Interview with Davi Kopenawa Yanomami

Talk between Davi Kopenawa Yanomami (DY) and Terence Turner (TT) in Boa Vista, March 1991. Transcribed by Bruce Albert and translated into English by T. Turner.

PART ONE: AN APPEAL FOR SUPPORT

DY: I want to send my message, this message, to our friends, the other indigenous peoples, and to our white friends too, those who stand by our side, who support us. I want to communicate my news and my message, my feelings and my needs. My full name is Davi Kopenaua Yanomami. The village I live in is called Watoriketheri. It is in the Mountains of the Wind.

My Yanomami people know, they see what is happening to our community, and they see what is happening to our relatives in other communities. They are terrified of the miners, by the [polluted] rivers.

The miners invaded our reserve and came to our communities feigning friendship; they lied to us, they tricked us Indians, and we were taken in. Then their numbers grew; many more arrived, and they began bringing in machinery that polluted the river. The pollution killed the fish and the shrimp, everything that lived in our rivers.

I am trying to help, no not trying, I am helping my people. At first I didn't know Portuguese, but I learned to speak it to be able to protest to the Brazilian government, to all authorities. I am travelling among my people to tell them of my work: to Tootobi, Araça, Ajuricaba and Catrimani. I am very sorry not ot have been able to travel to other communities because they are so far away, and hard to reach from where I have been. I would like to ask for help in my work from some friend, perhaps a white friend. I do this work, visiting other villages, whenever I get money to pay for the airplane to make the trip for me. It is very difficult to travel to distant villages because my people’s forest is very big, with high jungle and mountains. I am telling you this so you can understand the difficulty. I am going to work in Surucucus, Paapiu, Jeremias, Avaris, Erico, Waikas and Mucajai and as far as Marari. It is very hard to get there; it would take me 20 days [on foot]. If I had to walk to all of these places it would take me a year.

TT: Doesn't FUNAI ever help you with this?

DY: FUNAI never helps me to do this work. FUNAI has never given me an airplane to visit villages that have airstrips, places I could reach by plane. I get no support from FUNAI.

TT: Is FUNAI doing anything else to help your people these days?

DY: I have known FUNAI since I was little, when FUNAI first began to work for the Yanomami, and now I am an employee of FUNAI, I am the chief of the Post at my village, Watoriketheri. I am working for my kin, not for FUNAI. FUNAI never does anything well, it is always complaining that it has no money, or has no airplane, that it has no support from the government to do anything good for the Yanomami, and it never has. Now things have gotten even worse. FUNAI has become even weaker. That is why I need so much help to carry on my work with different communities; because FUNAI is not doing this, it is jealous of me, it gets angry with me if I do this. FUNAI doesn't want me to leave my own village, it wants to keep me hidden, it wants me to keep quiet, not to protest, not to talk to others, not to speak to white
supporters. At first FUNAI forbade me to leave my post, to leave my village. The FUNAI people want me always to stay in that one place, but I am not willing to sit still and keep quiet while my people are dying. I need to go out into the world, I need to cry out, I need to protest what is happening. no, not "need", I have the right to spread the news to other countries. My words have reached Europe, the U.S., Japan and Venezuela, and other countries throughout the world. But I am worried about reaching the more remote villages of my own people there on the [Venezuelan] frontier. You know this frontier, don't you? There are villages up there, I alone can't visit all of them.

**TT:** You're speaking of the Venezuelan frontier, aren't you?

**DY:** Yes, with Venezuela. It is virtually impossible for me alone to visit and talk with all of them. It is an enormous task. But I am trying to do what I can to save the lives of my people, of my Yanomami.

**TT:** Let me ask you if there are anthropologist who have helped or are helping you in your struggle, your effort. Can you tell me something about that?

**DY:** Yes, I can talk about that, certainly. Anthropologists exist only outside of FUNAI. There are only two anthropologists [who have helped us], one, who is not Brazilian, is called X, and there is another, called Y. These anthropologists have helped us. They have helped by writing reports and delivering them. X speaks our language, he is helping very much. We like his what he is doing. He is working for the Yanomami, in support of the Yanomami, and carrying out much news about what they are experiencing. X is going to our area and Y is going to the Auaris [the country of a northern group of Yanomami]. When they get to the communities where they are going, the Yanomami who live there tell them what is happening, so X and Y know, they write it down and afterwards send it to the news media so other people also hear about it.

