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Understanding the world is a human task—maybe the human task—and we have many ways of going about it. Most of us think of science as playing a key role in that endeavor. And there is no question that scientists have expanded our horizons and given us new ways of seeing. Sometimes, they have also provided warnings.

In recent years, Western science has offered us a timely warning of the climate crisis. Satellites and supercomputers have precisely detailed the peril we now face. Our troubled future is outlined each week in the latest issues of the journals of physics and chemistry. It is an enormous gift, this warning—without it we would have stepped off a cliff blindly. But that’s not the only way of knowing, and it’s clearly not sufficient—because at the moment we are stepping off the cliff anyway. Something’s gone very wrong in the way we respond to such information—something that hints at much deeper problems with our epistemologies and our ideologies.

This remarkable book offers some insights into what those problems might be, and how they might be overcome. It is a voice from a different part of the world linking us to ancient tradition, an echo of the human past that we can barely hear over the roar of modernity, but that we must strain to catch before it’s too late. Because it’s also, deeply, about the human future.

Here’s Davi Kopenawa explaining the difference between his world and ours, in truly memorable terms:

It was only much later that I understood that white people treat their merchandise like women with whom they are in love. They
only want to lock them up and keep them jealously under their gaze. The same is true of their food, which they constantly pile up in their houses. If we ask for some of it, they never accept to give anything without making us work hard for it. As for us, we are not people who are in the habit of refusing food to our visitors! When our gardens abound with manioc and bananas, we smoke a great quantity of game and invite the people of neighboring houses to a reahu feast in order to satisfy their hunger.

And here he talks about what that means in everyday terms (be warned: this book is a chronicle of the very real and omnipresent violence associated with the ongoing colonization of the Amazon):

Omama’s [the creator’s] image told our shaman elders: “You live in this forest I created. Eat the fruit of its trees and hunt its game. Open your gardens to plant banana plants, sugarcane, and manioc. Hold big reahu feasts! Invite each other from one house to another, sing and offer each other food in abundance!” He did not tell them: “Abandon the forest and give it to white people so they can clear it, dig into its soil, and foul its rivers!” This is why I want to send my words far away.

That was written ten years ago, but it’s even truer today. Under retrograde president Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil’s deforestation rate has soared; his government has made it clear that you can ignore indigenous land rights and environmental laws with complete impunity. As a result, the Amazon is nearing what scientists describe as ominous tipping points, where so many trees will have been cut that the rainforest can no longer keep its endless cycle of transporting water inland functioning efficiently.

Kopenawa, at times, talks about the use of hallucinogens—powerful medicine—to open minds. (“If you often drink the yakoana, like Omama taught us to, your mind never remains empty. Your thoughts can expand and multiply in the distance, in every direction. This is how we really gain wisdom.”) In truth, his words are mind-expanding enough. If you read this book with an open heart and an open mind, it will transport you to places you’ve never been before.
The Yanomami Territory in Brazil (Terra Indígena Yanomami).
© F.-M. Le Tourneau/P. Mérienne
Altitude greater than 500 m
Boundary of Yanomami territory in Brazil (Terra Indígena Yanomami)
Other indigenous land
Border Roraima/Amazonas states
Venezuela
Paved road
Perimetral Norte (remaining section)
Perimetral Norte (abandoned section)
Perimetral Norte (planned route)
State capital
Cities

0 50 100 km

VENEZUELA

Pico da Neblina
Santa Isabel do Rio Negro
Rio Negro
Rio Maraú
Rio Cauaboris
Rio Negro
Balawaú Outpost
Rio Taraú
Rio Jutai
Totoñobi Outpost
Surucucus Outpost
Pico da Neblina
Detailed map of the Terra Indígena Yanomami (cited Portuguese toponyms).
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Detailed map of the Terra Indígena Yanomami (cited Yanomami toponyms).
© F.-M. Le Tourneau/P. Mérienne
Location of cited ethnic groups. © F.-M. Le Tourneau/P. Mérienne
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. The *xapiri* spirits who come down from the mountains to play on their mirrors in the forest will escape far away. Their shaman fathers will no longer be able to call them and make them dance to protect us. They will be powerless to repel the epidemic fumes which devour us. They will no longer be able to hold back the evil beings who will turn the forest to chaos. We will die one after the other, the white people as well as us. All the shamans will finally perish. Then, if none of them survive to hold it up, the sky will fall.

