

Obituary, Gerald Weiss (1932-2021)  
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Dr. Gerald Weiss, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Florida Atlantic University (United States) – whose insightful, sensitive, and meticulous study of Ashaninka culture helped lay the empirical and theoretical groundwork for ethnographic work in the Selva Central – died in Boca Raton, Florida on April 10, 2021, aged 88. Gerald Weiss was born in the Bronx, New York City on June 29, 1932, the son of Max Weiss, a native of Iași, Romania, and Rose Knopping. He attended the Bronx High School of Science and Columbia University. In 1952, Weiss began his studies in anthropology at the University of Michigan, interrupted by two years of service in the US Army in 1954. He received a master's degree, and passed his qualifying examinations in 1958, after which he returned to New York. As he put it in a letter to an anonymous University of Michigan faculty member in September 1959, “I was confronted by the problem of selecting a culture for field-study. My difficulty lay in my total lack of preference for any particular part of the world.” In consultation, in part, with Robert Carneiro (1927-2020), an anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History, Weiss abandoned a nascent project on comparative African political systems to conduct research among the Ashaninka people of Peru.



Figure 1: Gerald Weiss working in Otika, late 1970s (courtesy of Eric Weiss)

With financial support from the National Science Foundation and the Social Sciences Research Council, Weiss arrived in Lima in late September 1960 aboard the ship Santa Margarita, spending six weeks at what he described in his diary as the “anthropologist's rallying place,” Pensión Morris in Breña. Also there were characters such as anthropologist Michael Harner (1929-2018) – already an experienced ethnographer of Jivaroan peoples and then affiliated with the American Museum of Natural History – who was about to undertake a field trip to Konibo communities. On the advice of Willard Kindberg of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), in November Weiss and his 700 kilos of equipment traveled overland to San Ramón, where he spent some two weeks before arriving by plane in early December at Puerto Ocopa. In his subsequent attempts to secure a boat, motor, and other provisions, Weiss would not settle in an Ashaninka community for another six months. Arriving in Atalaya by raft in mid-December but unable to purchase the relevant provisions, Weiss flew to Pucallpa. There he located a motor but no boat, and so he flew to Iquitos. While Weiss was traveling

along the Ucayali River in January 1961, the motor of his new boat gave out, so he returned to Iquitos, where he had it repaired and then shipped by barge to Pucallpa. He flew to meet it, not reaching Atalaya again until March, following a brief visit to Harner, who was at Imiríacocha on the Tamaya River. Again suffering from motor troubles leaving Atalaya, Weiss flew to San Ramón and then went by car to Lima to have more repairs done, ultimately reaching Atalaya by plane in April.

On May 4, 1961, Weiss was finally in a position to seek a field site on the Tambo River, leaving Atalaya with his equipment in two boats – one his own, the other belonging to a man named Trajano Izurieta – and in the company of a guide, Carlos Vásquez. After a brief visit at the home of *patrón* Carlos Ratteri, whom he felt obliged to visit, Weiss stopped in the Ashaninka community of Matobeni, where he encountered the SIL-trained schoolteacher Santos. Continuing upriver, in Anapati Weiss met an Ashaninka man named Luis Pérez, who offered to receive him, but Weiss felt the community was too close to Atalaya. He passed by Shoreni, where another SIL schoolteacher, Morán, was based, going on to the settlement of a man named Gerónimo, then to Santaro, then, again, to Puerto Ocopa, where he was received by the Mother Superior, who “seemed slightly displeased.” On May 8, Weiss returned to Gerónimo's settlement, where he would spend the next several months. Weiss's impressions there, summarized for May 10-12, represent the detail that characterizes his personal diaries and field notes.

The main hut consists of a roof on posts, under which there are 2 platforms, where the men (including visitors) tend to congregate, lying around chatting or drinking *masato*. Under the platforms (one especially) are stored mats, pots, baskets. From the roof hang various types of baskets containing things, and feather ornaments (worn down the back outside the *cushma*) and drums. In the eaves are stuck machetes, pan-pipes. Up above are stored bows and arrows and shotguns (Gerónimo has a muzzle-loader), and paddles. Depressions in the ground cradle gourds of *masato*, which is drunk with gourd bowls. The other huts are where women's work tends to be done – where the babies' hammocks are hung and rocked, where thread is spun (the spindle rotating in a small gourd bowl), where food is cooked (yucca is the staple, though maize hangs in the big hut). Water is brought up from the river in globular gourds with corncob stoppers (metal pots and utensils, and enameled plates and bowls, are present). In the hut near the big hut and the path to the river is the *masato* trough. In the farthest hut a long textile is being woven (from which a couple of *cushmas* are cut), the woof hanging from a papaya tree some 20 feet away, with 2 intermediary supports. Carrying baskets (suspended from the forehead) are used to carry the water-gourds and also yucca from the fields. [...] A couple of small chicken-coops (walled) are off a little ways.