**TT:** Is FUNAI doing anything to help these anthropologists? Can you say a little about that?

**DY:** No, they [FUNAI] do not like this work of the anthropologists. They keep trying to prohibit anthropologists [from entering Yanomami country], these two anthropologists who are working [with us]. FUNAI does not like anthropologists to move about from village to village because anthropologists tell the truth, anthropologists see at first hand what is happening in the reserve, there in Paapiu, in Surucucus, in Auaris, Tootobi, Catrimani, all these places. When an anthropologist tells the truth, it follows that s(he) is speaking against the government. FUNAI is an organ of the government and does not like this work [of anthropologists].

But that's the way it is, it takes a courageous person, a courageous anthropologist not to just do some research and then leave, we Indians need anthropologists with courage, anthropologists who can speak our language. We need anthropologists to come to us with news of what the whites are doing, of what the government is saying, of what foreign governments are saying, we need news from there, we need good news...because here in Brazil the Brazilian government never gives good news to us Yanomami. That is why we think it is good that they [anthropologists] speak our language, and can thus explain to people, to our communities, to the old people, to those who do not understand Portuguese, to the women who do not speak Portuguese. Anthropologists can speak to the Shabori [shamans], to the Tuxaua [chiefs] to those who don't speak Portuguese, to those who have never left the village to come to cities like this [Boa Vista]. Our people can learn about these things from anthropologists who speak our language. This is very important.
TT: Can you speak a little about the health situation? Is it getting worse? Is FUNAI doing anything to help? What can other people do?

DY: Well, FUNAI tried to carry out a community health project for the Yanomami as a whole. They only did a very little work, very little, they had no effect. This is because FUNAI has no doctors, or at least no competent doctors who can work with the Yanomami, who like to work with the Yanomami to help them. They only want to work for one or two months, staying amongst the miners. The personnel of FUNAI, government personnel are not prepared to do health work, they are not accustomed to it, and thus they find it difficult.

Personally, I think it would be better if the [FUNAI health workers] familiarized themselves with [us Yanomami] before coming in to our communities to do medical work. As it is, the FUNAI government workers only come to know the Yanomami when they are called in for emergency aid. When they arrive in the villages they are shocked to find no houses to stay in, no clean stream for them to drink. They are afraid of getting malaria.

Well, the malaria is getting a little better, not much, it is still continuing, it will never go away... For it to go away, FUNAI would have to do effective medical work, but FUNAI is just a little, weak, service, incapable of doing away with this disease that has attacked my people.

To deal effectively with malaria, it is necessary to have doctors in the villages, staying there for a month or two months without coming out to the city. That way, the disease could be diminished. As things are now, they [FUNAI medical personnel] only stay here in Boa Vista, or they go only to one Yanomami village, Paapiu or Surucucus. That way they will never accomplish anything. The FUNAI doctors will only have a real effect if they stay in the village, in Paapiu where there is much malaria. They have to stay in the village for a month. In Paapiu they need two doctors who will work continuously for a month without coming out to the city. They need to work there together with a couple of technicians from SUCAM, they have to take the microscope to see what kind of disease, what type of malaria it is, in order to treat it properly.

TT: Obviously; but this is not happening now, right?

DY: Right, this has not happened. So many people have died, children, youths, girls, shamans, almost everyone in Paapiu has died, so that very few people are left, that is why I am so worried. FUNAI is not doing effective work, the FUNAI doctor just arrives stays for 3-4 days or perhaps a week, and then leaves for the city, and the Yanomami continue to be sick, they continue to need the doctor, the nurse to be with them in their village. This is what never happens. They only go to Surucucus, Surucucus, Surucucus, or to Jeremias. They are usually people who do not like to stay in the jungle, don't like to eat game, and don't like to drink polluted river water, which is all they have now in Paapiu. Under conditions like this, the doctor is not likely to last ten days. He wants only to go back to the city, but the Indians need doctors who won't just stay [in the city].

