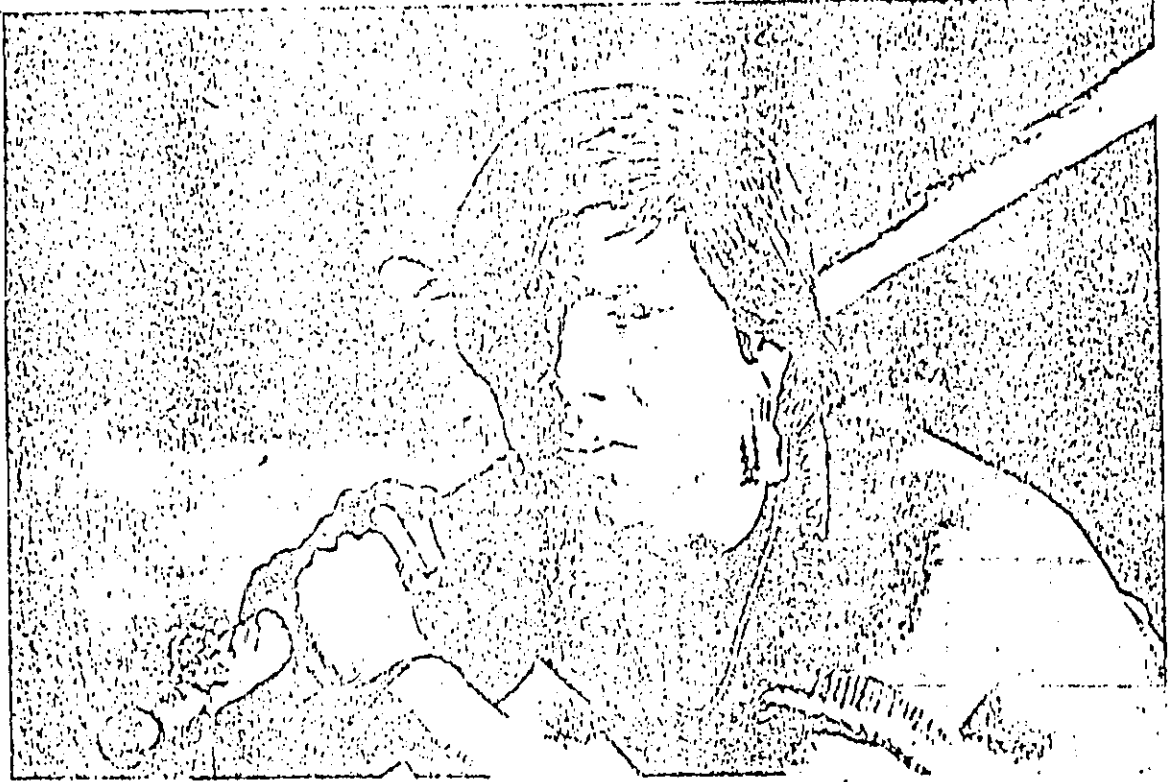


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An unmarried warrior painted for a raid carries the ceremonial club.

Anthropologist "And The "Big Lips"

Life with the Kayapó Indians of Central Brazil

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THE KAYAPÓ Indians have the well-earned reputation of being one of Brazil's most savage tribes. From their first contact with explorers in the mid-19th Century until the last group ceased its warfare and was "pacified" less than 70 years ago, the Kayapó terrorized settlers and other Indians of Central Brazil with their brutal raids. They are best known for two traits: bludgeoning to death their enemies with a ceremonial club (called a "lop"), and their distinctive stretched lips.

Kayapó men use lip discs to stretch a hole in their lower lip to extraordinary proportions. For each enemy killed in warfare, a Kayapó is entitled to enlarge his lip disc. The larger the lower lip, the more valiant and virile the warrior. I have seen lip discs that measure over six inches in diameter! Little wonder the Kayapó are known throughout Brazil as "the Big Lips."

Since the Kayapó have generally abandoned warfare today, the use of the lip disc is declining. Yet the older men wear their "big lips"

with dignity and pride; besides it is rather difficult to unstretch a six-inch lip! Every Kayapó male, however, still has his lower lip pierced. This hole is now used to sport ceremonial ornaments of feathers, toucan beaks, and strands of beads.

