The legacy of Charles Wagley: an introduction

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During the 2009 American Anthropological Association meetings in Philadelphia, at the end of a session entitled “Amazon Town: seven decades of research and engagement”, Samuel Sá of the Federal University of Pará reminded the panel that November 2013 would mark what would have been Charles Wagley’s 100th birthday. Samuel, a former student of Wagley’s, suggested, and all enthusiastically agreed, that some form of centennial commemoration was in order. In rapid succession plans were laid for a variety of presentations, panels, and exhibits in Brazil and the United States (US) to celebrate Wagley’s life and legacies. In 2012, Glenn Shepard of the Museu Goeldi also suggested a tribute to Wagley in the form of a dossier to be published in the Boletim do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi. Ciências Humanas. Within a month we found more than enough willing contributors. Those who knew ‘Charles’ or ‘Chuck’ Wagley were pleased and honored to contribute. Those who only knew of him felt privileged to be included in a celebration of his life and work. The results, presented in the following pages, combine the insights, memories, and interpretations of Charles Wagley’s legacy by 12 individuals from Brazil and the US.

For those unfamiliar with Charles Wagley, exactly who was this person? One could start with the following description: an American Anthropologist who became the leading Brazilianist of his time, a pioneer in the ethnographic study of Indigenous peoples and peasants of the Amazon and Northeast, and a distinguished professor at Columbia University and the University of Florida with an impressive publication record (see Appendix 1). Assembling a list of accolades and attributes, one would need to include: one of the founders of Brazilian ethnology, a skilled and careful ethnographer, cherished mentor and friend of both Brazilian and US students (see Appendix 2); founder and Director of Columbia University’s Institute of Latin American Studies, President of the American Anthropological Association (1969-1971); member of the National Order of the Southern Cross, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Center for Inter-American Relations; and founder of what eventually became the Tropical Conservation and Development program at the University of Florida (see Kottak and Schmink this volume).

Charles Wagley’s principal research focus was rural Brazil where he made major contributions to demographic and kinship studies among Tupí speaking groups in Amazonia (see Balée this volume). He also was on the forefront of acculturation and cultural change studies (influenced by one of his mentors, Ralph Linton) as shifts in anthropological theory began to challenge the static view of culture in use at the time. Wagley was among the first to practice applied anthropology through his work in the newly formed Serviço Especial de Saúde Pública (SESP) where he helped develop culturally relevant public health policy and education materials for Amazonian rubber tappers during World War II. In addition, Wagley was a leader (along with Robert Redfield) in applying the community study methodology, originally developed for tribal societies, to peasant societies, which he did in his research in Pará and Bahia. He also made important contributions to Julian Steward’s cultural ecology approach – including the 1951 comparison of demographic collapse...
and cultural survival in Amazonia described in “Social and cultural influences on population in two Tupí tribes”. Following Steward’s lead, he helped in the development of the concept of cultural areas for Latin America, particularly through the description of “Plantation America” and, with Marvin Harris, the 1955 “A typology of Latin American subcultures”. Wagley likewise aided in the conceptualization of race as a social construct and synthesized Brazil’s unity in diversity to describe the country’s national identity.

Charles Wagley was born in Clarksville, Texas, but grew up in nearby Bonham. He was the eldest of three boys, the second of which died young. The family was poor and struggled to make ends meet. When Wagley was around seven years old the family moved to Kansas City and soon after that his father abandoned them. Wagley’s mother provided for the two brothers by renting out rooms in their house. Wagley would joke about these years of hardship, telling of how in his teens he had to survive on “a half an egg sandwich” – made all the more challenging given his 1.85 meter stature. Despite many obstacles, including the onset of the Great Depression, Wagley managed to find a benefactor who provided loans and grants for him to attend the University of Oklahoma. Doing very well there in his first year, he applied to and was accepted by Harvard and Columbia Universities. He chose Columbia, in part because he could find work at the university to help pay his college expenses. By waiting tables at the women’s dormitory and later working as a governor for a small boy from a wealthy New York family, he supported himself through his undergraduate years. One of the jokes told by his Columbia professors at the time was that Wagley came from such a humble background that he only obtained his first pair of shoes when he started college in New York. Wagley continued to excel academically at Columbia and in 1936 earned his bachelor’s degree.