TT: As you know, I am here on behalf of the American Anthropological Association which is a foreign organization, from a foreign country. I would like to ask you to say something to the Association. What can we do to help? What do you think we can do, what would you like us to do from abroad to support your people's struggle?
DY: Well, this is good, hmm? You coming to Boa Vista to see me. It's lucky you caught me in the city. If I had been in the village it would have been a lot harder to talk! We need this work of yours, that you are doing with this foreign association that wants to help us, hmm? I need your support, because we are suffering, my Yanomami people. I need your support to work, to bring pressure on the government to make it think a little, to make it hink about solving our problems. You people are always writing letters to the government, bringing things to the attention of President Collor. We need this help that you give, we need you to bring your strength to bear to make them demarcate our land, to recognize our continuous area, our single and indivisible territory. We need this.

We Yanomami cannot fight against the whites. I don't want the government to fight against the Indians. I am more Brazilian than the government. I ask this of you: I need you to try to get out the news, to write letters, in order that the government should demarcate our land, remove the miners, remove everything that they have brought into our reserve. The miners always leave their machinery hidden, they even hide themselves, so the government must make sure to take them all. They must leave the area clean so as to abolish the disease that the miners brought, to end or diminish the malaria, TB, flu and other kinds of TB also (?), that kill so many people. These and other kinds of disease that I don't know. This disease that has come from outside Brazil has also arrived here in Boa Vista, and the white man is sick with it, he is sickened by it and then transmits it.

I also want to leave another message with you. I have a project. I think you haven't yet seen this, but you have heard about it, no? I have a project that I have thought of carryng out. It is called the Demini Community Project. It is not a project of FUNAI, it is not a government project, it is not a project of the missionaries, of the Church, or of CCPY. This is a project that I conceived and created myself. It is for this that I need help.

TT: Tell me about this project, I don't know about it.

DY: With this project I am trying to help four communities. I started with Demini, and now I am working in Toototobi and Araca and Ajuricaba. I also give support the [Catholic] Mission at Catrimani, for dental work. I am learning how the whites do things; I still don't understand well the work of this project, but I am learning now through the project.

In this project I have worked to bring doctors, two doctors who are working in the community of Demini, one man and one woman, The woman is Gorete, whom you met yesterday, and the man is called Istvan. There is also a nurse, who has gone to Sao Paulo to study. So, with this project, I am inviting doctors to come and work to help these four communities. There is also Cica [Maria Aparecida da Silva], she is a dentist. She knows how to work with Yanomami, she already knows some Yanomami families. These three don't speak our language, but they are working and helping.1

FUNAI knows about my project. So do the Church, the Evangelical Missions, and the Ministry of Health; I have shown it to them, and they found it good. So, as you have asked what the Yanomami need, I am answering you, hein? I need--no, the project needs--[support]. The project originated on my trip to Europe. The Europeans agreed, they thought it would be good if I did this, that I should start work on this, that I should begin to learn about money, to learn about how to do this sort of work. If I don't do anything, if I just let things slide like FUNAI, if I just leave everything for CCPY or the government to do, things will always lag behind, they would alwaays just stay the way they are.
PART TWO: HOW THE WHITES’ ASSAULT ON THE ENVIRONMENT THREATENS TO DESTROY THE WORLD

We have two struggles: the fight to defend the earth, the environment, the sky, the wind, the trees and the earth; and second, the fight to defend our land, our territory. The shabori [shamans] know how to do this; it is their work, because they understand Omame [God, the Creator] and his ways. Omame is like a government, like the President of the world, more powerful than any human government. The governments of the whites, like that of Brazil, do not know Omame, they don't listen to him, or the shamans. They are ruining the world, and the shamans are very worried about this, but they are growing tired of speaking out against it, they are giving up. This way the world will come to an end.

I am working with Bruce [Albert] for him to write down the shamans' knowledge of Omame and to make it into a book so that the whole world can know it. The pollution that the whites are creating is a smoke: the smoke of factories, the smoke of the forest-clearing fires, the smoke of bombs. The whites make war, drop this atomic bomb, and the smoke billows up, covering the whole world. This smoke causes much sickness among people, and the shamans are very concerned about it. People all over the world, whites, Indians, are falling ill with the sickness caused by this pollution from the smoke of metal.

The world is a sky. This smoke of pollution that the whites are generating will rise up into this sky until the sky will no longer be able to bear it, and then the world will explode, and that will be the end of it. This will happen if we do not stop this pollution. We all have dirty spirits. The whites have dirty spirits, the Indians too. There are, however, places in this world that are not dirty, where nature is still clean, as Omame directed. The shamans know these places, they understand this cleanness, they can teach it to others.