The big lips of the older men are nonetheless a sign of the proud, fearless Kayapó tradition. The young warriors now imitate their elders by stretching their lips with their hands as they sing in the

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"Here may be some lessons our own society needs."

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village plaza. Often the eloquent oratory of the younger leaders attempts to imitate the distinctive sounds of their big-lipped elders, who have an honored place in Kayapó society.

I arrived in Gorotire, largest of the Kayapó villages, in August, 1977, for a 14-month study of ecological factors affecting this indigenous society.

One night shortly after my arrival, I was invited to sit with the "big lips" in the Men's House or "Nga," and listen to the oratory of the elders' council. On this particular night, the village was full of excitement. The Indian Foundation plane had arrived earlier in the day to bring the Kayapó leaders together for a meeting in Gorotire.

The Brazilian government finally was demarcating the Kayapo lands to protect Indian territory from land speculators. The leaders of the villages had been assembled to discuss ways to protect their domain from encroaching plantations.

Of perhaps greater significance was that the Kayapó chiefs were meeting together for the first time in peace and cooperation. Since antiquity the various groups had lived in mutual hostility and warfare.

The electricity of the event was transmitted through the oratory of the great chiefs and leaders. As a newcomer to Kayapó society, I was awed by the formal dialogue between first one big-lip and then another. How could such large lip discs be manipulated so artistically, yet so authoritatively?

I marvelled even more at the ease and naturalness with which two great warriors gulped down coffee and manioc bread over their "built-in plates."

The bizarre array of big lips, formal oratory, strange language, colorful dances and ceremonies

formed an exotic filter around the people I had come to study. Every day was a bizarre experience.

Though my anthropological training had prepared me for such drastically different experiences, I nonetheless found the richness of the Kayapó culture overwhelming. I was stunned by the complexity of their social system, the intricate beauty of their elaborate rituals, the striking designs of their body painting and artifacts, and the drama of their formal oratory.

It took six months of living with the Kayapó before I could see through this exotic filter and begin to realize that the Kayapó were people too — with all the human frailties and attributes that characterize the human creature wherever he is found.

Kayapós fight and quarrel; they complain and argue; they have thieves and vagabonds; they can be petty and selfish and even lie. They love their families; cry for their dead; sacrifice for their

children; work hard to provide for their households; and delight in joking and conversing.

They are not just simplistic savages who live from day to day in blissful ignorance. Rather they are intelligent people who have thrived for thousands of years in the difficult tropical lands of the Amazonian Basin.

They have developed a social and agricultural system that is vastly better adapted to the fragile tropical ecosystem than anything the "civilizados" have attained even today in the same environment.

They have learned how to plant fields to minimize plant pests and diseases without using destructive poisons; they have learned to rotate field plots and use natural ground covers to prevent irreversible soil depletion and destruction; they have domesticated several plants to stabilize their food supply; they have become experts in the utilization of wild fruits, nuts and plants of the savanna and jungle; and they have a more nutritionally balanced diet than most middle class North Americans.

Very little of their time is required to provide the family with life's necessities. The rest is spent passing pleasant, unhurried hours with their children, talking with relatives and friends, or skillfully making headdresses out of macaw and eagle feathers, carving lances from mahogany or Brazil wood, or staging magnificent ceremonies.

Yet to the materialistically-oriented "civilizado," the Kayapó are still primitives. They don't wear shoes; they don't have a fancy wardrobe; they don't have TV or radios; they live in simple un-air-conditioned houses; they've never even heard of frozen dinners or instant soups; and they don't hoard money in banks.

