

## Foreseeing the big scientific questions: a special gift of Wagley's Prevendo as grandes questões científicas: um dom especial de Wagley

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**Abstract:** In this paper I review my experience as Charles Wagley's Ph.D. student and later as a faculty colleague at the University of Indiana. In addition to his deep humanism and personal warmth, Wagley also had an uncanny ability to foresee important emerging issues in social sciences, especially within Latin American and Brazilian Studies. With his flexible, personable style he found ways to direct students and colleagues towards the issues he considered important, and which later became truly major issues for these fields. For example, he helped to create the interdisciplinary field of Latin American Studies while in New York, focused on Latin American race relations while at Columbia University, and created the Amazonian Studies program at University of Florida with its focus on impacts of development and infrastructure projects. He helped create scholarship programs for such studies through the Title VI mechanism. Through all of his scholarly contributions, Wagley led by inspiring with a rare social consciousness and a deep concern for the human costs of social and economic change.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Peoples. Peasantry. Amazon. Brazil. Latin America. Social sciences.

**Resumo:** Neste trabalho, apresento minha experiência como estudante de doutorado e posteriormente como colega de Charles Wagley na Universidade de Indiana. Além de um humanismo profundo e da cordialidade, Wagley também tinha uma capacidade notável para prever questões importantes e emergentes nas ciências sociais, em particular nos estudos sobre a América Latina e o Brasil. Com seu estilo flexível e pessoal, ele encontrou caminhos para direcionar seus estudantes e colegas por questões que considerava importantes, e que mais tarde se tornaram verdadeiramente relevantes para esses campos. Por exemplo, ele ajudou a criar o campo interdisciplinar de Estudos Latino-americanos em Nova Iorque, focou nas relações raciais latino-americanas enquanto estava na Universidade de Columbia e criou o Programa de Estudos Amazônicos na Universidade da Flórida, com foco nos impactos do desenvolvimento e dos projetos de infraestrutura. Ele também ajudou a criar programas de bolsas para tais estudos por meio do mecanismo "Title VI". Em todas as suas contribuições acadêmicas, Wagley liderou e inspirou por meio de uma consciência social rara e de uma profunda preocupação com os custos humanos de mudanças sociais e econômicas.

**Palavras-chave:** Índios. Campesinato. Amazônia. Brasil. América Latina. Ciências sociais.

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In this paper, I reflect upon my experiences, first as Charles Wagley's doctoral student (1971-1975) and then as his colleague on faculty at Indiana University (1975-2012). In addition to his deep humanism and personal warmth, Wagley also had an uncanny ability to foresee important emerging issues in social sciences, especially within Latin American and Brazilian Studies. With his flexible, personable style he found ways to direct students and colleagues towards the topics he considered important, and which later became truly major issues for these fields. Here I will discuss Wagley's pioneering contributions to the field of area studies, his recognition of the importance of race as a social concept in Latin America, and his career-long focus on the Amazon.

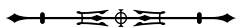
During his career in New York at Columbia University, Wagley was a major player in the creation of title VI funding for area studies in general and Latin American studies in particular. Title VI was one of a series of activities created to enhance American readiness to respond in other parts of the world, and provided scholarships to graduate students as long as they took language courses towards the goal of preparing themselves for international study. After World War II he recognized the importance of deeper United States (US) knowledge about the rest of the world and acted as a leader in the creation of the field of interdisciplinary Latin American Studies. He was most effective at this goal during his years as Director of the Institute for Latin American Studies at Columbia University. Over a twenty-year period – the heyday of Area Studies – he directed a generation of students who became luminaries in the field. When he moved to the University of Florida as Graduate Research Professor in 1971, he foresaw the emerging interest in environmental change and tropical rain forest deforestation. In a few years he created the innovative program of Amazonian Studies at the University of Florida at Gainesville. In typical Wagley fashion, the program was not about 'the trees', but about 'the forests' and especially the people there, and how national and global forces

impacted them. At both Florida and Columbia his insights were always on the cutting edge of the social sciences, instilling several generations of scholars with his rare social consciousness and a deep concern for the human costs of social and economic changes.