In the cities of the whites there are many poor people. Why? Because the rich whites seize their lands, take their money and don't give it back. Indians don't do this. We don't have poor people. Every one of us can use the land, can clear a garden, can hunt, fish. An Indian when he needs to eat kills just one or two tapirs. He only cuts down a few trees to make his garden. He doesn't annihilate the animals and the forest. The whites do this, they finish the trees and the animals because they cut down great areas of forest and kill all the animals, so that they can never come back.

The huburibi [spirits of blindness] live underground, with the gold and cassiterite. They escape in the dust, they get in the eyes and cause oncocercose. Omame hid the shawara [epidemic diseases] under the earth. Nabewakaribe2 use machines and dig deep holes in the earth [to get] iron, to make pieces of airplanes, of trains. This stirs up much dust, which the wind carries like smoke, and this makes many people sick.

There is also a petroleum disease (I learned about this from Lorival, the headman of my village, and my teacher; he is a shaman who is also my father-in-law). The whites take oil out of the earth. the oil, the iron, the rocks are not dead, they are alive. They only die when they are heated in the factories. then their spirits go wheeling around through the air, in the wind, and sicken children and old people. The shawara of stones gets out and wants vengeance. This is the universal sickness of pollution, the disease of smoke. It arises from iron, stones, oil, bombs, all these things. This is why I am worried about the war in Arabia, and all the black smoke that is rising from the [burning] petroleum.

If the miners are removed [from our land] only to make way for big mining companies with huge machines that can dig even deeper, this will only make things even worse, it will let loose even more
shawara, more epidemics. Disease is greedy, it wants to eat people, it is a glutton. It is too strong for the shamans, there are not in this world shamans strong enough to stand against it. This way everyone will be killed. The world will be destroyed in our own time, it will not survive us. This is what Lorival says, it is what all the Yanomami are saying, and other Indians as well. [There are not enough] strong shamans.

**TT:** Why not then become a shaman to work against this?

**DY:** Anybody who works very strongly against sickness, against the shawara, the shawara will kill, just as Chico Mendes was killed. This is why I do not say that I am "strong".

**TT:** But if things are so hopeless, why do you still keep fighting?

**DY:** Why do I still fight? Because I am alive. I believe in my fight. I am fighting for the young, for the children, and also for the adults, that my people may not to have to die so young.

Hutucara [the spirit of the sky] can call a powerful wind from under the earth, where the wind stays, call it forth thus [swirling arm gesture] and command it to clean away all that smoke, all that pollution and carry it back under the earth. Thus the world might be cleansed once again. It will require a very strong wind, however, because the world is very big. That is why all the Yanomami together are not enough to save it.

**TT:** In your letter, "To All the Peoples of the Earth" published in the last report of Acao Pela Cidadania (1990), you speak of the need to protect the sacred mountains of Yanomami country. Could you explain why these mountains are so important?

**DY:** I can explain it to you. I like to explain these things to the whites, so that they may know. We Yanomami are always talking of the name of the creator of the mountains, and we respect him/her [gender not indicated] very much, as do other Brazilian Indians, and all the indigenous peoples of the world. This sacred place, the high mountains, the beautiful mountains, are places of spirit. Now "spirit" ("espirito") is not a word in my language. I have learned this word "spirit" and use it in the mixed language I have invented [to talk to whites about these things], but my own indigenous name is hekurabe; [also] saboribe.4 These are the spirits of shamans (shabori) who live in the mountains. This sacred place we call hutu pata. It is a place where Yanomami villages stood in the past, and the souls of the Indians [who lived there] still exist there. In your language you say "soul" ("alma") but we call them "bore", "ne borebi, o ne borebi kua...a nomarayomeki a ne borebi temi."5

There are various spirits, different shabori.6 The shabori of the whole world created these mountains for them to live in and survive. The shabori like to stay in these mountains; shabori that exist in this land, and also in the entire world. These sacred mountains are important to the world as a whole, not just the Indians. It is very difficult, however, to enter into contact with these shabori. The Yanomami are able to know and see them, to enter into contact with them.

