"I Fight Because I Am Alive!" A Yanomami Leader Speaks
Statement by Davi Kopenawa Yanomami on the Situation of the Yanomami in Brazil

Text of an interview of Davi Kopenawa Yanomami by Terence Turner in Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil, March 1991

By Terence Turner and Davi Kopenawa Yanomami
Transcribed by Bruce Albert and Translated by Terence Turner

TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION

Alarmed by reports of the desperate situation of the Yanomami of Brazil, the American Anthropological Association resolved to take the unprecedented step of appointing a Special Commission to investigate the situation and recommend actions that might be taken by the Association in support of the Yanomami. Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, the chief spokesman and leader of the Brazilian Yanomami, served as a consultant to the Commission, and this interview was recorded as his contribution to its report. Turner, who travelled to Boa Vista as chair of the AAA Commission, conducted the interview in Portuguese. Davi, in his replies, occasionally used Yanomami terms and expressions. Bruce Albert, an anthropologist who has worked with the Yanomami for many years and who is also a member of the AAA Commission, transcribed the entire text of the interview and provided glosses for the Yanomami expressions. Turner translated the interview into English.

Davi wanted to have this interview published as widely as possible, so that his message could be brought to as broad an audience as possible. The publication of the full text in Cultural Survival Quarterly (arranged by Jason Clay of CS, a member of the AAA Commission) is directly in accord with his wishes. The interview falls into three main parts. In the first, Davi gives an account of the problems currently being faced by the Yanomami, their lack of support from the Brazilian government’s Indian Agency (FUNAI), the valuable assistance they have received from some anthropologists and NGOs such as the Commission for the Creation of a Yanomami Park (CCPY), and the medical assistance project he himself has initiated with support from CCPY, the Demini Project. He specifically appeals for support for this project: donations can be made through CCPY ( ). In the second part, Davi, who is an initiated Yanomami shaman, outlines the speculative interpretation of the nature of white civilization, its impact on the environment, and the imminent danger its environmentally destructive policies pose to the entire world, developed by the Yanomami shamans over the past several decades. Albert has described the development of this shamanic analysis from its earliest beginnings to its elaboration and systematization in recent years (Albert 1988), and Davi himself has produced a more recent formulation (Acao pela Cidadania 1990). The formulation Davi provides in this report, however, goes beyond the others in certain respects.

Yanomami shamans derive their power from a hallucinatory snuff which they inhale as an aromatic powder. From the outset, they interpreted the strange and powerful attraction of white manufactured commodities, with their ambivalent implications for the Yanomami who came into contact with them (they were thought to cause epidemic disease) as a kind of scent or fume exuded by the white goods. The successive stages of the development of the Yanomami cosmological analysis of the effects of white commodities and economic activities have been worked out through progressive elaborations of these linked notions of power as an inhalable fragrance or smoke and the nature of the contagion, disease and destruction that it brings in its wake. As Davi’s exposition demonstrates, the Yanomami shamans have
come a long way from their first notions of the paranormal, shaman-like power of the whites' technology and manufacturing economy as a "fragrance of metal" exuded by machetes, knives and aluminum pots. The "fumes of metal" have now become the clouds of dust raised by mining operations and the billowing clouds of black smoke from burning forests and even oil wells in the Persian Gulf War. The hostile power unleashed by these destructive activities of the whites is now seen as threatening not only the Yanomami and but all humanity with epidemic disease, and not only humanity but the physical world itself, whose cosmic layers are being progressively unbalanced by the clouds of mineral dust and oil smoke the whites are throwing into the atmosphere. As Davi's formulation in the present text also makes clear, the Yanomami have come to understand that the progressively increasing imbalance that the whites' actions are causing in the natural world is integrally related to the imbalance the whites have created within their own society, with its contrast between rich and poor and the insatiable drive of its rich to accumulate more wealth. This powerful and comprehensive analysis of the nature of the human and enviromental impact of white civilization, entirely worked out in terms of Yanomami shamanic cosmology, is an impressive monument to the theoretical power of the Yanomami shamanic tradition and its capacity to engage and comprehend the historical catastrophe to which Yanomami society has been subjected by its encounter with one of the most brutal and destructive forms of capitalist society.

In the third part of the interview, Turner raises a series of questions concerning the uses made of certain anthropological reports of chronic warfare and instability in Yanomami society by Brazilian political elements, economic interests, and media to justify the dismemberment and expropriation of Yanomami territory. Davi's responses to this series of questions stands as the first direct confrontation and refutation by a Yanomami spokesman of these tendentious interpretations and their political use by Brazilian military, economic and ideological forces.

REFERENCES CITED

Albert, Bruce

Acao pela Cidadania