

BETTY MEGGERS: HER LATER YEARS

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Eduardo Goés Neves and Betty Meggers. Photo by William I. Woods.

In this volume of *Andean Past* Monica Barnes provides a brief account of Betty Meggers' life, while Robert L. Carneiro gives us a personal view of his contributions to Amazonian ethnography and archaeology in relation to Betty's stance in these areas. Both of them, as should be, have given us clear and respectful views of her long career. I pick up where Bob left off, and summarize my own experiences with Betty. This retrospective discussion is largely based on our face-to-face conversations and those that occurred first by letter, and then by

email. It is liberally filled with recollections and quotations. I ask readers to please excuse the perhaps excessive use of the first person. Without it I would give a stilted impression largely not true to the focus of the discussion.

I first encountered Betty and Bob, which is to say I was first told about, and read, contributions by them, in 1969 in a Method and Theory in Anthropology course at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I was entranced by their quite divergent conceptions of Amazonian

occupation. A short time later, a year after the first Earth Day organized by Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, Betty's classic volume *Amazonia: Man and Culture in a Counterfeit Paradise* (Meggers 1971) appeared to great critical acclaim within the environmental activist community, with only an occasional critical appraisal. I was a graduate student studying with a group of Latin American scholars based in the Geography and Anthropology departments who had first-hand experience with many situations similar to those Betty described. Consequently, her volume was discussed openly in our seminars. The works of William Denevan from the nearby University of Wisconsin-Madison were well known and also influenced all of us with interests in pre-Columbian Latin America.

In 1974 I was fortunate to be a part of a United States National Science Foundation project under the direction of Robert Eidt that investigated anthropogenic soil alteration at historic mission sites in Misiones Province, Argentina and Chibcha ridged fields in the Sabana de Bogotá, Colombia. In addition to reinforcing my feelings about the importance of positive human impacts on the environment, I was able to transverse Amazonia, look down on its vastness, and experience some of its distinctive soils during a stopover in Manaus. The following year, I worked in Mexico's Puebla Valley on another N.S.F. project under the direction of Melvin Fowler. There I gained many additional insights into the sophistication of human articulations with, and manipulations of, the environment, efforts aimed at making it more productive. Although some of these failed after centuries of use, the basic fact implanted in me from these experiences was that humans in the past had tried to improve the physical conditions in which they settled, considered the micro-environment and their larger social context, and had a long-term perspective on management.

During the following years, my efforts were concentrated on finally getting my Ph.D. and on Mississippian archaeology in the Midwestern United States, on a Lucanian and Roman site in southern Italy, on a project in western Belize, and on continuing field studies in the Puebla Valley, with little more consideration of the basic questions presented by Amazonia. This all changed in 1993 during a visit to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to present an invited lecture on anthrosol analysis. A friend of mine reported to me that Bill Denevan was having a meeting of faculty and graduate students possibly interested in a project whose purpose was to locate and investigate the physical, chemical, and archaeological properties of *terra preta*. These organic and nutrient-rich anomalous soils are found throughout Amazonia in a variety of environmental situations and are very relevant to any discussion of pre-Columbian populations, soil fertility, consequent agricultural productivity and the resulting permanent settlements. After that meeting I was hooked, because this provided a venue for research in my specialty of archaeological soil science and presented an array of topics that looked to be fun and challenging. Later that year, and the next, I traveled to Brazil and met counterparts who had been investigating *terra preta*. My background in theory and methodologies, and my relevant experience, provided a context for my association with, and appreciation of, Betty.

By 1995 I felt it was appropriate to share my viewpoint on what I had learned, and so I presented a paper at the Applied Geography Conference in Arlington, Virginia, on November tenth. Before attending the meeting I had written a letter introducing myself to Betty and requested to meet with her at the Smithsonian (letter from William I. Woods to Betty J. Meggers, October 20, 1995, in the possession of Woods). She immediately replied in the affirmative and gave me directions for accessing her office. Apparently, she was always there, be-

