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Legacy to Anthropological Advocacy, Development  
Issues, and Indigenous Peoples' Movements*

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## A Passion for the Oppressed

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## PREFACE: “A Passion for the Oppressed”

This Special Issue is in honor of Shelton H. Davis, one of the pioneers in anthropological advocacy of indigenous rights and a major contributor to the elaboration of socially and environmentally sound development policies at the World Bank. His most important book, *Victims of the Miracle: Development and the Indians of Brazil* (1977), published nearly 35 years ago, has inspired all of the writers in this issue and countless numbers of people engaged in indigenous and environmental advocacy throughout the world. We have much to learn from Sandy’s career both as an activist in indigenous rights and more broadly, the rights of any citizen vis-à-vis the structures of power in nation-states, corporations and multilateral institutions. Colleagues, “*companheiros na luta*” (as Sandy would say), friends, and family alike here express their tremendous admiration and appreciation for Sandy’s work.

When we proposed this special issue to the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA), two suggestions were made by senior colleagues for conceptualizing it. The first, by Terence Turner, affirmed that:

...The most relevant way of honoring Sandy’s career and example would be to include an honest discussion of the ambiguities and conflicts inherent in what he tried to do as an activist at the Bank, not pulling punches where there are critical differences of opinion or disagreements, but also trying for a balanced assessment of the good he was able to do, which was considerable. The best commemoration we could give him would be to try to define, as fully as possible, the implications of his remarkable career for ourselves and our profession.

Sandy’s work at the Bank was one very significant aspect of his amazingly diverse and engaged career, one in which he advocated for a more relevant anthropology, called for its practitioners to be more responsible with the research they did, and more aware of human rights violations, as well as the environmental consequences of large-scale development. Decades before he began his approximately twenty-year career at the Bank, Sandy was engaged in indigenous support movements. Sandy was an early leader and consistent supporter of the international indigenous rights advocacy that contributed to indigenous peoples in the Amazon in particular, making enormous gains in winning recognition for their land rights. At the same time, he and his colleagues formulated analyses of the structures of domination and oppression against indigenous peoples of the world, especially in Latin America. This issue of *Tipiti* will highlight the new paths he cut which ultimately pointed to the ways future anthropologists might become more engaged in the struggles of the peoples they study.

The second suggestion for organizing this issue, by Jean Jackson, proposed that it focus on institutional decision-making processes:

We anthropologists study institutions, we know about the *limitations* the World Bank and other multilateral funding institutions place on information, employees, autonomy, and the pressures they’re under that can lead to self-protective measures or simply bad

decisions. One or more contributors could analyze the damage done by some World Bank projects involving indigenous or Afro-descendant populations. Many of us on this list, particularly our Latin American colleagues, face these issues constantly. They tend to be more involved with activist/advocacy issues and they tend to be asked by their governments or para-statal institutions to assist in projects, serve as director of a government agency related to indigenous issues, write for the newspapers, etc. It could be about the dilemmas, the degree of pushback any one person can achieve, the fine line between being a good, competent agent and co-optation, and so forth. Many SALSA members, I imagine, could write eloquently about this topic.

The articles in this issue are organized into two parts: I. The contributions Shelton H Davis made to “public interest anthropology” and most especially, indigenous rights advocacy; and II. Memories of Sandy by some of his closest colleagues and his nephew, recent recipient of a Ph.D. in Anthropology and much influenced by his uncle’s work. This is followed by a brief biographical sketch and material from the Mayan Memorial Fund (which grants a special award to young Mayan students help them continue their education).

## **PART I: SHELTON DAVIS’ “PUBLIC INTEREST ANTHROPOLOGY” AND INDIGENOUS SUPPORT WORK**

Shelton Davis’ anthropology was unique; it was not strictly academic (though he taught at many top universities: Harvard, University of California-Berkeley, Boston University, Colgate, MIT, and the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro). His writings developed a form of anthropological analysis that probed deeply into the “situations” of indigenous peoples in the Americas and worldwide. He “practiced” anthropology by constantly seeking to make the profession a useful tool at the service of indigenous peoples in their struggles especially, and more generally, all citizens of the increasingly globalized world. For twenty years, he was Principal Sociologist at the World Bank; fifteen years before that, he co-founded two international indigenous rights advocacy organizations. He circulated in many spheres: international conferences on development issues and indigenous peoples; numerous visits to indigenous communities; constant contacts with thinkers and activists of a critical, Marxist line, who were firmly committed to political engagement.

