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E. Jean Langdon

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

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Bill Vickers: A Pioneer in Engaged and Dialogic Anthropology

E. Jean Langdon

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina
BRAZIL

In 1972, when Bill Vickers began his fieldwork among the Siona-Secoya, South America was characterized as the “least known continent” by anthropologists (Lyons 1974), and the Amazon region was even less known (Jackson 1975). However, it was an exciting period due to the virtual explosion of modern anthropological research undertaken not only to expand our knowledge about the ethnography of lowland cultures but also to contribute to the construction of paradigms adequate for understanding the complexity of these little known groups (Seeger, Da Matta, and Viveiros de Castro 1979). These studies, stimulated by new interests in shamanism, ecology, ritual, mythology, symbolism, social organization, history, archeology, gender, and daily life (Overing Kaplan 1981; Viveiros de Castro 1996) have resulted today in placing both Amazonian ethnography and its analytical discussions at the center of contemporary anthropological debates.

Bill’s research on ecology, subsistence, and adaptation must be recognized as a pioneering ethnographic study that laid the necessary groundwork for the development of discussions on environment, knowledge, nature, and culture made famous by Viveiros de Castro, Descola, Ingold, and others. His interests in territory, subsistence, and change (Vickers 1980) also contributed to the subsequent work of Paul Little among the Secoya and the latter’s concern with a political ecology that goes beyond preoccupations with territory, including the role of the anthropologist in the dispute for resources (Little 1999; Little 2001).

As noted by Cipolletti, his work was also trailblazing in investigating the Western Tukanoans in Ecuador. Until 1970, the Western Tukanoan groups in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru were known only through reports by missionaries, naturalists, or ethnologists who occasionally passed through the region collecting isolated data. There were no long-term, in-depth studies of these groups until my research with the Siona of Colombia in 1970 and Bill’s with the Siona-Secoya in 1972.

Our research interests and methods were quite different. I was interested in shamanism, symbolism, and the relation between beliefs, perception, and behavior, exploring these themes through narrative and following therapeutic itineraries. Bill used systematic, precise, and quantitative methodologies to understand Siona-Secoya knowledge of the environment and to record subsistence practices in different ecological contexts (Vickers 1983). His studies of medicinal plants offered excellent comparative material for the Siona of Colombia (Vickers 1994), and his data on the varieties of *yajé* or *Banisteriopsis* (Vickers and Plowman 1984:18) cultivated and prepared by the Siona-Secoya is among the most complete; it supports the argument that knowledge and use of this important sacred plant among the Siona dated long before the arrival of the Spaniards. Its use in hunting, fishing, and other rituals performed for the maintenance of community well-being was not of mestizo origin as Peter Gow (1994) argues for ayahuasca shamanism in lowland Peru. His photographic register of exquisite face paintings inspired by *yajé* rituals (Vickers 1975a) presents aesthetic expressions of shamanic knowledge that the Secoya identified as their own.

In spite of our different focuses, we shared a commitment to the ethnographic method characterized by language and cultural immersion that made possible a dialogic relation with our Siona and Secoya collaborators and a more holistic under-

standing of their lives and concerns. He recognized the relation between ecology, knowledge, and shamanic and ritual practices, themes that today form the basis for Amazonian perspectivism. Bill didn't just collect information on ecology, knowledge, and subsistence practices. He participated fully in the lives of the Siona and Secoya, observing gender relations, changes in political organization, interactions with missionaries and colonists, shamanic practices, and aesthetic expressions. These themes can be seen in his many articles and other publications (Vickers 1975a; Vickers 1981; Vickers 1989). His articles on gender relations, hunting, and change (Vickers 1975b; Vickers 1979) spoke to debates circulating in the 1970s regarding male dominance in the Amazon. Like other authors who later studied gender among the Western Tukanoans, he presented gender relations as more egalitarian and based on reciprocity rather than male dominance.

Another dimension of his work is the connection between the local and the global as well as the relations between the local and the state. His experience and observations of the Siona-Secoya communities fit within the context of transformation caused by greater historical, economic, and political forces (Vickers 1989; Vickers 1992; Vickers 2003). When he began his fieldwork, the Siona-Secoya were little known outside the region and ignored by national interests. Their lives were adapting to the presence of nonindigenous migrants to the region and to Protestant missionaries working to undermine their religious system of shamanism (Vickers 1981). Subsequent to his first fieldwork, the region has undergone even deeper social, political, and ecological transformations due to the structural violences of petroleum extraction, drug trafficking, and the armed conflict overflowing from the Colombian civil war (Vickers 2001). In spite of the disastrous situation of Western Tukanonans in both Colombia and Ecuador, they have managed to survive and manifest political agency (Vickers 2003). They have formed indigenous organizations and important nonshamanic leaders have emerged to defend territorial rights and negotiate with the government, NGOs, and mining and petroleum companies. Western Tukanoan shamans have become famous figures among urban professionals seeking yajé rituals. Because of his capacity as an observer and his continual journeys to visit the Siona-Secoya over the decades, Bill's publications, beginning with his doctoral thesis, are all concerned with the effects of these historical, economic, and political forces. His extensive knowledge and experience among the Siona-Secoya has allowed him to make sense of the transformations and adaptations over the last forty-five years. One of his last articles details the introduction of shamanic tourism among the Siona-Secoya (Vickers 2007).

Bill's commitment to the principles of a dialogical and engaged anthropology was evident during his entire life. He was a "symmetrical" anthropologist long before the colonial position of anthropology became an object of self-reflection and certain anthropologists claimed to be the first to take their native collaborators seriously. Not only did he carefully document Siona-Secoya knowledge and practices regarding questions of ecology and subsistence in a rapidly changing and endangered environment, but in the early 1990s he founded the Siona-Secoya Foundation Incorporated, a nonprofit intended to support projects proposed by the Indians themselves. He played a role in the early stages of negotiations between the Secoya and the Occidental Petroleum Company.

Bill frequently revisited the Siona-Secoya during his life, conducting research and, more importantly, seeking ways to help them individually and collectively. His Brazilian wife Edite accompanied him on many of the trips, aiding him and also establishing deep and long lasting relations with Siona-Secoya herself. I remember a Christmas card from Bill and Edite with Siona-Secoya face designs that she had reproduced. Both were close friends of the Secoya artist Ramón Piaguaje, whose painting "Eternal Amazon" was selected as the winner of the first prize of the United Nations Millennium Art Exhibition in aid of UNICEF—"Our World in the Year 2000."

Because of our mutual interests, I corresponded and visited him occasionally in Florida. I saw them last in Gainesville in January 2016, when Bill knew he was dying. He and Edite received me in their home with all the warmth and generosity that has

characterized this couple since they met while pursuing graduate studies at the University of Florida.

Bill should be remembered not only for the importance of his excellent and timely scholarship on the Siona-Secoya, but also as a considerate colleague for those of us who worked in the same region. Even more important were his dedication to the Siona-Secoya and deep preoccupation with their survival in a turbulent and violent region. His caring for the Siona-Secoya did not falter with his declining health, and Edite told me that on the day he died, one of his last acts before he slipped away was to answer a request for aid from a Secoya friend who had called from Ecuador.

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