

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

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 9

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

Article 8

2011

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Recommended Citation

Barreiro, Jose (2011). "Firm in the Wind," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol9/iss2/8>

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Firm in the Wind

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I first heard Sandy Davis' voice in 1976—fielding a call from him at the Native American national newspaper, *Akwesasne Notes*. That newspaper was all about communications among Native communities, and its reach was hemispheric. I was a young editor in an intense collective of Native editor-activists, including the Seneca luminary, Dr. John Mohawk. Needless to say, at a major hub of the Native revitalization and self-determination movement, much of anthropology and most of its practitioners were suspect and rejected.

Well, not Sandy Davis. By the strength of his obvious sincerity, he established himself with ease. We talked at least an hour. That first call would become a conversation several decades long. Sandy was setting up the Anthropology Resource Center and winding down work on an even earlier communications effort, INDÍGENA. At INDÍGENA, he worked with the accomplished and highly committed Haitian Taino scholar, the late Marie Helene Laraque. Most welcome for us, Sandy had clear and current information on a broad range of cases of indigenous human rights and land rights issues. I remember it was exciting enough for me to ask John Mohawk to pick up a receiver and get into the discussion. Sandy's was life-blood material for a newspaper like *Akwesasne Notes*, which, as he pointed out to us himself, had a primary audience of Native community activists and formed a growing core of journalists and academics in a broad network.

"Your Native audience is the most important audience," he would say. And he supported our efforts every way he could.

That time, Sandy talked about Brazil extensively. He was working on his classic book, *Victims of the Miracle* (1977). It was his first major salvo to challenge standards of anthropology and other social sciences that study Native peoples. Not working theoretically but "in the practice," he defined a basis of humanity for that work that exemplified the potentials of observation and documentation in the service of the Native communities, to be not detrimental, not bound by the limiting standard of cold objectivity, regardless of the cultural or physical insult, but presenting a model of clear documentation coupled to, again, a humanistic standard.

He was not alone, but he was certainly in the vanguard of consciousness in

the academic disciplines that challenged students of Native world communities not to assume the eventual extinction of those communities but to visualize their survival.

This is the fundamental approach we carry into the core philosophy of the National Museum of the American Indian. And so we are fortunate and proud to have had Sandy's attention and some of his work and collaboration in the past few years.

We were one with him in the contemplation and discussion of the overall science of Native community Survival. Not the "expectation of extinction" that dominated the first century of anthropology, but to seriously take up the application of standards and methodologies of survival. In land and economics, in health, in a self-determined education, in self-governance, in the right to practice one's own religious or psycho-spiritual ways, in the conservation of cultural patrimony, in the ritual life that gives meaning to a people—assuming always the potential for survival, revitalization.

Sandy's understanding of the issues and his consistent willingness to be involved meant a great deal to the creative activism of the 1970s and 1980s. He joined us in a lot of issues, helped organize events, and he followed the action-reaction of movement. And no matter how complicated, how difficult the issue, you could always count on Sandy Davis.

At Akwesasne in 1980, a group of traditional Mohawks were surrounded by vigilantes and State troopers. Under siege for two years; great potential for violence. Sandy understood the situation and for weeks at a time worked the phones, worked his influence and his voice to ensure that New York State and its police understood the situation. Ultimately, that standoff was settled peacefully. I'll never forget how happy he was when he got the news that things there were being resolved.

We went back and forth, supporting each other's work. He was always willing to work on human rights campaigns that the *Notes* engaged.

Here is one story from late 1982. It was during the Guatemalan Scorched earth campaign against Native communities. If you recall, over 400 Maya villages were razed to the ground in Guatemala during those years. The element of insult, of wanton massacre and torture and death of innocents was unparalleled in the annals of modern Latin America. We worked together on one situation where several villages in the Cakchiquel region—perhaps three or four thousand people—had fled army sweeps that came through their mountains. A large army contingent had them spotted and moved to surround them, setting up large artillery. Many feared, and with good reason, that a major massacre was in the offing. We had a phone tree at the newspaper office that we could focus on as a particular point of attention: hundreds of phone calls and telegrams would arrive at a particular office or point of pressure. From Cambridge, Massachusetts, Sandy

worked the phones and somehow found out the name of the Army colonel in charge of the sweep. Not only that, but the Army base that was command post for his operation and even the phone number at headquarters there. “Let’s not antagonize them,” Sandy offered his sage advice. “Just inform them of the displaced people there and how watchful we are about them.”

