

Obituary: David Maybury-Lewis: Anthropologist keen to protect the interests of the peoples of central Brazil

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Much as he described the Shavante Indians of central Brazil in the 1950s, anthropologist and activist David Maybury-Lewis, who has died aged 78, himself stood "poised between two worlds". Though their own rich heritage gave meaning to their lives, the Shavante were urged to join the rural poor or follow the missionaries. "Nobody mentioned the other option," wrote Maybury-Lewis, "that they might retain their lands and enter the Brazilian economy while modifying, but not abandoning, their own traditions."

Maybury-Lewis, professor of anthropology at Harvard University from 1960 until his retirement in 2004, enjoyed a more privileged set of options, but he used his privileges in the service of those indigenous peoples crowded out and crushed by the west.

As an undergraduate student at

Harvard I first encountered him in two unforgettable personae. Behind the lectern he cut an elegant figure in tweed and corduroy; his voice and diction, like that of the actor James Earl Jones, filled the ears and fired the heart. Then, in his first book, *The Savage and the Innocent* (1956), I encountered his other persona, in a photograph, riding bareback across a swollen tributary of the Amazon; but it was not the donkey whose back was bare. Maybury-Lewis remains my model of elegant adaptation.

An Englishman, Maybury-Lewis

was born to an itinerant hydraulic engineer in Hyderabad, now part of Pakistan. Thus, his interest in the cultural other was congenital. He studied languages at Oxford University, culminating in fluency in nine languages. His 1960 Oxford DPhil in anthropology and his subsequent publications and projects all reveal his heartfelt fascination with the encounter "between two worlds".

The Savage and the Innocent details his own mid-20th-century sojourn to meet and befriend a people regarded by westerners as the "wildest Indians" and "notorious savages", known to have killed multiple previous parties of white interlopers. Maybury-Lewis does not romanticise or ennoble the "savage", but instead reveals, with empathy, what happens to people like these who do not resist western encroachment.

The reader hears what Maybury-Lewis and his wife, Pia, find disturbing, annoying, and even disgusting about the Shavante and the neighbouring Sherente people, but also what

the Sherente and Shavante find savage, disgusting and risible about their uninvited white guests. We witness the quick adaptation of Maybury-Lewis's toddler son to village life and are convinced by the end that what began as the adults' mutual greed for something in the cultural other has given birth to a universal, imperfect, love between human beings.

Maybury-Lewis was deeply reflexive, vastly more so than the other

ethnographers of his day. *The Savage and the Innocent* anticipates the self-critical instincts and the highlighting of the observer's positionality that became de rigueur in the ethnographies of the 1980s and 1990s. Though his second major book, *Akwe-Shavante Society* (1971), elegantly sketches the structural forms, daily experience and theoretical implications of dualistic thought and social organisation in this Ge-speaking population, we never lose sight of the observer's own relationships to those described or of the author's awareness of limits to his own understandings.

Akwe-Shavante Society challenges some central premises in the influential structuralism of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss by emphasising the heuristic character of the "structures" that anthropologists attribute to other cultures. Maybury-Lewis shows - again, in anticipation of much later scholarship by such as Pierre Bourdieu - the strategic ways in which local actors employ the "rules" and the unpredictable outcomes.

The book was the centrepiece of the Harvard-Central Brazil project, in which Maybury-Lewis led a team of his Brazilian and US students in the study of a series of Ge-speaking societies in central Brazil. The team discovered the diverse ways in which these societies combined and rearranged similar kinship forms, marriage patterns, age-grade organisations, fraternities, and patterns of social fission.

Previously, the feature of these societies that had most fascinated anthropologists was the thoroughgoing organisation of any given society's life around "moieties". That is, each society was believed, normally, to be divided into two "halves", in which a young man always married a young woman from the other moiety. Maybury-Lewis's team discovered great variability in the prevalence of outmarrying moieties per se in these societies, but it became clear to him that all human societies, including the Ge-speaking people, embrace such dualistic forms in their thinking and/or in their social organisation to one degree or another. For example, the US political process is persistently divided between two parties - the Democrats and the Republicans.

In 1972, he and Pia founded Cultural Survival, an organisation committed to guaranteeing indigenous peoples a voice in the policies affecting their lives, a sustainable means of livelihood, and the means of adapting their cultures to change.

Toward that same end, and the service of his western confreres as well, Maybury-Lewis hosted a PBS television series in 1992, called *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*, in which he depicted side by side

the marital, political, religious, and artistic practices of western and non-western societies all over the world. Each episode challenged the assumptions that Americans and Britons might make about human normality and western superiority by showing us decent and interesting human beings with very different ideas but who, like us, suffered difficulties, contemplated options, and found ways to be happy. More than any other anthropologist since Margaret Mead, Maybury-Lewis brought the wisdom and the worth of other ways of life into our living-rooms.

Apart from his long career at Harvard, he was the chair of the American Ethnological Society in 1980-81, and along with Roberto Cardoso founded the graduate degree programme in anthropology at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He penned numerous articles, published or edited nine books, and received many honours, including the Franz Boas distinguished service award (which he and Pia shared) from the American Anthropological Association.

Yet, for all of his brilliance and heroic activism, he is remembered as much for the generous ambience of the monthly dinner parties that he and Pia hosted, entertaining senior scholars and the greenest novices alike.

He is survived by Pia, his two sons, Biorn and Anthony, and his four grandchildren.

David Henry Peter Maybury-Lewis, anthropologist, born May 5 1929; died December 2 2007