



## Review article

### Like a bridge over troubled waters

KOPENAWA, DAVI & BRUCE ALBERT. *The falling sky: words of a Yanomami shaman*. xiv, 610 pp., maps, illus., bibliogr. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard: Univ. Press, 2013. £25.00 (paper)

*The falling sky* is an ethnographic treasure. It is a richly textured, semi-autobiographical account of probably the most famous Yanomami shaman/activist's views of the world in which we live. It also provides much food for thought about how anthropology operates today. As an introductory teaser, see if you can answer this question: how do reviews in the popular press of *The falling sky* differ from those of Chagnon's semi-autobiographical *Noble savages* (2013)? (The answer is below.)

For clarity, I will divide the review into text (or the book itself) and context (or how it shapes and is shaped by various Yanomami controversies). Let me begin with the text. It is divided into three formal parts plus two forewords (one by Albert, one by Kopenawa), two afterwords (similarly divided), four appendices, two glossaries, notes, references, and an index. Albert describes the three main parts as follows:

The first, 'Becoming Others,' recounts the premises of Davi Kopenawa's shamanic calling and his initiation under his father-in-law's guidance. It also describes the Yanomami shamanic cosmology and the multiple tasks of a Yanomami shaman... 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... The third part, 'The Falling Sky,' traces... 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 [Western] society (p. 9).

'Becoming others' offers the most in-depth account of Yanomami shamanic cosmology ever presented. This said, we do not know to what degree Kopenawa's beliefs differ from other Yanomami, especially other Yanomami shamans. (The linguist Migliazza suggests there are four partially intelligible language groups; Albert notes there are some 230 local groups in Brazil.) Moreover, Kopenawa/Albert's presentation lacks the systematic social ordering of Muchona/Turner's discussion of Ndembu cosmology. But 'Becoming others' possesses something perhaps more special. We see Kopenawa's beliefs operationalized as he makes sense of Western civilization in Yanomami cosmological terms (especially in part 3). The two key cosmological entities are Omama and *xapiri*. Omama 'created the land and the forest... It is he who gave us life' (p. 27). When the sky fell down, pushing much life underground, it was Omama who re-created forest life again. The *xapiri* spirits are seen by shamans in dreams, especially when inhaling hallucinogenic snuff. They defend the Yanomami 'against all the evil things, darkness, hunger and sickness' (p. 150).

'Metal smoke' provides a vivid account of Yanomami struggles against Western intrusions into Yanomami territory – especially from gold mining and from the partial building of the Northern Perimeter road. It highlights a point not always emphasized in accounts of the Yanomami. They are clearly not a pristine group barely touched by outside Western

influences, nor have they been for over a century (n.b. p. 465). The increasing intrusions have caused devastating epidemics. We might ask: why have some ethnographic accounts downplayed the significance of these disruptions?

The devastation caused by these intrusions, especially the epidemics, explains the motivation behind Kopenawa's travels in part 3 and his collaboration with Albert to produce this book. Kopenawa is trying to draw those within and beyond Brazil into helping protect the Yanomami. By showing how Yanomami beliefs and practices resonate with certain Western ideals and self-critiques, he is seeking to mobilize support. Some ethnographers suggest anthropological works should avoid such politics – as if they can control how others use their publications. Take the Brazilian military's use of Chagnon's depiction of the Yanomami as fierce to argue against a Yanomami protective reserve. Chagnon could no more control the actions of the military in this regard than other anthropologists could stop the military from torturing thousands of Brazilian citizens, including the current Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff. Kopenawa understands that ethnographic accounts may become politically entwined, for good or bad, so he seeks to use his account for positive ends. He writes,

After they have understood my account, I would like the white people to tell themselves, 'The Yanomami are other people than us, yet their words are right and clear. . . . I would like white people to stop thinking that our forest is dead and placed here without reason. I would like to make them listen to the voice of the *xapiri*. . . . Maybe they will want to defend it with us' (p. 12).

This perspective helps explain the book's title. Kopenawa fears further devastation. He writes, 'If the sky catches fire, it will fall again. Then we will all be burned, and we will be hurled into the underworld like the first people in the beginning of time' (p. 296). Kopenawa's message: we all need to take heed of what the destruction of the forest and its people might portend.

Turning to the context, let me focus on three points. First, Kopenawa and Albert, in using an autobiographical form of ethnography, avoid key problems associated with such classic texts as Paul Radin's *Crashing thunder* (1926). There is little question, for example, of Kopenawa dissembling. 'Through the struggle to defend Yanomami rights during the 1980s and 1990s', Albert writes, 'Davi Kopenawa and I forged the mutual respect and close working relationship that was the vital basis for the project that ended in the writing of this book' (p. 439).

Albert is sensitive to the problems of 'speaking for' Kopenawa in editing the many hours of taped interviews that form the core of the book: 'This book is . . . a "written/spoken textual duet" in which two people – the author of the spoken words and the author of the written form – produced a text working together as one' (p. 446). We see this in the separate authorship for the two forewords and two afterwords. The joint text adds much to our understanding of the Yanomami. We are left to ponder: why have such accounts become less popular within anthropology while memoirs flourish among the reading public?

