
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON A PUBLIC
INTELLECTUAL: DAVID MAYBURY-LEWIS

**David Maybury-Lewis and
Cultural Survival: Providing a
Model for Public Anthropology,
Advocacy, and Collaboration**

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In 1972, David Maybury-Lewis and his wife Pia founded Cultural Survival, a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of indigenous peoples.¹ At a time when most academic anthropologists were committed to objective social science research, publication, and teaching, David and Pia's efforts were very much outside the mainstream. Their actions were a response to the deteriorating situation of the Brazilian Indians they had studied in the 1960s. Yet the early years of Cultural Survival are a model for what has become public or engaged anthropology—an approach currently recognized as more central and legitimate within our discipline. Documentation, advocacy, and collaboration—three characteristics of Cultural Survival's work—have become regular activities both for a broad range of anthropologists and for the American Anthropological Association, the largest professional association of anthropologists.

The Context

In an early newsletter, David explained how he and Pia came to found Cultural Survival:

“Over twenty years [1958] ago my wife and I took our baby son and went to live with the Shavante Indians of Central Brazil. They had a reputation at that time for being fiercely hostile to outsiders, so that local backwoodsmen gave them a wide berth as they roamed beyond the frontier of Brazilian society. The Shavante accepted our little family, however, and let us live with them, to learn about them and to learn from them...Today [1980] they are still struggling to defend their way of life. The frontier has now caught up with the Shavante and threatens to destroy them. Their lands have been invaded and reduced..... They need help as do hundreds of other small societies throughout the world” (*Cultural Survival Newsletter* 4:3:12).

The condition of the Xavante and David and Pia’s decision to found Cultural Survival seems light years away from the anthropology of the late 1950s, when they first visited the Xavante, and 1962, when I arrived at Harvard as a graduate student. Social anthropology (which at the time was part of the Social Relations Department) was a discipline that saw itself as a social science dedicated to the objective and careful study of small-scale societies using field research and participant observation. David had arrived at Harvard, in 1961, fresh from Oxford—one of the British universities where the “real” social anthropology, as developed by Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, and Needham, was practiced. I remember taking copious notes in David’s class on “Kinship and Marriage” as he lectured on Lévi-Strauss, Needham, and Leach and their models of cross-cousin marriage. His lectures were clear and elegant. They led me to understand the many ways in which kinship ordered almost all social relationships in indigenous societies. David was one of my dissertation advisors (Evan Vogt served as the other). While most other students were involved in Harvard faculty research projects that took them to Central Brazil, Chiapas, and India, a handful of us conducted research with Native North Americans, groups that had long been studied by US anthropologists and were somewhat “passé” compared to populations in more exotic parts of the world. I conducted my research on residence patterns and cooperation on the

Navajo Reservation in 1965-66, and, characteristically, David suggested that I write the chapter on kinship and social organization first, since that would presumably be the heart of the dissertation.

Between 1965 and 1972, the US and the world changed dramatically. The US was increasingly involved in the Vietnam War, spawning a vigorous anti-war movement. We began to see US policy as no longer benevolent and US support for the World Bank and other international institutions as having very negative consequences for the indigenous peoples we studied. On the Navajo reservation, new coal strip mines, power plants, and light manufacturing plants raised environmental and labor issues, while in Brazil, the plans for building a highway in the Northwest frontier area threatened many small indigenous groups who had no land rights and who died from infectious diseases brought by invading settlers.

Anthropology, of course, had long been connected to efforts to change, assimilate, and even civilize indigenous peoples. But Cultural Survival provided a different approach. Unlike academic research or applied projects, Cultural Survival was dedicated to the kind of collaboration that would strengthen the ability of indigenous peoples to run their own organizations and advocate for land rights, health care, education, and political power.

Early Publications and Projects

Cultural Survival's initial activities set the agenda for the organization's vision of how documentation, advocacy, and collaboration could work. In the *Cultural Survival Newsletter*, the organization announced its first seven projects, all to assist indigenous populations in South America. These ranged from supporting a leadership training program among the Ayoreo and Chiriguano Indians of Bolivia, to funding a Cooperative among the Kaxinawa of Brazil, to supplying funds for local texts for the Amuesha's bilingual program in Eastern Peru. Two other programs advanced land rights and another one supported a radio station. In many of these cases, Cultural Survival was partnering with an indigenous organization and supporting an ongoing program (*Cultural Survival Newsletter* 4:2:1-3).