—Davi Kopenawa
Setting the Scene

This book—a life story, autoethnography, and cosmoecological manifesto—is an invitation to travel in the history and mind of Davi Kopenawa, Yanomami shaman. Born in the northern Brazilian Amazon along the upper Rio Toototobi, a region that was at that time very remote from the world of white people, Davi Kopenawa has been confronted in his extraordinary life with a series of representatives from the encroaching frontier: field agents of the Indian Protection Service (SPI),¹ soldiers, missionaries, road workers, gold prospectors, and ranchers. His stories and reflections, which I recorded in his language, transcribed, translated, and then arranged and edited in French (and now in English), present a hitherto unheard version—told with poetic and dramatic intensity, as well as perspicacity and humor—of the historic confrontation between Amerindians and the fringe of our “civilization.”

From the time we began working together, Davi Kopenawa wanted his account to reach the largest possible audience. So before the adventure of reading his narrative begins, I offer some essential context here: a brief overview of the Yanomami in Brazil and their history; biographical sketches of Davi Kopenawa, whose spoken words are the origin of this book, and of the author of this chapter, who tried to render the wisdom and flavor of this Yanomami shaman’s words in writing; and the story of how we met and produced this book together. All these subjects are addressed in greater detail in the final chapter, “How This Book Was Written,” and in the appendixes.
The Yanomami in Brazil

The Yanomami are a society of hunter-gatherers and slash-and-burn farmers who occupy an area of tropical forest comprising approximately 192,000 square kilometers located on both sides of the Serra Parima range, which divides the waters of the upper Orinoco (south of Venezuela) and the tributaries of the right bank of the Rio Branco and of the left bank of the Rio Negro (in northern Brazil). They constitute a vast and isolated cultural and linguistic group, subdivided into several languages and related dialects. Their total population is estimated to be slightly more than 33,000 people, which makes them one of the largest Amerindian groups in the Amazon to have mostly held on to their traditional way of life.

The Yanomami territory in Brazil, legally recognized in 1992 as the Terra Indígena Yanomami, extends over 96,650 square kilometers—an area slightly larger than some European countries, such as Portugal, Hungary, and Ireland. Their population of approximately 16,000 people is distributed among some 230 local groups. These communities are usually formed by what anthropologists call an endogamous set of cognatic kin. They are composed of several families linked through cross-cousin marriages, repeated from one generation to the next, who reside together in one or more ring- or cone-shaped communal houses.

The first sporadic contact the Yanomami of Brazil had with white people—collectors of forest products, foreign explorers, military personnel, and SPI agents—was in the early decades of the twentieth century. Then, from the 1940s through the 1960s, several Catholic and Protestant missions, as well as SPI outposts, were opened on the periphery of Yanomami territory. They provided the first regular points of contact and sources of trade for manufactured goods for the Indians, but such contact also led to deadly epidemics among them. In the early 1970s, these initial incursions by white people suddenly intensified, first with the opening of the northern section of the Trans-Amazonian highway (the Perimetral Norte) on the southern end of Yanomami territory, and then, after a ten-year respite, with an unprecedented gold rush into its heart. Highway construction was abandoned in 1976, and the invasion by gold prospectors had been reined in somewhat by the mid-1990s. Gold prospecting has been recently revived, however, by a surge in gold prices on international markets, and the Terra Indígena Yanomami is also
threatened by new interests reaching into the western part of Roraima state, including mining companies, agricultural colonization, and cattle ranching.

Davi Kopenawa, Shaman and Yanomami Spokesperson

Davi Kopenawa was born around 1956 in Marakana, a large communal house of approximately two hundred people in the tropical forest foothills along the upper Rio Toototobi, in the far northeast part of Amazonas state in Brazil, near the Venezuelan border. Since the late 1970s, he has lived with his in-laws’ community at the foot of the “Wind Mountain” (Watoriki), on the left bank of the Rio Demini, less than one hundred kilometers southeast of the Rio Toototobi.

As a child, Davi Kopenawa saw his origin group decimated by two successive epidemics of infectious illnesses, first one introduced by SPI agents in 1959 (or 1960), and then, later on, one brought by members of the New Tribes Mission. For several years, he was subjected to proselytizing by these missionaries who had settled along the Rio Toototobi in 1963. He owes them his biblical forename, the skill of writing, and a less-than-enchanted view of Christianity. Despite his initial curiosity, he was quickly repelled by the missionaries’ fanaticism and obsession with sin. He rebelled against their influence after he lost most of his relatives to a measles epidemic transmitted by the daughter of one of the pastors in 1967.

