



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The falling sky

In lieu of a response

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Response to HAU Book Symposium 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.

As one of the six reviewers of *The falling sky* pointed out, given the singular nature of Davi Kopenawa's moving and erudite shamanic testimony, reviewing it can hardly take the form of a classical critical debate. I would add that it is even less possible for the coauthor of such a book to respond to these superb reviews. To comply with the rules of this academic exercise, many challenging ethnographic issues raised by the authors' insightful comments could be discussed. To mention but a few, I would highlight the role of noniconic "image-beings" and their virtual multiplicities in Yanomami ontology and shamanic speculative thinking, considered by Pedro Cesarino;¹ the shamans' multiperspectival mastery of invention under the form of reverse anthropology, explored by Roy Wagner;² the shamanic critique of predatory consumerism and theory of commodity (cannibal) fetishism, emphasized by Peter Gow;³ the potency and paradox of the ethnopolitics of a

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1. See Albert (2012 and 2014a) on the Yanomami *utupë a* (or *utupa a*) "image" concept.
 2. See the interview of Wagner published during his visit in Brazil in which he comments on his encounter with Davi Kopenawa and other Amerindian intellectuals (Ferrari et al. 2011).
 3. See Albert (1993).



shaman writing his culture by proxy, raised by Emmanuel de Vienne;⁴ the ambiguous metabolization of shamanic cosmopolitical discourse in the “show space” of the “wide-white-world,” which worries Jadran Mimica; and the riddles of transcultural ethnographic writing strategies, examined by Janice Boddy.⁵

All these issues unquestionably deserve in-depth analysis. However, anthropological business as usual would not do justice to what lies at the heart of these reviews and of Kopenawa’s project for this book. Beyond their scholarly expertise and thought-provoking comments, all reviewers reveal the depth of their attention and respect for his personal and cosmopolitical message. In doing so, they not only demonstrate remarkable intellectual generosity and human empathy but also effectively motivate their audience to read his words firsthand. This is exactly what Kopenawa dreamed of when he asked me to discard the usual framework of my ethnographic interviews and to truly listen to what his *xapiri* spirits had to say about the collapse of the sky. We had to make their words heard, even in the form of drawings stuck on paper skins, by as many open-minded *napë pë* (foreigners) as we could reach, for the sake of protecting Yanomami land-forest and its inhabitants (human and nonhuman) from the “earth eaters” who threatened it.

With great perceptiveness and sensitivity, these six reviewers capture the significance of the elaborate onto-cosmological theory and far-reaching ecopolitical elements at stake in the book. I am grateful to all of them for this encouraging response, which makes me feel that I have fulfilled at least part of the weighty mandate that Kopenawa gave me many years ago. I would simply like to emphasize here that, besides being intellectually intriguing, Kopenawa’s words deal, first and foremost, with issues of life and death. They are fighting words brandished to maintain the local (Amerindian) and global *urihi a* land-forest-world as a livable and sustainable home for future generations.⁶ As Claude Lévi-Strauss once wrote about Kopenawa’s warnings about the fall of the sky:

Formulated in the terms of a metaphysics that is no longer ours, this conception of human solidarity and diversity, and their mutual implication, is striking in its grandeur. There is something like a symbol here. For it falls to one of the last spokesmen of one of so many societies on the path to extinction through our actions to state the principles of a wisdom which we are still too few to understand is also crucial to our own survival. (Lévi-Strauss 1993: 7, translation by Nicholas Elliot)

For three decades, Davi Kopenawa has dared to spread his bold words everywhere he could, “talking strongly” to the “People of Merchandise” with courage and determination. For this, he is now paying a heavy price. About to turn sixty, he is facing

4. The sense that much of *The falling sky* forms a sort of “shamanic Bible,” (or, more precisely, a shamanic anti-Bible) astutely noted by de Vienne, is continually expressed in Kopenawa’s countertheologizing of the demiurge figures in Yanomami mythology. For a discussion of mimetic resistance and cultural auto-objectification in the Amazon, see Albert (2000).
5. See Albert (2014b).
6. On the polysemy of the *urihi a* concept, see Albert (2009). On the philosophical scope of Davi Kopenawa’s thought, see Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2014).



serious death threats from gold miners and ranchers who continue to invade Yanomami's lands in northern Brazil, a country where, during the past decade, almost half (443) of the total world's murders of environmental activists (908) took places.⁷ Brazilian authorities must be reminded that the international community is watching and will hold them accountable for his safety.⁸

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7. See <http://www.globalwitness.org/sites/default/files/library/Deadly%20Environment.pdf>.

8. See <http://www.fidh.org/en/americas/brazil/15870-brazil-death-threats-against-mr-davikopenawa>.