

## Buell Quain (1912-1939): an Ethnologist without a Grave

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### Abstract

During the night of August 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> 1939, the American anthropologist Buell Quain, then working among the Krahô Indians, lacerated his body, opened his veins and ended up hanging himself from a tree by using a rope from his hammock. In several letters dated 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1939 which he had written and left for his usual correspondents, he mentions a contagious disease to explain his final act. But this reason would be contradicted by many of his last comrades and colleagues. This paper aims to investigate elements that contribute to the understanding of the links between the fieldworker and his subject.

### Keywords

Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, Buell Quain, Suicide, Brazil

In the preface written by Charles Wagley to present *The Trumai Indians of Central Brazil*, Buell Quain's notes written in 1938, and finally assembled for publication by Robert Murphy in 1955, there is no mention of the suicide of this young American anthropologist who had gone to study the indigenous communities of Brazil. It was not until much later, in 1983, that Wagley remembered the shock of this tragedy which involved one of the members of the group of American anthropologists<sup>1</sup> who had arrived in Brazil at the end of the Thirties under the auspices of the convention for promoting cultural inter-American relations<sup>2</sup> and welcomed by the Director of the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, Heloisa Torres:

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My colleague Buell Quain, also from Colombia University had committed suicide while in the state of Maranhao among the Krahô Indians. Heloisa Alberto Torres wrote asking me to return to Rio de Janeiro. Both William Lipkind and Ruth Landes, the other anthropologists from Colombia, had returned to New York, so I was the only representative of the Colombia group in Brazil and my presence was needed to identify Buell Quain's papers and belongings. (Wagley, 1983: 17)

During the night of August 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> 1939, Buell Quain, then working among the Krahô Indians, lacerated his body, opened his veins and ended up hanging himself from a tree by using a rope from his hammock. In several letters dated 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1939 which he had written and left for his usual correspondents, among whom were Heloisa Torres, Ruth Benedict, his research director, and Manoel Perna, his local informant, he mentions a contagious disease to explain his final act. This reason would be contradicted by Manoel Perna himself in a letter sent to Heloisa Alberto Torres<sup>3</sup>, as well as by his living companions, the Krahô Indians, as another letter from Buell Quain's financial agent in Brazil, Carlos Dias reports<sup>4</sup>. These all assert that, in fact, Buell Quain enjoyed good health but had been depressed after receiving letters from family and close friends. The enigma surrounding this act becomes more mysterious as we discover the last wishes of the young man: he wished to be buried in the precise place where he died and he formulated the request that his death should not be investigated. The real motives and reasons for suicide are always enigmatic, but it still remains that the portrait drawn of Buell Quain in various writings, in what was said of him by his colleagues, among whom were Alfred Métraux, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ruth Landes and Bernard Mishkin, and in his own writing allow us to perceive a physical and psychological vulnerability which questions the complex link between an ethnologist and his field.

The son of a prosperous family in North Dakota, Buell Quain was born on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1912. His father Eric Quain was a renowned surgeon and co-founded one of the biggest hospitals in the region. His mother Fanny Quain was the first woman in North Dakota to obtain a doctorate in medicine and became the Chairperson of an association she created, with

others, to help tuberculosis patients. They had two children, Marion, born in 1908 and Buell, born four years later. At sixteen, Buell Quain graduated from high school and registered in 1929 at the University of Wisconsin. He spent his summers travelling across the world: Europe, Africa, Asia. After obtaining his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Zoology in 1934, he married Paula Hurlburt<sup>5</sup> and registered at the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, New York before making his first field trip to the Fiji Islands between 1935 and 1936 with a total of more than ten months spent in the inland areas of Vanua Levu. Two works were derived from this field and published after his death: *The Flight of the Chiefs*, published in 1942, brings together a collection of poems and songs from Vanua Levu presented and translated by Buell Quain; and *Fijian Village*, published in 1948 with an introduction by Ruth Benedict, puts into perspective a historical and ethnological study of Fijian villages and indigenous daily life. Ruth Benedict reminds her audience in the introduction of the importance of Buell Quain's work interrupted by his tragic death in Brazil as well as his project of writing an introduction to the work himself in 1938<sup>6</sup>. Nothing came of it however. Taken up by other preoccupations, Buell Quain, who had already written the foreword to *Fijian Village*, left the project to concentrate on his new field of observation, indigenous Brazil.

