

Obituary Charles Leslie (1923-2009)

Charles Miller Leslie, one of the architects of contemporary medical anthropology and recipient of last year's Society for Medical Anthropology Career Achievement Award, died on August 15, 2009 at the age of 85. Charles played a pivotal role in building a transnational community of medical anthropologists through his efforts as editor of *Social Science & Medicine* and of the University of California medical anthropology book series. He organized historic conferences on Asian Medicine which led to prominent edited volumes among which the pioneering *Asian medical systems* (1976) and *Paths to Asian medical knowledge* (1992, co-edited with Allan Young). He was tireless in his efforts to engage scholars from anthropology and allied disciplines in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia in dialogue about subjects such as local medical traditions and medical pluralism. Charles was the co-founder and Secretary General of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Asian Medicine (which offers an annual award in his name) and served as president of the Society for Medical Anthropology. In 1992 he received the Distinguished Service Award from the American Anthropological Association.

Charles was born in Arkansas and served as a pilot in the US Army Air Corps during WW II. Following the war, he went on to receive his B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Chicago. During his academic career, he taught at University of Minnesota (1954-55), Pomona College (1956-65), Case Western Reserve (1966-67), New York University (1967-1976) and University of Delaware from 1976 until his retirement in 1991. Charles helped mentor scores of young anthropologists and was a visiting professor at several universities. Following retirement, Charles moved to Bloomington, Indiana where he became an adjunct professor at the University of Indiana.

In 1990, he wrote an editorial in *Social Science & Medicine* that debunked a in his view racist article in the same journal by J. Philippe Rushton and Anthony F. Bogaert on sexual behaviour and HIV incidence. Criticizing co-editors of his own journal for publishing this article was politically risky, but a stand Charles felt was called for by anthropologists. Silence was not an option.

Charles' fieldwork and major publications address the worldview of Zapotec villagers in Oaxaca, Mexico, comparative Asian medical systems, medical practitioners' responses to biomedicine, and the biopolitics of Ayurveda in colonial and contemporary India. During his retirement he handed over his research materials on Ayurvedic medicines to Maarten Bode from the University of Amsterdam who wrote his dissertation on the production and commodification of these medicines. Charles became an adviser to this project. The gesture was typical for Charles' collegial sense of scholarship.

In the last years of his life, Charles wrote a book about his friendship and correspondence with Donald Ray Wallace, an inmate on Indiana's death row. The letters provide a shocking picture of the spiritual and social void in American prisons. He wrote: "They demonstrate the way our justice system may incarcerate a confused twenty-one year old and, some twenty years later, execute a very different man."

Charles is survived by his wife Zelda, his sons Mario and Sam, his daughter Mira, and four grandchildren. For those who want to learn more about Charles' extraordinary work in medical anthropology, a Festschrift was published in his honour in 2002, edited by Mark Nichter and Margaret Lock: *New horizons in medical anthropology*.

Charles will be remembered for his invaluable contribution to medical anthropology but also for his generosity, kindness, intellectual engagement, and attentiveness to social justice. He was always the gentleman, but stood up for what he believed in, be it in the summer of 1964 when he worked in the civil rights movement in Mississippi, or when he confronted racism masquerading as science.

Mark Nichter and Sjaak van der Geest