cause she did not specify any time or date, just extended a warm invitation to talk. When I was free from the conference the day after my presentation I took the Metro to D.C. and made it to Betty's office. She was most gracious, and, to my pleasure, regaled me with her vision of the pre-Columbian situation in Amazonia, the archaeologists involved, and their techniques in the quest to understand that region. Of course, I was shown how *terra preta* had formed by multiple, seasonal reoccupations of a site as demonstrated by ceramic seriation. She produced detailed distribution maps that correlated with her hypothesis. There were many personal accounts of her work with "my dear departed husband". Curiously an 1867 letter on black-lined mourning stationery from Mary Todd Lincoln to my great grandfather, in the possession of my family, uses the same wording. Betty discussed the many personages that had once been, or were at the time, still actively involved in Amazonian research. Most of these I have forgotten, but Anna Roosevelt stood out as a person to be avoided, as she was quite misguided. Indeed, Betty said that she had never even met Anna. This is one of the many points disputed between the two. I choose to listen, and not disagree, because anything else would clearly have been an inappropriate and unproductive stance. Toward the end of the afternoon, Betty began to reveal her misgivings about the current crop of Amazonianist archaeologists apart from Roosevelt and said that those in the biological and physical sciences really understood the value of her observations. She shortly followed up with a letter (Meggers to Woods, May 15, 1996, in the possession of Woods) instructing me to get in touch with Michael Eden, Denis Williams, and, especially, Eurico Miller, whose assistant would show me sites in the upper Madeira. This was a kind gesture, but at the time I was unable to take up her suggestions.

Because she thought I was a geographer, and later a geologist, but surprisingly never an archaeologist, I was included in the natural and physical science group and for a while was treated most favorably. Upon leaving her office I was given a host of reprints with instructions to read and follow their line of reasoning. I forwarded these to Bill Denevan and in response to one he replied, in part, "I had not seen the new Meggers' article. She dismisses Carvajal as being full of 'fantasy,' but she only cites the first version of Carvajal. The second, written with more care with the first version in front of him, does not have enormous numbers of Indians and excessive lengths of villages" (William Denevan to Woods, March 27, 1997, in the possession of Woods). Shortly afterwards Betty sent a letter (Meggers to Woods, February 25, 1997, in the possession of Woods) saying that she was surprisingly not familiar with the Nimuendaju map (Nimuendajú 1952 [1939]), that I had sent her and requested a source for it.

Because I was new to the topic of Amazonian environments, I endeavored to immerse myself in the literature and meet, when possible, the principals who were producing it, and to visit the field situations in which they were working. Dirse Kern, Marcondes Lima da Costa, Mike Heckenberger, Jim Peterson, and Eduardo Goés Neves were particularly crucial to my education in this regard. I received permits from the Brazilian and U.S. governments to import soils and did so at every opportunity. Analysis of their physical and chemical properties indicated a clear separation between *terra preta* and the background latosols, with traits indicating an anthropogenic origin dominating the former.

Later (letter from Meggers to Woods, May 17, 1998, in the possession of Woods) Betty requested my permission to publish portions of a paper that Joe McCann and I had given at the 1998 Association of American Geographers

meeting with the note, “I want to use it to refute the notion among archaeologists that this soil is intentionally produced by humans and therefore implies high precolumbian population density in Amazonia.” However, the focus of the paper and subsequent publication (Woods and McCann 1999) was just the reverse. I sent the manuscript to her and received a lengthy letter that provided a detailed analysis of this document with strong suggestions for revision. A few excerpts will provide the tone of the letter (Meggers to Woods, June 9, 1998, in the possession of Woods). “With regard to the Kayapó, I don’t recall any mention of *terra preta* being produced by their manipulations.” This is in spite of the fact that she was most familiar with Robert Carneiro’s and Michael Heckenberger’s intensive work with the Kuikuru and that of Susanna Hecht and Darrell Posey with the Kayapó (Carneiro 1957; Hecht and Posey 1989; Heckenberger 1996). “Although you allude to the distinction between *terra preta* and *terra mulata*, it may be worth noting that *terra preta*, which is the most desirable for agriculture at present, is unlikely to have been cultivated indigenously because habitation sites are also burial grounds.” A wealth of evidence available at that time clearly suggests this not to have been the case in many portions of Amazonia, although a conversation with Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff in Belém shortly before he died suggested that, at least in Colombia, people consciously avoided *terra preta* sites with the exception of gathering feral plant hybrids. She wrote, “Finally, I think you are being unfair by claiming that those of us who consider shifting cultivation environmentally friendly ‘concede’ it is incompatible with dense sedentary populations and have suggested a rewording.” There are many handwritten notations on the document and in the letter and many other relevant quotes, but these will suffice to provide its essence. By this time there was an exponential increase in archaeological activities and attendant *terra preta* research in Amazonia and the

