

Comissão pela criação do Parque Yanomami

**XAWARA - THE CANNIBAL GOLD AND THE FALLING OF THE SKY**

*Davi Kopenawa Yanomami speaks with the insight of a pajé (shaman) of the trauma through which his people are passing as a result of the epidemics brought to their lands by invading gold-miners. Original text in Yanomami from an interview with anthropologist Bruce Albert; English translation adapted from Bruce Albert's Portuguese version by Alex Shankland.*

We call these epidemics *xawara*. The *xawara* that is killing the Yanomami - that's what we call the epidemics. Now we know where it is that the *xawara* comes from. In the beginning we thought that it spread by itself, with no reason. Now it is growing greatly and spreading everywhere. This thing that we call *xawara* was kept hidden a long time ago by our ancestors. *Omamë*, the Yanomami creator-spirit, kept the *xawara* hidden. He kept it hidden and didn't want the Yanomami to disturb it. He said "don't touch it!". For this reason he hid it deep in the earth. He also said "if this comes up to the surface all the Yanomami will start dying in droves!". Having spoken these words, he buried it very deep. But today the *nabêtië*, the whites, after discovering our forest, have been possessed by a frantic desire to take this *xawara* out from the depths of the earth where *Omamë* had hidden it. *Xawara* is also the name by which we call *baashikë*, the substance that you call "minerals". We are afraid of it. The *xawara* is the Yanomami's enemy, and yours too. It wants to kill us. That way, if you start to get sick, it goes on to kill you. Because of this we Yanomami are very worried.

When the gold stays in the cold of the depths of the earth, there's no problem. Then everything's just fine. It isn't dangerous. When the whites take the gold out of the earth, they burn it, stir it over the fire as if it were manioc flour. This makes smoke come out of it. This is the way that *xawara*, which is this smoke from the gold, is created. Afterwards this *xawara wakëxi*, this "epidemic smoke", spreads not just through the forest, where the Yanomami live, but also through the lands of the whites, everywhere. This is why we are dying - because of this smoke. It becomes measles smoke. It becomes very aggressive and because of this it destroys the Yanomami...

When the whites store the gold in tins, it also gives off a kind of smoke. That's what the older people say, the true elders who are great *pajés*. When

the whites dry out the gold inside tins with tightly-closed lids and leave these tins exposed to the heat of the sun, smoke starts to be given off, smoke which you can't see and which spreads and begins to kill the Yanomami. It also makes the whites die, in the same way. It isn't only the Yanomami who die. The whites may be very numerous, but they will all end up dying too. This is what the Yanomami say among themselves...

When this smoke reaches the breast of the sky, the sky also begins to get very sick, it also begins to be affected by the *xawara*. The earth also gets sick. Even the *hekurabê*, the helper spirits of the *pajés*, get very sick. Even *Omamê* is affected. *Deasimê* - God - is too. This is why we are very worried now.

Then there is also the smoke from the factories. You think that *Deasimê* can drive away this *xawara*, but he cannot repel this smoke. He also will begin to die from this. Even though he is a supernatural being, he will get very sick. We know that things are happening this way, and for this reason we are giving you the word. But the whites don't pay any attention. They don't understand this and simply think "these people are lying!". There are no *pajés* among the whites, that's why. We Yanomami have *pajés* who inhale the *yakôans* powder, which is very powerful, and that is how we find out about the *xawara* and get very worried. We don't want to die. We want to become numerous. But now that the gold-miners have seen us and got close to us, in spite of the fact that *Omamê* has hidden the gold under the earth they are taking out great quantities of it, digging up the forest floor. That is why the *xawara* has now grown a lot. It is very high up in the sky, it has spread itself very far. It is not only the Yanomami who are dying. Everyone will die together. When the breast of the sky is filled by this smoke it also will begin to die, like a Yanomami. Because of this, when it gets sick the thunder will be made itself heard without ceasing. The thunder will get sick too and will bellow with rage, without ceasing, afflicted by the heat...

Thus the sky will end up breaking. The Yanomami *pajés* who have died are many already, and they will want to avenge themselves... when the *pajés* die their *hekurabê*, their helper spirits, get very angry. They see that the whites are causing the deaths of the *pajés*, their "fathers". They will want vengeance, they will cut the sky in pieces so that it collapses over the Earth; they will also make the sun fall, and when the sun falls everything will go dark. When the moon and the stars also fall, the sky will go dark. We want to tell the whites all this, but they don't listen. They are a different

people, and they don't understand. I think that they don't want to pay attention. They think: "these people are just lying". That's what they think. But we do not lie. They don't know about these things. That's why they think that way...

The whites seem to be multiplying a lot, but later the Yanomami will end up getting their revenge. This will happen because the *hekurabë* are here with us, as is the sky, as is the spirit of *Omamë*, who says to us "no! don't despair! later we will have our revenge! The gold-miners, the government, these whites who don't like us... they are a different people, that's why they want to make us die. But we will have our revenge and they will also end up dying"... This is the way that the *hekurabë* think too: "yes! we will have our revenge!"