## **STUDIES OF PEASANTRIES AND INDIGENOUS AMAZONIANS**

Charles Wagley's interest in peasantries and indigenous peoples began early as a doctoral student at Columbia University. He used to tell me that Ruth Benedict, his advisor, sent him to the village of Santiago Chimaltenango in Guatemala at her own personal expense to build his enthusiasm for doctoral study and to help him understand exactly why anthropology mattered. His resulting dissertation in 1937 became an important publication in its own right on peasant societies (Wagley, 1937). Somewhat unusual for the time, Wagley felt strongly that anthropologists had a responsibility not only to observe the people we studied, but to let them know about 'us' so they could be better prepared to deal with the outside world. This was an important approach he also incorporated in his later studies of the Tapirape and Tenetehara Indians of Brazil (Wagley, 1977).

Ruth Benedict's actions impacted Wagley's whole professional career, not only by setting him on his course, but by shaping his abiding interest in getting doctoral students to the field early and helping them find research funds. In my personal case (and jumping forward nearly 35 years), within three months of starting my doctoral studies under Wagley's direction, he was writing grant proposals to get me into the field with him to develop a large project on the impact of the Transamazon Highway. He was intent on ensuring that I understood what I needed to know to be ready for the dissertation fieldwork. The field trip made it clear to him, however, that the Brazilian government would not welcome a large project such as he envisioned. This was a period when the military saw the Amazon as an area of 'national security' and concerned with the ambitions of the US and



other countries towards the Amazon's resources. Agencies advised us that a large scale project by non-Brazilians would not be welcomed. Instead, he encouraged me to carry out the research on my own, which I did with support from the Social Science Research Council.

In 1941 Wagley's academic trajectory was diverted by global circumstances. The US and Brazil had entered World War II and he was asked to stay in Brazil to help with the effort to ensure the production of wild rubber, an essential raw material for the tires on Allied airplanes. The Japanese had cut off supplies of the dominant producer, Malaysia, and Brazil was called to action to replace this supply from the native forests of Amazonia. He joined the Brazilian Public Health Service (Serviço Especial de Saúde Pública – SESP) and travelled widely in the region to assist with maintaining the health of rubber tappers who had become important for the war effort. From this experience he came to know Amazonian communities – their culture, health, economy, and history – as no social scientist had before. "Amazon town", published in 1953, uniquely captured the daily life of an Amazonian peasant community. It is a beautifully written book, and so rich in detail that even after reading it many times, one still learns new things with each reading. The intimacy he developed with many of the people of Gurupá is astounding and has survived decades. When I visited Gurupá, the real name of the community referred to in the book as 'Itá', it had been 20 years after the book first appeared and many more since he had lived there as a public health officer. Immediately upon arriving in the community, many of his 'informants' came forth to identify themselves, to reminisce on his practice of ethnography, and to remember him with fondness and admiration.

This fondness came from the authentic personal interest he immediately transmitted to people he came into contact with, no matter how humble. I recall my first field trip to the Amazon, stepping back in admiration and watching how he interviewed people and obtained information – a skill I have not seen surpassed even after 36 years of professional practice in anthropology. Wagley

was 'the real thing', very quick to establish rapport and put people at ease. Above all, he cared profoundly about people's well-being and safety. I learned from him early on in my field work with him the importance of protecting the information provided by people, particularly in the context of the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil during my first and second fieldwork trips (1972-1974). Wagley deeply opposed the inhumanity of the military rulers, and led letter-writing campaigns in the New York Times to protest against human rights violations. For his activities he was banned from traveling to Brazil and was only allowed back in 1971 when a very slow (14 year!) process of return to democracy began. He taught me to code my field notes and to never write anything that could be used against anyone if my notes were confiscated. This caution came from prioritizing the lives of the people who trust us with their life experiences, above and beyond the information itself and what it meant for our analysis.

This concern for people – and for the poor in particular – was palpable in his life, in his writings, and in his advising of students. I saw him moved to tears several times at the sight of children begging for food, or people experiencing exploitative work or wages. He felt to his deepest core that social justice was a human right and that one should struggle to ensure that justice prevailed. I think that is why he was attracted to, and so devoted to, the study of indigenous peoples and peasants. These members of society face social injustice every day and yet remain profoundly human in their struggle for existence. It was by showing how wonderfully human these people are that he hoped to express, in his writings lectures, that the social injustices committed by those in power had to be corrected.

