# BOOK REVIEW

Translated version

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## WHAT MANAGEMENT TO POSTPONE THE FALLING SKY?

### THE FALLING SKY: WORDS OF A YANOMAMI SHAMAN

Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 2013, 690 pp.

> *An Indian will descend from a brightly coloured star. From a star that will come at an astonishing speed and will land in the heart of the southern hemisphere, in America, in an instant. (Caetano Veloso)*




What can researchers in the field of socio-environmental management learn from an indigenous shaman? This question may prove rather pertinent if investigators in the field face up to the challenge of reading *A queda do céu: Palavras de um xamã Yanomami* (see The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman, in its English edition). This book, by French anthropologist, Bruce Albert, and the indigenous intellectual, Davi Kopenawa, and the fruit of a strong friendship born out of working closely together for more than 30 years, is an impressively substantial tome. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro points out in its foreword, for the scientific anthropology community it constitutes an object as unprecedented as it is composite. It is unprecedented in the innovation it brings to the construction of anthropological knowledge, being the result of an ethnographic pact sealed between the authors, which demanded processes of translation and mediation, the complexity of which is pointed out by Albert in the prologue and detailed in the postscript: "How this book was written".

It is composite in that it blurs the boundaries between genres of anthropological descriptions. This is a unique biography of an indigenous survivor who, before returning to his village to become a shaman, lived for years in towns and cities in the Amazon region, working for supposed Indian protection agencies and/or as an interpreter on the expansion frontiers. It is also a description of the poetic-metaphysical foundations of a worldview whose wisdom is only now beginning to be recognized. Lastly, it is a powerful exercise in symmetrical anthropology, a rigorous and scathing analysis of the world of white people and their morbid relationship with the planet. Above all, it is because of this third aspect of the book that I recommend that researchers in the field of management studies should read it, especially those whose research interests lie in socio-environmental management.

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Anthropology, whose origin as a science dates back to the end of the 19th century, was originally constituted as the study of alterity. One of its classic authors, the North American Clifford Geertz, once said that its role was not to answer the deepest questions of Western society, but to make available the inventory of answers that other cultures have given to those same questions. To that end, ethnography, its method *par excellence*, was a means of accessing the point of view of the "other". What is new in this work is that it does not bring the Western anthropologist's interpretation of this "other", but an indigenous intellectual's interpretation of the West.

Divided into three parts, each of which consists of eight chapters, plus prologues written by each of the co-authors, the aforementioned postscript and various maps and appendices that help readers situate themselves in territorial, linguistic, historical, and sociological terms, the book delivers a lucid and unequivocal message. This message can be summarized as follows: if commodity people, that is, the whites and their "civilizational" machine that destroy not only nature, but also the forms of existence that represent alternatives to Western modernity do not listen to and take the words of the forest peoples seriously, the sky will fall. And, if this comes to pass, the consequences will affect both indigenous people and their tormentors.

The notion of the falling sky is found in the world destruction myths of several indigenous ethnic groups. Throughout human history different cultures have produced myths about the creation and destruction of the world, such as the flood narrative in Genesis for the Judeo-Christian civilization. Myths, anthropologists argue, are stories by which a society expresses itself, indicates its ways, and argues with itself. Although they may not bring a "truth", this does not mean that they have no value. It is their efficacy and not their veracity that should be the criterion for assessing them. What should be appreciated in them is their capacity for guiding human thought and action when dealing with important existential questions. Who among us would disagree with the usefulness of this myth of a falling sky at a time when the West, and perhaps even more so what its transplant to the 'sad tropics', is being shaken by so many different crises (epidemiological, economic, political, social, environmental, moral, spiritual)? Does the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting from the SARS-COV-2 virus that is plaguing us and dragging on, leave any room for doubt or disagreement?

Let the reader be not deceived, however! As I stated above, this is a heterogeneous piece of work. A life story and a counter-anthropology are added to the mythical narrative, and the subject whose life we have access to possesses the credentials that enable him to weave an analysis that is as shrewd as it is ironic with regard to the incivility of whites, who are blinded by the "metal smoke". These credentials are derived from the lessons learned from the innumerable acts of violence that have been perpetrated by successive necropolitical policies on the author, on the Yanomami society, and on indigenous peoples in general. They also come from the wisdom of a shaman who, in a demonstration of generosity, but also as a last warning, offers "us" the "beautiful words" which have been passed on to him by his ancestors.

It is by respecting these credentials that "we" can bow (getting ashamed?) before an image of "ourselves" that he exposes, with no complacency, by way of a set of mirrors: "White people

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don't think too far ahead into the future. They're always too preoccupied with the things of the moment. [...] They are ingenious, it's true, but they lack a lot of wisdom". Or, again, in phrases originally spoken in the interviews and conferences he has given around the world and that are arranged as epigraphs in some of the chapters: "What do white people do with all this gold? Do they eat it, by any chance?"; "They [New Yorkers] are like ants. They walk one way, turn suddenly, and continue on another. They always look at the ground and never at the sky"; "I think you [white people] should dream of the earth, for it has a heart and breathes".

Or yet again, in this excerpt: "White people ask for money for everything all the time, even to drink water and urinate! Wherever you go there's a crowd of people hurrying everywhere without knowing why. You walk quickly from one place to another in the midst of strangers, without stopping and without speaking,. The life of the whites who bustle about like this all day long like *xiri na* ants [a species of ant, according to Yanomami classification and nomenclature] seems sad. They're always impatient and fearful of not arriving on time for their jobs, or of being fired. They hardly sleep and run around sleepily all day. They only talk about work and the money they don't have. They live without joy and grow old quickly, always busy with empty thoughts, and always wanting to acquire new commodities. Then, when their hair turns white, they're gone, and work, which never dies, always survives all of them. Then their children and grandchildren go on doing the same thing".

This is straight talk, which we can no longer pretend surprises "us" by being exotic. We must see it as a message that, despite being obvious, has always been hidden, or perhaps it would be better to say concealed, silenced. Then, we can imagine and put into practice other ways of managing the common home we share, including with other species. If management studies are an eminently interdisciplinary area of knowledge, which throughout its history has sought inspiration in various sciences, including anthropology, it should benefit from the lessons anthropological science has learnt from being challenged by other kinds of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge. This movement of renewal is urgent. Otherwise, "we" will only be left with the desperate hope that Davis Kopenawas, Ailtons Krenaks, and new generations of indigenous shamans keep on living. After all, as he also tells us: "Why do I keep on fighting? Because I'm alive! [...] As long as the shamans are still alive, they can prevent the sky from falling, even if it gets very sick".

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Pedro Jaime worked on the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach, theoretical review, writing and final revision of the manuscript.

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