculative), he's often visited tribes other than his own, including some very recently contacted.

Davi has never read anyone's biography; his is a unique, first-hand account, standing on no other shoulders. It's unlikely to be emulated. Although it hasn't yet been translated into Portuguese, Davi can speak that language, though not with total fluency. He learned its Brazilian variant when employed first by missionaries and then the government's National Indian Foundation (FUNAI). When road building arrived in Yanomami territory in the 1970s he quickly saw that it was going to destroy the Indians.

At first, he didn't know of the organization trying to save them, the

Yanomami Park Commission (CCPY), started in 1978 by Albert himself, Brazilian photographer, Claudia Andujar, and Italian lay missionary, Carlo Zacquini. The trio built on earlier work, particularly by anthropologist couple, Brazilian, Alcida Ramos, and Scotsman, Kenneth Taylor, and the campaign was pushed onto the world stage by Survival International.

The focus was on pressing the government to abandon reserving the Yanomami only small pieces of land around a few communities, and to campaign for a single Yanomami territory. Stopping the road was essential.

As he recounts, Davi soon became the principal protagonist for the movement and began a series of uncompromising meetings with government officials, eventually reaching the president himself. He first left Brazil – for Britain and Sweden – when he was invited by Survival International to stand alongside it when the NGO was awarded the 1989 alternative Nobel prize. Survival's publicity catalyzed the issue in a way never seen before for any Amazon Indians. That trip was followed by one to New York, when Davi met the UN Secretary General. A German newspaper later titled him 'Dalai Lama of the rainforest'!

In the 1980s, a new and even more acute threat had arrived on Indian territory, an invasion of illegal gold miners. About twenty per cent of Brazilian Yanomami died as epidemics of measles, cerebral malaria, and flu, swept the region, and as mercury waste poisoned their food. The shamans saw these illnesses as 'epidemic smokes'

against which they lacked real power. They were a repeat of the diseases which carried off Davi's mother when he was a child. Her body had been hastily buried by missionaries and could not be found – an unthinkable desecration, as I'll explain.

If the destruction of American Indians through illness might be thought to dilute the culpability of the invaders who brought the diseases, there is certainly no mistaking the guilt of the miners who killed with gun and machete. A few of these violent bandits were eventually convicted of genocide, but only after they butchered a community of Yanomami women, children, and the elderly, in a 1993 massacre which Albert describes in an appendix. (Unusually, it was reported to missionaries and successfully prosecuted. Five miners were eventually sentenced to a total of 98 years in prison, but only two were ever jailed.)

This is just one contemporary echo of a litany of genocides which Indians of all the Americas have faced over the last centuries, and which continue today. Davi's descriptions are the most detailed ever recorded by a witness from the victims' side: they provide a harrowing indictment of the real price of the resources stolen from tribal lands, one which is never paid by those who profit.

During Davi's travels abroad he never finds much new: he's already seen these places, or their 'reflections', in his visions. But this hasn't bred arrogance: he reiterates how little he knows when compared to the great shamans of yesteryear, and he berates himself for his

comparative ignorance and superficiality. Of course, he doesn't think *we* know much either, certainly nothing like *we* think *we* do!

He's visited Europe and North America a few times, usually cities, which he sees as particularly inhuman with their inequalities and overcrowding. He observes, *'People constantly ask you for money for everything, even to drink or urinate... Their hearts beat too fast, their thought is seized with dizziness, and their eyes are always on the alert... The endless noise and the smoke covering everything prevent you from thinking right... In the city, you also never clearly hear the words that are addressed to you. You have to press together to understand each other when you speak.'*

In similar vein, visiting the Bronx in 1991, he tells of the houses 'in ruins' and movingly recounts, *'The people who live in those places have no food, and their clothes are dirty and torn... they looked at me with sad eyes. It made me feel upset. These white people who have created merchandise think they are clever and brave. Yet they are greedy and do not take care of those among them who have nothing. How can they think they are great men and find themselves so smart? They do not want to know anything about these needy people, though they too are their fellows. They reject them and let them suffer alone. They do not even look at them and are satisfied to keep their distance and call them 'the poor'. They even take their crumbling houses from them. They force them to camp outside in the rain with their children. They must tell themselves: 'They live on our land, but they are other people. Let them stay far away*

from us, picking their food off the ground like dogs! As for us, we will pile up more goods and more weapons, all by ourselves!' It scared me to see such a thing.'

