

Pioneer in Brazilian Ethnography & Indigenous Rights Advocacy: David Maybury-Lewis (1929-2007)¹

HARALD E. L. PRINS
Kansas State University
prins@ksu.edu

LAURA R. GRAHAM
University of Iowa
laura-graham@uiowa.edu



David Maybury-Lewis in canoe, Peruvian Amazon, 1990.
(Photo courtesy of Richard Meech)

It is one of the many ironies of the American experience that the invaders created the category of Indians, imposed it on the inhabitants of the New World, and have been trying to abolish it ever since.... The indigenous challenge [is] to imagine a nation that can tolerate indigenous cultures within its pluralism; to imagine a nation that does not need to extinguish the traditions that nourish it, because it inspires in its citizens a commitment to a transcendent Americanism. (Maybury-Lewis 1993:55, 58)

Born in Hyderabad in 1929, David Maybury-Lewis grew up in rural Pakistan—then under the British Raj. His father, a civil engineer, led the family in a nomadic existence in the Sindhi desert—often moving with camel caravan from one irrigation worksite to the next. During the early

years of the Second World War, David attended an elite boarding school in England. After serving as a military officer in the West Yorkshire regiment (1948-49), he studied modern languages at Cambridge University and eventually acquired fluency in seven languages, as well as competency in two indigenous Amazonian tongues, Xavante and Xerente.

Upon graduation, in 1953, David traveled to Brazil to study indigenous cultures with the German-born anthropologist Herbert Baldus, who became his mentor at the Free School of Sociology and Politics in the University of São Paulo. Although lowland South America had attracted the attention of an international cast of pioneering ethnographers like Erland Nordenskiöld, Rafael Karsten, Curt Nimuendajú (Unkel), Claude Lévi-Strauss, Alfred Métraux, and Charles Wagley, and the Smithsonian's *Handbook of South American Indians* notwithstanding, there was still "a relative dearth of published works" (Rivière 1980: 533).

David took up Baldus's challenge to try to solve the anthropological contradiction that the central Brazilian Gê speaking peoples appeared to present through their perplexing combination of highly sophisticated and complex systems of dualistic social organization in conjunction with only very rudimentary technology. Because many of these societies seemed to be, according to Nimuendajú's reports (1937), in "decay," David wished to comprehend Gê dualism in an intact state by studying a group that had experienced minimal outside interference. The Xavante, the first group of which had only recently established peaceful relations with representatives of Brazilian national society, offered a perfect case.

To prepare himself for his Xavante fieldwork and learn the language, David first carried out research among the Xerente who spoke a closely related language and had co-existed with Brazilian national society for many years. In eight months of fieldwork, David found that Xerente peoples continued to speak their language and maintained many of their dualistic practices. His wife Pia Henningsen, a Danish-born nutritionist, accompanied him on this journey. This research became the subject of David's master's thesis at the University of São Paulo.

Returning to England, David began graduate work in social anthropology at Oxford, studying under Rodney Needham. In 1958, now with infant son Biorn in tow, he and Pia went back to Mato Grosso to conduct ethnographic research among the Xavante, semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers who ranged in the savannahs of Brazil's central plateau—a drainage area of the Amazon tributary, Rio das Mortes. David and Pia (or "Davi" and "Bia" as they are fondly remembered by members of the community) set up housekeeping in Apewen's community at São Domingos (who were later moved to Pimentel Barbosa). Here David enthusiastically participated

in every possible activity and established a pattern of active participant observation. As Maybury-Lewis later recalled: “[T]he village in which my wife and I lived in 1958 had only one chief. Apewen, ‘Beautiful Return,’ who bestowed his own name on me, was a man who inspired respect” (Maybury-Lewis 1992:236). Pia was named Arenwainon, after one of Apewen’s three wives, and Biorn received the name Sibupa, one of the formidable leader’s sons—all of whom had become David’s “brothers”—the one who was considered as David’s ceremonial friend (Maybury-Lewis 1992:26). His fieldwork set an exemplary model of positive encounters for future ethnographers working among the Xavante. Similarly David’s intellectual generosity and welcoming attitude encouraged contributions and positive exchange among ethnographers of Xavante who followed in his footsteps.