Documentation in this first decade often took the form of Special Reports and Occasional Papers. In 1978, at the request of USAID, David and James Howe, a fellow anthropologist, traveled to Paraguay and prepared a report on the Indian peoples, their plight, and their prospects (Maybury-Lewis and Howe 1980). David, Jason Clay, and David Price put together a

short report on the impact of the highway on the endangered peoples of Northwestern Brazil (Maybury-Lewis et al. 1981). When the newsletter became *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, short articles throughout the 1980s and 1990s began to document, for example, the genocide against the Mayans in Guatemala (*CS Quarterly* 7:1), the growing conflict between the Miskito and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (*CS Quarterly* 9:1:59, 9:2:38), and famine in Ethiopia (*CS Quarterly* 9:2:36, 12:2:49). Many issues were built around a theme: migration and labor (vol.7:4), education (vol. 9:2), resettlement and relocation (vol. 12:3 and 4), and hydro-electric dams (vol. 12:2). David continued to write about the struggles of the Xavante (vol. 7:1) and other Brazilian Indians (vol. 7:4, 13:1). In 1993, the UN Year of Indigenous People, Cultural Survival published a book, *State of the Peoples*, drawing on an international network of scholars to construct a “global rights summary” in each of ten regions of the world.

Documentation was complemented by advocacy. Early newsletters reported that Cultural Survival sent a telegraph to request that government officials demarcate Yanomami lands in Brazil (*CS Newsletter* 4:2:3), reported on resolutions presented to the American Anthropological Association (*CS Newsletter* 4:4:13; 7:1:13), and printed a letter urging members to support indigenous land rights in the Peruvian Amazon (*CS Newsletter* 5:4:17). David gave a presentation to the Senate Appropriations Committee in September 1985, expressing concern about the World Bank funding of transmigration projects in Indonesia and arguing that Bank loans had adversely affected native peoples in the Philippines, India, Paraguay, and Brazil (*CS Newsletter* 9:4). In 1986, David testified regarding the World Bank before the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, arguing that the Bank rarely put into practice their guidelines protecting indigenous peoples and the environment (*CS Newsletter* 10:1).

A Changing Anthropology

David Maybury-Lewis and Cultural Survival were on the forefront of changes to anthropology over the last three decades. Since the indigenous and rural peoples that anthropologists study are so negatively impacted by economic development, increasing dislocation, and urbanization, research has focused on these topics as well. The work of applied anthropologists and academic researchers began to converge on what is now called public or engaged anthropology. Although there has been debate over the differ-

ences between applied and public anthropology, both approaches involve increased collaboration and partnership with communities we study (pioneered by Cultural Survival), expanded outreach to the public so that research results are broadly disseminated (Cultural Survival's type of documentation), and concrete efforts to influence policy (following Cultural Survival's emphasis on advocacy) (Lamphere 2004). Setha Low and Sally Merry who utilize the term "engaged anthropology" also include the role of social critique in shaping this approach (Low and Merry 2009).

That this convergence has become more central to the discipline is clear from the programs and policies pursued by the American Anthropological Association most recently under the presidencies of Alan Goodman and Setha Low. For example, during 2008, the AAA sent advocacy letters regarding: language questions in the US census, the Human Terrain System Project, Homeland Security laptop searches, Project Minerva, and Gaza Fulbright restrictions. The AAA regularly appoints task forces to investigate issues (e.g. World Food Problems, Labor Relations) and provide guidance to the AAA board in formulating policy or advocating for policy changes.

Dissemination to a broad audience of anthropological research and perspectives is perhaps best exemplified by the award-winning AAA museum exhibit, "RACE: Are We So Different?" The exhibit examines race in the US and shows how human variation differs from race, why the idea of race was invented, and how race and racism affects everyday life. The exhibit opened at the Science Museum of Minnesota and is traveling to museums across the US (*AAA Newsletter* 49:1:21)

The 2008 Annual AAA meeting in San Francisco was focused on "Inclusion, Collaboration, and Engagement." Noel Chrisman, Program Chair, encouraged paper submissions that emphasized the changing relationships between anthropologist and their research subjects (from "informants" to collaborators), research on public policy issues (including immigration, welfare reform, protection of indigenous rights), and various forms of engagement with students, communities, and the larger public (*AAA Newsletter* 49:1:25).

Maybury-Lewis's Legacy

Cultural Survival continues to thrive. As the number of NGOs involved in indigenous rights has grown worldwide, Cultural Survival still provides a

model. Unlike NGOs with top-down approaches, Cultural Survival's collaboration has emphasized partnership and indigenous leadership. In 2009, there are 7 indigenous members of the 19 member board, including Les Malezer, Native Australian of the Gabi Gabi Community, who was instrumental in lobbying the Australian Government to endorse the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples (*CS Quarterly* 33:1:3). Cultural Survival's in-house projects (Revitalizing Native Languages and the Panama Dam Campaign) continue the tradition of partnering with indigenous organizations, while the Guatemala Radio Project is run by indigenous staff and volunteers. Cultural Survival is certainly David Maybury-Lewis' most enduring legacy.

ENDNOTE

¹As a Cultural Survival Action Update stated in 2000 "Cultural Survival promotes the human rights, voices, and visions of indigenous peoples. Through US based educational fora, cutting-edge and widely read publications, research, special projects, and an interactive web site, Cultural Survival works toward a world in which indigenous peoples are able to determine their own futures on their own lands."

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