This is no cartoon primitive ogling our wondrous creations, as invented by colonial travelers, nor is it the impression sought by NYC & Company. 'The Falling Sky' is far from being just a diatribe against 'whites', however, and a different reaction was provoked by Davi's visits to rural areas, including megalithic sites of southern Britain such as Avebury and Stonehenge. He gives his view of how the giant stones came to be, and what role in creation they fulfill. But he's clearly happiest at home, traveling only occasionally when invited, to talk to the 'people of merchandise'. He wants us to know that we are destroying the world with our insatiable hunger for more stuff – and he wants us to stop.

His worldview is of course in diametric opposition to mercantile trade and profit, which have become our principal measure of 'progress' now that government and business force everyone away from their former self-sufficiency and into total dependence on money and goods. This brings up an important point, both about tribal societies and what we think of them.

For example, Yanomami hunters never eat their own catch: they don't even bring it home but give it away before it reaches their wives' cooking hearths. In turn, they have to rely entirely on what others give to them. Little could make less commercial sense: the best hunters derive no benefit.

Such explanations are often met by a sneering, 'noble savages' riposte from uninformed cynics, particularly those whose faith in 'progress' blinds them to the suffering it inflicts. But whatever else the idea of giving away all your own food might be in terms of exchange and reciprocity, it's also an altruistic sacrifice to the community's wellbeing above the personal. Davi has his own quite different explanation: the animals, it turns out, recognize a *'hunter who generously gives away all the prey he arrows, they fall in love with him.'* *'These (hunters) do not need to see the game from a distance. It comes toward them... It feels nostalgia for the hunters the way a man misses a woman he is in love with. This is why it lets itself be arrowed without effort and is happy about it.'* In other words, Yanomami boys are taught that they will never become good hunters *unless* they are generous and give away their game.

Although ideas of service to others were once commonplace in our own teaching, it's difficult to see the notion catching on nowadays in business schools: 'You can't be successful unless you're generous!' This though is the most fundamental of all Yanomami codes, extending through life and beyond. As Davi explains, *'We know that we will die, this is why we easily give our goods away. Since we are mortal, we think it is ugly to cling too firmly to the objects we happen to possess. We do not want to die greedily clutching them in our hands. So we never keep them for very long. We have barely acquired them before we give them to those who might in turn desire them.'*

It turns out that what a Yanomami really desires is not more stuff, but to know that his or her funeral will

attract genuine mourners. Generosity in life will bring guests to the party, but when the funerary rites are over (and they can go on for months), that's the end. Not only is there no notion of recompense in any afterlife, a Yanomami's loved ones are so stricken at his or her passing that they simply strive to forget: they keep no memento, all the possessions of the dead are destroyed, and the Indians won't even say their names again – it would be too painful. The ashes of the dead are either buried near the hearth or portions are ingested in banana soup at grand funeral feasts. Everything is destroyed. That's why the burial of Davi's mother without cremation was so barbaric.

All this of course runs contrary to our own thinking: the memorials for our dead, our burials, and especially the displays of bodies and bones in museums and churches, are the ultimate in savagery as far as the Yanomami are concerned. Davi explains these anxieties in what I call the third book in 'The Falling Sky'. This is a collection of essays on Yanomami life, and on our own. It's partly Davi's view of us, turning the tables on those (like me) who seek to describe indigenous peoples.

It includes a chapter on 'war' which is of particular importance in the renewed row about whether an American anthropologist's characterization of the Yanomami as 'the fierce people' is really just misrepresentation. Napoleon Chagnon built a lucrative career on his accounts of the incidence, nature, and rationale of Yanomami raiding. Although he has been long refuted by practically every other scholar to work with the tribe, Chagnon has now become a cornerstone for

disparaging claims about tribal peoples which are repeated by 'popular science' writers like Jared Diamond and Steven Pinker. All this is regressing to a damaging 19th century view of brutal savages who are supposedly waiting, and wanting, to be tamed by the colonial enterprise. Chagnon falsely alleges that 45% of Yanomami men are killers and that chronic warfare reigns (at least, where he studied). He further claims that women are the root cause of all this brutal savagery.

Davi doesn't deny that the Yanomami fight: on the contrary, he describes it. The Indians hold ritual duels with clubs, which can be vicious but are not intended to be lethal. They also occasionally raid houses with the explicit intention of arrowing 'one or two reputed warriors'. This is done invariably out of revenge for a previous killing, whether 'real' (in our terms) or brought about through sorcery.