When he arrived in Brazil in February 1938, introduced by a letter from Franz Boaz to Heloisa Alberto Torres<sup>7</sup>, Buell Quain was supposed to accompany and help Lipkind and his wife in the field of the Karaja Indians, as stipulated by the certificate of authorisation granted to Lipkind on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1938 (Dionisete Benzi Grupioni, 1988: 94, 95). However, at the end of April, Buell Quain, advised by Heloisa Torres and supported by Ruth Benedict, wrote to the *Conselho de fiscalização das expedições artísticas e científicas* – the national organisation supervising foreign expeditions to Brazil – to submit a new request modifying his initial trip and permitting him to go to Xingu so as to work with the Trumai Indians (Dionisete Benzi Grupioni, 1988: 95). His request was approved by the Council in spite of resistance from the *Serviço de Proteção aos Índios* who would soon be responsible for the interruption of his work in this field<sup>8</sup>.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1938, on the boat going from Corumba to Cuiabá, on that long road which would lead him to the Trumai Indians, Buell Quain met

the Brazilian ethnologist Castro Faria who was getting ready to join Claude Lévi-Strauss for the expedition to Serra do Norte<sup>9</sup>. Between 9<sup>th</sup> May and 6<sup>th</sup> June 1938, he met Lévi-Strauss at Cuiabá. Of this meeting and its context very little remains, apart from a testimony from Lévi-Strauss indicating that from that time, Buell Quain thought he had syphilis which he had caught on his arrival in Brazil during the Rio Carnival, during which he had apparently been contaminated by a woman disguised as a nurse<sup>10</sup>. From the month of August to the month of November, Buell Quain was in the field of the Trumai. A letter dated 10<sup>th</sup> October 1938 from the Regional Inspector for the Ministry of Labour, written at the request of the PIS, requested him to leave the Trumai field<sup>11</sup>. Despite his vain attempts to remain in this field – a letter to Ruth Benedict who asked in her turn for the American Ambassador to approach the Brazilian authorities – the PIS remained firm, Buell Quain had to leave the Trumai and get his paperwork in order in order to obtain a new authorisation permitting him to work in Brazil among the Krahô Indians. Between December 1938 and February 1939, Buell Quain made a certain number of return journeys between Rio de Janeiro and Cuiabá while waiting to undertake the journey to his new field in Goiás. On 16<sup>th</sup> February 1939, Buell Quain wrote and obtained his authorisation for departure. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of that month he met, at a lunch in Rio, Alfred Métraux who noted on his travel diary the peculiar impression caused by this meeting:

[Buell Quain] told us about his journey among the Xingu, and then went on about syphilis. In the brutal frankness with which he spoke of it, in the jokes he made on the subject, I think I detect a certain hopeless act of bravado<sup>12</sup>. (Métraux, 1978, 41)

In March 1939, Buell Quain was in the field of the Krahô. He only had a few months to live. The letters addressed to Heloisa Alberto Torres betray the feeling of a certain difficulty in getting involved in this new field<sup>13</sup>, insofar as the Trumai Indians occupy his thoughts and his projects: he commented on the photographs he had taken of the Trumai<sup>14</sup>, asked why another ethnologist, Curt Nimuendaju, had obtained authorisation from the PIS to work in the Xingu<sup>15</sup>, indicating confusedly his desire to return the following year to the Trumai<sup>16</sup> or in a more distant future in 1941 or 1942<sup>17</sup>. In a letter

addressed to Margaret Mead, he spoke of his frustration at having had to renounce his Trumai field and indicated that he had more to do over there than on the Krahô field<sup>18</sup>. A subtle way of showing his boredom and lack of enthusiasm. In that same letter, the desire to depart for the Trumai field jostles with a wish to leave Brazil “for ever”. In another letter addressed to Mead, he evokes the better quality of his work with the Trumai<sup>19</sup>. A few weeks later, his last letters arrived at their destinations with, in substance, the same content: “I am dying of a contagious disease,” “disinfect this letter”.

