

# Charles Wagley (1913–1991)

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I have studied relatively untouched tribes, acculturated Indian villages in touch with the Brazilian frontier, small peasant communities in northern Brazil, and small towns . . . 'little communities' . . . One cannot understand a nation without knowing how its institutions are lived out within the confines of a local community.

*An Introduction to Brazil*

The world has seen many cases of primitive and peasant groups turned into miserable agricultural laborers, miners and factory workers—into people deprived of their traditional institutions and values without the possibility of full participation in the new society.

*Amazon Town: A Study of Man in the Tropics*

Between the two world wars of this century appeared the first generation of historians and social scientists, many North American, to study Latin America. In the thirties the field attracted many North Americans, partly as a result of the bilateral cultural treaties between the United States and Latin American republics under the Good Neighbor Policy, and especially after the United States entered World War II in 1941. After 1945 and down to the early seventies, U.S. scholars predominated in the study of Latin America until the entry of scholars from Western Europe, notably England, France, and Germany. In the case of Brazil during the interwar decades, a number of social scientists produced significant field research and publications, among them the anthropologists Kurt Nimuendajú and Herbert Baldus, Frances and Melville Herskovits, and Claude

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Lévi-Strauss and the sociologists Donald Pierson, Emilio Willems, and Roger Bastide, to name only a few of the non-Brazilians who joined their Brazilian colleagues Artur Ramos and Heloisa Alberto Torres.

This was the intellectual ambiance of social science study of Brazil that Charles Wagley entered in the late thirties. He was trained at Columbia University in social anthropology, which, after the powerful impress of Franz Boas, included anthropologists such as Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton (Wagley prized his “scientific orientation and . . . friendly counsel”), and Ruth Benedict. For his dissertation field work, Wagley went to Guatemala in 1937 to study the economic anthropology of the highland Indian “little community” of Santiago Chimaltenango. After returning to Columbia, and encouraged by the French anthropologist Alfred Métraux, Wagley went to the Amazon to study another “little community” of native people whose contact with Brazilian national society and economy had commenced about 1900: the Tapirapé. In 1940 the Tapirapé appeared deeply disorganized by four decades of such culture contact. Wagley’s approach was shaped not only by the concept of the “little community” but also by the canon of “acculturation” ideated by Linton, Redfield, and Herskovits: the impact of modern technology and culture upon isolated native peoples. Wagley’s reading and discussions with experienced anthropologists Nimuendajú and Balduz led him to complement his study of the Tapirapé with further field work on a kind of control group, the Tenetehara, who despite three centuries of contact had survived by selective adaptation. Eight years after beginning field research, Wagley and Eduardo Galvão produced *The Tenetehara Indians of Brazil: A Culture in Transition* (1949).

By graduate training and field research first in Guatemala’s highlands and then in Brazil’s Amazon and *Nordeste*, Wagley was developing expertise on small groups of native peoples relatively isolated from their respective national cultures. The United States’ entry into the war, soon followed by Brazil’s participation, changed Wagley’s perspective as social anthropologist. His Brazilian field experience involved him in a wartime joint U.S.-Brazilian public health program to protect the migrants from the *Nordeste*’s labor reserves, who were employed in Amazon rubber collection and the mica and quartz mines of central Brazil. As Wagley described his evolving views, “In traveling over a large part of the Brazilian hinterland, and by living with rural Brazilians, I became aware of rural problems as viewed both by the people themselves and by the planners and executives from the city.”<sup>1</sup> This early synthesis of his Amazon experiences came with the publication of *Amazon Town: A Study of Man in the*

1. *Amazon Town*, viii.

*Tropics* (1953), whose book jacket bore the clarifying title, “A Penetrating Study of a Backward Area.”

Equally broadening to Wagley’s perspective as a social anthropologist was a 1950 project sponsored by UNESCO, Bahia’s Fundação para o Desenvolvimento da Ciencia, and Columbia University’s Department of Anthropology. Just as a member of that department, Julian Steward, had taken a group of graduate students to Puerto Rico for field work in various communities, so Wagley took a group to Bahia, initially to study a number of small communities confronted by modernization and Social Darwinism. The research design was modified when Alfred Métraux, UNESCO’s representative, proposed that the researchers shift their primary focus to the “general field of race relations.” The result was *Race and Class in Rural Brazil* (1952), edited and with a contribution (“Race Relations in an Amazon Community”) by Wagley. Summarizing the volume’s four studies, Wagley—aware of racism as a cultural artifact embedded in the industrialized economies of the North Atlantic, fearful that with imported technology Brazil might absorb “Western attitudes and concepts of racism”—voiced the hope that Brazil might industrialize “without losing its rich heritage of racial democracy” (p. 155). An admirer of Gilberto Freyre’s *Casa grande e senzala* (1933), Wagley had bought into Freyre’s illusions about race relations in Brazil. In 1979, however, Wagley shaded this position when he found that *Casa grande* “perhaps . . . overemphasized the special tolerance of the Portuguese to miscegenation.”<sup>2</sup>

The sixties found Wagley seeking to couple his long-term interest in the community with a recognition of its relationship to the nation. Up to this point he had studied diversity in Brazil’s *Nordeste* and Amazon, and now he felt compelled to understand “the unity of Brazil as a nation or the complexity of its society and economic structure.”<sup>3</sup> To see the whole through its parts explains the ambitious range of themes—region, class, family, religion, community, and nation—that compose *An Introduction to Brazil* (1963), a tour de force in which Wagley drew upon his own insight and that of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, essayists, and novelists, Brazilians and others, to conclude that despite Brazilians’ diversity, still “they are a people and form a nation distinct from all others.” Here Wagley acknowledged his gratitude to Cecilia Roxo Wagley, “companion in research and travel in Brazil,” whose insight helped him “to understand her native land.”