These tumultuous months gave way to a sustained commitment to Ashaninka people that lasted many years. Gerald Weiss remained in the Tambo basin from May 1961 to September 1962, after which he spent several months as an Ogden Mills Fellow at the American Museum of Natural History. He was there again from July 1963 to August 1964, changing field sites to live at Osherato with the family of Matías Antúnez Gómez, with whom he would develop a lifelong friendship. At this time, there was no significant scholarly documentation of Ashaninka ways of life. In this context, Weiss's goal was “to investigate all aspects of the culture [...] collecting the data needed for a thorough and precise description of that culture in its entirety” (Weiss 1969:4). As a consequence, Weiss's work is incredibly wide-ranging, and, as such, is of great value to current and future generations. It encompasses not only his doctoral research on cosmology, but also regional history, genealogy, numerous aspects of material cultural (e.g., manufacture, subsistence), kinship, language, and the collection of specimens for ethnobiological investigation, together with material cultural objects. While Weiss's publication record related to Ashaninka culture is modest (see Weiss 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1980, 1983, 1985, 2005), his unpublished materials are extensive, including manuscripts, diaries, notes,

file slips, correspondence, sound recordings of stories and songs, and thousands of photographs.<sup>1</sup> The copious diaries and notes reflect the rich (and sometimes painful) activity of daily life, and the beliefs and practices that imbue it. In particular, Weiss's contributions to the documentation of the Ashaninka language are unique. For example, his collaborations with biologists and botanists from the Systematic Entomology Laboratory to the Field Museum have resulted in a degree of precision in the lexical documentation of Ashaninka that is unusual in the documentation of indigenous languages (see Figure 2, which also illustrates his documentation of the functions of plants, and dialectal variation).

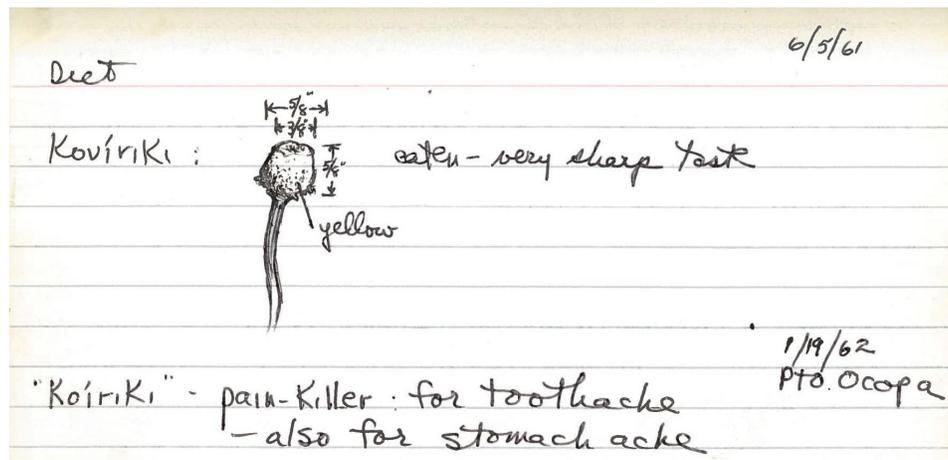


Figure 2: File slip documenting *kobiriki* (*Acmella oleracea*), June 5, 1961 (courtesy of the California Language Archive)

In 1964, Weiss took a position as a professor of anthropology at Florida Atlantic University, where he remained until his retirement in 2002. During this time he was active in union affairs, being variously vice president and president of the local chapter of the United Faculty of Florida. In September 1976, Weiss received a grant that released him from his teaching duties, which allowed him to assemble an exhibition of Ashaninka material cultural objects at the university (see Riordan 1976), an example of the regular incorporation of South American indigenous cultures into his teaching. The spirit behind his ethnographic work is evident in an interview about the exhibition (Harakas 1976).

"We (westerners) have always had a strong impulse to impose our way of life on someone else [...] Why must we crush everything into a single mold? Why must we homogenize all existence?"

With his then wife Sara and his daughter Ana (and sometimes alone), Weiss returned to the Tambo basin from September to November 1977, July to December 1978, and September to November 1980, living again with the family of Matías Antúnez in the newly founded community of Otika. After the 1977 trip, he was so alarmed by the changes he observed from the intervening years that he designed and taught a course for the spring 1978 term titled "American Destiny." The spirit behind the course is similarly evident in an interview (Sonsky 1978; see also Weiss 1977).

"The impression one gets now is that history is repeating itself in South America – the same history that occurred in North America a century ago... It is occurring there just now with the governmental opening of the greater interior of the Amazon basin. The result is, we find these Indian

<sup>1</sup> Paper materials, sound recordings, and photographs will be archived with the California Language Archive (University of California, Berkeley). Material cultural objects will be repatriated to the Museo Nacional de la Cultura Peruana.

tribes in jeopardy.”

After 1980, the activities of the Shining Path made it infeasible for Weiss to return regularly to the Tambo basin. Indeed, in one letter written from Sheboja on April 22, 1991, Matías Antúnez says “todos estamos en esta comunidad emos benido como refujido emos salido de Otica porque ha entrado los senderos [sic].” Weiss did not return until 2009, accompanied by his son, Eric.

Gerald Weiss's work is embedded in an early period of anthropological research conducted in Ashaninka communities of the Selva Central and adjoining regions, alongside that of John Bodley, whose fieldwork began in 1968 (Bodley 1970:v), John Elick (1919-2000), beginning in 1951 (Elick 1969:xiii), William Denevan, and Stefano Varese, who, in March 1964, turning off his motor headed down the Tambo River and hearing Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* in the distance, encountered the “genteel and brilliant” Weiss, “[a] thin young man [who] received [him] with the dignity of someone who has lived many months in isolation from his own culture and in the liminal space of another that is just beginning to be revealed” (Varese 2020:88). This period, as illustrated above, was one in which research projects of this sort were considerably more difficult than similar ones today. Nevertheless, Weiss's approach embodies a breadth of scholarship that was unusual then and is even more unusual today. Notably for the time, he profiled his Ashaninka teachers in the presentation of his observations of their way of life (Weiss 1969:10-14): Sabarojani, his wife, Jebayoki, her foster parents, Shariti and Komempe, and Sabarojani's half-brother Kenchori, Porekabanti, Shirikonka, Komitya, and Mariti. This obituary is dedicated to them. Gerald Weiss is survived by his daughter, Ana, and his son, Eric.

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