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“Don Guillermo” or William Vickers among the Secoya

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Before I personally met Bill, I knew him through the stories told by Secoya (Western Tucanoan) people in San Pablo, on the Aguarico River, where he had often lived. They spoke about him and the funny moments they had shared. Their memories were not based simply on his accumulated time with them. No doubt other colleagues have had a similar experience: the uneven path of memory, which forgets people who may have spent considerable time with them but who, in spite of that, have left little or no impression.

Bill was a pioneer in ethnographic research among the Secoya and Siona, who in the early 1970s lived together in San Pablo. In 1983, when I began my own fieldwork, his 1976 PhD thesis served as a very welcome field guide. In fact, Bill's dissertation (which circulated as a bad photocopy among the few of us in Ecuador who were doing research there) stood out in the otherwise limited bibliography on the region.

Bill's ethnographic research brought a rich knowledge of several fields that he studied in this part of the northwestern Amazon: adaptation to the natural environment, traditional subsistence practices, and the accelerating pace of social and political change. In particular, he focused on the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), along with the demarcation of indigenous territory and related processes in which he played an active role (see Vickers 1988).

On all these topics, Bill's publications provided fresh knowledge and points of view and laid the groundwork for perspectives that became important for later studies. Three aspects should be mentioned. The first involves emic classification of flora, which is often more complex than scientific taxonomy and usually more difficult to discern. Along with their native uses and classification, Bill collected plants with psychoactive properties that play an important role in shamanism. The Secoya recognize eight varieties of *Banisteriopsis*, seven of *Brugmansia*, and four of *Brunfelsia*, each with its own attributes and mode of action. From the scientific standpoint, these nineteen different species collapse into only four or five categories (Vickers and Plowman 1984:18, 29ff).

Although Bill would never have called himself an ethnohistorian, two cases showed how carefully he read the 18th century Jesuit sources that underpin our understanding of indigenous groups in the region. One case involves the long-term continuity of native territories that have been occupied at least since that century. After identifying the sites of early Jesuit missions, Bill reconstructed the territorial divisions of Western Tucanoan groups using the names of their respective headmen (Vickers 1983:461, 463). As a result, he determined that many 20th-century Siona and Secoya settlements remained in almost the same place as the 18th-century missions and used similar territories for their subsistence (around 220 km²; see Vickers 1983:465, 471). Bill also pointed out that colonial Western Tucanoan groups recognized no political leadership beyond the weak authority of their shamans. He was one of the first researchers who understood this relationship and emphasized its sociopolitical consequences (Vickers 1976:155 and following pages).

When Bill began to work among the Siona and Secoya, both groups lived in the same settlement. He called them “the Siona-Secoya,” a term that then appeared to be appropriate. Later, they split up among separate hamlets and have since emphasized their diverse origins and religious beliefs. A subsequent effort to unite them in a single indigenous federation failed. Even so, Bill continued to write about them as the Siona-Secoya, and they are often known by that name today.

Secoya who knew Bill personally will have learned of his death with great sadness, because he was and remains part of their past. No doubt they will have bid him “*saiyé*,” the traditional way of saying goodbye.

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