In his undergraduate studies Wagley became intrigued with anthropology and decided to continue on for a PhD at Columbia. He took classes with Franz Boas, who was advanced in years by this time. However, it was his mentors Ruth Benedict, Ruth Bunzel, and Ralph Linton who had the greatest influence on him. With support from Bunzel he conducted dissertation research in the highland Guatemalan community of Santiago Chimaltenango in 1937, leading to his doctorate degree in 1941.

Wagley was inspired by Linton’s interest in acculturation and for his second ethnographic research he sought to study a remote group experiencing rapid change. This desire brought him to the attention of Heloísa Alberto Torres of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro who was actively recruiting Columbia graduates to conduct research in Brazil. With Torres’ administrative support, and a suggestion by Alfred Métraux on which group to research, Wagley journeyed up the Araguaia River in 1939 to spend 15 months studying the Tapirapé. He published several articles from this research, but his 1940 “The effects of depopulation upon social organization, as illustrated by the Tapirapé Indians” stands out as an early exemplar of demographic anthropology.

During his Tapirapé fieldwork Wagley contracted malaria. If not for the care given by his guide and assistant, Valentim Gomes, who returned from a trip down river just in time to force Atrabina (anti-malaria medicine) and liquids down his throat while he was unconscious, his life would have ended there. Later, after losing contact with the National Museum due to flooding and the inability to send mail, Torres sent a team to find him. On the team was a young intern named Eduardo Galvão. Wagley and Galvão soon became friends and developed a professional relationship that lasted until Galvão’s death in 1976. Galvão would become Wagley’s first graduate student at Columbia – even sharing an apartment for a while with the Wagleys in New York. Upon graduation, Galvão became Brazil’s first Anthropology PhD and went on to play a major role in developing Brazilian anthropology.
In 1941 Wagley married Cecília Roxo, whom he met at Columbia where she was studying library sciences. Cecília was from a prominent Brazilian family and through her family ties Wagley was able to maintain multiple connections with Brazilian intellectuals and literary figures of the era – ranging from Gilberto Freyre to Jorge Amado. In 1941 Wagley and Galvão teamed up to conduct a study of acculturation among the Tenetehara of Maranhão. The result of this research was the book “The Tenetehara Indians of Brazil” (1949). It was also during this period of late 1930s and early 1940s that Wagley came to know Claude Lévi-Strauss. Both of them were interested in utilizing Robert Lowie’s kinship research in their Brazilian research. Although Lévi-Strauss credits Lowie with the critical knowledge that directed his future research on kinship, it was actually Wagley who sat down with Lévi-Strauss in Brazil to explain the details of the different terminological and descent systems.

By 1942 the US entered World War II. As Wagley was preparing to return to the US to enlist in the military he was recruited instead to join a collaborative Brazil-US program under the newly formed Brazilian public health organization (SESP) to aid efforts in improving the health of rural workers for the purpose of increasing the extraction of key war-time resources. Since Wagley spoke Portuguese and had several years of experience of working in the Amazon interior, he was sent to work with rubber tappers in Pará – setting up health posts and producing culturally appropriate educational materials on health and malaria prevention. His work – one of the earliest examples of applied medical anthropology – proved of such value that the Brazilian government presented him with the prestigious Medal of War and named him to the National Order of the Southern Cross (an honor given to foreigners in recognition of significant service to the nation).

After the war Wagley resumed teaching at Columbia. In 1948, with funds from United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture’s Hylean Amazon survey, Wagley, Galvão, and both their wives conducted research in one of the communities under SESP’s war-time purview – Gurupá. Their collective efforts resulted in Galvão’s dissertation and later book “Santos e visagens” (1955) and Wagley’s classic 1953 ethnography of rubber tappers, “Amazon Town” (re-issued in 2014 as part of his centennial celebration). During one of his war-time SESP visits, Wagley was accompanied by the author Dalcídio Jurandir who had previously lived in Gurupá and served as its municipal secretary. Wagley credits Dalcídio with significant assistance in the early phases of research. Dalcídio later wrote about Gurupá in his novel “Ribanceira” (1960), describing many of the same people (through pseudonyms) as Wagley did in “Amazon Town”.

