

ALFRED METRAUX

(1902-1963)

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Alfred Metraux died in Paris on April 12, 1963. He was, in my opinion, the world's foremost authority on the South American Indian. His work and interests, however, ranged widely into other fields and other geographical areas. He was an influential teacher, a tireless field researcher, a productive writer, an efficient administrator, and an imaginative planner of projects in applied social science. Above all, he was a man of great erudition. He was truly a citizen of the world. Born in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1902, he spent much of his childhood in Argentina where his father was a well known surgeon resident in Mendoza. He received his secondary and university education in Europe, at the Classical Gymnasium of Lausanne, the Ecole Nationale des Chartes in Paris, the Ecole Nationale des Langues Orientales (Diplome, 1925). The Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Diplome, 1927) and the Sorbonne (Docteur es Lettres, 1928). He also studied in Sweden, in Goteborg's Hogskola, and did research at the Goteborg Museum. Among his teachers were Marcel Mauss, Paul Rivet, and Erland von Nordenskiold. While he was still a student he entered into correspondence with Father John Cooper who introduced him to the American school of cultural anthropology. It is said that Father Cooper did not realize at first that his scholarly correspondent was only 19 and 20 years old. They actually met much later, when Metraux came to the United States; but Father Cooper seems to have had considerable influence on Alfred Metraux's thought. Metraux combined in his work the best of both the European and the American tradition of historical anthropology.

His professional career was equally cosmopolitan. He founded and was the first director (1928 – 1934) of the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Tucuman (Argentina). In 1934-35, he led a French expedition to Easter Island, and in 1936 –38, he was a Fellow of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. In 1939, he returned to Argentina and Bolivia for field research on a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 1940, upon his return to the United States from South America, he was in residence at Yale University with a renewal of his Guggenheim Fellowship. That next year, he worked with the Cross Cultural Survey (now the Human Relations Area Files) on South American data and was associated with such people as John Dollard, Leonard Bloomfield, and others of the Institute of Human Relations. In 1941, he joined the staff of the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution. There, from 1941 to 1945, he played an important role in producing the monumental *Handbook of South American Indians*. Perhaps no other writer contributed as many pages to this work. As the editor, Julian Steward, acknowledges, "The extent of his (Metraux's) contribution is by no means indicated by the large number of articles appearing under his name. With an unsurpassed knowledge of South American ethnology and ever generous of his time, his advice and help to the editor and contributors alike have been a major factor in the successful

completion of the work.” (Vol. I, p.9). In addition, Alfred Metraux taught briefly at the University of California, Berkeley (1938), the Escuela Nacional de Anthropologia, Mexico (1943), the Colegio de Mexico (1943), and the Facultad Latino-Americana de Ciencias Sociales, Santiago, Chile (1959-60). At the time of his death, he was Professor of South American Anthropology at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris.

In the early spring of 1945, Alfred Metraux went to Europe as a member of the United States Bombing Survey and he saw the physical and moral desolation of Europe. Although he had by then become a citizen of the United States, this experience seems to have reaffirmed, in a way, his traditional ties with Europe. It also strengthened his belief in the necessity for European unity and for the need of a firm basis for international, inter-cultural, and inter-racial understanding. His early view of war devastated Europe was important in his decision in 1946 to take a post on the secretariat of the United Nations. Thus, from 1946 until 1962, he worked for his ideals of international and inter-cultural understanding within the framework of international organization with only occasional excursions into academic life and into anthropological field research.

In 1946 and 1947, he was a member of the Department of Social Affairs of the United Nations, but in 1947 he was assigned to UNESCO, and finally, in 1950, he became a permanent member of UNESCO's Department of Social Science. As an international civil servant, he served the world and his profession well. He took part in the Hylean Amazon project in 1947-1948; he led the UNESCO Marbial Valley (Haiti) anthropological survey from 1948 to 1950; with personnel from the international Labor Office, he studied the internal migrations of the Aymara and Quechua Indians in Peru and Bolivia (1954). He edited the series of pamphlets on *The Race Question and Modern Thought* and *The Race Question and Modern Science*, published by UNESCO since 1950. He also organized the research that led to a series of volumes on race relations in Brazil, such as “*As relacues raciais entre negros e brancos em Sao Paulo*,” edited by Roger Bastide and Florestan Fernandes (Sao Paulo, 1955), *Race and Class in Rural Brazil*, edited by Charles Wagley (UNESCO, Paris, 1952), and others. At UNESCO, he was responsible for the participation of anthropologists in many important projects around the world, and he consistently emphasized the anthropological point of view in all of the many programs with which he was associated. Anthropology has lost not only a productive scholar, but an effective translator of anthropological theory and knowledge into action.