results were strikingly different from Betty’s version. The citations are too numerous to cite, but four volumes (Lehmann *et al.* 2003; Glaser and Woods 2004; Woods *et al.* 2009; Teixeira *et al.* 2010) on the Amazonian dark earths resulting from many conferences and workshops give a clue to this activity. Additionally, there were documentaries for the BBC, PBS, and other outlets in Europe, Brazil, and Japan, as well as numerous articles in scientific and popular outlets relating to the recent advances in Amazonian archaeology and their implications. This provides the context for future correspondence between us about which I will be brief.

In September 2001 the Society for Brazilian Archaeology (SAB) met in Rio de Janeiro and Eduardo Neves had organized a symposium whose purpose was to provide an update on recent developments in Amazonian archaeology. Most of the presenters, and Betty, sat in the first row, as always. She shook her head throughout each paper and at the end I introduced her to Eduardo (arguably the premier current Amazonian archaeologist), stepped back, and took the photo at the beginning of this tribute. One can see Betty telling Eduardo of the errors in his interpretations and his defensive posture. By this time, Betty was clearly on the wane with her environmental determinist prospective and she knew it. However, she continued to fight to the last. Her review in *Chungara* (Meggers 2011) of the 2008 *Handbook of South American Archaeology* was scathing. It repeatedly refers to “foreign” investigators, meaning those from the mid-latitudes who were not from the country in which they were working. The irony of this is that Betty never considered herself as belonging to this group. To her credit, throughout her career she encouraged and supported Latin American researchers more than anyone else I have known. However, only those who agreed with her were granted the privilege of support. On the other hand, she was always available and provided data to anyone

who was interested. She was not a scholar squirrel by any means.

My last correspondence with Betty included two emails on 16 July 2009 and one on 10 November 2010. The following excerpts show the tenure of the conversations. In relation to the 2009 Woods *et al.* volume she stated: "I was not happy with your statements on the previous page, in which you claim that I have 'failed to realize the significance [of *terra pretas*] for prehistoric cultivation' and attribute their existence to recurrent short-term occupations, and assert that this view is 'in need of serious reconsideration.'" "I have been disappointed in your support of the current fad to interpret *terra preta* as an intentional creation and the basis of intensive agriculture." "Please give me references to the evidence you claim exists for large sedentary populations and intentional creation of *terra preta*." In her final message she chided me about my speaking activities: "The grapevine tells me that you were the keynote speaker at the recent 29th Northeast Conference on Andean Archaeology and Ethnohistory and although none of the presentations dealt with Amazonia, you spoke on Amazonian Dark Earths." "I was surprised by your support of interpretations by the foreign archaeologists because when we exchanged correspondence in the early 70's you were less convinced that *terra preta* identified dense permanent settlements." (As mentioned above our correspondence actually began in the mid-1990s.)

Please do not in the least take my comments to be derogatory, Betty, indeed, was clearly a giant—a most prolific scholar whose positive influences spanned well over half a century. Unfortunately, the basis for her stance on so many Amazonian and extra-Amazonian (e.g. Valdivia) issues was not a solid one. But she stuck to these until the end. Betty and her husband, Clifford Evans, were both students of Julian Steward, and as such were trapped in a

mindset that was vogue in the 1940s, but clearly was shown to be a false one. Robert Carneiro put the nail in it by the early 1960s and was followed by Donald Lathrap and his students, as well as by many, many others. However, Betty persevered and she, through her adherents, still exerts an enormous influence. Betty, from the grave, remains among us. This is not totally a bad thing. She always made one think and will continue to do so. I will miss her emails. Perhaps she will continue sending them.

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*Betty Meggers towards the end of her life.
Photo courtesy of Barbara Watanabe, Smithsonian Institution.*