Yanomami shamans in the Amazon rainforest protect nature, in its entirety, by defending “the forest’s trees, hills, mountains, and rivers, its fish, game, spirits, and human inhabitants.” They do so with the help of their xapiiri auxiliary spirits (primordial images) who under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs (yãkoona), which explains why shamans are described as those who act as, indeed become, spirits. Xapiiri feed on flower nectar and on yãkoona. They appear to shamans as minuscule humanoid wearing extremely bright, colourful feather ornaments and body paint. Like guests at a harvest festival (reahu), a son recalling his father, or a pet in search of a home and a master, they long to be chanted and danced into existence. The shamans and their xapiiri battle relentlessly against the dark forces that threaten the wellbeing of the forest universe, making it cool and beautiful, even when the rains become scarce.

When Claude Lévi-Strauss described art as the ultimate refuge of the savage mind in our society, he did not anticipate that he would inspire a militant anthropologist (Bruce Albert) to make common cause with a Yanomami intellectual (Davi Kopenawa) eager to broadcast a shamanic prophecy as widely as possible. Nor could the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, the second volume in Jean Malaurie’s celebrated Terre Humaine series, have imagined that these two friends would join their spirited rebelliousness to produce the latest book in the same series: *The Falling Sky*.

Originally published in French, in 2010, this book is now available in its English translation. Its title refers to a myth about the cataclysmic end of the world, invaded by the deadly smoke of metals and fuels. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that the “falling sky” is the book’s main protagonist. It is this anthropomorphized entity, at once threatening and fragile, that the Yanomami urge us to take seriously:

> Beyond our own fate, we also worry about the entire world, which could well turn to chaos. Unlike us, the white people are not afraid to be crushed by the falling sky, but one day they may fear that as much as we do! The shamans know a great deal about the bad things that threaten human beings. There is only one sky and we must take care of it, for if it becomes sick, everything will come to an end.

Anthropologists and other specialists will find much to relish in this beautifully crafted evocation of Yanomami culture and philosophy. Based on hundreds of hours of interviews taped in native language, it is enriched by almost a hundred pages of footnotes, ethnobiological and geographic glossaries, bibliographical references, detailed indexes and, last but not least, an essay by Bruce Albert on how he wrote the book. While the book resonates with current Western metaphysical angst about finitude, it is written principally as a long shamanic chant, opening a multitude of interior journeys and providing a new consciousness of the world as a whole.

For humanity to progress, the chant goes, the entire forest, the great forest-land-earth (uriri a pree) must be defended, “including the one human beings do not know” – hence the invocation of the xapiiri. His consciousness enlarged, the shaman acquires wisdom through dreaming, rather than through meditation, as in the great Eastern traditions, or through some kind of awakening. Although the art of dreaming is cultivated by all Yanomami, shamanic initiation requires a deeper kind of dreaming, a dreaming that goes beyond the things of the moment. In the first section of *The Falling Sky*, Kopenawa recounts the details of how Lourival, his father-in-law, along with other seasoned shamans, guided his spiritual growth.

> “I started to dream of the forest Omama [the demigod of Yanomami mythology] created for us more and more often and little by little his words grew inside me.” Yanomami shamans “do not become spirits alone”; they dream for others, in very much the same way as hunters hunt for others, and never eat the prey they arrow. Shamanic initiation links the old to the young, the strong to the weak, through the chains of authorial voices, a sign of mutual recognition and true friendship. It is, above all, a splendid story told by an exceptional man, who barely knows how to read and write. That the story was written down by an ethnographer who elected not to adjust his research to the canons of academia adds to its importance. The use of the first-person singular to tell the tale, involves a fusion of authorial voices, a sign of mutual recognition and true friendship if ever there was one; it lends a musical quality to the resulting “hetero-biography”. Through their sonorous presence, the numerous beings evoked in the shaman chant usher in the fertility of life as shamans see and feel it. What better way to entice readers away from everyday forgetfulness than to invite them to hear the forest’s vast and timeless symphony?

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