Our fathers and grandfathers, our old shamans, die but continue to exist, their souls still live. They only leave behind their skin, their flesh and bones, because it has grown old, as people take off their old clothes when they are torn and no longer good to wear, and throw them away. When Yanomami die, we burn their bodies, but their souls do not die. They stay where the person died, where his house was, hein? The soul always remains there, and therefore we respect it as a sacred place, we are afraid of it. The souls want to live, to be with us, they do not want to separate from us. We make loud noises [to
They hurt us Yanomami, they inflict disease on children, those which we call "our" diseases, but other shamans, those still living, are able to talk to them, and are thus able to cure the sick so that they don't die.

**TT:** If miners destroy the mountains, will it still be possible to contact these spirits?

**DY:** Yes, but they don't want...the shamans have already contacted these spirits, these hekurabe who live in the mountains, they do not want anyone to disturb their dwelling place. They want the mountains to remain clean. When the whites come there wanting to destroy the mountains, the spirits become angry. This is what happened in Paapiu. the whites dug in the mountains, the miners disturbed a sacred place, a sacred mountain. They kept digging there, so the spirits became angry and killed them.

**TT:** So because of this many people died?

**DY:** Because of this many died. The whites do not know what the spirits are doing. They break and upset things in the mining operations; many such things are happening in all these places, everywhere where the shabori have been angered by the noise of the helicopters. Sometimes they even cause airplanes to disappear; the spirits make airplanes crash from time to time. When the hekurabe are angry they break things, they stand up and when the airplane approaches and they see it they destroy it, and the airplane crashes. These spirits, the shabori are small but strong. They have the strength to destroy [an airplane] and thereby demonstrate their power. The whites need to understand that if they keep disturbing sacred places, many people are going to die, many airplanes will crash, many winds, many rainstorms will come, houses will be destroyed even in the cities, because the spirits are angry.

**PART THREE: ON YANOMAMI WARFARE, "FIERCENESS" AND FIGHTING**

**TT:** As you know, one of the arguments that has been made for splitting up your country into discontinuous "islands" is that Yanomami communities area always fighting with each other. Would you care to address this point?

**DY:** Sure, I have heard this many times, this thing that they say against us, but in my time, today, the Yanomami are no longer fighting with one another. In my time there is no more war among the Yanomami. In the past, it existed among us, just as it exists among you. Right now there is a war in Arabia, so you can see that it is not only the Indian who is dangerous. The white man is more dangerous than the Indian. The Yanomami do not have bombs like the whites, they do not mistreat and kill everybody [when they make war]. Our way of war is different. We don't have warplanes, we don't drop bombs.

There was still warfare when I was in my mother's belly, but today it no longer exists. Today we are all friends. Disputes are rare, and when someone is killed, it does not lead to fighting year after year. The whites are saying this against us because they don't want to make our reserve, they are afraid of you [ie. foreign supporters], they are afraid of us too, the whites who speak this way are afraid that they might lose. They think the Yanomami are like them. On the contrary: we want our reserve for the Yanomami to live in. It was they who cut up our country into little pieces, without ever telling us what they were doing or why.
The "Northern Headwaters" Project [the secret military plan, "Projeto Calha Norte"] did this in secret, they hide what they are doing, they never tell people or explain or ask to hear from the Indians as to whether they agree to this division of our land into these little pieces. In Brazil [DY is here referring to Yanomami country--TT] there is no war, no fighting or violence of the kind they speak of. If there were I would truthfully say so. I am a Yanomami, I like to speak truly, I would not lie, I would want to make things clear to these people, I would say, "Look! We really are dangerous, we fight a lot, we kill a lot of people, we don't get along with each other, so we don't need much land, only little discontinuous areas."

But it's the other way around: because we have so little [land], my Yanomami people today are very weak, [also] because of malaria. The whites speak this way [about the Yanomami] because they want to use the minerals of our land, to work the gold, the cassiterite of our reserve. They are not just talking, they are doing it: the government of President Sarney, together with the "Northern Headwaters" [Calha Norte] Project, FUNAI [Fundacao Nacional do Indio], and IBAMA [Instituto Brasileiro da Amazonia], cut our land up into little pieces, one for each community, so they could enter our country and work its resources, so they could finish off our people. They have done much violence against us Indians in order to kill us off. So I am here fighting to keep my kinfolk from being wiped out.

