

Urihinari a, the Spirit of the Forest: sustainability, ecology and the Amazon for the Yanomami

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Abstract: Yanomami leader and shaman Davi Kopenawa and French anthropologist Bruce Albert's book *O Espírito da Floresta* (The Spirit of the Forest) was launched in Brazil in 2013 in a context of grave environmental degradation and humanitarian crisis. We analyze the texts that make up that anthology in their aspect as a critique of Western environmental thinking founded on an epistemological separation of humanity and nature. The conclusion is that this work is a veritable anti-capitalist ecological manifestation emerging from the Yanomami comprehension of the Amazon, and one that challenges us to urgently reform the extant concept of sustainability which favors the market economy to the detriment of the ecological equilibrium of the spirits of the forest.

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Introduction

Ever since their first contact with ‘whites’ in the 1940s, the Yanomami have been living under the threat of genocide. From the 1960s on, national integration projects and the discovery of gold deposits in the region intensified the devastation of their territory. Indigenous and international pressure led to the demarcation of the Yanomami Territory in 1992 with the intention of slowing down that socioenvironmental devastation which, however, albeit at a lesser rate, has never stopped.

In recent Years illegal gold mining has once again been intensely stimulated. At the beginning of 2023, the Yanomamis’ tragic situation due to the inaction of the Brazilian government was highlighted in the national and international media in view of the situation of deforestation, poisoning of the rivers, epidemics, sub-nutrition, assassinations and rapes, stemming from the mining activities in the Yanomami Indigenous Territory

It was precisely in that context of serious environmental degradation and humanitarian crisis that the book *O Espírito da Floresta* (The Spirit of the Forest) by anthropologist Bruce Albert and Yanomami leader and shaman Davi Kopenawa came before the Brazilian public. Originally published in French in 1992, the work is the product of a meeting of intellectuals and artists of various nationalities promoted by the *Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain* (Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art) that took place at the beginning of this millennium inside the Yanomami territory which is located in the extreme north of Brazil.

‘The spirit of the Forest’ comes in the wake of *A Queda do Céu* (The downfall of the Sky), a book that, since its publication in France in 2010 and in Brazil in 2015, has brought about a revolution in the Environmental and Social sciences, particularly anthropology. In turn, ‘The spirit of the Forest’ goes beyond a mere esthetical reflection on that encounter of knowledges, with a more profound discussion of the ecological issues presented in the preceding book.

In the very first chapter of ‘The Spirit of the Forest’, Davi Kopenawa announces the book’s primary objective: to dialogue with western environmental sustainability discourses, countering them with the Yanomami understanding of the Earth-Forest – *Urihi*, the word that corresponds to the generalized but limited western notion of nature as an isolated sphere with the primary function of serving for economic exploitation. *Urihinari a*, in turn, is the Spirit of the Forest formed by a myriad of beings (*xapiri pë*) with which the shamans establish veritable, privileged, communicational relations just like those in person-to-person interlocutions.

That acknowledgement of life in all animal and vegetable forms as well as the wind, sun, earth, mountains etc., should not be viewed as an exotic belief or metaphor but rather as actually representing the assumption that the elements of nature themselves are sensitive subjects endowed with agency, sensibility, culture and life, just like human beings, as opposed to the hierarchy imposed by modern scientific thinking founded on the superiority of instrumental rationality over the natural ambit. That separation of humanity from nature finds no support in the Yanomami comprehension of the world; one which implies completely different ecological relations even when compared to the

most progressive environmental sustainability discourses. That is the central theme of the anthology analyzed in this review.

The Amazon in Yanomami cosmology

“The downfall of the sky’ immediately became a classic in the anthropological literature. Bruce Albert and Davi Kopenawa’s work represented a transformation in the ‘ethnographic pact’ unprecedented in the history of Anthropology (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p.11), insofar as it proposes that the indigenous people themselves should occupy the first-person singular of the scientific incursions as they are the “subjects of their own history and the readers of their own ethnographies” (Albert, 1997 apud Albert; Kopenawa, 2023, p. 11).