In 1951-1952 Wagley teamed up with Brazilian anthropologist Thales de Azevedo to lead the Bahia State-Columbia University Community Study Project. Wagley originally planned the project to parallel the cultural ecology focus of his colleague Julian Steward’s project in Puerto Rico, but following a suggestion by Métraux, Wagley focused instead on race relations. The research resulted in the first comparative anthropological study of race-relations in Brazil in Wagley’s edited “Race and Class in Rural Brazil” (1952). Building upon the Bahian research, Wagley described the cultural area of Plantation America in his 1957 article “Plantation America: a culture sphere” (see Hay this volume).

During the 1950s, at the height of the ‘Red Scare’ and the McCarthy hearings which looked for communists and communist sympathizers in the US, many on the Columbia University faculty were called to testify – and some were fired thereafter. Wagley, who was not a communist, nonetheless had read and understood Marx’s views. He, like Julian Steward, incorporated some Marxist ideas into his writings, but not overtly (for example, see his discussion of aviameneto and external exploitation in “Amazon Town”). Isabel, Wagley’s daughter, remembers as television coverage of the McCarthy hearings began her father suffered a relapse of malaria. While recuperating at home he bought the family’s first television set to watch the hearings – fearful that his name would be mentioned and he would be forced to testify.
Although this never came to pass, several years later when he tried to renew his passport, the process was held up for months when someone in the State Department accused Wagley of befriending known communist in Brazil. Although some of the mayors he worked with during the SESP years were communist – the accusation was ‘guilt by association’ without any basis and was dropped and the passport issued after some higher-level intervention.

In 1958 Wagley teamed up with his prominent student and by then a colleague at Columbia – Marvin Harris – to co-author the first-ever cross-cultural comparison of minorities – “Minorities in the New World: six case studies”. In 1959 Wagley wrote his influential “On the concept of social race in the Americas” – a foundational piece documenting the cultural construction of ‘race’. His description of social race was a clear statement on the arbitrary nature of racial classifications – which in the Americas could be based on phenotype, descent, language, dress, wealth, social customs, and/or self-identification – and could change depending on circumstances. His collaborative work with Harris on race relations and minorities greatly influenced Harris’ later work on race and racism. Wagley’s ecological focus and early demographic work also influenced Harris’ conceptualization of cultural materialism – although the two parted theoretical (but never personal) company later on due to Wagley’s “persistent eclecticism” according to Harris.

By 1962 Wagley turned his attention to Brazilian national identity in his “An Introduction to Brazil”. He patterned the book on his mentor Benedict’s post-war study of Japan, “The chrysanthemum and the sword” (1946). Wagley avoided the mistake of oversimplifying a culture – a critique made of Benedict’s work. Wagley, instead, carefully included descriptions of regional, racial, and class diversity in addition to the unifying themes of Brazilian national culture. Following the military coup of 1964, Wagley wrote protest letters against the dictators which were published in the New York Times. For his stance, he was banded from Brazil for several years. He may have also lost the chance to serve as the US Ambassador to Brazil due to his views as well (see Schmink this volume).

Charles and Cecilia Wagley’s had two children, Isabel (Betty) and Carlos William (Billy). Billy died in his early teens after an accidental fall led to internal hemorrhaging. According to Isabel, it was a tragedy from which her parents never really recovered. Isabel later studied anthropology as an undergraduate student, then social work as a graduate student. She accompanied her parents on many of their trips to Brazil, including the Bahia field school organized by her father, but run by Marvin Harris. It was during the field school of 1960 that Isabel met a young undergraduate named Conrad Kottak. The two married in 1963. Conrad went on to a productive career at the University of Michigan while Isabel pursued a career in social work. They have two children, Juliet (M.D.) and Nicholas Charles (PhD), with Nicholas earning his doctorate in Anthropology from Emory University – the third generation of Wagley/Kottak anthropologists.