Some light has been shed on Buell Quain’s last moments by the letter dated 12<sup>th</sup> August 1939 and sent to Heloisa Torres by his informer and friend, Manoel Perna. It indicates that on 31<sup>st</sup> July, Quain left the Krahô village to go to Carolina in the company of two indigenous men nicknamed João and Ismael. They spent the night at São Bento and continued their journey to a property, Fazenda Serrinha. They settled in there in the afternoon of 2<sup>nd</sup> August and Buell Quain, in tears, began to write his final letters until late into the night. Buell Quain then asked one of the two Indians who had accompanied him to carry the letters to the guardian of the property of Fazenda Serrinha. When this man came back to Buell Quain, the sight was most shocking: the anthropologist had cut his body and was covered in blood. The other Indian, who had just woken, implored him to stop wounding himself in that way. According to that letter, Buell Quain had replied that he was cutting his body in that way to alleviate his suffering. Shocked, the two Indians ran to fetch help and when they came back, Buell Quain’s body was hanging from a tree. He had hung himself to accelerate his death. Much later, when the note given to the guardian of Fazenda Serrinha was read, one of Buell Quain’s last requests was carried out. He had asked that they give the Indians a spade and other tools so that his grave should be dug and that he be buried at the place of his death. Manoel Perna’s letter also gives details that a few days before his death, Buell Quain had received bad news from his family – he had spoken of the fact that his father was leaving his mother – and that these letters which he had torn up and burnt, seemed to have completely broken him.

This explanation for Buell Quain and his act of suicide– because it has been questioned by those who were close to him at the end of his life – may be questioned in the light of several elements which allow us to reconstruct it in a dimension which is individual, specific to Buell Quain, and collective,

making Buell Quain the symptom-carrier of an indigenous uneasiness with which he was confronted, and which overcame him. Reading his notes on the Trumai illustrates the difficulty of the field and the loneliness of a young man faced with a dying culture living constantly in fear – notably of attacks from other indigenous groups – and who practised, through repeated infanticides and abortions, collective suicide. It is useful to remember that Buell Quain was alone in his field and that in such a context, emotions were all the more contagious as the Trumai language was unknown to him at that time. The perception he had of this dying culture is confirmed by Robert Murphy's contribution which indicates that from the number of forty-four individuals in 1938, at the time Buell Quain met them, the Trumai were only twenty-five in 1955, when Murphy wrote and completed the work. The same diagnosis of a fated culture would be put forward by Buell Quain on the Krahô Indians whose language he felt would be likely to be lost forever. Without knowing it, Buell Quain was already speaking of himself: soon he would be lost for science. In contrast to Lévi-Strauss, who was never alone in the Brazilian fields, who had perhaps already glimpsed the danger to be had from getting too close to these dying cultures: does he not evoke the subject of the Tupi-Kawahib, "the sad liquidation of these last vestiges of a dying culture"<sup>20</sup> (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 429), Buell Quain seems to have shared deeply the helplessness of populations who, still today in Brazil, apart from the great difficulties attached to difficult living conditions, have an alarmingly high suicide rate<sup>21</sup>. The melancholy that seems to belong to him and was pointed out by his friend Ruth Landes<sup>22</sup> is not without connection to the melancholy described by Freud from 1917 onwards in *Mourning and Melancholy* and in letters and manuscripts drawn up from his correspondence with Fliess. (Freud, [1917] 1991: 161-168). In fact, can we not see in this lacerated body an attempt to bring out into the open a psychic reality which Freud conceptualised as an "internal haemorrhage" (Freud [1895] 1991: 161-178) to explain the removal of the main urges which keep the subject alive? We do not know the content of the letters Buell Quain received and destroyed, which had so driven him to despair if we believe Manoel Perna. Yet we do know the frustration and the loss he had felt when he had to renounce the Trumai field. The constant references to this loss, in his letters to Heloisa Alberto Torres, Ruth Benedict or Margaret Mead, illustrate the difficulty of pulling himself away from what he had lost and the melancholy

which could be a result of that loss, a shared melancholy. “I am dying of a contagious disease” is an enigmatic phrase which could have been pronounced by any of the Indians – including the Trumai – victims of the ethnocide produced by devastating epidemics. From this perspective, Buell Quain carried a sickness which was not his own. On the other hand, it is interesting to remember that his father, a surgeon, cut open bodies – just as Buell Quain cut open his – and that his mother, chairperson of a tuberculosis patients’ association, was involved with young people who had contracted and were dying of contagious diseases. Thus, in his suicidal act, everything is intermingled: the historical reality of the Indians, that of his parents and, finally, the state of extreme solitude of Buell Quain, whose body was claimed by his family. He was buried in a place which is lost today, since despite incessant demands by Heloisa Torres, no stone has ever marked and adorned the grave.