The twin themes of diversity and unity underlie articles Wagley pub-

2. Wagley, “Anthropology and Brazilian Identity,” in *Brazil: Anthropological Perspectives, Essays in Honor of Charles Wagley*, ed. Maxine L. Margolis and William E. Carter (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979).

3. *Introduction to Brazil*, vii–viii.

lished in the fifties and sixties as he tried to pinpoint common elements in Latin America's colonial period under Spain and Portugal, the persistence of those structures into the postcolonial centuries, and how by the mid-twentieth century they were interacting with technological and industrial change. In the essays collected in *The Latin American Tradition* (1968), Wagley found both unity and diversity in the area. Introducing the volume is a conspectus ("A Framework for Latin American Culture") of unity and diversity, and closing it is "The Dilemma of the Latin American Middle Class," much of it written as Brazil's government collapsed in the coup d'état of 1964. Realistically, Wagley the social scientist turned briefly political scientist had to confess that in Latin America the "middle class remains passive before a military coup that guarantees stability or supports . . . stability rather than abrupt change."<sup>4</sup>

Wagley's last major publication returned to the first tribal group he had studied in Brazil 40 years earlier, the Tapirapé. Where *Amazon Town* may be seen as somewhat optimistic about the effect of technology and industrialism upon Brazil's Amazon peoples, in *Welcome of Tears* (1977) he saw the process as "hideous." Acculturation brought few benefits for the Tapirapé, and Wagley now questioned the wisdom of incorporating "a hostile or withdrawn tribe" into Brazil's national culture. So much so that he was impelled to turn to Kurt Nimuendajú's blaming himself for participating, in 1922, in the pacification of the Parintinim of Amazonia: "It would have been better," Nimuendajú had confessed bitterly to Wagley, "if I had encouraged them to resist and to have died fighting rather than to have died of disease and hunger." Yet Wagley still hoped that the work of anthropologists could somehow inspire the Brazilian government to "give the Indian cause the support that it deserves."<sup>5</sup> There is no reason to believe reality has matched his hope.

As dedicated anthropologist, sentient observer of Latin American reality, and North American liberal to the core, Wagley joined that constellation of social scientists—Ralph Beals, George Foster, John Gillin, Sidney Mintz, John Murra, John Rowe, Eric Wolf, and others—who form the second or post-1945 generation of Latin Americanists in the United States. We cannot overlook another facet of Charles Wagley's career, one that helped train, through fellowship programs in which he participated, a generation of Latin Americanists here. There was his long-term association with the Social Science Research Council, first in 1948, when he drafted its report on area research and training, and then his participation (1948–49) on its Committee on Area Research and as chairman of

4. *Latin American Tradition*, 207–8.

5. *Welcome of Tears*, 296, 304.

the SSRC/ACLS Joint Committee on Latin American Studies (1960–66); not to neglect his wide-ranging activity as founder and innovative director (1961–69) of Columbia University's Institute of Latin American Studies. At Columbia, and after 1971 at the University of Florida, he remained devoted to training both U.S. and foreign graduate students. Wagley's research and teaching have been widely felt in Brazil. It is opportune to recall the activity of Wagley and others now, at a time when public and private funding of Latin American and other regional studies programs is drying up.

The field of Latin American studies owes much to Charles Wagley, whose research, empathy, and dedication to the way "little communities" have helped confront the "fundamental problems of man" earned the reward that the sympathetic Tapirapé once sang of:

Lie quietly  
in your hammock . . .  
Doctor Carlos

The following is a selective bibliography of Charles Wagley's publications.

- 1941 *The Economics of a Guatemalan Village*. Menasha, Wis.: American Anthropological Association. Reprinted 1949, 1957.
- 1949 "Brazil." In *Most of the World: The Peoples of Africa, Latin America, and the East Today*, edited by Ralph Linton. Reprint, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970.
- The Social and Religious Life of a Guatemalan Village*. Menasha, Wis.: American Anthropological Association.
- The Tenetehara Indians of Brazil: A Culture in Transition* (with Eduardo Galvão). Reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1969.
- 1951 "The Indian Heritage of Brazil." In *Brazil: Portrait of Half a Continent*, edited by T. Lynn Smith. New York: Dryden Press.
- 1952 *Race and Class in Rural Brazil*. Paris: UNESCO. Reissued 1964.
- 1953 *Amazon Town: A Study of Man in the Tropics*. New York: Macmillan. Reissued 1964, 1976.
- 1955 "A Typology of Latin American Subcultures" (with Marvin Harris). *American Anthropologist* 57:3, pt. 1 (June 1955), 428–51.
- 1957 "Plantation America: A Culture Sphere." In *Caribbean Studies: A Symposium*, edited by Vera Rubin. Kingston: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University College of the West Indies.
- 1958 *Minorities in the New World* (with Marvin Harris). New York: Columbia University Press.
- 1963 *An Introduction to Brazil*. New York: Columbia University Press. Reissued 1971.

- 1968 *The Latin American Tradition: Essays on the Unity and Diversity of Latin American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 1977 *Welcome of Tears: The Tapirapé Indians of Central Brazil*. New York: Oxford University Press.