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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

"Listen to me, listen to me, listen to me, listen to me . . . "

A brief commentary on *The falling sky* by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert

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Comment on Kopenawa, Davi and Bruce Albert. 2013. *The falling sky: Words of a Yanomami shaman*. Translated by Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

We are the inhabitants of the forest, and this is our way of being.
These are the words I truly want to make the white people understand.
—Davi Kopenawa

When Chief Seattle spoke about his profound concerns about his people and the world, those to whom he spoke were largely unready for what he said. His magisterial speech was recorded in a highly unreliable form in a local newspaper of which only one tattered copy survives, and there is no independent confirmation that he ever made it. Some dismiss it as fiction, or even as a fake, although this seems very unlikely. For Davi Kopenawa's equally magisterial speech, luckily we have ample evidence that he made it and when and where. If no white people really took Chief Seattle seriously when it could have changed the course of the future, this was because none of them would have understood his central concerns. This will not be the case for Davi Kopenawa.

This remarkable book, uniquely focused as it is on the complexities of translation, has been rather badly translated into English. Its very title is mistranslated. *The falling sky* is not an accurate translation of *La chute du ciel*. Good translators

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are like good shamans, in full command of their immensely difficult task, and they must endeavor to send their respondents' thoughts off in the direction of the original intention of what has been said and who originally said it. *The falling sky* is a phrase from a song by Bruce Springsteen, the great poetic power of which relies on its sheer unexpectedness. Springsteen's image is about 9/11, this terrible disaster that fell out of a sunny sky. The sky was not literally falling in Springsteen's song. It was a poetic metaphor. For Kopenawa, the sky has actually fallen once and he is afraid that this might happen again if we do not treat the forest with the respect that it is due. It is not a poetic metaphor, but a reminder of a long ago event and a prophetic warning.

The mistranslation of the title is, one hopes, down to ignorant marketeering, not incompetent translators. But the book's translators are not off the hook, even though on the whole it makes for very good reading. The translators have served Bruce Albert's translation of Davi Kopenawa's words from Yanomami into French extremely well, but they have made very little attempt to understand Kopenawa's central topic, *urihi*, "the forest," and they come out with some very strange translations indeed. The effect is to make this text seem more unfamiliar than it actually need be. The translators do not even have the excuse that the Yanomami world is especially unknown to English speakers: the very famous works of Ettore Biocca (1968) and Napoleon Chagnon (1969) could have given the translators a very good guide as to how to write about that world in English. The most glaring and egregious mistranslation that is clearly the fault of the translators is that of the French "*pirogue*" as English "pirogue." Nobody in a class of St Andrews undergraduate students, an elite bunch of very well-educated young people, mostly native English speakers and some American, had ever heard of this word. Pirogue certainly exists as a word in English, but it is an extremely obscure one, and one effectively restricted to discussions of the early colonial history of Upper Canada. Normally, the translation of French *pirogue* into English is canoe, which is not an obscure word. Only translators who are indifferent to the substance as opposed to the meaning of what they are translating make such elementary mistakes.

You begin to lose confidence, but please don't. The translation has its problems, but keep going, for Kopenawa's book is really important. The old-time Italians called Marco Polo's account of his travels *Il miglione*, because they thought it contained a million new things, that is, a number of new things that were simply unimaginable to them. Davi Kopenawa's book is the return trip. It contains an unfathomable number of new objects. It is a world that I am all too familiar with seen through fresh eyes, eyes that are fresh but by no means naïve. Anyone who has ever been richly screwed over by *Air France* and has had to spend much more time in Charles de Gaulle airport than any sentient being should, will recognize Kopenawa's description of Paris as "The Shaking Place." (It is in fact an excellent description of any large airport and the basic inhumanity of mass passenger transit.) On the other hand, Kopenawa's account of Avebury simply amplified my sense of wonder at that place and made me regret that he did not visit or comment upon Callenish. And the care and sensitivity with which Kopenawa describes his encounters and conversations with the people he meets in his travels is both humbling and enlightening.