Over there in the communities of Niyayobetheri and Shamataro they fought a lot because it was there that courage was created, where Waithesi was raised, where Oeori was born, where Aroweke created his place, which is called Niyayobethesi. It was from there that courage was diffused to all the Indians, to the whites as well, so that is why they fought alot in Niyayobethesi. I don't know if they are still doing it now, I haven't been there, and I haven't heard any current reports of fighting there.

TT: Another thing that people say is that the Yanomami fight alot because of women, that fighting is a way to get women. Is there anything to this?

DY: Well, when Yanomami fight, they don't just fight over nothing, not just over women. When the Yanomami still fought alot, before I was born, it was not just over women, it was because someone had killed somebody from another community. This made everyone angry. If someone killed one of my kin, I would be obliged to fight back, to defend my kinsman, to take vengeance by killing somebody in return. This was why fighting occurred. One would even have alot of one's own kin fighting against oneself, calling on other communities to aid them. Then if this other community would kill 2 or 3 of one's own brothers, one's own community would kill 2 or 3 of them in return. This was the Yanomami way. The Yanomami fought over the killing of their relatives, not just over women.

TT: Is it true nevertheless that a warrior who kills more people thereby gets more women?

DY: No, this is not true. Just because a warrior is more bellicose against another community does not mean he becomes able to get more women for himself. Just because this warrior grows up from a small boy, and his courage grows with him, and when he grows big his desire to fight has also grown bigger, his desire to mistreat one of their [the other community's--TT] people, to be famous, to be fighting [has grown]...does not mean that this warrior will need to take another man's woman. When Oeoeri, Omame and Aimori were created, Aimori invented this fighting [over women?--TT]. This Aimori Oeoeri is very old, this is not like the fighting the whites are doing today. This fighting [of Aimori] ceased many years ago. It is not like you whites' warfare, where you fight other countries to take their land, or their oil. Our fighting now is different, it is not to take the women of other men.
When some gossip arrives in a different [white] community, how do you people fight? How do FUNAI, or CCPY fight (because you are always fighting with the government)? It is only verbal fighting, hmm? The Yanomami also fight over gossip, as a result of lies; the other man becomes angry and wants to fight immediately, and so they fight by pounding each other's chests or heads, or with war clubs hitting only here [indicates safe region of body].

**TT:** Not fighting to kill.

**DY:** At times just to hurt, or at times to kill. We have two kinds of fighting: fighting with arrows, with wayube and okara, we call wayu huu.7 The other kind we call pariki sheyu, which is pounding the chest... with a stick of wood or a rock to injure the other's chest. He who wants to kill uses the arrow; the more courageous ones kill. He who does not want to kill fights with the [chest]. If some people carry off a man's wife, and he wants to fight, the community decides [which type of fight it may be]. This is the way we Yanomami resolve communal problems through fights. Everyone fights but afterwards it's all right. But then they fight again.

**TT:** Would you say that people are fighting less in these two ways today than in the past?

**DY:** Nowadays [as a rule] we don't have these fights...Of course, fights still happen over particular things. These aren't fights that involve everyone at the same time. They are the sort of fights that start over gossip or lies, but they aren't wars to kill everyone all at the same time. Maybe one or two people may be killed, and then they make friends again. Then another fight arises, and so it goes.

When I was little, I had an uncle, a warrior named Roberto, I remember him well. At that time the people were warriors because they had started a war because people from other communities had killed Roberto's father. When Roberto grew up he went to fight with the man who had killed his father. That's the way we Yanomami fight. If my mother or father are killed by somebody from another community, then I will go kill the one who killed my father or mother. This is the way the Yanomami fight.

### NOTES

1 As of May 1991 Project Demini includes three doctors, two nurses with training as laboratory technicians, one laboratory technician, one dentist, and one anthropological assistant and interpreter.

2 Literally "whites--giant armadillos", i.e., miners.

3 Davi was actually initiated as a shaman by his teacher Lorival in the early 1980s.

4 Literally, "old gardens".

5 "People have souls...when they die, their souls come alive".

6 Shabori means "shaman", but may also mean hekura, the familiar spirit of a shaman. Here it is used in the latter sense.

7 Wayube: "warriors"; okara: "sorcery against enemies"; wayu huu: "to launch a raid".