

DARRELL ADDISON POSEY (1947-2001)

WILLIAM BALÉE
Tulane University

Darrell Posey died from cancer on 6 March 2001 at Oxford, England. He was very well-known in a variety of scholarly, indigenous, and activist circles. His professional frame of reference extended from Kayapó villages in the cerrado country of Central Brazil to gatherings of colleagues and policymakers on six continents. He had traveled considerably far in his relatively short life of fifty-three years. His range of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances was extraordinary both in its professional and geographical scope and in its size and variety. For sociological network analysts, Posey would represent no doubt a node of major significance, connected into a world network of no mean demographic proportions, geographic extent, and professional depth. One might say he was pre-adapted to the Globalization Age, in which we now live. So it seems befitting to ask, Who was Darrell Posey? Why did he acquire so much notoriety and network-centeredness in his lifetime? What is his likely legacy, especially to anthropology, and even more specifically, to anthropology as it is taught and practiced in Brazil?

Several persons would argue that Posey was an ecologist or botanist or ethnobiologist, but not really an anthropologist. Some consider him to have been both an anthropologist and an entomologist (e.g., Ellen, 2002: 245). For many who knew him in the final phase of his life, he was an activist, above all on intellectual property rights and their applications to indigenous knowledge. A grain of truth resides in all these angles of classifying Posey the professional. Posey's career seems to be curiously parallel to that of Darcy Ribeiro in this regard, whose footprints in anthropology per se have been the subject of some debate among those who knew him and his work, with some saying he was never really an anthropologist and others claiming

he was once in anthropology but left it for new pursuits, such as politics, early on (see discussion in Vidal and Barretto Filho, 1997: 159).

If one looks at the paper record, however, Posey undeniably met the requirements for a job description in anthropology. A Kentuckian by birth, Posey earned a Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Georgia in 1979; his earlier degrees were a B.S. in entomology (1970) and an M.A. in geography and anthropology (1974), both taken at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. At Louisiana State University, Posey came under the tutelage of social anthropologist Miles Richardson (who incidentally was Tulane University's first Ph.D. in anthropology). Richardson was probably the most important anthropological influence on Posey's career, since though he graduated in anthropology at Georgia, he evidently worked most closely there with entomologists.

Posey was on the fringes of the establishment of academic anthropology, both in Brazil and abroad; the professional appointments he held, both in Brazil and later in England, were interdisciplinary. That seems to have been a choice Posey made early in his career, rather than the result of circumstances thrust upon him. In his Kayapó work, Posey collaborated mostly with natural scientists, including two botanists, two geographers, a pharmacologist, a soil scientist, a geneticist, a mammalogist, an entomologist, an ornithologist, an astronomer, and others. When I first met Posey, at the Primeiro Símpósio do Trópico Húmido, which was hosted by EMBRAPA at the Belém Hilton, in October 1984, he told me that he regarded himself as an ethnobiologist, which at that time as a profession was relatively obscure, though largely thanks to Posey, it is more fashionable for one to so self-identify now (Berlin, 2002). At this time, Posey was beginning to acquire an international readership, and his work in Kayapó ethnoentomology (the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation) and agroforestry practices was beginning to intrigue scientists in multiple fields. Brent Berlin (2002: xiv) noted that the practice of ethnobiology today is the "ethnobiology of Posey's vision." That vision was interdisciplinary above all. At another meeting I had with Posey in Washington, D. C., in November 1985, when we were co-organizers of a session at the American Anthropological Association that later became a book (Posey and Balée, 1989), Posey indicated he would not wish to pursue a professorial career in anthropology but preferred to be in an interdisciplinary research position of his own design. He certainly achieved this aim, both in Brazil and later in England.

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At the time I first knew Posey, he was serving as Director of the Laboratório de Etnobiologia of the Universidade Federal do Maranhão, and he was working under the wing of the esteemed biologist and geneticist, Dr. Warwick Kerr. It was colleagues like Kerr – and other natural scientists working in the tropics, such as botanists Ghillean Prance of the New York Botanical Garden and S.K. Jain of the National Botanical Garden of India – who first gravitated to Posey's work and seemed fascinated by Posey the person. Indeed, Posey was a *bon vivant* who left a memorable impression on virtually everyone who ever met him. He also was a fine orator both in English and in his accented Portuguese, and audiences in both languages applauded him accordingly. Although Posey was not engaged full-time as a professor, he gave short courses from time to time and he had a marked influence on several Brazilian natural scientists with whom he came into contact. Prominent among these is ichthyologist turned ethno-ichthyologist Dr. José Geraldo Marques, who has published noteworthy texts in ethnobiology that reveal considerable anthropological expertise and insights (in particular, see Marques, 2001).