I first met Alfred Metraux in 1939 when he was teaching at Yale University. I hoped after completing my doctoral dissertation to undertake field research in South America, perhaps in the Gran Chaco, perhaps in Brazil. My knowledge of South American ethnography was scanty, for South America was somewhat of an ethnographic “dark continent” at the time; the data were scarce and were published in Spanish,, Portuguese, Italian, French, and German. I arrived in New Haven just before Metraux was to lecture. That day he discussed the work of the 18th century Jesuit, Sanchez Labrador (*El Paraguay catolico*) of whom I had never heard. Before the day was over, I had heard of, and was armed with a long bibliography on the Chaco and on Brazilian Indians. I also met through Metraux that day a graduate student at Yale, a man about my own age named Allan Holmberg, who under Metraux's guidance was also determined to do field research in South America. At first, I was attracted by Metraux's invitation to join forces with him and to work in the Argentine Chaco; but then out of his notes, he

recommended the Tapirape, a Tupi tribe of Central Brazil, which Boron von Nordenskiöld suspected to be the remnants of the now extinct Tupinamba (which they turned out not to be).

In any case, I sailed on the SS ARGENTINA in January 1939, in the company of Alfred Metraux – he, on his way to Argentina, and I to Brazil. The 12 days aboard ship before reaching Rio de Janeiro were instructive and delightful for a younger anthropologist. Metraux talked of South American anthropological problems; briefed me on conditions in the field and on people whom I would meet and upon whom I would depend. He gave me letters of introduction to several people. He was well known in Brazil for his scholarly studies of the Tupinamba, based on early sources. In his two days in Rio de Janeiro, he introduced me to colleagues at the Museu Nacional, which was to be my research base for many years to come. Thus began a rich professional association and friendship which lasted from 1939 until his death. I use these personal reminiscences to illustrate something about the man. He was able, out of his own enthusiasm for his subject and his work, to impart enthusiasm to others. And his influence extended internationally. Florestan Fernandes, the well known Brazilian sociologist whose own brilliant studies of the Tupinamba derive from and develop Metraux's earlier works, glows when he tells of the dinner he cooked himself for "*O Mesire Metraux.*" One constantly encounters anthropologists from Latin America and Europe whose careers have been influenced by Alfred Metraux – and yet he spent so little time in formal teaching.

Alfred Metraux field ethnography more than theory. He let the facts speak for themselves, and many of his facts modified anthropological theory. Yet, one felt that he was too restless and too eager to be on his way to produce detailed and lengthy field reports such as those of Curt Nimuendaju on the Brazilian Ge. He was a sensitive field worker with many years of experience, and his articles on the Argentine Chaco and his book on Haitian Vodun indicate that he gathered careful and objective data in the field. He liked to think of himself as a field ethnologist. Any evening with him led to stories of nights around a fire with Argentine *gauchos*, his last stay with the semi-pacified Kayapo of Brazil, his period of residence on Easter Island, a Haitian vodun ceremony, or a *candomble* ceremony in Bahia which he had attended with his friend Pierre Verger. The truth is, I suppose, that Alfred Metraux was also a romantic who valued the human experiences field research can bring to an anthropologist.

His great strength was, in my opinion, syntheses and historical research. His two books and many articles on the Tupinamba, based on reports by 16th and 17th century chroniclers, are classics. His studies of Argentine, Paraguayan and Bolivian tribes are often based more on historical sources than on field work; and he often was the only person to know the obscure data on an extinct tribe. In other words, he was fundamentally a scholar, but a scholar willing and able to undertake the tedious work of empirical historical and field research. A man of his erudition and knowledge of European languages (he wrote well in French, Spanish, and English) would be hard to find in anthropology today. As one might well imagine, with Metraux's talents and interests, he was often irked by some of his mundane obligations as a staff member of UNESCO. But, in fact, he performed them well and efficiently. He was an inveterate world traveler. He was always plotting how to relieve himself of administrative duties, but always accepted the obligations of new projects and programs. In recent years, he

wrote his books and articles at night and on weekends. He had looked forward to teaching and “pure” research after his retirement from UNESCO in 1962 and two students from Paris were waiting for him in Paraguay to undertake field work among the Guayaki when he died.

Alfred Metraux was married three times. Each of his wives was in a different way a scientific collaborator. His first wife, Eva Spiro Metraux, translated anthropological materials from English to French. His second wife, Rhoda Bubendey Metraux did research with him in Mexico, Argentina, and Haiti and is today a well known anthropologist. More recently, he married Fernande Schulmann who accompanied him to Chile, Peru, and Brazil and who planned to work with him in Paraguay. He is survived also by his brother Guy Metraux of Paris, his sister Ver Conne of Lausanne, and by two sons: - Eric Metraux from his first marriage, and Daniel Alfred, the son of Rhoda Metraux. He is mourned by his family, and his many friends and colleagues on two continents.¹

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