The *Akwesasne Notes* and other networks activated, respectfully but directly, and the colonel and higher command were obliged to pay attention to the new information coming into their system. It was a case of human rights information and networking perhaps actually influencing an army maneuver. In any case, the Army command took the tack of allowing the displaced people to return safely to their villages—and billed it as their rescue of a civilian population from the insurgent guerrillas.

Somewhere in the Cakchiquel Mountains, in the region of Chimaltenango to San Jose Poaquil, there are—perhaps a thousand or more—Maya people walking this earth today because of the keen work of Sandy Davis.

He hit licks on the right and on the left. He was exacting that way. When the difficult case arose of the Miskito Indian war with the Sandinista army in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, one involving many unsavory players and also a genuine Native people’s autonomy movement, Sandy put his eye on it. Sandy teamed up with John Mohawk to author, “Revolutionary Contradictions: Miskitos and Sandinistas in Nicaragua” (1982), a highly debated article that ultimately proved a proper prescription for the thorny issue. It advised early what ultimately became the policy: negotiate with the Indian bases on matters of autonomy, local self-government, co-management of natural resources. It can be a workable solution.

Most recently, in 2007 and 2008, we traveled some old ground together. Again among the Maya but this time in southern Florida, where waves of Maya migration that started during that horrible war later continued, fueled by economic need. Now, there is a settled community of some 20 to 40 thousand Maya in just that region of the state, prominently in a town called Indiantown.

Our common history there with Sandy began in 1983, when the Maya community in Florida were perhaps 300 to 500 people total. Eight Kanjobales were arrested by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and threatened with deportation—at that moment, a likely death sentence. Sandy was immediately involved. He helped organize me into a delegation with a Kanjobal speaker, our colleague, Jeronimo Camposeco, who translated their horrible story of violent persecution and helped generate a case that set precedent for Maya refugees from political violence. The eight Kanjobales were a clear example, witnesses and sufferers of the most horrendous violence, and their case opened an opportunity for such stories and cases to be heard in the United States.

More recently, twenty-seven years later, during a virtual exhibit and

documentation project, we trekked the populous Florida Maya communities, from Indiantown to West Palm Beach, Immokalee, and Jupiter, visiting Maya midwives and day-keepers, community leaders, churches and schools full of Maya children, where Maya languages and cultural bases are taught. He was still vintage Sandy and it was such a great pleasure to work with him again, as it turned out, one final time. He was focused on the great impetus of the Maya diaspora to retain and revitalize their culture and identity, even as they adapt to American life.

One day we watched a group of burly protesters outside an outstanding project in Jupiter, Florida, called El Sol, which helps many Maya migrants learn English, find work and get established. The protesters carried signs high, chanting, “illegals are criminals,” and “El Sol—gateway for terrorists.” This El Sol Center and others like it, where various players in American civil society are reaching out to migrants, receives quite nasty hate mail for its reconciliatory work.

All of this concerned Sandy a great deal. He noted among our last conversations how the anti-migrant sentiment in American life needs to be called out for its racism. The migration north by indigenous and peasant peoples he saw as an inevitable result of the destruction of the land-based ways of life. “We are destroying their local economies,” he would say. “So we must do something.”

Sandy Davis stayed active, committed and involved to his last moments of capacity; always friendly, always the self-less heart, the empty reed through which his prayer, which was his lifework on behalf of indigenous peoples, sang clear and loud and pretty.

Sandy Davis was beautiful, like a tall pine in full greenery, firm in the wind.

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