"Listen to me, listen to me, listen to me, listen to me . . . "

This is the opening phrase of *patamou*, and exactly describes Kopanawa's basic intention in this book. *Patamou* is from the western dialect of Yanonami and means, "older people's speech": this is not Kopenawa's eastern dialect, where the word is *hereamuu*, but it is very similar. Waking out of their dreams, older Yanomami people begin to talk to those around them. "Older people's speech" is really powerful. Those old people whose parents are dead are now giving advice to young people. Kopenawa's advice to youth is simple: you must live. How you are going to do this is your work to find out.

In a recent book, Napoleon Chagnon (2013: 433) has denied claims that Davi Kopenawa is the chief of the Brazilian Yanomami, and argued instead that he, like other such leaders, has been "groomed by outsiders like missionaries, politicians, or leaders of NGOs." This statement is at once true and disturbing. Chagnon is entirely convincing when he argues that Yanomami leaders have no authority outside their own villages. This is a well-trodden theme in the anthropological literature on the region, and it is even questionable whether such leaders have any real authority within their own villages either. But are such new leaders being "groomed" by outsiders? Such wording in a publication in 2013 seems inappropriate, as does Chagnon's use of the expression Kopenawa's "foreign mentors." Is Davi Kopenawa a child? Is he susceptible to "grooming"? Does he need "mentors," foreign or otherwise? Chagnon even changes Kopenawa's name in his text, for he there appears as Davi Kobenawä. As someone who was a long time ago treated generously by Chagnon, I take no part in his anthropological demonization, but such talk is reminiscent of a political system that we have hopefully moved beyond. What Kopenawa says is unquestionably misquoted and misconstrued by legions of "outsiders like missionaries, politicians, or leaders of NGOs," an ugly process that Chagnon must know only too well and for which he might be expected to have more human sympathy. There is no evidence that Kopenawa ever claimed to be the chief of the Brazilian Yanomami, but he is very clear that his name is Davi Kopenawa.

Davi Kopenawa is clear that his name is linked to the authority with which he speaks. The first name with which he was called, *Yosi*, a form of José, he totally rejected as too close to *Yoasi*, the name of the destructive brother of the creator hero *Omama*. Then missionaries called him "Davi," a Biblical name. Then, as he became a man, Brazilian federal employees started calling him Davi Xiriana, after the name given to another Yanomami population, a name he was obliged to use but that he seriously disliked. As a full adult, and beginning to become a shaman, the *kopena* wasp spirits came to him and gave him the name Kopenawa (Kopenawa and Albert 2013: 19), to help him in facing white people in the rage he felt within him against them.

Kopenawa is admirably clear about the source of his authority,

> And so, little by little, my name became longer and longer. First there was Davi, the name the white people gave me in my childhood, then Kopenawa, the one the wasp spirits gave me later. Finally I added Yanomami, which is a solid word that cannot disappear, for it is the name of my people. I was not born on a land without trees. My flesh does not come from the sperm of a white man. I am the son of the inhabitants of the forest highlands and I fell on the ground from the vagina of a Yanomami

> woman. I am the son of the people *Omama* brought into existence in the beginning of time. I was born in this forest and have always lived here. Today it is my children and grandchildren's turn to grow up here. This is why my words are those of a real Yanomami. (21)

So much for "foreign mentors"!

Our best account of Yanomami leadership concerns a genuinely remarkable man called Husiwä.[1] We have available two detailed portraits of him. The first is by Husiwä's youngest wife, Napëyoma, aka Helena Valero, a girl kidnapped at the age of eleven by Yanomami people (he is the Fusiwe of Biocca's [1969] book). Napëyoma/Helena Valero's story is an incredible love story. She loved that man, and he loved her. Husiwä was incredibly violent, including toward Napëyoma/Helena Valero herself, but it is clear from her account that she eventually felt very safe with him until his violent death. The second portrait of Husiwä is in Chagnon's work, where the awesome life of Husiwä is detailed, so to speak, by proxy. Much of Chagnon's work is really about the fall-out, for many Yanomami people, of this extraordinary man's life. He was *really* fierce. Chagnon never met Husiwä, but wrote a whole book about meeting his son Miawä, *Studying the Yanomamö* (1974), which is arguably his unrecognized masterpiece.

