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A Tribute to Sibby Whitten

**RACHEL CORR*,
MICHELLE WIBBELSMAN, MICHAEL UZENDOSKI, in
consultation with Norman Whitten**

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Dorothea “Sibby” Scott Whitten, whose lifelong work on ethnoaesthetics, gender and indigenous cosmology in Amazonian and Andean Ecuador influenced many generations of scholars, died August 8, 2011. This year would have been her forty-first year as Research Associate in the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

Her interest in ethnoaesthetics began in 1963 when she first visited Ecuador. Beginning in 1968 she and her husband, Norman Whitten, spent from three to thirteen months at a time working with Afro-Ecuadorian, Canelos Quichua, Achuar Jivaroan and highland Quichua indigenous communities in Ecuador every year until 2008.

Sibby’s work explored the transformative powers of indigenous Amazonian women as master potters and visionaries whose ceramic creations draw on profound mythohistories and contemporary indigenous politics to mediate the interpretation of shamanic imagery. Visionary female ceramic artists are usually related by kinship or affinity to powerful male Canelos Quichua “healers.” Sibby’s involvement, field research, and publications brought special attention and access to the realm of women and the influence they exert through the beautiful objects they create and the imagery they communicate. She also worked with Tiguan artists in highland Ecuador whose slice-of-life paintings capture the intricacies and multilayering of cultural expression and political transformation in the Andes. Sibby’s ethnoaesthetic approach provides unique insights into central Amazonian and Andean indigenous concepts of power, reflectivity and stewardship of life, considered integral to people’s representations and nurturing of their ecological, social and spiritual existence.

Reflecting on their joint research, her husband, Norman Whitten, added these remarks:

“During 1986-1987, as we were engaged in sustained research with the Canelos Quichua and Achuar Jivaroan peoples of Amazonian Ecuador, Sibby began a synthesis of our cumulative work on mythohistory and ethnoaesthetics, seeking ways to present the complexities of indigenous thought and imagery in Spanish and English prose to communicate to broad audiences. She took the lead in curating two major exhibitions entitled “Causáunchimi! (We Are Living!)” shown in the Art Gallery of the Museum of the Banco Central in Quito, and the Municipal Building in Puyo, Ecuador (1987). Her lead work on our joint imagery and ethnoaesthetics project resulted in two books in English, a major exhibition at the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois in Urbana (1988), other gallery exhibitions, and an educational tour of south-central Illinois by two Amazonian potters (1992), Estela Dagua and Mirian Vargas. She later led in designing a permanent exhibition also entitled “Causáunchimi! We Are Living!” at the Spurlock Museum of the University of Illinois and a temporary exhibit there, “Rain Forest Visions” (2006). The pivotal document, which Sibby first developed in Ecuador in 1986, became, by 1988, the well-illustrated art book, *From Myth to Creation: Art from Amazonian Ecuador*. Without her design of this work our subsequent endeavors probably would not have attained the level of competence that we think we have achieved together.”

Sibby became a Curator of the Spurlock Museum of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2000, where she worked with staff on a number of projects ranging from gallery design to image selection, text writing, and object selections all focused on South American cultures, societies, art and aesthetics. She and Norman were pivotal to the establishment of a unique, permanent, ethnographically grounded exhibit at the Spurlock Museum with special attention to the artists who had created the items on display.

In addition to *From Myth to Creation*, Sibby took the lead in another publication, the edited book *Imagery and Creativity: Ethnoaesthetics and Art Worlds in the Americas* (1993). Her latest publications are co-authored books with her husband and include *Puyo Runa: Imagery and Power in Modern Amazonia* (2008) and *Histories of the Present: People and Power in Ecuador* (2011), which is a critical ethnography based on fieldwork in Ecuador since the 1960s.

Sibby developed and directed a program of medical-care delivery for indigenous people with whom the Whittens were working, and for many others who sought them out for help with medical needs. The Whittens established Sacha Runa Research Foundation in 1976 to support this medical-care program, now in its thirty-fifth year of operation as a non-profit organization in the service of more than thirty-eight communities of Pastaza Province.

Sibby and Norman's partnership as an academic team and their sustained collaboration with the indigenous people among whom they lived and worked stand as a model of engaged, cooperative scholarship that has inspired generations of researchers and has contributed to empowering indigenous artists. Above all else, students and colleagues who worked with the Whittens will always be indebted to Sibby for her generosity and hospitality whether in Urbana or in Ecuador as a kindness that shaped our professional and personal lives.

Here follows a tribute written by Michael Uzendoski:

Sumak Sumak Sibby (Beautiful Sibby)

Sumak sumak sumak Sib-by (Beautiful beautiful beautiful Sibby)
Dorothea Scott Whitten warmi-mi (A Dorothea Scott Whitten Woman)
Sinzhi muskuk warmi ashkangui-mi (A Strong dreaming woman you are)
Dorothea Scott Whitten warmi-mi (Dorthea Scott Whitten woman)

Sumak sumak sumak Sib-by (Beautiful beautiful beautiful Sibby)
Sisa kwinta rikurin-gui (You look like a flower)
Sisa shina shayarin-gui (You stand like a flower)
Sumak sumak sumak Sib-by (Beautiful beautiful beautiful Sibby)

Kanda yapa iyari-sha (Thinking of you so much)
Wakanaya wakanaya-mi (Makes us want to cry)
Kanpa kilkana maki-mi (your writing hand)
kunan samanara ushangui (now it can just rest)

Sumak sumak sumak Sib-by (Beautiful beautiful beautiful Sibby)
Wiñay wiñaylla kawsan-gui (Just live eternally)
Ñukanchira kwira-sha (taking care of us)
Ñukanchira rikusha-lla (just looking after us)

Sumak sumak sumak Sib-by (Beautiful beautiful beautiful Sibby)
Wiñay wiñay kawsangui-lla (Just live eternally)
Ñukanchira llakisha-mi (Loving us)

Wiñaykama kawsanga-pák (to live eternally)

Sumak sumak sumak Sib-by (Beautiful beautiful beautiful Sibby)

Dorothea Scott Whitten warmi-mi (A Dorothea Scott Whitten Woman)

Sinzhi muskuk warmi ashkangui-mi (A Strong dreaming woman you are)

Dorothea Scott Whitten warmi-mi (Dorthea Scott Whitten woman)

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Michael Uzendoski, 30 October 2011

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