Such raiding has all but evaporated in many areas where the Yanomami face increasing threats from outside, but Davi is scathingly dismissive about the indictment that the Yanomami were ever more violent than 'whites'. The latter, he reminds us, *'constantly tell us that it is wrong for us to arrow each other for revenge. Yet their ancestors were so bellicose they traveled great distances to plunder the land of people who had done them no harm!'*

He explains, *'We never killed each other without restraint, the way they do. We do not have bombs that burn houses and all their inhabitants... we do not kill... for merchandise, land, or oil, the way they do. We fight about human beings. We go to war for the*

sorrow we have for our brothers and fathers who have just died... But unlike white people, [we] would never kill women and children like the gold prospectors did...'

He is similarly contemptuous of the claim that the cause of 'war' was women: *'Our Elders certainly did not arrow each other because of women... It was a question of avenging the dead, not of fighting over women.'*

Davi is equally unequivocal when it comes to sticking to the 'rules' of raiding. For example, enemies' bodies must always be recovered by their families, to enable them to conduct proper funeral rites. It would be unthinkable for any Yanomami to try and prevent that, whatever their level of animosity.

This raises a point about whether tribal, as opposed to industrialized, societies generally abide by their own principles. Although Napoleon Chagnon condemns the Yanomami as treacherous, one might ask which society is the more hypocritical. After all, do we not pontificate about human rights and the law, and are not both routinely violated as much by governments and corporations, as they are by self-professed outlaws and terrorists? The point is not lost on Davi, who observes, *'The long-ago white people's elders drew what they call their laws on paper skins, but to them they are only lies! They only pay attention to the words of merchandise!'*

It is these goods which perplex Davi most of all, and few will deny the accuracy of his observations: *'This merchandise is truly like a fiancée to them! Their thought is so attached to it that if they damage it while it is still shiny, they get so enraged that they*

cry! They really are in love with it! They go to sleep thinking about it like you doze off with the nostalgia of a beautiful woman.' *'They... always desire new goods... 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.'*

Although 'The Falling Sky' leaves no doubt that the Yanomami 'way of being' is very different than ours, our shared humanity is also reflected: *'even though we [Yanomami] are other people than they are, we have a mouth and eyes, blood and bones, just like white people. We all see the same single light. We are all hungry and thirsty. We all have same fold behind our knees so we can walk!'* The Yanomami, together with most indigenous peoples, are still seen as less than 'us', so it's understandable that Davi unknowingly echoes the most famous *Untermensch* lament in literature – Shylock's, *'If you prick us, do we not bleed?'*

Perhaps it's even the case that Davi's overall vision isn't as different to ours as it might appear, perhaps we are all a little bit of shaman, striving constantly to maintain health and balance both in our own lives and in what we see and feel around us. Aren't we too trying to figure out where our boundaries lie, and what effect we have on our own worlds?

The Yanomami still face several threats to their survival. Davi openly recognizes the one from inside: *'Maybe the white people will be able to confuse the minds of our children*

and grandchildren to the point that they will stop seeing the spirits and hearing their songs? Then, without shamans, they will live helpless, and their thought will get lost. They will spend their time wandering on the roads and in the cities. They will be contaminated there by sicknesses that they will pass on to their wives and children. They will not even think about defending their land anymore.'

Although the campaign for Yanomami land finally won in 1992, other external threats remain: the miners are still there and still violently taking the gold in spite of being evicted, repeatedly but halfheartedly, by the authorities. There is also a nationwide threat to all Indians in Brazil now that the escalating price of raw materials increases the incentive to steal indigenous land: Indians' rights are now threatened in the same way they were a generation ago.

The battle is engaged. It's between those who exploit the idea of 'development' to increase their own short-term wealth at others' long-term cost, and those who yearn for ideas about human rights to mutate into living facts, and believe that *really* would be progress. The latter include some who believe that

justice is not simply an option, but is vital in saving the world. (As such, they might be seen as assuming something of the shaman's mantle themselves!) Davi's book is an invaluable tool in this everlasting struggle; but, primarily, it's a searing testament to the immense variety of human genius which has blossomed over thousands of generations.

Our planetary garden (of Eden?) still grows many flowers, many different ways of looking at the world. Are we really intending to mow down every one except our own, are we really going to allow none other ever to seed again – and all this, just so the vultures can grow fleetingly fatter from the spoils?

As well as an unconscionable tragedy, wouldn't that be a dereliction of duty to our descendants? Davi Kopenawa thinks that if we destroy the Yanomami, we destroy ourselves. He might have a point. For readers who can cope with prejudices being rattled, Davi's message deserves to be heard.

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