

Davi Kopenawa (author)

Written by: Renzo Taddei

Translated by: David Rodgers

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Davi Kopenawa is a shaman and political leader of the Yanomami people, president of the [Hutukara Yanomami Association](#), an activist in defense of Indigenous peoples and the Amazonian forest, as well as an author, scriptwriter, cultural producer, and public speaker. The Yanomami are an Indigenous group of Northern Amazonia, currently around 30,000 people, living in the interfluvial region between the Orinoco and the Amazon basins. Davi Kopenawa is one of the most important intellectual, political, and spiritual leaders in the contemporary panorama in defense of native peoples, the environment, cultural diversity, and human rights, recognized nationally and internationally. He is also the author of *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (2010), and *Yanomami, l'esprit de la forêt* (2003), coauthored with the French anthropologist Bruce Albert.

Davi Kopenawa was born around 1956 in the Yanomami village of Marakana on the upper course of the Toototobi river, a few kilometers from the border between the Brazilian state of Roraima and Venezuela. Due to the difficult access to this region of Amazonia, contact with non-Indigenous people was rare or non-existent among the Yanomami until the start of the twentieth century. Kopenawa was a child when he saw non-Indigenous people for the first time. His family was almost entirely wiped out by infectious diseases brought by the Brazilian authorities at the end of the 1950s and later, again, by members of the New Tribes Mission in 1967. As a consequence, while still a teenager, he left the village and began to work as an interpreter for the Brazilian National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples (FUNAI), a function he has performed ever since. At the start of the 1980s, he married the daughter of a respected shaman from the Watoriki community and settled there. He was initiated into shamanism by his father-in-law. During his initiation, he received the name

Kopenawa from spirit entities called xapiripë, referring to wasp spirits known for their ferocity.

In 1987, the Yanomami territory was invaded by around 40,000 gold miners, a contingent twice the size of the Yanomami population living in Brazil at the time. Some estimates suggest that a fifth of the Yanomami population died due to violence, malaria, malnutrition, and mercury poisoning caused by the mining process. As a result of intense national and international mobilization, led by Davi Kopenawa, Bruce Albert, the missionary Carlo Zacchini, the photographer Claudia Andujar and other activists involved in the Commission for the Creation of the Yanomami Park (CCPY, founded in 1978 and subsequently renamed the Pro-Yanomami Commission), the Yanomami Indigenous Land was homologated by the Brazilian government in 1992 at the time of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The following year, twelve Yanomami individuals – a group composed of elderly men, women, and children – were massacred by gold miners in an episode that became known as the Haximu Massacre. Davi Kopenawa's activism in defense of his people and the forest intensified in the aftermath. Kopenawa joined a broad international campaign to protect the environment and Indigenous peoples, traveling extensively in the United States and Europe.

In 2004, Kopenawa was one of the founders of the [Hutukara Yanomami Association](#), through which he has coordinated political actions and projects to defend the territory against gold miners and other invaders, improve the health conditions and education of the Yanomami people, and train new generations of shamanic experts and political leaders.

Following the Jair Bolsonaro government's dismantling of FUNAI and IBAMA, the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Natural Renewable Resources – the government agencies responsible for promoting and protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples and the environment, respectively – the Yanomami territory rapidly became the target of new invasions by gold miners from 2019 on. Despite the repeated death threats, Kopenawa continued to work intensely in defense of the Indigenous and environmental causes. In February 2020, he formally denounced the

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Brazilian government at the 43rd session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, for its attack on Indigenous peoples and the Amazon forest. During the SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic, through Hutukara and in collaboration with allies such as the Pro-Yanomami and Ye'kwana Network and the nonprofit organization Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), he worked to protect and assist his people, already assailed by other diseases brought by the presence of illegal miners in their territory.

Kopenawa has also explored many different political, educational, and spiritual possibilities brought about by the arts. In recent decades, he has participated in major artistic collaborations: he was one of the creators of the opera *Amazonas-music theatre in three parts* (with Peter Ruzicka, Peter Weibel, and Laymert Garcia dos Santos), presented in 2010 in Munich and São Paulo; with Yanomami and non-Indigenous artists, he produced various films, including *Xapiri* (2012, with Bruce Albert, Leandro Lima, Gisele Motta, Stella Senra and Laymert Garcia Dos Santos), *Urihi haromatima pë: curadores da floresta* (2014, with Morzaniel Iramari Yanomami) and *A Última floresta* (The Last Forest) (2020, with Luiz Bolognesi), winner of the public award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2021.

In Bruce Albert's view, the extraordinary combination of having lived his childhood immersed in the traditional modes of Yanomami existence, his vast experience among non-Indigenous Brazilians, and his shamanic training has enabled Kopenawa to develop an original cosmological reflection, based on the Yanomami ontology and presented in the book *The Falling Sky*, on the connections between the commodity fetishism characteristic of non-Indigenous collectivities, the destruction of the forests and climate change, as well as the pathogenic repercussions of these interventions on bodies and the world. The publication has had a notable impact in various areas of the arts, the social sciences, and philosophy.

Kopenawa has received various international awards, such as the UN Global 500 in 1988, the Order of Rio Branco from the Brazilian government in 1999, the Itaú Cultural Award in 2017, and the Right Livelihood Award in 2019. In December 2020,

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Davi Kopenawa was elected a collaborative member of the Brazilian Academy of Sciences. In 2023, he was granted two honorary doctoral degrees by the Federal University of Roraima and the Federal University of Sao Paulo, both located in Brazil.

Editor's note: *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* is based on twenty years of conversations between Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert. They were originally held in Yanomami and were translated into French by Albert, and published as *La chute du ciel. Paroles d'un shaman yanomami* (2010) in the *Terre Humaine* collection. The book has since been translated into English by Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy (2013); Brazilian Portuguese by Beatriz Perrone-Moisés (2015); Italian by Alessandro Palmieri and Alessandro Lucera (2018); German by Karin Uttendörfer and Tim Trzaskalik (2024); and Spanish by Emilio Ayllón (2024). The Brazilian edition has a preface by the anthropologist [Eduardo Viveiros de Castro](#), where he states the importance of the book, which “shifts, inverts, and renews” academic discourses on Native Americans, redefining anthropology’s “methodological and pragmatic conditions of enunciation”.

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KEYWORDS

Amazon; Indigenous rights; Indigenous intellectuals; Indigenous leaders; Native Americans; shamanism; Yanomami

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