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<sup>1</sup> Of whom Ruth Landes, working among Afro-Brazilian communities, Charles Wagley and William Lipkind, who on their part were interested in indigenous communities in Brazil as had been their predecessor Jules Henri an anthropologist with a diploma from Colombia University and those who followed, James and Virginia Watson and Robert and Yolanda Murphy. On anthropology in the Thirties see Mariza CORRÊA, “Traficantes do excêntrico: os antropólogos no Brasil dos anos 30 aos anos 60”, *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, n. 6, 1988, p. 79-98.

<sup>2</sup> The Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace held in Buenos Aires in 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Manoel Perna to Heloisa Alberta Torres dated 12th August 1939. An important part of the correspondence between Buell Quain and Heloisa Alberto Torres is conserved in the archives of the Casa Cultural Heloisa Alberto Torres, Niteroi, Brazil. Part of it has been published by Mariza Corrêa and Januaria Mello (eds) *Querida Heloisa, cartas de campo*, Unicamp, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Carlos Dias to Heloisa Alberto Torres dated 12th August.

<sup>5</sup> Information given by Wisconsin Alumnus – Thomas Hardy C. ed. Vol. 38, n° 5, February 1937.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Benedict in B. Quain, *Fijian Village*, p. IX.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Franz Boaz to Heloisa Alberto Torres dated 10<sup>th</sup> February 1938.

<sup>8</sup> The Protection of the Indians Service (created in 1910 and replaced in 1967 by the FUNAI – National Foundation for Indians) tried to preserve the distant communities from contacts with strangers. On this subject see Carlos Augusto da Rocha Freira, *Memórias do SPI*, Museo do Índio-Funai, Rio de Janeiro, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Luiz de Castro Faria, *Um outro olhar, diário da expedição a Serra do Norte*, Ouro sobre Azul, Rio de Janeiro, 2001, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Lévi-Strauss addressed to Gruponi, quoted in Corrêa and Mello, 2008, p. 30

<sup>11</sup> The research work by the linguist Raquel Guirardello-Damian is conserved in the Archives of the Trumai language database. An old Indian was questioned about his memories left of the visit of Buell Quain: RG91H-Quain – Oral history: the visit of Buell Quain – Organisation of a Text Collection in Trumai, Aiming at its Scientific Documentation 1991-07-17, Raquel Guirardello-Damian: [http://search.language-archives.org/search.html?q=Man%20Met&sort=title\\_sort%20desc](http://search.language-archives.org/search.html?q=Man%20Met&sort=title_sort%20desc).

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Métraux, *Itinéraires 1*, Payot, Paris, 1978, p. 41

<sup>13</sup> From this field Buell Quain established a few notes and a report of nine pages concerning the Krahô language, “*Brief of Krahô Culture*” which was completed in



the Fifties by another anthropologist, Olive Shell: Grammatical Outline of Krahô (Gê family)[after Buell Quain], *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 18, p. 115-129, 1952.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Buell Quain to Heloisa Alberto Torres, dated 8th March 1939.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Buell Quain to Heloisa Alberto Torres, dated 5<sup>th</sup> June 1939 and letter of 7<sup>th</sup> June 1939.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Buell Quain to Heloisa Alberto Torres, dated 7<sup>th</sup> June.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Buell Quain to Margaret Mead, dated 4<sup>th</sup> July

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Buell Quain to Margaret Mead, dated 13<sup>th</sup> July.

<sup>20</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, [1955] translated by John and Doreen Weightman, Jonathan Cape, 1973, p. 359

<sup>21</sup> The suicide rate among indigenous communities in Brazil (30/100,000) is nearly six times higher than that of the non-indigenous population (5/100,000), *Mapa da violencia*, ed. 2014. [www.mapadaviolencia.org.br](http://www.mapadaviolencia.org.br) (consulted 12<sup>th</sup> December 2014)

<sup>22</sup> In letters from Ruth Landes to Ruth Benedict, Buell Quain is described as “mournful”, “hurt”, “nervous”: Sally Cooper Colle, *Ruth Landes: a life in anthropology*, University of Nebraska, 2003, p. 270

### **Biographical note**

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