## THE STUDY OF RACE IN BRAZIL

Before the civil rights movement began in the US, those who were concerned with race relations used to point to Brazil as a model of racial harmony. Apparently absent in Brazil were the tensions and racial separation between whites and blacks pervasive in the US, particularly the

South. Wagley foresaw the importance of studying race in Brazil and initiated a large research project in the state of Bahia, funded by United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO). A number of prominent anthropologists came out of this project, such as Marvin Harris and Conrad Kottak, who continued to explore concepts that Wagley pioneered. One such concept was 'social race'. According to Wagley, social race was a construct based only loosely on phenotypes, but more critically on social and economic criteria. It served as one way Brazilians dealt with the infinite variety of racial mixing present in their society and the wide disparities in education, wealth, and status. Together with his team of students and colleagues, they defined the linguistic distinctions utilized to label racial and social differences. In the research process Wagley foresaw a huge literature on '*branqueamento*' ('whitening') that developed years later, which showed how social and economic cues like education, wealth and employment could 'whiten' an individual's assigned racial identity regardless of their actual phenotypic 'color' (Wagley, 1952).

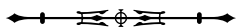
The UNESCO study became influential not only in Brazil but in the US and beyond. The research placed a mirror before society and clearly showed the injustice of treating people based on color. Prominent scholars like Carl Degler (1971), Thomas Skidmore (1974) and others followed Wagley's lead in exploring differences in race relations between the US and Brazil and the two countries' historical trajectories and responses to injustice. Wagley took this study one step further in "Introduction to Brazil" (1963), a book that was for decades the most insightful study of Brazilian society. In it, he challenged the reader to appreciate Brazil and its people, yet did not shy away from being critical, but also optimistic, about Brazil's future and its ability to meet the social and economic needs of its diverse people. As he did in "Amazon town", he provided insight into how social class affects economic opportunity, how family structure provides opportunity and solace to members of households, and how generosity of spirit was

richer than malice. He lays out concisely for readers a set of insights about Brazil and its people that is keener than that found in other books many times its size. The same clarity of exposition applies to his views about what was needed to advance social justice in Brazil. His insights were appreciated in Brazil, as evidenced by his inclusion into the Order of Rio Branco, the highest recognition given to a foreigner for contributions to Brazilian society.

## AMAZONIAN SOCIETY AND DEVELOPMENT

From early in his career, Wagley developed unique understandings of social processes in the Amazon. In his studies of the Tapirape and Tenetehara he showed how these two groups dealt with (or did not deal with), with rapid depopulation caused by exotic diseases. Unlike most scholars of the time, he was not only interested in the rates of depopulation in themselves, but in understanding what social and cultural mechanisms were at play in worsening or improving the survival of the populations in question. In a classic article comparing the two groups (Wagley, 1951), he showed that the Tenetehara were surviving in the face of disease by discarding certain customs (particularly infanticide), while the Tapirape were at risk of extinction due to a lack of cultural modification of such practices. James Eder (1992) tackled a similar situation many years later among a native population of the Philippines who seemingly refused to deal with the growing occupation of their territory by Filipinos.

In a second Amazonian example, Wagley's studies during and after World War II provided insights, unsurpassed for decades, on how communities traded for rubber, how they were supplied with goods by rubber traders, and how laborers were often trapped in a system of debt peonage (*regatão* system) as virtual indentured servants for years in isolated communities of the region. By the 1970s, with the change from a river-oriented region to one increasingly pointed toward a region-wide network of roads, great change was underway, and once again Wagley foresaw the enormous impacts of these changes.



The very first trip we made together in 1972 aimed to examine the potential of a large research project addressing the impact of the Trans-Amazon Highway, set to bring large-scale settlement and integration of the Amazon into the national goals of economic development. Wagley rightly foresaw the Trans-Amazon Highway as a transformative project for the region, and understood correctly that it would be the most important phenomenon to study in the region for the next 30 years. It was this insight, presented in a Colloquium at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida in 1971 soon after he got there, that got me engaged in Amazonian studies. His challenge – namely that someone ought to study the impacts accompanying this ambitious road project – led me to his office the next day and shaped my doctoral training and research. Literally the next day, Wagley sent me to study tropical soils with Hugh Popenoe, systems ecology with Howard T. Odum, and geography with Josh Dickinson, ensuring that I was academically prepared to meet the multiple challenges involved in studying what he rightly predicted would be a major transformation about to happen in Amazonia (Moran, 1981).