Kopenawa does not refer to Husiwë by name, perhaps following Yanomami etiquette, but he is clearly influenced by that potential, in Husiwë or others. He says,

> If the white people hadn't appeared in our forest when I was a child, I would probably have become a warrior and would have arrowed other Yanomami in anger when I wanted revenge. I have thought to do it. Yet I never killed anyone. (21)

Perhaps Kopenawa's statement here could clear up the whole "The Fierce People" controversy, or at least part of it. There is clearly no single model of being Yanomami, or even of being a Yanomami man. What there are are ways forward.

Kopenawa chose a very different path to that of Husiwë in very different historical circumstances. Where the latter dealt with his fears and curiosity about the *napë*, "outsiders," by appropriating to himself a kidnapped *napë* girl, Kopenawa actually confronted the world of the "outsiders" directly. He went, as a very young man, and with no guidance other than the good advice and spiritual protection of his elders, to learn about the wider world and get them to listen to Yanomami people. The courage, the fierceness, that this must have taken is hard to calculate, but it must have been very great.

Often very angry in tone and with very good reason, Kopenawa is also remarkably compassionate. Kopenawa wants you and me to hear his message, and to use it to find our way forward. The message has been very clearly thought through, and is presented in a form of language far from those of normal Yanomami speech. As Bruce Albert makes clear, the words of the message are Kopenawa's, but that the sequence of the book was a collaboration based on many years of conversation between the two.

Kopenawa relays the message, but he is not its source. The message and the messengers are coming from the forest and the sky in the form of the *xapiri* spirits,

1. Also spelled Husiwë. —Ed.

the images of the ancestral animals. In mythic times the animal ancestors were human but when they transformed into animals, their mythic potency remained in the form of their images, the *xapiri* spirits. In this book, these things are not spoken about, *they* speak. The central character in this book is *urihi*, "the forest," which Kopenawa is clear is not the Yanomami equivalent of our notions of nature or the environment, but rather a livable world for Yanomami people. Admirably, Kopenawa is unashamedly Yanomami-centric, and indeed most concerned with his home community of Watoriki. Kopenawa makes clear that charity does indeed begin at home, and that small is indeed beautiful. Far from being self-serving bullshit or pious hopes, these are strategies for living, and continuing to live.

How does Kopenawa know this? He knows this because the forest comes to his home to tell him. He describes the source of his message in remarkable detail. It is the presentation dance of the *xapiri* spirits. I have never drunk the food of the *xapiri* spirits, the hallucinogen *yãkoana*, nor seen their presentation dance, so I simply do not know. None of my elders when I was growing up ever told me about such things. Yet there are analogues in my life, such as the beings my elders were circumspect about directly naming and instead called the "good people." Those ones will also play music and sing and dance for you if you are really careless or really careful: when they let you go home depends on the care. They live in the wilder places and are the ultimate owners of the land and its protectors. They will, it is said, teach you to speak really well if confronted with courage and purity of intention and, of course, especial care. So there are analogies to Kopenawa's message and its sources, if you choose to look.

At this point, things get a little tricky for the anthropologist. Not for me as a human being, as just noted, but for me as a professional anthropologist, committed to translation between lived worlds. On the one hand, it would be nice to take Kopenawa at face value here, but on the other hand, I know that I don't, or don't really. That is to say, I can live there, but I can't really talk about it in that language and still be taken seriously by my specific audiences. Here, well-meaning anthropologists start resorting to get-out clauses like "metaphor." This is the small print of anthropology. Kopenawa is not talking about that, but about something very different.