Sandy’s work at the Bank was more than appreciated by many people, among them Bettina Ng’weno, of the University of California-Davis. Bettina worked with Afro-Colombians in the Pacific region. The following statement was sent to us through the courtesy of Jean Jackson, with the author’s permission to publish:

I am also very sorry to hear about Sandy and appreciate what others have written. I worked for him at the World Bank in 2000. He had a huge influence on my idea of what is possible from a place like the World Bank and he was instrumental in making the Bank think of titling collective territories for Indigenous and African Descent peoples in

Colombia a possibility for funding. Until that time the World Bank had only ever funded (and actively promoted) the titling of private property. He was also instrumental in formulating their Indigenous People Policy (now known by a different name). He made those projects human and responsive to local demands. (Other statements of deep appreciation from his colleagues at the Bank may be found at the website: [www.virtual-memories.com](http://www.virtual-memories.com))

Sandy was a professional with great vision and courage, who sought to take issues of indigenous rights into the places of power where fundamental changes might actually be made. Sandy's field of battle was on a global scale, where whole systems could potentially be made more responsive to local communities and human needs. His high ideals, the vast scope of his ideas, and the tremendous courage of his actions were indeed hard to match. As others have said, he combined "unflinching" activism with critical and rigorous thinking in conceptualizing indigenous peoples' struggles worldwide.

One of the central themes that guided his early work was the demonstration that the existing "models of development" promoted by multilateral funding institutions, and multinational corporations were fundamentally predatory and destructive, and would inevitably lead to environmental and social catastrophe. He demonstrated this with elegant clarity and powerful prose in *Victims of the Miracle* (1977), his best-known work (translated into numerous languages). If there was a single book that led to a major change in the situation of Brazilian Indians, I believe it was *Victims of the Miracle*.

When Sandy wrote *Victims*, indigenous peoples in Brazil had Constitutional rights to lands they traditionally occupied but virtually nothing had been marked on the ground or homologated in official Land Titles. Today they have twenty percent of the Amazon, an area of forest twice the size of California inhabited by some 550,000 people. Similar processes of land recognition unfolded in most of the Amazon countries. Clearly, the principal protagonists of these stories have been the indigenous peoples, their organizations, and in some cases the national support groups. These gains, however, are still highly contested (nowhere more so than in Brazil), and profoundly threatened by predatory development plans. But the land struggle has been the first priority for indigenous movements worldwide, and we should recognize how much they have, in spite of everything, won. Sandy's leadership in international indigenous rights advocacy contributed substantially to these gains.

In his writings and public lectures, Davis consistently issued a "call," directed to a broadly based audience, to demand that the macro-institutions of economic and political power rethink their policies of global development in light of an exceedingly poor record of success and the extraordinary devastation that lay in their wake. While he wrote the *Victims* book, other social scientists from Latin America (e.g. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira), as well

as indigenous organizations were beginning to defend the idea of a kind of development “from-the-ground-up,” which came to be called “ethno-development” (DOCIP 1981). Indigenous peoples, increasingly more organized and present in international human rights forums, consistently pointed to the need to critique and rethink fundamental institutions and practices in the Western way of life, which continued to demonstrate high levels of violence, intolerance, and domination, both internally, and in relation to other, non-Western peoples.

The articles in this issue focus on several, interconnected themes: international advocacy campaigns and their concrete results; the sharpening of theoretical and practical discussions of “development” and indigenous peoples’ active participation in and control over the kinds of development they would prefer for their communities; the interrelation between indigenous cultural traditions (knowledge, food-getting activities, spiritual relations to the environment) and development; the positive and negative sides of NGO consultancies and assessments of “sustainable development” projects in indigenous communities; and, last but among the most important, the responsibility of anthropologists in relation to indigenous peoples’ struggles.

The last issue mentioned can be analyzed into several sub-themes: firstly, how can anthropological analyses and interpretations effectively shape institutional policies with regard to indigenous peoples? Secondly, does our work stand a greater chance of being effective by (a) seeking change within institutions of power, (b) upholding an adversarial relation, as many NGOs and concerned individuals do, with structures of power, or (c) seeking a middle-ground approach that articulates the local, national and global levels into kinds of partnership relations?

For the sake of organizing Sandy’s incredibly complex and rich production of ideas on these themes, we divide his work into two broad chronological time periods, although these were never in fact differentiated in his life. In the early years of his career, covering from at least the early 1970s, through the publication of *Victims* (1977), and until the mid-1980s, the focal point of his work was indigenous rights advocacy, the critique of development policies, and the demonstration with hard facts of who was really responsible for environmental destruction and genocidal policies. Often, his demonstrations traced a clear path to MNCs (multinational corporations) based in the US, which made his argument of citizen responsibility all the more compelling.

