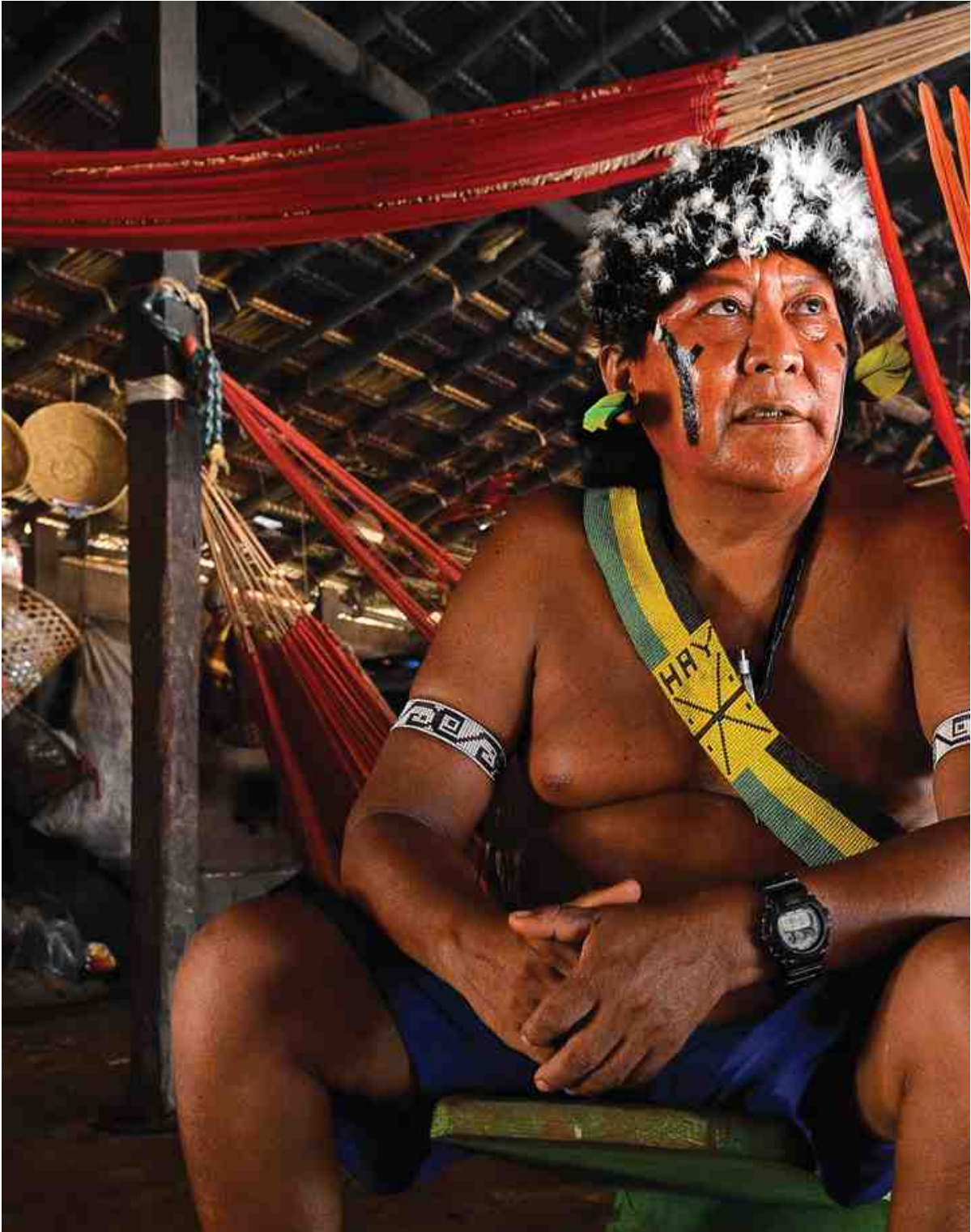


The shaman's-eye view: A Yanomami verdict on us

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- **Book information**
- [The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami shaman](#) by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert (translated by Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy)
- Published by: Harvard University Press
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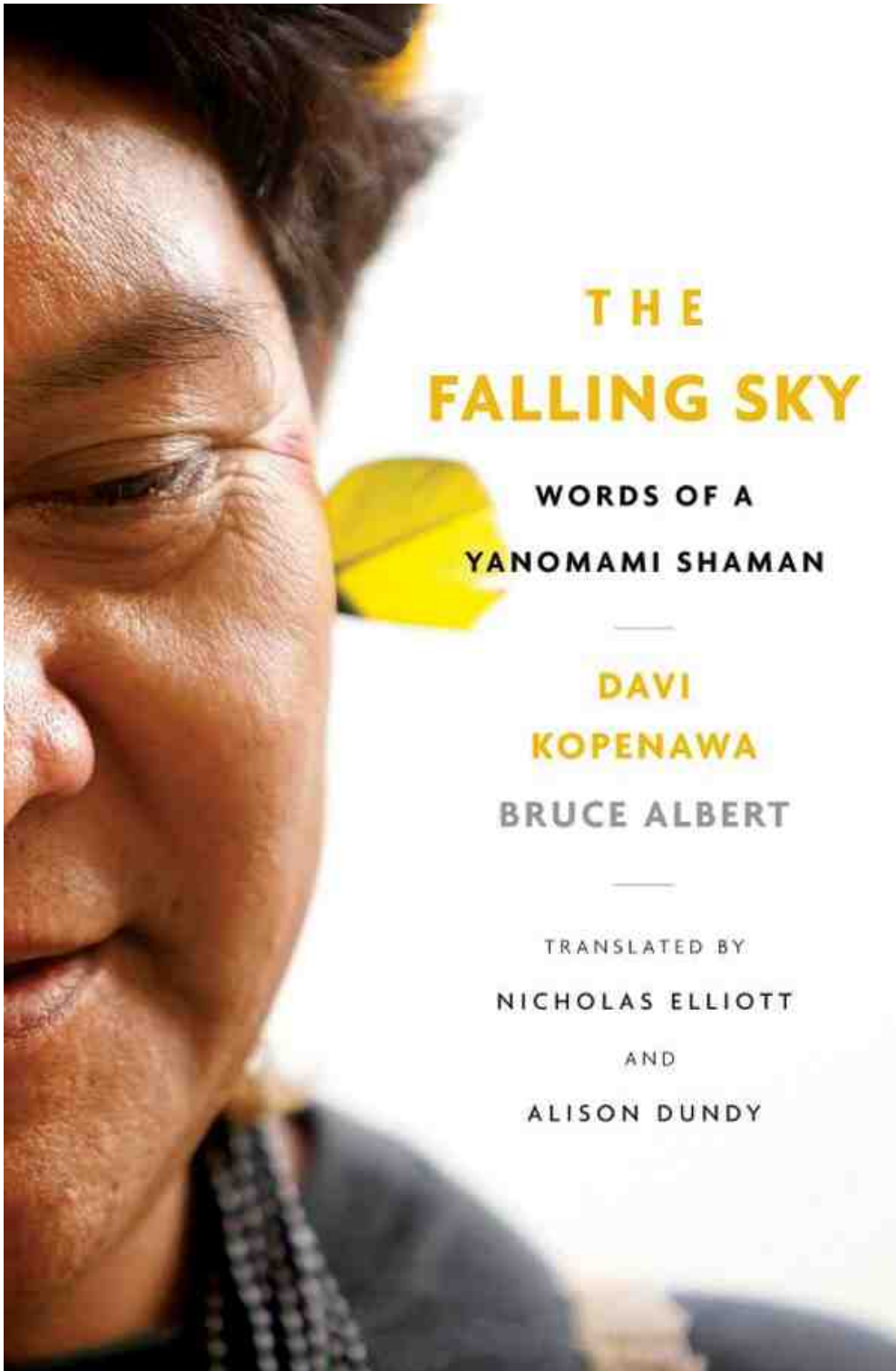


Davi Kopenawa hopes to overturn prejudices towards his people (*Image: Vincent Rosenblatt/Camera Press*)

In The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami shaman, Davi Kopenawa looks from the other side of the anthropological lens – and the result is a literary

treasure

STORIES are quilts. They are patches of brightness sewn together by narratives. And as with a quilt, each patch is chosen, not random. No two people will make the same quilt or tell the same story, even if they choose the same material.



So it is with *The Falling*

Sky: Words of a Yanomami shaman, one of the first and best autobiographical narratives by an indigenous lowland Amazonian. It is the result of a collaboration between French anthropologist Bruce Albert, who worked among the Yanomami for 38 years, and Davi Kopenawa, a shaman who became spokesman for all Amazonians through his work with indigenous-rights organisation Survival International. Albert wrote the introduction and the conclusion; the rest is Kopenawa, translated.

Each offers his perspective, but the central story is Kopenawa's, his personal history, the philosophy and spirituality of the Yanomami, and his view of the outsiders who have both attacked and celebrated his people, in Brazil, the US and Europe: the "white people".

One interpretation of the book is that it is little more than 600-plus pages praising superstition, interspersed with lengthy, mistaken condemnation of modern societies. But this misses the main point: all descriptions of other peoples will be affected by how the writer's perspective was formed within

their own society, simultaneously full of truth and rife with misunderstanding, wrong focus, or attempts – conscious or unconscious – to impose the author's beliefs.

