

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

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 9

June 2004

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Recommended Citation

Hern, Warren M. (2004). "Darrell A. Posey (1947-2001)," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol2/iss1/9>

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OBITUARIES

Darrell A. Posey (1947–2001)

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From the time he began his fieldwork among the Kayapó Indians of Brazil in 1977 until his death in March, 2001, Darrell Posey was as engaged with his chosen field of anthropology as one could be. Born and raised on a farm in rural Kentucky by a family with deep roots in American history and proud traditions, Darrell brought to this work an extraordinary preparation as an entomologist and geographer, with degrees in these fields from Louisiana State University. He then studied ecology with the legendary Eugene Odum while a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Georgia. In a little over 20 years from the time he received his Ph.D. in 1979 until he became terminally ill in 2000, Darrell had an enormous impact on the people around him as well as institutions and academic disciplines. According to various sources, he was the author or co-author of three books, editor or co-editor of four books, the author or co-author of some 154 articles and book chapters, and 22 book reviews. He assisted in the production of 15 documentary films and videos about the Kayapó and the Amazon. Beyond this prodigious output as a scholar, he was a teacher, an organizer, and an inspiration to many.

Appalled by the destructive potential of the proposed Xingu River hydroelectric project and what it would do to the native lands of the Kayapó, Darrell took two Kayapó leaders to New York City to protest the project and managed to convince the World Bank to withdraw its \$1 billion dollar funding for the project, a coup which got him in serious trouble with the Brazilian government and placed him in personal danger. He and his Kayapó colleagues were arrested with the charge that they were “harming the national reputation.” Encouraged by his success and unphazed by his unpopularity with the authorities, not to mention threats on his life, Darrell organized the First International Congress of Ethnobiology in Belém, Brazil in July, 1988. This landmark event resulted not only in the later origin of the International Society for Ethnobiology but more immediately in the Declaration of Belém, which asserted the human rights of native peoples and called for protection of their knowledge, use, and management of ecological resources. The response to this action was so universally positive that the Brazilian government decided not to harm its own reputation further and dropped the charges against Darrell

and his associates. Soon after, the International Sierra Club awarded the Chico Mendes Award for Extraordinary Courage in the Defense of Nature to Darrell.

In 1989, he founded the International Society for Ethnobiology and helped organize the “Altamira” gathering of Amazon tribes to protest the destruction of the rainforest. To their consternation and ill-concealed fear, Brazilian legislators in business suits were confronted with indigenous people in feather headdresses and war paint. At about this time, Darrell accepted a Humbolt Fellowship in Germany but continued his work in Brazil, founding the Institute of Ethnobiology in the Amazon based in Belém.

In 1992, Darrell became Special Adviser to the Brazilian Special Secretary on Internal Affairs and Indigenous Peoples. In the same year, he was made convenor and president of the Earth Parliament during the Earth Summit meeting in Rio de Janeiro. The next year, in 1993, he was awarded the United Nations Global 500 Award for Outstanding Achievement in Service to the Environment.

By this time, Darrell had become associated with Oxford University, where he coordinated ECOS (Ethnoecology: The Ecological and Social Dimensions of Well-Being) at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology. He was on the faculty of the Mansfield College’s Centre for Environment, Ethics and Society (OCEES) and was an Associate Fellow at Linacre College. In 1999, he was elected Fellow of the Linnean Society of London. Darrell’s last book published during his lifetime is *Cultural And Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, which was edited for the UN Environment Programme and published in 1999.

Beyond these remarkable academic and political accomplishments, Darrell Posey is remembered fondly by not just the Kayapó, whose cause he took as his own, but his many colleagues in the Americas and in Europe. Touching personal obituaries written for Darrell by his friends may be found in a variety of professional journals and periodicals such as *HerbalGram*, the *Journal of the American Botanical Council*, the *Times of London*, the *Journal of Ethnobiology*, and a moving tribute by his Brazilian colleague and co-author, Dr. Elaine Elizabetsky, who notes his passing with *muitos saudades*, a unique Brazilian expression of profound sorrow. Veronica Strang, in a newsletter published by the Association of Social Anthropologists at the University of Manchester, notes that “All of us will miss a charismatic, kindly and courageous friend.” Herbert Girardet, in his memorial in the *Guardian Unlimited*, called Darrell “a truly great man.”

Those of us who had the privilege of knowing Darrell personally share the view that he was a person of great energy and personal charm, who had the *joie de vivre* and who, in the spirit of the French Quarter, always wanted to *laissez le bon temps rouler*. One of the first things he did when I met him at an Amazon conference in Brazil was to give me several Mardi Gras necklaces with the injunction that they would bring me luck and help me have a good time in the Big Easy. He had a ready smile, a quick wit, a great laugh, and a

mischievous manner that brightened up the most serious academic conference and otherwise routine dinner.