Orphaned and outraged by the repeated loss of loved ones, yet intrigued by the material power of white people, as an adolescent Davi Kopenawa left the region where he was born to take a job with the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI, which had recently succeeded the SPI) along the lower Rio Demini, at the Ajuricaba Outpost. He then tried, as he says in his own words, to “become a white man,” and ended up with a case of tuberculosis. This misadventure cost him a long hospitalization, which he used to learn basic Portuguese. When he recovered, he returned for a period of time to his communal house in Toototobi before being employed in 1976 as an interpreter for FUNAI after the opening of the Perimetral Norte highway. In that capacity, he spent several years traveling across the greater part of Yanomami territory, gaining knowledge of its breadth and its cultural cohesion in spite of local differences. This experience also gave him a more precise understanding of the economic
greed animating those he calls “the People of Merchandise,” and the threats they represent to the existence of the forest and the survival of his people.

Finally, weary of his travels, Davi Kopenawa settled for good in Watorki in the early 1980s after marrying the daughter of the community’s “great man” (pata tê), a renowned shaman and firm traditionalist, who became his mentor in shamanic journeying. This initiation enabled Davi Kopenawa to pick up the thread of his shamanic calling, which began in childhood but had been interrupted by the arrival of white people. Shamanism later provided him with the basis for his own cosmological reflection on commodity fetishism, the destruction of the rain forest, and climate change.7

In the late 1980s, more than a thousand Yanomami perished in Brazil from illnesses and violence resulting from the invasion of their territory by some 40,000 gold prospectors. This tragedy rekindled Davi Kopenawa’s childhood memories of the decimation of his kin, leaving him distraught. Having struggled for several years in Brazil to obtain legal recognition for the Yanomami territory, he began an international campaign to defend his people and the Amazon. 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. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, he visited several European countries as well as the United States. In 1988, the United Nations awarded him the Global 500 Award for his contribution to defense of the environment. In 1989, the nongovernmental organization Survival International invited Davi Kopenawa to stand as its representative to receive the Right Livelihood Award to raise international awareness about the dramatic situation of the Yanomami and their struggle to protect their lands. In May 1992, during the United Nations conference on the environment and development, which took place in Rio de Janeiro (the “Earth Summit,” or Eco ’92), he finally obtained legal recognition from the Brazilian government for a vast area of tropical forest reserved for the exclusive use of his people: the Terra Indígena Yanomami. He was decorated in 1999 with the Order of the Rio Branco by the president of Brazil “for exceptional merit.” In 2004, he became the founding president of the Hutukara association, which represents the majority of Yanomami in Brazil.8 In December 2008 he received special honorary mention for the prestigious Bartolomé de las Casas Award, granted by the Spanish government for defense of
the rights of Native American peoples. In 2009, he was decorated in Brazil with the Order of Cultural Merit.

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. He has six children, including a recently adopted little girl, and four grandchildren whom he and his wife, Fatima, lovingly care for. He lives with his wife and his youngest children in a section of the vast communal dwelling of Watoriki. Their family hearth is indistinguishable from any other in the house. 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.

Bruce Albert, Anthropologist

I was born in 1952 in Morocco, earned a doctorate in Anthropology from the University of Paris X Nanterre, and am now director of research at the Institute of Research for Development in Paris. I began my long-term fieldwork with the Yanomami in Brazil in March 1975. Just twenty-three years old, I was freshly graduated from a Paris that was, at that time, effervescent in social sciences debates. Exhilarated by intense ethnographic readings, I suddenly found myself plunged into chaos on the Amazonian frontier during the construction of the Perimetral Norte highway near the Venezuelan border, along the upper Rio Catrimani. The Yanomami charmed me immediately with their elegance and mocking pride as they wove their way among the giant bulldozers opening the road, or humorously outsmarted the intrusive good intentions of a local Italian priest. I was revolted by the spectacle of the omnivorous roadwork, blindly gutting the tropical forest, and the ensuing illnesses and social degradation of its inhabitants. Given my temperament—more disposed to the quest for real-life knowledge and social engagement than the pursuit of academic ambitions—I came to understand that the only acceptable ethnographic research for me would require a lasting commitment alongside the people with whom I had decided to work. Anthropology thus became
for me an intellectual adventure and a way of life, more than a profession whose institutional aspects were far less seductive. Since then my existence has been guided by the political consequences of that first encounter with the Yanomami. This personal lifelong adventure as an “engaged observer” has not been, however, incompatible with an appetite for anthropological analysis—far from that.