In this, he provided an answer to one of the key questions in anthropological advocacy, regarding the appropriate moments or situations when anthropologists can and should intervene or seek to change a situation. If a situation can be traced directly back home—whether missionaries from the US, or companies with local affiliates in Latin America—then citizen and anthropological action is clearly called for. The external involvement, however,

should take into account the appropriate moment to “self-destruct,” as Sandy would say, that is, avoid creating such an investment in a local community’s future that the external support eventually develops into competitive and asymmetric relations in local politics. Awareness of ethnic politics and the limitations of advocacy work or NGO support are important dimensions to consider.

Protection of cultural rights and the relation of indigenous culture to “development” issues was another major issue; in an article he published in the Brazilian anthropological periodical *Mana* (2008), he wrote on the work of Cultural Survival, founded by David and Pia Maybury-Lewis in 1972, and which today is one of the foremost NGOs working on behalf of indigenous peoples’ cultural rights. Sandy drew attention to UNESCO’s “World Decade for Cultural Development” initiated in 1988, that had as one of its results an

increase in international consciousness for the recognition and promotion of the cultural heritage of these peoples, as well as more positive cultural policies—that go beyond the mere protection of “world patrimonial sites”—which could exercise a critical role in the development process. (Davis 1988:576; my translation)

In an article he later published in *Akwe:kon*, titled “Hard Choices: Indigenous Economic Development and Intellectual Property Rights” (1993), Sandy went further in this analysis of culture and development by examining the growing alliance between pharmaceutical companies and local indigenous Amazonian communities in marketing medicinal plants. While calls for protection of “intellectual property rights” he felt were important, he was “skeptical about the recent claims that the new bio-technology revolution and the recognition of intellectual property rights will necessarily lead to the economic prosperity of indigenous peoples and other traditional communities” (Davis 1993:20). In his visit to a Guajajara community in the Brazilian Amazon, which had signed an agreement with a Brazilian company connected to the German Merck Company, he witnessed “total dependence” of the Guajajara on extraction of the marketed plants “to the detriment of other aspects of the local economy” (Davis 1993:21).

In this same study, Sandy compared the Guajajara situation with the Yanomami Indians whom he had learned and written about during the campaign for the creation of a Yanomami Reserve (1977-1991). From what he was told by anthropologist Bruce Albert, for the Yanomami:

plant knowledge represents more than “intellectual property”...Plants were given to human beings not as objects or commodities to be exchanged for money in impersonal markets, but rather as gifts to maintain the delicate balance of the universe...These plants are revered as having sacred qualities and they should be protected and kept secret. (...) The current international biodiversity prospecting and intellectual property rights fail to comprehend this sacred or spiritual quality of indigenous plant knowledge.” (Davis 1993:21)

In my own work in this issue and elsewhere (Wright 2007), I have sought to develop this critique by examining the forms of “sustainable” projects introduced among the Baniwa people with whom I have worked since the 1970s.

Indigenous peoples are connected to their environments through deep spiritual ties; they do not have the same perspectives on “natural resources” as those who “develop” or “manage” them. It is this spirituality that Sandy profoundly respected and felt, seeking to incorporate the human and social perspective into sustainable programs or projects. In that sense, Sandy’s work paralleled that of scholars in the human and natural sciences seeking to bring together the findings of ecology and anthropology in an effort to make the “human sciences” more open to understanding and incorporating indigenous peoples’ perspectives and needs.

The obligation of governments to protect native land rights is one of the predominant themes in Sandy’s second publication on *Land Rights and Indigenous Peoples: The Role of the Inter-American Commission Rights*, published by Cultural Survival in 1988. In it, Sandy raised the fundamental question of the need for a more effective dialogue between non-governmental organizations and global human rights institutions such as the Organization of American States, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples, and the ILO (International Labor Organization). Anthropologists can have an extremely important role in bringing to the attention of these institutions cases of indigenous rights violations. For their part, international institutions could more effectively bring to public attention the treaties and human rights accords most relevant to indigenous peoples. One of the clearest examples of the violations of indigenous rights in the Amazon was the case of the Yanomami peoples in Brazil and Venezuela in the late 1970s. The global campaign in support of the protection of Yanomami rights—spearheaded by NGOs for several decades—included the presentation of documentation directly to various human rights institutions.

Another case, analyzed by Chernela in this issue, was the situation of the indigenous peoples of the Northwest Amazon who, for over seventy years, had lived under the ethnocidal regime of missionary organizations, both Catholic and Protestant. This case was likewise brought to the attention of international human rights forums, particularly the Fourth Russell Tribunal, on “Violations of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the Americas” in Rotterdam, the Netherlands in 1980. In both cases, anthropologists were engaged in presenting documents to these forums on behalf of, or in collaboration with, the indigenous peoples.