I offer another analogy. The very impressive Yawalapiti chief Aritana once told me something apparently similar to what Kopenawa is saying. He said, "We must protect the places of the powerful spirits, for this is how the old time people spoke about the ecological relations that support our rivers and fish stocks." My co-conversationalist, Aritana's old friend Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, later observed that such prestigious Upper Xingú chiefs are experts in translating local concerns into a language acceptable to outsiders whose support they want, so that spirits = ecological relations. I can go with that, but it is questionable whether Aritana really thinks that way, rather than thinks it is politic to say he does so to people like me.

Nowhere does Kopenawa claim that the *xapiri* spirits are metaphors, and nowhere does he ask his readers to believe in them. The latter point is powerful because Kopenawa was a Christian convert until his entire family died in an epidemic and he decided that the Christian God was ineffectual. Kopenawa justifies his message by means of his own witness of the *xapiri* spirits and their presentation dance. For Kopenawa, the *xapiri* spirits are simply existent, and under the right circumstances, the consumption of their food *yãkoana*, can be communicated with.

Kopenawa does not expect the recipients of his message to believe in the *xapiri* spirits, the way the missionaries expected him to believe in the beneficence of the Christian God who had allowed all of his family to die, nor does he show any interest that we might all start taking the hallucinogen *yãkoana* and interacting with them ourselves. No, he asks us to listen to what they have taught him. He is asking us to listen to him as he listened to them.

Leaving behind all the small print of anthropology, this reader is impressed by the sheer obviousness of Kopenawa's argument. All the empirical evidence is on his side. The Yanomami have not destroyed *urihi* as a livable world. We have. We piss where we eat. They don't. The gold miners who have brought untold destruction to many Yanomami communities and to *urihi* are victims of a capitalist system that views the livable world as essentially infinite in its capacity to fulfill ever-escalating desires. The gold-miners are the shock troops of that utterly illogical vision of the world, and like all shock troops, are its victims. Nobody goes to work in some toxic gold mine at the end of the earth because they are greedy assholes. They go because something is very wrong with where they come from, such that they are willing to go so far and do something so unpleasant and dangerous. They go because they are desperate. The terrible tragedy is that this solution to their desperation creates even greater desperation for Yanomami people.

In 1993, in the city of Boa Vista in Roraima, the closest large city to Yanomami territory in northern Brazil, I met a Jamaican gold miner in a bar. We bonded over our common language, a product of our common colonial heritage, and my reverence for certain aspects of Jamaican culture. He wanted to be back home in Jamaica, and clearly felt very lost in the hostile environment he found himself in. His Portuguese was terrible, which placed him in the power of Guyanese people who treated him with utter contempt for being Jamaican, and he was clearly discovering that being an "international rude boy" was a lot more complex than he had thought. I met this Jamaican guy because I was in Boa Vista for my own special reasons. I wanted to "get away from it all," and I thought visiting my friend Ana Paula in this backwater city was a way of doing it. Unfortunately my visit coincided with the breaking news of the massacre by miners of the Yanomami people of Haximu, and the subsequent explosion of state intervention and journalistic activity. It was alarming and fascinating to experience all of this, and to discover that what you think of as a backwater can suddenly become the center of world attention. We were two very lost men in the midst of everything, with absolutely no synthetic vision of what the hell was going on, and no clear way forward. We were both in desperate need of Kopenawa's message, and I do hope that the Jamaican guy has found it too.

To me, the most powerful chapter of this book is "The love of merchandise," which reminded me of the power of Chapter 27 in Volume 1 of Marx's *Capital*. Interested readers might choose to read them together. I have the sense that they are about the same thing. Both chart the violent process of expropriation from a specific way of living in the world, and its replacement with an alienated consciousness of that loss, and the search for a synthetic understanding and a consequent way forward. But where Marx saw that process as an inevitable stage in the historical dialectic, Kopenawa sees it as an ongoing disaster that must be stopped. For Kopenawa, this is not progress, and he is admirably clear about the nature of

Yanomami people's relationship to their world and the virtues of their relations with each other. Yanomami people have few things, and they are generous with them. White people want to have many things, and they want to keep the things they have, and get more. Kopenawa is mystified as to why this should be so. Reading "The love of merchandise," I began to think of Western critiques of environmentally destructive consumerism and why I had never before come across anything as powerful as Kopenawa's analysis.