While pursuing ethnographic research on different aspects of Yanomami society and culture, I co-founded a nongovernmental organization in Brazil in 1978, the Comissão Pró-Yanomami (CCPY), which waged a fourteen-year campaign alongside Davi Kopenawa and won legal recognition for the Yanomami lands in Brazil in 1992. For twenty-five years the CCPY led healthcare programs, created bilingual schools, and sustained environmental projects; I had a direct hand in all of them. Along the way, I gained an acceptable knowledge of one of the Yanomami languages—the one that is spoken in the region where Davi Kopenawa was born and where he presently lives. I have visited the Yanomami practically every year, sometimes several times a year, for the last thirty-eight years, and, as one might imagine, I am tied to Davi Kopenawa through a long history of friendship and shared struggle.

The Meeting

I met Davi Kopenawa for the first time in 1978 under odd and amusing circumstances (see the final chapter, “How This Book Was Written”). We were both in our twenties. I had just begun my second phase of ethnographic fieldwork in Yanomami territory (having already spent a year on the upper Rio Catrimani from 1975 to 1976). Davi Kopenawa was an interpreter in the FUNAI outposts set up along the Perimetral Norte highway, the construction of which had been abandoned a year and a half earlier. Then, in 1981, I stayed for several months in the area where he was born along the Rio Toototobi, where we met again while he was visiting his relatives. I had the opportunity there for firsthand encounters with the people and places that were important to him throughout his childhood and adolescence. Then, from 1985 on, the village where he had married, Watoriki, became my most frequent destination in Yanomami territory. I knew his father-in-law and shamanic mentor as well as most inhabitants of this community from my first journey in 1975 on the up-
per Rio Catrimani, where they lived at the time. My friendship with Davi Kopenawa grew increasingly close through lengthy visits to Watoriki, and through the bond of our common political involvement against the gold rush then ravaging Yanomami territory. This book originated in Davi Kopenawa’s anguish and outrage over the decimation of his people by gold prospectors in the late 1980s. It would not have been possible without our longstanding trust and connection. We began the recording sessions that served as the basis for successive versions of the manuscript in December 1989 and continued through the early 2000s during stays in the forest or political events in the city. These sessions consisted mostly of free-ranging discussions, conducted in fits and starts over a time period spanning more than ten years. This is, therefore, a collection of narratives, thoughts, and conversations recorded in Yanomami about Davi Kopenawa’s life, culture, and experience with the world of white people. As one might surmise, recomposing this prolific archipelago of words into French (and then into English) to write this book was no simple undertaking. The challenges of this complex process of editing and writing are also explained in detail in the last chapter, “How This Book Was Written.”

The Book

Davi Kopenawa’s narrative is the first inside account of Yanomami society and culture published in English since the extraordinary biography of Helena Valero edited by Ettore Biocca in 1970, Yanoama: The Narrative of a Young Woman Kidnapped by Amazonian Indians. These two books deal with experiences in two successive periods. Helena Valero escaped from captivity in 1956, the year Davi Kopenawa was born. One takes place in Venezuela, the other in Brazil, and the identity and trajectory of their narratives are the reverse of each other.

Yanoama narrates the tribulations of a young Brazilian girl captured by the Yanomami in 1932 when she was thirteen years old, at a time when the Yanomami warriors of the highland region between the Rio Negro and the Rio Casiquiare tried to repel the rubber tappers and other harvesters of forest products who were invading their territory.11 Davi Kopenawa narrates a personal history and shares reflections about white people from the point of view of a contemporary Yanomami shaman and spokesperson. His narrative covers a period that begins in his early child-
hood, before the founding of the first missionary outpost in his native region in the early 1960s, and continues with his unique odyssey, starting in the late 1970s, towards the world of white people.

Yet this book is not a usual Amerindian biography built, like the twentieth-century North American classics, as a documentary life story ghostwritten by an anthropologist. Nor is it an ethnobiography pertaining to a traditional narrative genre, merely transcribed and translated by an ethnographer whose role is reduced to that of a secretary.