It is again within the context of violations of human rights that Sandy did his most outstanding work in sentinel activism. He had done his doctoral fieldwork in Northwest Guatemala among Mayan peoples who in the 1980s were the victims of one of the worst holocausts that has befallen a native people in the Americas in probably the entire century. Knowing the long-term and direct

involvement of US government agencies and corporations in Guatemala, which were in large part what led to the formation of resistance movements, both indigenous and *ladino*, he fully assumed the role of action anthropologist by closely monitoring the situation, especially in the northwestern Department of Huehuetenango, where he had done his dissertation fieldwork. Some of the most terrifyingly brutal massacres took place in that region in the early 1980s. The sentinel role and networking at all levels were crucial in this stage, as Linstroth and Barrero relate in this issue.

At the same time, in alliance with local actors, Davis was a fundamental link in assisting Mayan refugees who were entering the US in large numbers and suffering the culture shock and trauma of having lost their homes and families, to enter an unknown and ruthlessly intimidating place. Sandy and Anthropology Resource Center (ARC) student intern Julie Hodson put together a series of documents published by Cultural Survival under the title of *Witnesses to Political Violence in Guatemala* (Davis et al. 1983) that was later used in court cases to assist Mayan refugees to get asylum in the United States (see article in this issue by Linstroth). Through Sandy's intervention in several cases, he literally saved the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Mayan Indians from imminent massacre.

From 1983 until its official closing, the ARC worked with the Florida Rural Legal Services and the American Friends Service Committee in providing legal assistance to a community of 400 Kanjobal-speaking Mayan Indians from Guatemala who were seeking political asylum status in the United States. The ARC worked closely with Jeronimo Camposeco, a Mayan Indian leader who founded the CORN-MAYA Project in Indiantown, Florida, a paralegal and social service program for the Kanjobal community in Florida. With the ARC's assistance, the activities of the CORN-MAYA Project were extended to Mayan Indian refugees in California and other parts of the United States.

These are just some of the ways that Sandy pioneered a totally new kind of anthropology, from which students today who show a willingness to emerge from purely academic discussions, can become engaged in such a way that makes the enterprise meaningful and useful to the peoples whose ways of lives have demonstrated extraordinary resilience despite their tragic suffering.

In his article, Allan Burns, former President of the Society for Applied Anthropology, celebrates Shelton Davis as one who followed many different ways of bringing Anthropology to the public, showing that the discipline means "far more than writing and publishing, it means doing." Whether by creating an NGO, assisting an indigenous project, or doing an anthropological assessment, Sandy was always at the service of the people with whom he developed a long-term relation. With regard to Sandy's career at the World Bank from 1987 until his retirement in 2004, Burns states:

Shelton's publications, reports, and indeed, his employment showed that there is no inherent opposition between taking an objective, evidenced-based approach to human suffering and human problems and a stance in favor of one strategy over another. Rather it is that objectivity and careful attention to detail and data that lead to a stance of advocacy.

The work of the ARC reflected the diversity of Sandy's involvement in questions of citizens' rights. Sandy and his colleagues were influenced by Ralph Nader's "public interest research groups," developing what they called "anthropology in the public interest." While the main focus of our work at the ARC was on development and the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, Sandy kept a variety of projects going in other, perhaps less well-known, issues, such as Native (North) Americans and energy development, rural revitalization, education, impact assessments of large-scale development, and, in general, human rights in the context of a globalized world.

In each of these networks, Sandy maintained a strong presence along with Bob Matthews primarily in raising issues of public concern through the *ARC Newsletter*. Sandy's vast knowledge of macro-processes of globalization and their impacts on the local level had to be joined with the voices and perspectives of disenfranchised peoples. It was not enough to study impacts of power structures on peoples and the environment without listening to those who are most affected by these structures, analyzing the strategies and actions available to them to protect their "rights," and incorporating those options into development policies.

Sandy was always interested in the question of Indian education. As a lasting gift to the Mayan people of the region where he did his fieldwork, the Mayan Educational Foundation, at the request of Sandy's wife, son and daughter, established a special scholarship to be awarded to young students from the Mayan community of Todos Santos. The Shelton H. Davis Memorial Fund has now completed its first year having awarded scholarships to five young schoolchildren whose education is guaranteed for as long as they wish (for further information see below.)

To reflect on the questions raised by Sandy during his career, we have asked several of his coworkers to write about the legacy of his work, especially those that involve anthropological advocacy in the Amazon, its possibilities and limitations. The present-day dilemmas of development in the Amazon—particularly exemplified in the debate over the Forest Code in the Brazilian Congress and the government's decision to construct the Belo Monte Dam (see article in this issue by Schwartzman and Andreassen)—are critical cases for defining what is still useful in the way of advocacy work at the present time and what could potentially become new approaches to "development" as conceptualized and implemented by local communities themselves based on their own traditions and needs.

- Robin M. Wright

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