Wagley's insights as to the transformative nature of this project did not mean that he necessarily liked what we saw in the field. As we travelled together along the Trans-Amazon Highway, picking up rides with the National Department of Roads (Departamento Nacional de Estradas de Rodagem – DNER) crews, he reminisced from his hammock on the beauty of the Amazon he had come to know so well in indigenous and peasant communities along the river over the previous 30 years, and what a negative and unpleasant contrast the new context was becoming. In this nostalgic spirit, Wagley hired a boat to take me and some of our hosts in the DNER up the Xingu River to see the beauty of the river and wildlife along its banks. Indeed, it was a beautiful trip and we all commented to him how much more peaceful and beautiful it was than the constant dust, grinding of large-scale machinery, and general tumult of

road-building. While swimming at a beautiful white sand beach along the Xingu on that boat trip I was struck on the heel by a stingray. Wagley sprang immediately into action, sucking the toxin out of the wound in order to reduce the painful effects and reducing the danger of infection. For his heroics he was left with a large sore on his lip. As he performed this first-aid, he realized he was spitting the blood into the water and was attracting piranhas. To this day I do not know how he or I managed it, but we both leapt a seemingly impossible vertical distance from the water into the boat in order to escape the danger we had gotten ourselves into. Wagley then had the boat rush me to the closest hospital for surgery to remove two barbs that remained in me.

As we continued our trip this experience led him to recall other incidents over his many years in the Amazon working with Brazil's public health service (SESP) during World War II, and reflect on the dangers of life in the region for all those living in isolated communities far from medical care. His concern for my well-being was palpable, and I later learned at the Goeldi Museum from Eduardo Galvão – Wagley's student and research companion for many years – that Wagley himself had been near death from malaria when Galvão arrived carrying life-saving medicine. Wagley had never told me about this, but indeed black and white pictures taken by Galvão showed an emaciated, very ill Wagley, unrecognizable from any pictures before or after.

After returning from our Amazon trip, I watched as Wagley developed the Florida program on Amazonian Studies over the next few years. After I had completed my PhD and left Florida, the program's name was changed to the Tropical Conservation and Development Program as it expanded its scope. The program built up an impressive team of researchers to address both social and ecological questions in the region. Through the hard work of Wagley and his successors, it attracted substantial funding from many sources and became what is arguably the world's best place to do interdisciplinary work on Amazonia. Guided by



Wagley's keen insights, the program has provided first-rate research and training to scores of graduates to assist rain forest peoples and conservation efforts.

My ties to Wagley did not end with graduation. As a young faculty member at Indiana University, Wagley was generous in coming to Bloomington several times, and in each visit sharing his thoughts on the future of the Amazon. Like so many before me, I was always challenged by Wagley to think ahead of what the discipline was currently concerned with. His perspective inspired the creation of the Anthropological Center for Training and Research on Global Environmental Change (ACT) at Indiana University – the first center in the US dedicated to human dimensions of global change – and the Center for the Study of Institutions, Population and Environmental Change (CIPEC) which I co-founded and co-directed with Elinor Ostrom from 1996-2006. Both of these centers were ambitious in their agendas, ACT focusing largely on the Amazon and founded the year after Wagley passed away, and CIPEC on the Western Hemisphere to examine how community organization and resource use patterns shape the condition of forests over time (Moran and Ostrom, 2005). The legacy of Wagley lives on in these two centers and I am grateful for his inspiration over the years. In retrospect, I learned from Wagley that the greatest legacy one can leave behind is to inspire young people to pursue important questions addressing social and environmental injustice. The fourteen Brazilian Ph.D.'s I have mentored at Indiana and their subsequent contributions are a testament to this inspiration. Wagley's biggest insight was that one must

always be looking to the future and how to change it, so that it is more humane, more just, and more caring. The questions we ask in the academy should be about what matters to people as individuals and families.

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