

Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626

Volume 9

Issue 2 *Special Issue in Honor of Shelton H. Davis: Legacy to Anthropological Advocacy, Development Issues, and Indigenous Peoples' Movements*

Article 6

2011

Shelton Davis and "Applied Anthropology"

Allan F. Burns

University of Florida, afburns@ufl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burns, Allan F. (2011). "Shelton Davis and "Applied Anthropology"", *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70845/2572-3626.1138>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol9/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.



Sandy (ENVAP), Colin Rees (ASTEN, back right) & Hemanta Mishra (ASTEN, front center) with Datu Tomas Ito (back, center) Bagobo spiritual leader & two legal advisors. Mt. Apo National Park, Mindanao, Philippines.

SHELTON DAVIS AND “APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY”

ALLAN F. BURNS

**Professor and former Chair of the Department of Anthropology
University of Florida
Former President, Society for Applied Anthropology
afburns@ufl.edu**

Shelton Davis was an anthropologist whose life and career are inspirational. My goal in this essay is to celebrate his inspiration, in part because his work is not well known in many university settings. Shelton decided to work in NGOs, at the

World Bank, and in many consultant positions where his influence was not directly infused into the world of academic anthropology. His life and work also deserves reflection because of that fact. The Society for Applied Anthropology has goals of influencing policy, expanding the role of anthropology, and also to celebrate and recognize applied scholars and researchers whose careers are in non-academic settings. As the mission statement of the Society notes,

The occupation of "Anthropologist" should be promoted as a satisfying, rewarding and important professional role whether as an independent consultant, an employee of public agencies, corporations, nonprofit organizations, or as a university faculty member or administrator. Successful professional roles and identities must be identified, promoted and strengthened. (<http://www.sfaa.net/sfaagoal.html>)

As an applied anthropologist, Shelton's commitment to doing something with knowledge, advocating for Latin America, and his welcomed advocacy stands as a model of engagement and a model for people going into the field. My first encounter with Shelton was during the Guatemalan civil war, where his articles and reports on the situation of Maya people in the Northwestern Highlands of Guatemala informed my own work in that area and neighboring Mexico. In 1981 he helped found a Guatemalan Maya NGO in exile, IXIIM. Through talking with Shelton about the needs of Maya immigrants to the United States, that organization became the model of the NGO that Jeronimo Camposeco and I founded in Florida with the same name, but this time translated into English: Corn Maya. We used the English translation of the Maya IXIM partly to distinguish the Florida NGO from that of California, and partly as a political decision by the other Maya founders of the organization to be more accommodating to their new country.

Shelton's writings were and are a model of objectivity imbued with advocacy. Objectivity and advocacy are often thought of as opposing categories, and policy researchers, applied anthropologists, and their colleagues in other disciplines are often asked how one can be an advocate for a group of people or a program and still be objective. Shelton's publications, reports, and indeed, his employment showed that there is no inherent opposition between taking an objective, evidenced-based approach to human suffering and human problems and a stance in favor of one strategy over another. Rather it is that objectivity and careful attention to detail and data that lead to a stance of advocacy. Advocacy is an oppositional category to neutrality, and as an applied social scientist, Shelton and others like him seek out opportunities where neutrality is valued far less than advocacy. That advocacy results not only in political statements or attempts to influence policy in the public sphere. It is more profoundly located in working for the World Bank, in using what is known about social structure to found an immigrant association, or in teaching in adjunct positions to give students a different path towards a career. His adjunct and affiliate university appointments are a case in point: Georgetown University, Boston University, Massachusetts

Institute of Technology, the University of California-Davis, Harvard University, and the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro are among the universities where his semester by semester presence added a fresh perspective on indigenous affairs, economic changes in the third world, and the critical place of indigenous peoples in the world.

Shelton's community service indicates that being an applied anthropologist can effectively be done through local and international service. In addition to helping found IXIIM, he served on the board of Oxfam America, the Ruth Mott Foundation, and was on the advisory committee for English as a Second Language (ESL) for the board of education of Falls Church, Virginia. He also joined the board of the Plumsock Foundation which supports the *Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica* (CIRMA) in Antigua, Guatemala. Within the field of anthropology, he founded the Anthropology Resource Center in Boston, dedicated to the analysis of development policies on indigenous people. He also founded INDÍGENA, INC. in Berkeley, California to give voice to indigenous issues in all of the Americas.

Shelton's work at the World Bank illustrates another part of his creativity and is a model for a career as an applied anthropologist. The World Bank hired him to analyze and report on different issues confronting bank programs in Latin America. But what Shelton did was to use the limited position he was first hired in to elaborate a rich career with influence far beyond the technical needs of the bank. His last position as Sector Manager in the Social Development Unit included the following activities, here in Shelton's own words as written in his Curriculum Vitae:

- Manager of fifteen-person unit responsible for ensuring regional compliance with Bank social safeguard policies (indigenous peoples, involuntary resettlement, and cultural property); preparation and supervision of regional investment operations in areas of social dimensions of environmental management, indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant populations, youth and social development, community participation and civil society engagement, and urban crime and violence prevention; conducting of analytical work on poverty and social exclusion and country social analysis; and, preparation and implementation of regional social development strategy.
- Operational support to Juridical Reform, Land Fund and Universalization of Basic Education Projects in Guatemala, including work with Guatemalan Ministry of Culture and UNESCO Representative in Guatemala on preparation of First National Congress of Cultural Policies and a special World Bank-financed program on "Cultural Diversity and Pluralism."

- Regional Representative on World Bank Social Development Family Board, Foundations Advisory Committee, Small Grants Program Committee, Small Grants Research Committee, Indigenous Peoples and NGO and Civil Society Thematic Groups.
- Founder and Organizer of Urban Crime and Violence Prevention Thematic Group and Social Development Roundtable.
- Representative on Inter-Agency Working Group on Indigenous Peoples in Latin America, Inter-Agency Consultation on Race in the Americas, and Inter-Agency Coalition on Prevention of Violence in Latin America.
- Organizer of World Bank and FLACSO Costa Rica Conferences on “Poverty Reduction and Social Exclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean” (Washington, May 1999); and Distance Learning Events and Workshops on “Poverty Reduction and Inclusive Social Policies” in Santiago, Chile (June 2002), San José, Costa Rica (May 2003) and Antigua, Guatemala (July 2004).
- Organizer of two conferences in 2003 and 2004 on Social Development Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean with the Social Development Units in the Inter-American Development Bank and the UN Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).
- Participant in World Bank Executive Development Program at Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration and John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (August and December 2000).

Shelton Davis was an advocate for people, especially indigenous people in the Americas. That advocacy was what he did, not just what he wrote. As an advocate, he had a passion for indigenous people and social justice, and that same passion gave him the energy and creativity to create a life of advocacy in his job at the World Bank, in his community service, and through his skilled writing. His was a life of effective advocacy, an advocacy that was based on objectivity in the scholarly and scientific sense, but an objectivity that informed his ability to transform the work of the World Bank. One of the last initiatives that Shelton spearheaded at the bank was the recognition of African descendant peoples of Central America, bringing to the forefront the contributions and human resources of the Garifuna, Isleños, Miskito, and other groups where African descendant people and Indigenous people had created successful societies over the past several centuries.