Kopenawa labels whites as "fierce people" with deliberate irony, playing on the label applied to the Yanomami by some anthropologists, the best known of whom is [Napoleon Chagnon](#). His book about the Yanomami, *The Fierce People*, is perhaps the bestselling anthropological book of all time. His work has been attacked by Survival International for promoting the idea that the Yanomami are more violent than whites, a view that has informed the work of other academics.

Kopenawa makes it clear that the Yanomami revenge fights are nothing compared with whites' mastery of destruction, which dwarfs anything the world has seen. So he rejects the label "war" as a description of his people's violence, saying that they fight over "funerary urns" – the desire to avenge loved ones killed by the sorcery and violence of others.

You may not like the way he portrays whites because, surely, we are not like that? Yet Kopenawa bases his interpretation on personal experience, training and observations – no different from any anthropologist. And the story that emerges of our people is unpleasant. Even when he gets us wrong, *The Falling Sky* teaches us that it hurts to read partial truths about one's society from the pen of a largely unsympathetic observer. Just as it hurts the Yanomami. Anthropologists and travel writers, take note.

Yet ironically, the fame of the Yanomami and the interest this book is generating are partly due to anthropologists like [Chagnon](#) and their views. Kopenawa condemns the whites who "...continue to lie about us by saying: 'The Yanomami are fierce. All they think about is warring and stealing women. They are dangerous!' Such words are our enemies and we detest them."

The effect whites had on him as a child is more complex, though. "If the white people hadn't appeared... I would probably also have become a warrior and would have arrowed other Yanomami in anger when I wanted revenge. I have thought to do it. I always contained my evil thoughts... and stayed quiet by thinking of the white people. I would tell myself: 'If I arrow one of us, those who covet our forest will say I am evil and devoid of wisdom... they are the ones who kill us with their diseases and shotguns. And it is against them... I must direct my anger today!'"

Fierceness is indeed a trait of the Yanomami, one that comes from the ancestor spirit Arowë, Kopenawa tells us. But so too are gentleness, hard work, love of family, deep philosophical thought, fun, and more. Your quilt will look different depending on which patch – the one for fierceness, understanding of nature, or love of family – you sew in the centre. None of the quilts is false: each shows the variety of human perceptions and why no quilt, story or book should be taken as "the truth". The true contribution of this book is to show us the richness of the Yanomami spirit and culture through the eyes of a respected leader of the community.

The author's name, too, speaks volumes. "Davi" is the name the whites gave him. Kopenawa is his Yanomami name, referring to the vicious kopena wasps found in the area, while the "omamo" part of Yanomamo – as it is sometimes transliterated – means "sons of God". The book's title, *The Falling Sky*, is also significant. It refers both to the periodic destruction of the world in Yanomami lore, and to the threat of final destruction if the "white man" does not adopt more of the Yanomami values.

The book is a mix of autobiography, history, personal philosophy, and cultural criticism of whites for their destruction of the world, worship of the material, and lack of spirituality and vitality. It extols the virtues of Yanomami life and culture and their deity, Omama, placing him at the foundation not only of their culture but of white culture, too. Tellingly, Kopenawa's first impression of Stonehenge, which served a society that some would label truly fierce, was that it was most likely built by and dwelt in by Omama.

Kopenawa's life began when he "fell on the ground from the vagina of a Yanomami woman". Pride in the lack of euphemism and in his origins is evident in this phrase. He has no desire to pretend he is like a white man, though he enjoys being among them. And the book is not only finely detailed and full of challenging philosophical points, it also contains much humour. Take Kopenawa's reaction on seeing the large populations of Brazilian cities: "White people must never stop copulating."

More darkly, he reminds us what it is like to be on "the other side" – to be missionised, anthropologised, and regulated by government. These are not pleasant experiences. His story is particularly pointed when he describes the ham-fistedness of Brazilian state employees. He singles out the officious attitudes of the FUNAI, the body that makes and carries out policy relating to indigenous peoples.

The book is also in part the story of anthropologist Bruce Albert. His narrative is clear and compelling as the story of an anthropologist working among a particular people in the Amazon. But the presence of a second narrative dilutes Kopenawa's story, and overall the book would have been stronger without it – though it would, no doubt, make an excellent stand-alone book.

Ultimately, it is Kopenawa's voice that tells us who he is, who his people are, and who we are to them. It is complex and nuanced; I'd go so far as to call *The Falling Sky* a literary treasure: invaluable as academic reading, but also a must for anyone who wants to understand more of the diverse beauty and wonder of existence.

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