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The Kayapó of the Brazilian Amazon

Kayapó

By Darrell A. Posey

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 ten 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 "kop"), and their distinctive stretched lips.

Kayapó men used lip discs to stretch a hole in their lower lip to extraordinary proportions. The larger the lower lip, the more valiant and virile the warrior. I have seen lip discs that measure over six inches across. 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 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. ▷

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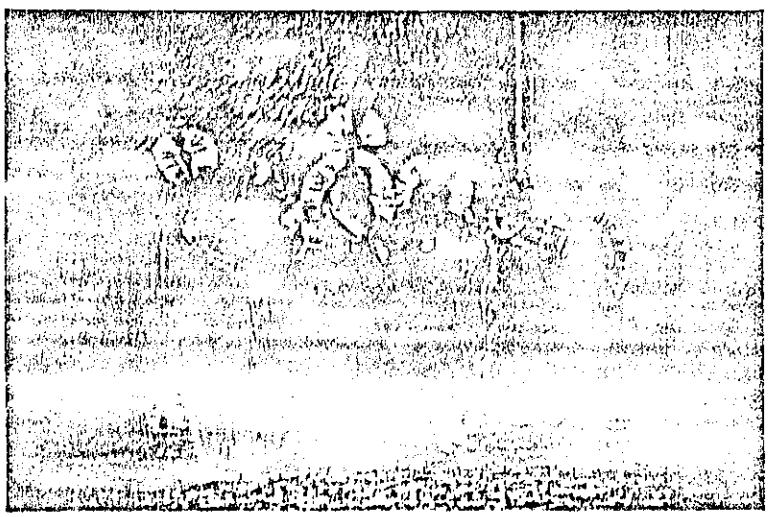

I arrived in Gorotire, largest of the Kayapó villages, in August 1977, for a fourteen-month study of ecological factors affecting this indigenous society.

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 Kayapó 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 marveled 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 kaleidoscopic experience.

Although 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 had 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 Amazon 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 horde money in banks.

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 other material wealth is amassed, except the highly-prized colored glass beads; even these are redistributed at death, 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 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,

The Kayapó Collection

The Kayapó collection recently acquired by the Section of Man, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, is one of the largest and most complete collections for any Zingu tribe. The extensive inventory of ceremonial as well as utilitarian artifacts was put together during a fourteen-month field study with the Gorotire Kayapó (in the Brazilian State of Para) by Dr. Darrell A. Posey, Research Associate of the museum.

The collection includes feather headdresses, feather coronas and decorative objects; items of carved tropical wood—including ceremonial swords and clubs; items of bead, shell and seed work; an extensive collection of spears, bows and arrows; and hundreds of miscellaneous objects of daily use to the Kayapó.

The collection now in Pittsburgh is perhaps the most extensive in the world. Other collections in Berlin, Geneva, Antwerp and Rio de Janeiro rival but do not exceed the collection at Carnegie Museum of Natural History. When Dr. Posey returns to Brazil later this year to resume research, collecting will resume to make the Kayapó materials of the Section of Man even more complete.

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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.

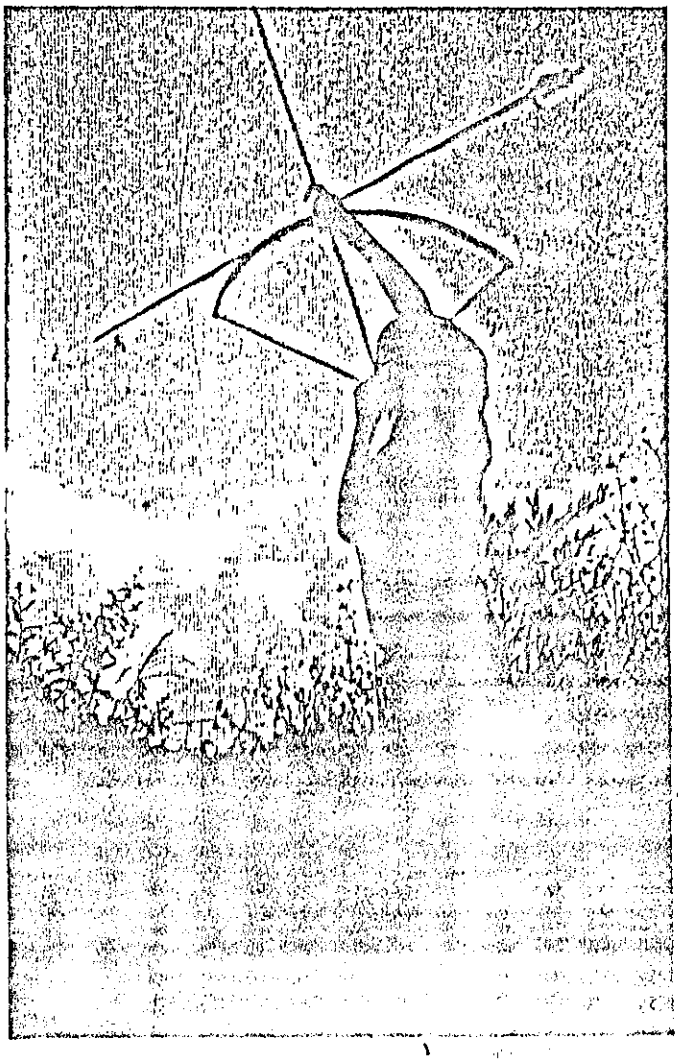
The crisis that now confronts the Kayapó is the same one that every other remaining Indian group faces. The rapidly-expanding, insensitive and materially oriented society that encroaches daily on their lives is simply unequipped to evaluate or appreciate peoples like the Kayapó. Our preoccupation with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



Photographs by D. A. Posey

All that remains is turned up now and then by the plow or the power shovel. Over 10,000 years of human occupation in western Pennsylvania has been reduced to a scatter of stone artifacts, pottery fragments, broken animal bones, charcoal, and an occasional skeleton, huddled knees to chest, sleeping in the hills. In little more than a century, aboriginal society went down before that devastating trinity—the gun, the cross, and the plow. Forests were stacked and burned, wildlife decimated, and the natives, those of the forest, eliminated as a threat to Manifest Destiny, either by disease, by outright slaughter, or by destroying the resources upon which the aboriginal way of life was based. This land was tamed, and civilization flourished on the native soil as it has done in few other places.

What might we have learned from the "primitive" societies we so precipitously replaced? Standing alone amidst these same western Pennsylvania hills we would not survive long in the very surroundings that sustained other men for tens of thousands of years. The cultural adaptations and native technology died with the forest environment that engendered them. What these people took with them is beyond recall.

We have no need for such anachronistic lifeways today, and few of us would willingly trade places. But the nagging question remains. What might we have learned from studying another approach to solving the problems of living? Given the violent confrontation of the times, such things were rarely thought of, and it is only from the comfortable distance of hindsight that we can afford the luxury of pondering over what might have been.

In this, the second contribution from The Scientist's Notebook, Dr. Posey takes us to one of those rare places left on earth where a native people and their social structure are still viable, the jungles of central Brazil. And through the eyes of a trained field anthropologist, we catch a glimpse of the complexity and fullness of a "primitive" culture and some lessons we may learn from it. —John E. Guilday