Rereading Thoreau recently, I saw his prescient virtues and his priggish shortcomings. He was certainly very prescient in his meditations in the woods. His meditations on how many clothes you actually need were, on reacquaintance, humbling and embarrassing. I certainly possess far more than I actually need. His question about how many chairs you need, however, struck me as seriously misplaced. He wrote, "one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society." And he meant it. Larger gatherings in Thoreau's cabin were explicitly enjoined to either dispute the third chair, or stand. Neither the one chair for solitude nor the second chair for friendship were available to such guests. The underlying lack of generosity is shocking. No, Henry, you give all the available chairs to your guests first, then you scramble and make shift to seat all of your guests comfortably. You do not make them stand. They are your guests, and their comfort is your paramount concern. Thoreau's position is a very simple inversion of "The love of merchandise," and as such one of its variants. Get as many things as you can or strip your life down to the minimum, and screw everyone else!

Kopenawa has a very different answer to the same very simple problem: be more generous. In Thoreau's terms, provide more seats, and hence more society. There are two important points here. First, for Kopenawa, the nature of relations between people and between people and the land are indivisible, and the attempt to divide them is disastrous for everything. There is no evidence that Marx was aware of this fact, but Kopenawa has come to it by dint of his hard life experiences, wide travels, acute observations, and careful reflections, with the advice of his elders and the presentation dance of the *xapiri* spirits to guide his thoughts. Second, Kopenawa practices what he preaches, so to speak, for his message is profoundly generous. He has thought these thoughts for us. And in doing so, he has formulated a vision of the world and the predicament of ourselves fully within it of remarkable power and beauty.

It would be completely inappropriate for someone like me to express my gratitude to Davi Kopenawa and for his description of the presentation dance of the *xapiri* spirits, even although I might earnestly want to. To speak really forcefully does not require the listener's gratitude, but simply the listener's willingness to listen. In terms of Yanomami "older people's speech," I am awake and listening.

Kopenawa says to his readers, "You have never met me." Actually, I met Kopenawa once at a party in Hampstead in London. We had no language in common then, but my friend Thaïs Cristofaro translated for me. I cannot remember what we said. This must have been the journey in which he visited Avebury. He struck me as an amazing person, utterly unafraid of himself, and an excellent role model. His statement here, "You have never met me," contains a very important point. This book is precisely for those white people who Kopenawa has never met.

Appropriate gratitude can be directed at two other men, remarkable in their own right. Bruce Albert's (1985) doctoral thesis on the Yanomami has an iconic

status in the recent Amazonianist anthropological literature. It has never been published until now, for it is in essence the footnotes and appendices of Kopenawa's book. The sheer egolessness of this fact is very unusual in anthropology, and especially, it might be noted, in anthropological writing about the Yanomami, where, as we all know, strong egos abound. Reading this book, you learn relatively little about Albert as a person except from Kopenawa's point of view, and thankfully very little about the extremely rancorous debates within anthropology about the Yanomami people. What little you do learn about those debates is again from Kopenawa's point of view. This is humbling yet again, and I find myself asking, in these circumstances, if I would have had the intellectual humility to have done this. Again, I do not know.

Albert clearly has had excellent guidance in this difficult predicament in the form of Jean Malaurie, the founder of the extraordinary *Terre Humaine* series in which this book was first published. In his own remarkable book, *The last kings of Thule* (1982), Malaurie tells a remarkable story. An Inuit shaman dreamt that there were other people living very far to the north. Nobody around him had ever heard about these other people, but the dreamer was insistent: these people exist! Some people joined him on his strange enquiry, and set out to find these unknown people, seen only in a dream. Traveling and traveling very far to the north, on and on, year after year, and guided only by this strange dream and its dreamer, they actually found those only-dreamt-about people. It is a remarkable story of human imagination, courage, and endeavor. Kopenawa's message is another.

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