Dream the forest

LAURA RIVAL

Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert

THE FALLING SKY

Words of a Yanomami shaman

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Translated by Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy

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Yanomami shamans in the Amazon rainforest protect nature, in its entirety, by defending "the forest's trees, hills, mountains, and rivers, its fish, game, spirits, and human inhabitants". They do so with the help of their *xapiri* auxiliary spirits (primordial image-beings) and under the influence of powerful hallucinogenic drugs (*yãkoana*), which explains why shamans are described as those who act as, indeed become, spirits. *Xapiri* feed on flower nectar and on *yãkoana*. They appear to shamans as minuscule humanoids wearing extremely bright, colourful feather ornaments and body paint. Like guests at a harvest festival (*reahu*), a son recalling his father, or a pet in search of a home and a master, they long to be chanted and danced into existence. The shamans and their *xapiri* battle relentlessly against the dark forces that threaten the wellbeing of the forest universe, making it cool and beautiful, even when the rains become scarce.

When Claude Lévi-Strauss described art as the ultimate refuge of the savage mind in our society, he did not anticipate that he would inspire a militant anthropologist (Bruce Albert) to make common cause with a Yanomami intellectual (Davi Kopenawa) eager to broadcast a shamanic prophecy as widely as possible. Nor could the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, the second volume in Jean Malaurie's celebrated Terre Humaine series, have imagined that these two friends would join their spirited rebelliousness to produce the latest book in the same series: *The Falling Sky*.

Originally published in French, in 2010, this book is now available in an English translation. Its title refers to a myth about the cataclysmic end of the world, invaded by the deadly smoke of metals and fuels. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that the "falling sky" is the book's main protagonist. It is this anthropomorphized entity, at once threatening and fragile, that the Yanomami urge us to take seriously:

> Beyond our own fate, we also worry about the entire world, which could well turn to chaos. Unlike us, the white people are not afraid to be crushed by the falling sky. But one day they may fear that as much as we do! The shamans know a great deal about the bad things that threaten human beings. There is only one sky and we must take care of it, for if it becomes sick, everything will come to an end.

Anthropologists and other specialists will find much to relish in this beautifully crafted evocation of Yanomami culture and philosophy. Based on hundreds of hours of interviews taped in native language, it is enriched by almost a hundred pages of footnotes, ethnobiological and geographic glossaries, bibliographical references, detailed indexes and, last but not least, an essay by Bruce Albert on how he wrote the book. While the book resonates with current Western metaphysical angst about finitude, it is written principally as a long shamanic chant that opens up a multitude of interior journeys and provides a new consciousness of the world as a whole.

For humanity to progress, the chant goes, the entire forest, the great forest-land-earth (*urihi a pree*) must be defended, "including the one human beings do not inhabit" – hence the invocation of the *xapiri*. His consciousness enlarged, the shaman acquires wisdom through dreaming, rather than through meditation, as in the great Eastern traditions, or through some kind of awakening. Although the art of dreaming is cultivated by all Yanomami, shamanic initiation requires a deeper kind of dreaming, a dreaming that goes beyond the things of the moment. In the first section of *The Falling Sky*, Kopenawa recounts the details of how Lourival, his father-in-law, along with other seasoned shamans, guided his spiritual growth. "I started to dream of the forest Omama [the demiurge of Yanomami mythology] created for us more and more often and little by little his words grew inside me." Yanomami shamans "do not become spirits alone"; they dream for others, in very much the same way as hunters hunt for others, and never eat the prey they arrow. Shamanic initiation links the old to the young, and the chant, through its careful repetitions and seductive metaphors, gives life to a multitude of beings. Without the *xapiri*, there would no realization of the vital solidarity between all that is alive.

While the second part of the book concentrates on why the Yanomami people will not survive without shamanic expertise, the authors' attention in the third part turns to the white people, who also depend on the shaman's hard labour, even if "they only pay attention to their own speeches, [as] it never crosses their minds that the same epidemic smoke poison devours their own children". These two sections of eight chapters each chronologically follow, like the first section, the course of Davi Kopenawa's life. The chapters in which he recalls the crisis caused by the arrival of the missionaries, the opening of the Perimetral Norte highway, or the gold rush and other encroachments of Yanomami lands, stand in stark contrast with those in which he reminisces about his shamanic calling. Encounters with white people are as lethal as those with the evil forces that animate the predatory, cannibalistic spirits, enemy of the *xapiri*. In fact, Yanomami mythology has a ready explanation for white people's cruelty, greed and short-sightedness: they are the children of Yoasi, Omama's bad brother, the trickster responsible for the loss of human immortality, an ally of Teosi, the Christian God. After shedding his own Christianity, and surviving tuberculosis, malaria and other potentially fatal diseases, Kopenawa went back to his forebears' tradition, and "If I had not become a shaman, I never would have known how to go about protecting the forest". Having reached full spiritual maturity, he now feels confident enough to warn us all, whether we are Westerners consumed by materialist desires or young Yanomami with empty thoughts "full of smoke", that what we need most of all is to regain the ability of dreaming the forest.