In 1971, after being robbed in his New York City apartment elevator, Wagley decided to move to the University of Florida (see Margolis this volume). He remained in Gainesville for the rest of his life. Also in 1971-1972 he served as the President of the American Anthropological Association. During his time at Florida Wagley published his Tapirapé material (gathered from 1939 to 1965) in “Welcome of Tears: the Tapirapé Indians of Central Brazil” (1977). With the building of the Transamazon Highway, Wagley began his last project, training students to investigate the massive changes underway in the region. Foreseeing the value of cross-disciplinary research, he encouraged his students to supplement anthropological training with natural science, agricultural, and forestry coursework (see Moran this volume). His 1974 edited volume, “Man in the Amazon”, reflects this concern, which was also evident in his work to establish what eventually became the interdisciplinary center for Tropical Development and Conservation at the University of Florida (see Schmink this volume).

In the pages that follow the various authors describe their relationship to Charles Wagley and what influence he, or his writings and deeds, have had upon their work and the work of others. The first essay is by Roberto DaMatta,
who although not a student of Wagley, reminisces about his encounters with Wagley and offers a view of his place in Brazilian Anthropology. Conrad Kottak follows with a detailed review of Wagley’s career. Kottak only audited one class of Wagley’s while at Columbia, but enjoyed Wagley’s inspiration through their familial ties as well as through Wagley’s student and Kottak’s mentor, Marvin Harris – a critical influence on Kottak’s work on race and racism. In the following essay Emilio Moran writes of Wagley’s person friendship as well as his vision for multidisciplinary studies of Amazonia, an approach that Moran followed with great success. Maxine Margolis, a student of Wagley at Columbia and then a colleague at both Columbia and the University of Florida, also writes of personal ties and Wagley’s guidance to study all things Brazilian – including her focus on Brazilian immigrant communities in the United States.

William Balée, who was an undergraduate student of Wagley, writes of Wagley’s mentorship that led him eventually to his work with the Ka’apor. Balée maintains that although Wagley never considered himself a theoretician, his work in kinship was theoretically significant and on occasion ground-breaking. Marianne Schmink writes of a different kind of legacy for Wagley, the creation and expansion of the innovative and cross-disciplinary Tropical Conservation and Development program at the University of Florida. Building upon Wagley’s groundwork, Schmink and others were able to create what is likely the top program in sustainable develop for the tropics worldwide. My analysis of Wagley’s photography is next. As a graduate student of his as he retired, I, like others, inherited some of his photographs. Gathering as many of the images as I could find, I have studied them to identify the cultural and theoretical conventions he used in his photography – revealing yet another facet to his important research.

Fred Hay, also a student of Wagley at the University of Florida, writes of his legacy in studies of African diaspora in the New World. Hay uses several of Wagley’s concepts developed in “Plantation America” to inform his studies in Haiti. The last essay is from a group of my students who have taken up the mantle of research in Wagley’s “Amazon Town” – Gurupá. As the third generation of researchers, through them we see how Wagley’s legacy continues and how his careful and insightful ethnographic observations (along with those of Galvão and their spouses) still inform and serve as a valuable base-line for research in a wide range of contemporary concerns.

APPENDIX 1. Charles Wagley Bibliography (chronological order).


WAGLEY, Charles. If I were a Brazilian. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963.


APÊNDICE 2. Estudantes de doutorado de Charles Wagley.

APPENDIX 2. PhD students of Charles Wagley.

Universidade de Columbia
Columbia University

Diana Brown
Leslie Brownrigg
Hans Buechler
William Carter
Louis Faron
Shepard Forman
Eduardo Galvão
Eric Gottlieb
Sidney Greenfield
Dorothy Hammond
Marvin Harris
Michael Horowitz
Harry Hutchinson
Morton Klass
Anthony Leeds
Luisa Margolies
Maxine Margolis
Alexander Moore
Robert Murphy
Joyce Riegelhaupt
Hubert Ross
Helen Safa
Eduardo Seda-Bonilla
Robert Shirley
Sydel Silverman
Mariam Slater
Arnold Strickon
William Willis
Charles Wilson

Universidade da Flórida
University of Florida

John Butler
Jane Collins
Méricio Gomes
Fred Hay
James Jones
Judith Lisansky
Charlotte Miller
Darrel Miller
Emilio Moran
Nassaro Nasser
Richard Pace
Susan Poats
Samuel Sá
Anthony Stocks
George Vollweiler
John Wilson
George Zarur