In 1960, Oxford granted Maybury-Lewis his doctorate in Social Anthropology. By then, he had joined the anthropology department at Harvard, becoming an assistant professor the following year. In 1962, he returned to the Xavante for almost a month and, along with anthropological geneticists James Neel and Francisco Salzano, revisited for another several weeks in 1964. *The Savage and the Innocent* (1965), David’s first book, vividly—often humorously—reflects on many of the challenges that he and his family faced while living in the rugged central Brazilian frontier and conducting fieldwork among the Xerente and Xavante. His reflexivity anticipated subsequent ethnographic trends. But, at the time, David was anxious that his frank personal and emotional account of fieldwork in Mato Grosso might hinder his academic career. In fact, his concern was so great that he originally considered publishing this work under his wife Pia’s name (William Crocker, personal communication with first author, June 2008). Generally, however, the book was well-accepted and received favorable reviews from his peers Richard Wagley and Robert Carneiro. David’s more conventional ethnography, *Akwe-Shavante Society*, followed in 1967.² This seminal study opened Gê studies to further comparative work and had a decisive influence on native Amazonian ethnography generally speaking. *Akwe-Shavante Society* was translated into Portuguese by Aracy Lopes da Silva, a beloved Xavante scholar who practically became a daughter to David and Pia, and was published in 1984 as *Sociedade Xavante*.

By then, Maybury-Lewis had become curator of South American Ethnology at Harvard’s Peabody Museum. In 1969, the university promoted him to full professor, and during much of the next decade, he chaired its anthropology department (1973-81). During the 1960s, along with Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, he founded the graduate degree program

in anthropology at Brazil's National Museum (Museu Nacional) in Rio de Janeiro. Throughout his career, David made significant contributions to fostering dialogues and collaboration among anthropologists in Brazil and North America.

Among David's greatest contributions to the anthropology of lowland South America was his inspiration and mentorship in the Harvard-Central Brazil Project, a collaborative endeavor between the Anthropology Departments at Harvard and the Museu Nacional that took place from 1962-67. This series of coordinated but independent field research projects was conceived as part of a broader comparative study of central Brazilian Gê societies. It made major contributions to lowland South American ethnology, influencing subsequent discussions of the kinship and social organization well beyond the Gê, as well as to general theories of dualistic social structure and kinship worldwide. The project also inspired a series of subsequent research projects by both North American and Brazilian scholars.

The Harvard Central Brazil Project involved seven North American and Brazilian doctoral students, including Joan Bamberger and Terence Turner (Kayapó), Roberto Da Matta (Apinayé) and Júlio Cezar Melatti (Krahó),



David Maybury-Lewis
Taking notes while doing research among the Xerente (1955-56)
(Photo by Pia Maybury-Lewis)

Jean Carter Lave and Dolores Newton (Krikatí), and Christopher Crocker (Bororo). The results were first presented in 1968 at the 38th International Congress of Americanists and later published in the Congress Proceedings (1971). Reworked, expanded, and deepened, these essays were dedicated to Nimuendajú and later published in *Dialectical Societies: The Gê and Bororo of Central Brazil*, a 1979 volume edited by Maybury-Lewis.³

In addition to numerous articles, David Maybury-Lewis authored, edited and co-edited a total of eleven books. Originally a structuralist, trained in the British social anthropology tradition of Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown and Needham, he was concerned not merely with “structure” per se, but with how Gê people’s complex systems of cross-cutting and intersecting binaries possessed meaning for them, and how these systems actually operate in their daily lives.

A keen and adventurous observer, David was also a man of compassion. Having lived in the backlands of Mato Grosso, he became acutely aware of the repressive forces that accompany capitalist and state expansion and the challenges these pose to indigenous peoples, often in the form of violent intrusions such as Xavante continue to experience today. And early on, David recognized that the anthropologist’s profession comes with moral obligations that may call for political action in solidarity with those who have become friends, neighbors, and, sometimes, even relatives during fieldwork.

In 1972, with the Xavante close to their hearts and seeking a way to help indigenous groups protect their lands, resources and culture, David and Pia founded Cultural Survival, Inc. This NGO is dedicated to indigenous peoples and their struggle for human rights and sovereignty as distinctive tribal nations and has earned international renown and respect.