The Yanomami have suffered the effects of deadly epidemics, land dispossession and aggressive missionary evangelism. The resulting break in the flow of knowledge between older and younger generations, a lack of communication between indigenous and non-indigenous interlocutors, and a general loss of connection with the natural environment, are common problems. Despite remarkable political gains in the past thirty years, including the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2007, a health and social crisis is deepening within many indigenous communities. As *The Falling Sky* makes plain, this crisis is rooted in the symbolic violence exercised by the dominant society, which fails to recognize the *value* (rather than just the right) of being different and of living in a distinct human collectivity. Malaurie, in his foreword, argues that the global ecological challenges the world faces in the twenty-first century will not be solved by top-down, unidirectional solutions; instead, a genuine exchange needs to be fostered between those who understand the ecological and cultural environments from the inside, and researchers seeking to understand the interdependency of beings, and the web of relations between ecology, culture and history.

Davi Kopenawa

The Falling Sky will be used to settle anthropological disputes, to elucidate technical points, and clarify the complex meanings of concepts such as "value" (*në*). But like all Terre Humaine books, it is, above all, a splendid story told by an exceptional man, who barely knows how to read and write. That the story was written down by an ethnographer who elected not to adjust his research to the canons of academia adds to its importance. The use of the first-person singular to tell the tale, involves a fusion of authorial voices, a sign of mutual recognition and true friendship if ever there was one; it lends a musical quality to the resulting "heterobiography". Through their sonorous presence, the numerous beings evoked in the shamanic chant usher in the fertility of life as shamans see and feel it. What better way to entice readers away from everyday forgetfulness than to invite them to hear the forest's vast and timeless symphony?

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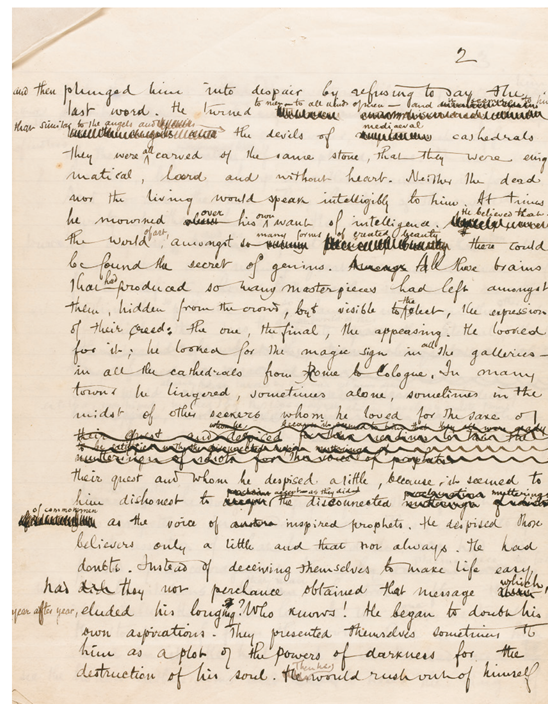

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and then plunged him into despair by refusing to say the last word. He turned to men — to all kinds of men — and it seemed to him that similar to the angels and the devils of mediaeval cathedrals they were all carved of the same stone, that they were enigmatical, hard and without heart. Neither the dead nor the living would speak intelligibly to him. At times he mourned over his own want of intelligence. He believed that in the world of art, amongst so many forms of created beauty there could be found the secret of genius. All those brains that had produced so many masterpieces had left amongst them, hidden from the crowd, but visible to the elect, the expression of their creed: the one, the final, the appeasing. He looked for it; he looked for the magic sign in all the galleries — in all the cathedrals from Rome to Cologne. In many towns he lingered, sometimes alone, sometimes in the midst of other seekers whom he loved for the sake of their quest and whom he despised a little, because it seemed to him dishonest to accept as they did the disconnected mutterings of common men as the voice of inspired prophets. He despised those believers only a little and that not always. He had doubts. Instead of deceiving themselves to make life easy had they not perchance obtained that message which, year after year, eluded his longing? Who knows! He began to doubt his own aspirations. They presented themselves sometimes to him as a plot of the powers of darkness for the destruction of his soul. Then he would rush out of himself

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