Second, a comparison between Chagnon's semi-autobiographical *Noble savages* (2013) and *Falling sky* helps us better understand the controversies swirling around the Yanomami. Start with the degree to which the Yanomami are 'fierce' or violent. Because this accusation was hurled at the Yanomami by opponents of the 1992 Yanomami reserve set up to help protect them against intrusive gold miners, it became a heated, political issue. Chagnon used genealogical data to emphasize the number of Yanomami killed in raids by other Yanomami. Kopenawa acknowledges that 'our long-ago elders engaged in raids' (p. 357) to avenge the killing of relatives – at 'a time when I was not yet born' (p. 364) (i.e. around 1956). However, neither Chagnon nor Kopenawa stresses that such violence was common in the late 1980s/early 1990s – suggesting that the whole argument over Yanomami violence was irrelevant to the issue of the reserve! They were not that violent – certainly not in comparison to the Brazilian military from 1964 to 1985 – at the time the reserve was being established.

Turning to Kopenawa's and Chagnon's knowledge claims, it is clear Kopenawa's assertions are based on personal experiences. At first glance, they seem to contrast with Chagnon's 'scientific' methods. In collecting data, for example, Chagnon (2013) emphasizes he visited more than sixty villages during more than sixty months of fieldwork. But Chagnon does not practise science in Ioannidis's sense of the term (e.g. Ioannidis 2005; 2014). Chagnon never makes all the details of his data publicly accessible so others, unattached to his perspective, might double-check his analysis in an unbiased way. Intriguingly, Tierney (2000) and Fry (2006) both come to a different conclusion from Chagnon regarding Yanomami violence. But they, too, do not make their data publicly available so others can double-check them. What we see is not science but a political ideology of claiming to be scientific. It is not enough to assert you are practising science and to put forth all sorts of statistics. Others, not tied to your perspective, need to be able to check the data that support your analysis. We are left to wonder how to assess the ethnographic credibility of such pseudo-science versus Kopenawa's statements. You decide.

Moving to a related topic, some have suggested that while Chagnon violated Venezuelan law and manipulated children in order to collect genealogies, he may not – depending on one's perspective – have violated the anthropological ethical code of 'doing no harm'. In the case of Venezuela, he was forced to leave the country before he did serious harm. In the case of the children, his defenders have suggested Chagnon simply was more open than other anthropologists about the ploys used to collect data. (The unstated implication is that his manipulations are not all that different from common anthropological practice and, hence, should not necessarily be viewed in negative terms.) Chagnon played a major role in popularizing the Yanomami and provided some Yanomami with valuable trade goods. But was this sufficient return for the millions of dollars he earned from his Yanomami publications, publications that ensured he became a well-paid tenured professor? Given the serious conditions Kopenawa and Albert describe, should Chagnon, following their example, have done more to help? Is promising not to intentionally harm a group sufficient recompense for its help in advancing your anthropological career?

Finally, turning to the reviews of both books, Chagnon and Kopenawa/Albert have received more reviews from major popular press news sources than have any other books written by anthropologists in recent memory. I have listed the sources of the English-speaking reviews below. They range from the *New York Times* to the *Guardian*, from the *Times Literary Supplement* to the *New York Review of Books*, from Al Jazeera to *The Economist* to the *Chicago Tribune*. The UK reviews follow the same pattern as the US reviews.

Of the fifteen reviews discussed here, eight were written by anthropologists, seven by journalists. The reviews of *Noble savages* differ markedly from those of *The falling sky* (as do the reviews by journalists and anthropologists of the former). While the seven journalist reviews of *Noble savages* touch on Chagnon's intellectual ideas, they mainly focus on the controversies surrounding the Yanomami. It seems that controversies – whether political or anthropological – spark public interest. Generally, the journalists' reviews tend to be relatively balanced. The reviews by anthropologists at elite universities (Columbia and Cambridge) are negative. The reviews by anthropologists with less prestigious positions tend to be pro-Chagnon to varying degrees. Compared to the journalists, the anthropological reviews are collectively less balanced. The reviews of *The falling sky* are all by anthropologists. They tend to be quite positive. They also downplay the controversies. While *The falling sky* has fewer reviews than *Noble savages*, it is rare for an indigenous semi-autobiographical account to receive such public attention. Being reviewed by

both the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New York Review of Books* (plus interviews by the *Guardian* and National Public Radio) is impressive.

Where does this leave us? We are caught in an interesting bind. *The falling sky* is a rich, textured ethnographic account that adds much to our understanding of the Yanomami. We see anthropology at its best, illuminating alternative ways of understanding the world around us. But the book would not have garnered such public attention if it were not for the controversies and the critique of anthropology embedded in them. Many anthropologists embrace the ennobling vision of the discipline implicit in *The falling sky*. Whether they are open to addressing the critiques highlighted by the controversies – especially allowing others to confirm publicly the construction of their analyses or focusing on more than 'doing no harm' – remains uncertain. But like the book itself, addressing these critiques would represent a positive step forward.

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