In 1977, Maybury-Lewis became a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Three years later, the American Ethnological Society elected him as its president. Recognizing David and Pia’s extraordinary contributions to the profession as co-founders of Cultural Survival, the American Anthropological Association honored them with the Franz Boas Award for Exemplary Service to Anthropology in 1988.

Just one year before the United Nations proclaimed 1993 the International Year of the World’s Indigenous People, David garnered international fame as the host of the public television series *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*, depicting the lives of indigenous peoples in 15 distinct countries. The idea for this ambitious project came from Canadian filmmaker Richard Meech, one of his former students at Harvard. For this film, David and Pia, accompanied by a camera crew, flew back to the Xavante village (at Pimental Barbosa). David recalled

that they were welcomed by his brother Sibupa and that “[w]omen who had known us back in the old days sat with us and wept. Their weeping was a customary form of greeting, expressing the sadness of absence and mourning for those who had died while we were away. We wept, too”(Maybury-Lewis 1992:190). Since 1992, the series has been broadcast in a dozen countries and viewed by more than 50 million people. As a companion text, the anthropologist authored a lavishly illustrated book with the same title, published by Viking.⁴

In 1997, Maybury-Lewis was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Scientific Merit—Brazil’s highest academic honor. The same year he was also elected to that country’s distinguished Academy of Sciences. The King of Sweden presented him with the Anders Retzius Gold Medal of the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography in 1998. This occasion was marked by a symposium on Anthropology, Ethnicity, and Indigenous Rights, with David giving a keynote address titled “The Cultural Survival of Indigenous Peoples: Theoretical Issues and Practical Considerations.” Toward the end of his career, he edited two important collections concerning the politics of ethnicity and indigenous peoples and the state, *Indigenous Peoples, Ethnic Groups, and the State* (1997), and *The Politics of Ethnicity: Indigenous Peoples in Latin American States* (2002).

In 2004, after nearly half a century of highly productive and activist scholarship, Maybury-Lewis retired. Three years later, the United Nations General Assembly finally adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, based on principles long advocated by Cultural Survival. Without human rights activists like David, this milestone for humanity would not have been possible. In their support of indigenous peoples and their native rights, anthropologists have been instrumental in pressuring countries such as Brazil to legally set aside and protect tracts of ancestral territories for small and threatened groups such as the Xavante.⁵

In December 2007, having long struggled with Parkinson’s disease, Maybury-Lewis died at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was 78. When word of his death reached the Mato Grosso, a Xavante friend sent a message to announce that his community was grieving. Hiparidi Top’tiro, a Xavante man who visited David and Pia and stayed in their home just two years previously, proclaimed: “I am very sad to receive this news. I am crying. I liked David and I miss him. I have always thought highly of his work. I am going to shave my head to mourn his passing” (personal communications with second author, December 2007).

In June 2008, at the annual meeting of the Association of Brazilian Anthropology, David Maybury-Lewis will be posthumously honored with the “Roquete Pinto Medal for Contributions to Brazilian Anthropology.”

As Luis Cardoso, son of Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, former student of Maybury-Lewis, full professor at the University of Brasilia, and President of the association told us, this medal is the highest honor given by the association: “David will be the first anthropologist whose career developed outside of Brazil who is being awarded the medal.”

NOTES

1. Following the reception of SALSA’s 5th Sesquiannual Conference in Oxford, tribute was paid to Maybury-Lewis by Peter Rivière, followed by two films. The first, *Among Xavante Friends* (2008), was made by Harald Prins, Adam Bohannon, and Jessie Stone, and features footage of David and Pia returning to the Xavante in 1990 (material taken from the two Millennium films, *Mistaken Identity* and *The Shock of the Other*). Next came *Owners of the Water: Conflict and Collaboration over Rivers* (2008), documenting the Xavante struggle for indigenous rights today, which was made by Laura R. Graham, David Hernández Palmar, and Caimi Waiassé (distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, DER).
2. Reviewed positively by Crocker (1974) and Leacock (1968), but more critically by Ortiz (1967) and Shapiro (1971).
3. This book was positively reviewed in *American Anthropologist* (Young 1981), and more critically in *Man* (Rivière 1980).
4. Both film series and book received mixed reviews.
5. Today approximately 15,000 Xavante live in over 200 communities located in nine indigenous territories in Mato Grosso state. Some Xavante are working to expand and connect some of these areas into a larger contiguous territory.

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