Davi Kopenawa’s narrative goes far beyond prevailing canons of autobiography—our own or those of the Yanomami. His accounts of key episodes in his life inseparably intertwine personal events and collective history. Moreover, he always expresses himself through complex overlapping genres and styles: myths and dream stories, shamanic visions and prophecies, autoethnography and cross-cultural comparison, reported speech and exhortations. In addition, the book is the result of a written and oral process that was continually shaped by the intersecting projects of the two authors—a Yanomami shaman very wise to the world of white people, and an ethnographer quite familiar with the world of his long-time hosts. 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. Davi Kopenawa’s words thus constitute a multidimensional cosmological and ethnopolitical account based on an extraordinary effort at self-objectification and conviction. 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.

For my part, I did my best to render the poetic sensibility and conceptual richness of his way of thinking and speaking in a translation that stayed as close to possible to his words, yet with a writing style and form of composition that made them accessible to a nonspecialist public. I chose to illuminate his text with this brief introduction, a concluding
chapter, and explanatory notes as well as supplementary material at the end of the book to avoid any intrusion of a patronizing interpretive authority that might threaten to overshadow Davi Kopenawa’s words. I wished to avoid breaking up his narrative with extraneous reminders of my own presence or feelings. In presenting his account in this way to the reader, in all its singular power and otherness, I hope I have done justice to my mandate to make Davi Kopenawa’s words heard and their strength felt. May they resonate and make an impact in our world.

This book is composed of three parts. The first, “Becoming Other,” recounts the premises of Davi Kopenawa’s shamanic calling and his initiation under his father-in-law’s guidance. It also describes Yanomami shamanic cosmology and the multiple tasks of a Yanomami shaman, disclosing the knowledge he acquired by learning from his elders. The second part, “Metal Smoke,” deals with different kinds of encounters with white people—initially Davi Kopenawa’s own and that of his community, and then the overall experience of the Yanomami in Brazil. It opens with the shamanic rumors about distant strangers that preceded the first actual contacts, then passes through the arrival of missionaries and the opening on the Perimetral Norte highway, and concludes with the deadly encroachment on Yanomami lands by the gold prospectors (garimpeiros). The third part, “The Falling Sky,” traces, in reverse order, Davi Kopenawa’s journeys—in Brazil, then Europe, and later the United States—to denounce the attacks on his people and the destruction of the forest. This account, told in the form of a succession of shamanic journeys, is intertwined with comparative cultural reflections and critique of certain aspects of our society, and unfolds into a cosmoecological prophecy about the death of shamans and the end of humanity.

Orthography, Pronunciation, and Glossaries

To give an idea of the pronunciation of Yanomami words and expressions cited in this book, the reader need only grasp some basic information, remembering that sounds not specifically mentioned here correspond approximately to similar sounds in English. In terms of vowels: e is pronounced like the vowel sound in fate in English, u is pronounced like the vowel sound in food, ë is the equivalent of the vowel sound in but, and i (barred i) is a sound between i and u. As for consonants: hw is pronounced like an aspirated h with rounded lips (as in which), ṭ is pronounced like a
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followed by a light exhalation (“aspiration”) as in top, and x is pronounced like sh in ship. For more information on the Yanomami language spoken by Davi Kopenawa and its written form, the interested reader can refer to Appendix A at the end of the book.

All Yanomami terms and expressions cited in this text appear in italics while the occasional Portuguese words used by Davi Kopenawa in the recordings we worked from are translated and displayed in boldface the first time they appear. The transcriptions of onomatopoeic forms, which are so delightful and subtly codified in Yanomami speech, were kept to a minimum to lighten the text. On the other hand, several interjections that are frequently used to introduce topics have been maintained. For example: asi! indicates anger; awe! signals approval; haixopë! denotes a positive response to some information; ha! indicates surprise (satisfied or ironic); hou! shows irritation; ma! expresses disapproval; and, finally, oae! indicates sudden recollection.

The numeric notations applied to the thirty-five myths (M 4 to M 362) cited in the endnotes refer to my contributions to the collection of Yanomami narratives by J. Wilbert and K. Simoneau, 1990 (see References). Curious readers can, of course, consult this compendium if they would like to deepen their knowledge of Yanomami cosmology. Plant and animal species mentioned in the text are identified in glossaries included at the end of the book, as are details concerning ethnonyms and toponyms. All of the illustrations in this book, except for the maps, were drawn by Davi Kopenawa.

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