Apart from the ethnographic discussion, the work of the Yanomami shaman in partnership with the French anthropologist has taken on monumental importance in light of the repercussions of the ecological movements all over the world. As Viveiros de Castro (2015, p.26) puts it, in his two books, Davi Kopenawa’s words represent “a watershed [...] in the intellectual and political relations between Indians and non-Indians in the Americas”.

Kopenawa himself recognizes the Yanomami perspective’s contribution to ecological thinking:

The words of ecology [...] are our ancient words, those that *Omama* a gave to our ancestors. The *xapiri pë* have defended the forest ever since it has existed. They were always there beside our ancestors and for that reason they never devastated it. It is still very much alive, isn’t it? The ‘whites’ who formerly ignored such things are only now beginning to understand. That is why some of them have invented new words to protect the forest. Now they are saying that they are the ecology people because they are worried because their land is getting hotter and hotter [...] We are inhabitants of the forest. We are born at the very center of ecology and that is where we grow up (Albert; Kopenawa, 2015, p. 480).

A new paradigm is established for the Environmental Sciences when we consider the ancestral indigenous wisdom as valid and essential knowledge for a scientific comprehension of the Amazon. That especially implies recognizing “the communication [that is] present, contemporary and real between humans and non-humans” (Albert; Kopenawa, 2023, p. 14).

As Kopenawa states in ‘The Spirit of the Forest’, the forest has a reason for existing. The trees are beautiful because they are alive and only die, in pain, of hunger and thirst when they are cut down. The forest breathes and is just as alive as we humans are. The forest is not silent; quite the contrary, it is made up of a polyphony of voices which through his words the Yamomami shaman invites us to listen to. It is thanks to its vital

breath (*wixia*) – so much longer than that of the human beings – that the plants grow, that the water flows, that the air and the rain circulate. and it is that vital breath that enables us to cure our infirmities.

The Yanomami observe the destruction carried out by the ‘whites’ who surround and invade their lands. In the name of economic development, those whom Davi calls ‘the goods people’ deforest huge extensions of forest land, not to grow food, but to plant grass for cattle and they stir up the rivers like ‘wild hogs’ leaving the waters contaminated and “full of the epidemic smoke that comes from the motors (Albert; Kopenawa, 2023, p. 53), only to complain of hunger and thirst in the cities afterwards. The inhabitants of the forest now see days that do not dawn, the daybreak full of smoke, the moon ruddy red and the rain hardly falling at all or when it does fall accompanied by furious storms; that is the forest venting its anger (Albert; Kopenawa, 2023, p. 145).

So, we, the shamans, have to carry out our work to help to contain those angry movements. It is only when they calm down that we can live there, out of danger and not we alone, the whites too. But when all the inhabitants of the forest have disappeared and all the shamans have died, when the earth-devouring whites have killed off all the trees and the rivers, reduced the ground to muddy holes, then you too will suffer (Davi Kopenawa, 2023, p. 165-166).

The indigenous peoples and especially their shamans play a notable and fundamental role in the ecological equilibrium. For the Yanomami, *Urihi a* embraces not only the Amazonian vegetation formation but also the terrestrial space that sustains it. Thus *Urihi a* is, at one and the same time, the name of their territory and their name for the world; a world that shelters a complex society formed by both human and non-human ‘subjects-beings, albeit invisible and inanimate to western eyes, in a vital flux that integrally embraces all forms of life.

Albert analyzes that it goes in a contrary direction to classical ecology in which the vegetable kingdom holds a secondary and consequent position. From the ancestral Yanomami perspective, the trees are at the beginning of any understanding of the climate and that converges with scientific discoveries that “the great trees of the Amazon forest can pump thousands of liters of water a day from the soil and throw them into the atmosphere ” (Albert; Kopenawa, 2023, p. 144). The ‘flying rivers’ as those low altitude atmospheric currents have come to be called in meteorological studies, are largely responsible for the South American rainfall regime, increasingly affected by the deforestation of the Amazon forest.

The anthropologist calls attention to the fact that shamanic elaborations regarding the forest, derived from thousands of years of the experience of ecological relations in the tropical forest and formerly treated as mere primitive beliefs, are currently inspiring advanced scientific reflections. That tendency becomes a reality when we realize that the indigenous peoples’ prophetic warning against the devastation of the forest (‘the downfall of the sky’ in Yanomami cosmology) is not a mere allegory but a “disturbing ecological

literality” (Albert; Kopenawa, 2023, p. 146).