In a book just published posthumously, which is reviewed elsewhere in this issue, Darrell's fundamental warmth, passion, and humanity is in full view along with his singular contribution as a scientist. He saw the Kayapó as a remarkable people and as remarkable individuals from whom he learned much. His riveting personal account of his first exhausting trek with the Kayapó that nearly ended in catastrophe as he was stranded in the Brazilian rainforest conveys his determination to be with these people no matter what and his awareness, as his Kayapó rescuers take him to safety through a torrential rainstorm, that *they* are the ones who really understand what it means to be a human being vulnerable to the world and its forces.

It is noted in various comments about Darrell Posey that he was controversial, not only in the view of the Brazilian government and developers who threatened the Amazon environment, but also among his professional colleagues. It is said that many did not like or agree with his irreverence for academic and professional boundaries, and that his political activism and determination to speak truth to power violated the sense of propriety and convention of some. But Darrell had a vision. He saw that what he learned from the Kayapó about their own ancient and complicated reality of the Amazon environment was too valuable to be lost either by the Kayapó, whom he respected profoundly as human beings, or by the rest of us. He saw that what was and still is threatened with destruction in the Amazon is not merely some trees and a few weird bugs but the web of life itself and the possibility—no, necessity—of harmonious human existence within it.

Darrell discovered some of the traditions and knowledge of the Kayapó that have permitted them to thrive in this incredibly complicated and dangerous environment without modern technology for thousands of years. He heard the tractors tearing the heart out of the jungle and saw and smelled the conflagration of burning forest that destroyed all, everything, in its path. Those of us who have also seen and experienced these things in the Amazon understand his passion. We understand why he could not stand by, return quietly to the academic environment, and husband his heaps of data. The Kayapó mattered to him, their other indigenous brethren in the Amazon mattered to him, the natural beauty and wonder of the Amazon mattered to him, and the principles mattered to him. That they should matter so much to all the rest of us.

January, 2004

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[Compiled by Jeffrey David Ehrenreich & Nicole Taylor]

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- 1988b *Without Borders*. Documentary film made for the United Nations on native peoples, CNN Productions (USA). Barbara Pyle, producer.
- 1988c *Jungle Pharmacy*. Documentary film made for TV Trust for the Environment, Central TV (Britain) on medicinal plants used by native peoples. Herbert Girardet, producer.
- 1989 *Xingú Encounter*. Documentary film about the First Encounter of Indian Peoples in the Amazon, Floresta Films. Neville d'Almeida, director, Darrell A. Posey, text and narration.
- 1990a *Kayapó Knowledge and The Future of the Amazon*. Documentary film about the educational activities and aspects of the ethnobiological research project with the Kayapó Indians. Text, narration, assistant editing and co-direction/ production. De Campos Produções, Belém Pará.
- 1990b *Altamira and After*. Documentary of the Altamira Encounter and the subsequent activities of the indigenous groups of the Amazon in defense of their native lands and resources. Text, narration, assistant editing and co-direction. De Campos Produções, Belém Pará.
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- 1991a *The Institute for Ethnobiology of the Amazon—INEA*. Documentary about applied ethnobiological research in the Belém-based institute. Text, narration, assistant editing and co-production. De Campos Produções, Belém Pará.
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ISSN: 1545-4703.

* “The *tipiti* is an extendable basketry tube made from reed strips, enclosed at the lower end and open at the upper. It is plaited on the bias, which is to say that the two sets of interwoven elements opposed to each other run diagonally in relation to the long axis of the tube ... In using this device to squeeze manioc, it is first compressed from both ends to widen the opening at the top. Through this opening, the tube is filled with grated manioc pulp. Once filled, the *tipiti* is hung from the end of a beam by a loop woven into the upper end of the tube. Through a similar loop at the lower end, a pole is inserted to be used as a lever. Pressing down on the lever stretches the *tipiti*, thus narrowing its diameter. As it stretches, the inner volume of the *tipiti* is reduced to about half of what it was when first filled with grated pulp. The pressure to which the resulting lateral compression subjects the contents of the device forces the poisonous juice of the manioc pulp to be extruded through the interstices of the plaited mesh, dripping down the outside of the tube.”

[Quoted from Robert L. Carneiro, 2000, “The Evolution of the Tipiti.” In *Cultural Evolution: Contemporary Viewpoints*, Gary M. Feinman and Linda Manzanilla, editors, pp. 61-93. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.]