We, the *pajës*, are also working for the sake of you, the whites. For this reason, when all the *pajës* are dead you will not be able to free yourselves of the dangers which they know how to repel... You will be left alone on the Earth and will end up dying too. When the sky really gets very sick, there will be no more *pajës* to hold it up with their *hekurabë*. The whites don't know how to hold the sky in place. They only hear the *pajës*' voices, but they think to themselves, without any understanding of things: "they're saying worthless things, it's all lies!". While the *pajës* are still alive the sky may be very sick, but they will manage to prevent it from falling. Yes, even if it wants to fall, if it starts to fall down towards the Earth, the *pajës* can hold it in place. This is because we, the Yanomami, still exist. When there are no more Yanomami, then the sky will fall once and for all. It is the *hekurabë* of the *pajës* who hold the sky in place. It may start to break, making a thunderous noise, but they manage to repair it and make it silent once again. When we, the Yanomami, all die, the *hekurabë* will cut the spirits of the night, who will fall. The sun too will end up this way. The sky has already fallen once, in the earliest days when it was still fragile. Now it has become solid, but in spite of this the *hekurabë* will want to break it. They will also want to tear the Earth. One piece will be torn this way, another that, another a different way. All this will also fall, everyone will fall off the other side of the Earth - everyone will die together. That's the way it will be, and that's why we are getting very worried. But the great *pajës*, the oldest ones, tell us: "no! don't worry! Later we will have our revenge! In the same way they are making us die, we will also make them die!". This is what the *pajës* are saying...

The *hekurabê* are very fierce. When their fathers, the old *pajês*, die they go into a great mourning-rage. They feel a great desire for revenge. Then they start to cut the breast of the sky. But other *hekurabê*, who belong to the *pajês* who are still alive, hold them back saying: "no! don't do that! There are still other *pajês* alive! The younger *pajês* are taking the place of the older ones!"... speaking in this way, they manage to prevent the sky from falling.

We, the *pajês*, want to put an end to the *xawara*... but it is very tough... it is all wrinkled and elastic, like rubber. The *hekurabê* are unable to cut it with their weapons and it holds on to them when they attack it... when in this way it succeeds in taking control of the *hekurabê*, their "fathers" the *pajês* die. Only by sending many other *hekurabê* is it possible to pull out the *hekurabê* that it is holding prisoner... then the *pajê* comes back to life. The numbers of the spirits of the *xawara*, the *xawaribê*, are growing a lot. For this reason the *xawara* smoke is very high in the sky. They are as numerous as the gold-miners, as numerous as the whites. Because of this we cannot bring together enough of us to fight. The whites don't join us in the fight against the *xawara*. Their ears are deaf to the words of the *pajês*. The whites don't think "the sky will fall down", don't say to themselves "the *xawara* is devouring us". Because of this it is also devouring many of their children, destroying them; it devours them without stopping, kills them and roasts them as if they were monkeys it had been hunting. Thus it accumulates a heap of roast children. All the Yanomami it kills are roasted and piled up in this way by the *xawara*. It only stops when it has enough. It kills a load of children the first time and then, a while later, attacks another lot. That's the way it is... the *xawara* is very hungry for human flesh; it doesn't want game or fish, it only wants the flesh of the Yanomami, because it is a supernatural being...

When the *pajês* try to use rain to drive away the *xawara* smoke, this also does not work... it is very high up, stays out of reach and cannot be driven away. This is the way in which we speak of these things among ourselves. In the beginning, I didn't know any of this. It was the great *pajês*, the oldest ones, who taught me to think in the right way... I didn't know, but now I have learned.

If the gold-miners continue to invade our forest, if they don't go back to where they belong, the Yanomami will die, they will be truly finished. There will not be anyone to cure us. The whites who cure us, the doctors and nurses, are few in number. For this reason, if the gold-miners continue working in our forest, we will really die, we will come to an end, only a little group of us will remain. Many people have already died, and I didn't want all these people to be allowed to die... but the gold-miners don't like us, we are a different people and for this reason they want us to die... they want to be left working alone. They want to remain alone in control of our forest. For this reason we are very afraid. No more Yanomami will be created after us. When the gold-miners have destroyed the Yanomami, no others will spring up in their place... no, none. *Omamé* has already left this world, gone far away, and he will not create any more Yanomami... no, none.

In the beginning our health was good, we didn't die in droves, we didn't suffer from malaria. We were truly happy. We hunted, we had celebrations, we were happy. We cured with the rituals of the *pojés*. Today the Yanomami do not even build their great communal roundhouses, which we call *yano*, any more; they just live in little huts in the forest, under plastic sheeting. They don't even plant vegetable gardens, don't even go hunting any more, because they are always sick. That's the way it is.