In 1987, Posey accepted appointment as Director of the Programa em Etnobiologia of the Museu Goeldi in Belém. That same year, he got involved in an environmental impact study sponsored by Eletronorte involving indigenous populations in the area of influence of the Xingu Hydroelectric Project. At some point early in the consultancy, Posey fell out with the administration at Eletronorte, and the rest, as they say, is history. He and two Kayapó Indian leaders denounced the dam project in the office of the President of the World Bank in Washington, D.C. As a result, together with negative publicity the event attracted, the World Bank suspended payment of the funds to Eletronorte that were needed to drive the dam project forward. Upon returning to Brazil, Posey and the two Indians were arrested and fingerprinted on charges of harming the reputation of Brazil abroad. Soon released from custody and awaiting trial on the charges, Posey continued to organize and then host the First International Congress of Ethnobiology in July 1988, again at the Belém Hilton. It was an astounding meeting of hundreds of scholars in numerous fields from thirty-five countries. It resulted in two edited volumes on ethnobiology published by the Museu Goeldi. The 1988 Declaration of Belém, which called for protection of indigenous knowledge, use, and management of biological resources as well as human rights of indigenous peoples was one of the oft-cited results of this congress as well.

That Declaration preceded the Convention on Biological Diversity at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, in which Posey also played an important role (Berlin, 2002: xiv). While Posey was enjoying widespread endorsement of his work by international colleagues, the charges against him and the two Kayapó leaders were quietly dropped. In 1989, Posey was decorated with the Chico Mendes Award for “extraordinary courage in the defense of nature” given by the Sierra Club and in 1993 he was honored with the United Nations Global 500 Award for outstanding achievement in service to the environment. Clearly after 1988, Posey was a committed activist, if he had not been one before.

Posey founded an NGO in 1988 called Institute of Ethnobiology of the Amazon in Belém; part of that NGO’s applied focus was on environmental education. He eventually vacated his position at the Museu Goeldi and became Senior Associate Fellow at Oxford in 1992, where he remained in one capacity or another until his death. From that time on, Posey’s public and professional work was primarily aimed at promoting the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples while simultaneously opposing the threats to these rights that he perceived to be emanating from international pharmaceutical and other commercial interests. He also challenged anthropologists to take a more active, protectionist role in their work with indigenous peoples, especially as concerned their handling of indigenous knowledge.

In 1992, Eugene Parker, a geographer who had been one of Posey’s collaborators in Kayapó work, published in the *American Anthropologist* a scathing critique of Posey’s work with the Kayapó. In particular, Parker questioned Posey’s findings regarding the forest islands (“*apêtê*” in Kayapó) that dot the cerrados of their landscape. Posey had argued in various much-cited publications that the trees of the *apêtê* had been deliberately planted by the Kayapó. In his view, the Kayapó were not only custodians of the forest, they had created it. Parker contended that the *apêtê* were naturally occurring phenomena and that Posey’s methods in determining them to have been planted by humans were flawed, sloppy, and misleading. Posey replied briefly to Parker’s exposé also in the pages of the same journal, alleging mainly that Parker did not speak Kayapó and therefore he could not have found evidence necessary to refute Posey’s conclusions about the efficacy of indigenous practice and knowledge in influencing the terrain. It seems likely that the question of anthropogenic impacts on the forest islands in the Kayapó habitat, and probably in other areas of cerrado and campo, will linger for some time

to come (see Balée, 2000 e 2003, for further considerations of the *apêê* controversy). Many of Posey's most important scholarly contributions to Kayapó ethnobiology and resource management have been reprinted posthumously in a fine volume (Posey, 2002).

Darrell Posey was a unique figure both in anthropology and ethnobiology. Trained as an anthropologist, his research focused on studying the encounter between the Kayapó Indians and the flora and fauna of their cerrado habitat. His pioneering contributions focused on how they recognized and classified insects; how they farmed; and how they may have influenced and even created the forests of their habitat. He was an activist who found a niche in arguing that indigenous knowledge of natural resources merited not only preservation, but legal protection through laws of intellectual property rights. He also met with and hosted scholars from all over the world in various venues dedicated to ethnobiology, indigenous knowledge, and protection of indigenous knowledge and its possessors. He will be most remembered for his writings in ethnobiology, and for his organizational expertise. In particular, his original contribution to ethnoentomology, a field that consisted of very few persons before him, is likely to be well appreciated for many years to come. His work on indigenous management of plants continues to be influential, though essential research questions over the origins of *apêê* remain somewhat unresolved. His instrumental contributions to an applied ethnobiology will be no doubt long-lasting. At least two extant academic societies owe much to him. These are the International Society of Ethnobiology as well as the Sociedade Brasileira de Etnobiologia e Etnoecologia (SBEE). It can be fairly said that Posey more than anyone else introduced ethnobiology into Brazil. Posey's work is still not standard reading in North American ecological anthropology, and this may be because of its evolutionary bias, though Posey's works are often assigned in anthropology courses that deal with Amazonia and ethnobiology. His work will probably become even more familiar to North American and European anthropology students now that many, formerly disparate, papers have been brought together in one volume (Posey, 2002). Relatively few Brazilian anthropologists to date are members of the SBEE, which with a few exceptions mostly consists of agronomists, botanists, zoologists, and pharmacologists. In contrast, most North American and European ethnobiologists (with noted exceptions) are, paradoxically, trained in anthropology. Probably not many more Brazilian anthropologists would consider themselves to be ethnobiologists, ecological

anthropologists, or environmental anthropologists. These fields have not set firm roots in Brazilian anthropology. On the other hand, should ethnobiology and related fields begin to be taught more in Brazil, one can only expect Brazilian anthropology students of the future to become increasingly familiar with the work of Darrell Posey.

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