The indigenous perspective that Kopenawa brings to us in ‘The Spirit of the Forest’ exposes the fact that it is not possible to think in terms of a ‘pure’ and technicist ecology, for all relations with nature are necessarily socio-political relations. In that sense, the Yanomami words are evidence of a radical critique of the economic model of the ‘goods people’. Underlying the book’s argument is the fact the indigenous question is essentially incompatible with the accumulation of capital, above all in its agro-industrial and mining expressions that the nations of the subcontinent have taken on in the international division of labor. That becomes clear when we look at the Amazon, one of the largest extensions of territory in the world that has not yet been reduced to the status of private property.

Conclusions

The ‘message of the forest’ (Viveiros de Castro, 2015) that Davi Kopenawa’s words pay homage to goes beyond just the Yanomamis’ understanding of the Amazon and represents wisdom accumulated in the course of centuries by other indigenous peoples, riverside dwelling populations and quilombolas, all historically excluded from the development of western scientific knowledge.

‘The Spirit of the Forest’ is a work that denounces the excess of romanticism in the western scientific discourse, which after centuries of destruction, has adopted a purist, paternalistic posture in relation to the indigenous peoples but continues to be incapable of truly considering their knowledge and that of their leaders and shamans as being just as legitimate or even more so in the understanding of the Amazon.

In that sense, ‘The Spirit of the Forest’ constitutes a veritable anti-capitalist ecological manifesto, a “shamanic critique of the economic nature policy” as Albert (1993) puts it so well. That is the essence of the revolution that indigenous thinking proposes to bring about in the discourse of contemporary ecological movements. As Viveiros de Castro (2015, p. 15) stated earlier, Kopenawa and Albert’s work “is an unquestionable scientific event [...]; we have the obligation to take absolutely seriously what the Indians have to say in the voice of Davi Kopenawa”.

The words of Davi Kopenawa challenge the Environmental Sciences to have the courage to recognize that the devastation of nature promoted by agribusiness, mining activities, and mega projects will never stop in the present model of global economic development. The ‘message of the forest’ has been given.

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Urihinari a, o Espírito da Floresta: sustentabilidade, ecologia e a Amazônia para os Yanomami

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Resumo: O livro “O Espírito da Floresta”, do líder e xamã yanomami Davi Kopenawa e do antropólogo francês Bruce Albert, foi lançado no Brasil em 2023, em meio a um grave contexto de degradação ambiental e crise humanitária. Analisamos os textos que compõem a coletânea em sua crítica ao pensamento ambiental ocidental fundado na separação epistemológica entre humanidade e natureza. Conclui-se que a presente obra é um verdadeiro manifesto ecológico anticapitalista, que emerge da compreensão yanomami da Amazônia e nos desafia à urgente reformulação da concepção de sustentabilidade em voga que privilegia a economia de mercado, em menosprezo ao equilíbrio ecológico dos espíritos da floresta.

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Resenha

Palavras-chave: Yanomami; Cosmologia; Sustentabilidade; Ecologia; Amazônia.

Urihinari a, el Espíritu del Bosque: sostenibilidad, ecología y la amazonia para los Yanomami

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Resumen: El libro “O Espírito da Floresta” (“El Espíritu del Bosque”), del líder y chamán yanomami Davi Kopenawa y del antropólogo francés Bruce Albert, fue lanzado en Brasil en 2023, en medio de un grave contexto de degradación ambiental y crisis humanitaria. Analizamos los textos que componen la colección en su crítica al pensamiento ambiental occidental basado en la separación epistemológica entre humanidad y naturaleza. Se concluye que el presente trabajo es un verdadero manifiesto ecológico anticapitalista, que surge de la comprensión yanomami de la Amazonía y nos desafía a reformular urgentemente el concepto de sostenibilidad en boga, que privilegia la economía de mercado, desconociendo el equilibrio ecológico de los espíritus del bosque.

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Reseña

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