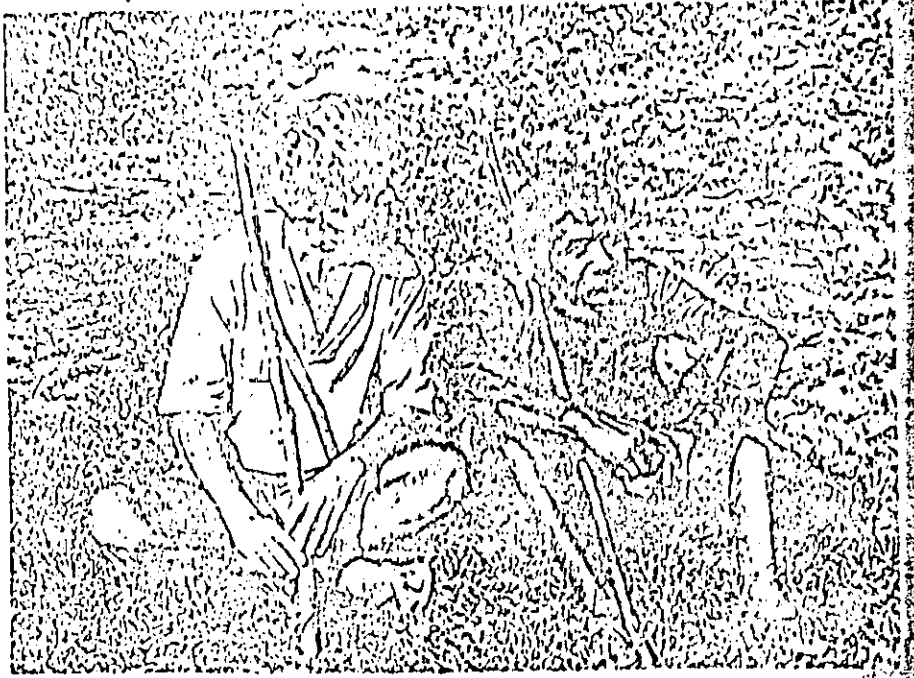


Decorated with macaw feathers and covered with green parrot feathers, a young man prepares to receive a ceremonial sword and a ceremonial club.

Material wealth for the Kayapó is in the form of stored food and artifacts kept for important ceremonies. These are accumulated by a family only in order to sponsor a festival to honor their children. Every child is given a special festival in which he or she receives a ritual Kayapó name.

No material wealth is amassed, except the highly-prized colored glass beads; even these are redistributed at death among relatives, or more generally buried with the corpse of the owner. The Kayapó worry little about their material possessions, for they have no such "wealth."

It is wrong to claim that the Kayapó live as unspoiled and pristine "noble savages." Yet as an anthropologist trained in



Author Posey sits with a "Big-Lip" elder who once was one of the most famous Kayapo warriors.

THE AUTHOR

Darroll Posey, who received both his B.S. and M.A. degrees from L.S.U., was a member of Delta Tau Delta's first Undergraduate Council and a student editor of the Rainbow Review. A two-term president of Epsilon Kappa Chapter as an undergraduate, he has remained active in Delta affairs as an alumnus, serving in several capacities, including Southern Division vice-president and resident advisor at Georgia. After receiving his master's degree in anthropology, he went to Brazil under the sponsorship of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, an international foundation for anthropological research. There he lived 14 months with the Kayapó researching the effects insects have on human populations and human management of the tropical ecosystem. Currently completing his Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Georgia, he plans to return to Brazil in August to begin work for the Brazilian National Amazonian Research Institute and continue similar research with other Indian tribes.

cross-cultural objectivity, I cannot help but see an idyllic quality in the Kayapó life.

They have learned to live in harmony with their environment; they are free from the material-oriented worries that plague modern society; they have no problems with suicides, loneliness, unwanted elders, impersonal and unresponsive governments, lack of self-esteem or problems with personal identity. They have a degree of personal freedom that most people long for but that few societies allow.

The crisis that now confronts the Kayapó is the same one that every other remaining Indian group faces. The rapidly-expanding, insensitive and materially-evaluating society that encroaches daily on their lives is simply unequipped to evaluate or appreciate peoples like the Kayapó. Our preoccupation with the problems in our own mastodonian society has already allowed us to tragically ignore the rights of Indian peoples throughout the Americas.

The greatest tragedy, however,

has been the permanent loss of the wisdom, experience, and expert knowledge of native peoples whose cultures we have annihilated.

Anthropologists have tried, and some of us are still trying, to reverse this process with the priceless few remaining native cultures. But the engulfing tidal wave of our bigger-is-better society is woefully reluctant to slow down long enough to listen.

It is always easy to interest people in the exotic side of Indian life — big lips, strange customs, and elaborate rituals — as I tried to do in the beginning of this article. But hidden behind this exotic filter may be some practical lessons in domestic tranquility, personal freedom, and human dignity that our own society desperately needs.

The "Big Lips" are more fortunate than most Indian groups. Their lands are now protected by law and it appears their traditional way of life will survive. It remains to be seen, however, if modern society is sophisticated enough to learn from the Kayapó and other native peoples.