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Eric R. Wolf, 76, an Iconoclastic Anthropologist

By ROBERT McG. THOMAS Jr.

Eric R. Wolf, an accidental anthropologist whose cultural studies of Latin American peoples and European peasants helped enrich an already eclectic field even as he challenged some established cultural assumptions, died on Sunday at his home in Irvington, N.Y. He was 76 and had taught at Lehman College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

The cause was liver cancer, his family said.

For someone who had had an intense fascination with the sometimes striking cultural differences of diverse peoples since his grade school days in polyglot Vienna and his teen-age years in strife-torn Sudetenland, Dr. Wolf -- whose father was Austrian and mother Russian -- did not immediately see anthropology as his natural academic outlet.

Even after he came to the United States with his parents and settled in Jackson Heights, Queens, Dr. Wolf, whose father had operated a textile factory in the Sudetenland before the 1938 Nazi takeover, saw biology as the best bet to explain human differences.

But after enrolling in Queens College planning to major in biochemistry, he stumbled into an anthropology class one day and realized that the broad field embraced just about everything he was interested in, which was just about everything about every aspect of the human experience.

After interrupting his education to serve with the Army in the Alps in World War II, Dr. Wolf received a degree in anthropology in 1946 and went on to Columbia University on the G.I. bill, receiving a doctorate in 1951.

Before joining City University in 1971 as a distinguished professor, he had brief teaching stints at the University of Illinois, the University of Virginia, Yale University and the University of Chicago and nine years as a professor at the University of Michigan.

By then he had already established his reputation as an innovative and iconoclastic academic, whose credentials included helping to organize one of the earliest Vietnam teach-ins, at Michigan in 1965.

His 1959 book about Mexico, for example, "Sons of the Shaking Earth," raised eyebrows among established anthropologists -- even as it established a fertile trend -- by drawing on archaeology, history and other alien fields to trace the diverse cultural development of Mexico. It is a reflection of the book's power, as well as of Dr. Wolf's clear and graceful writing style, that it is still used in introductory anthropology courses.

In writing the book, Dr. Wolf not only made unorthodox use of scholarship from other fields but also refined some of his own unorthodox ideas about the very nature of culture. Long seen by anthropologists as a stable set of attitudes and practices that defined various peoples and differentiated them from others, culture, as Dr. Wolf came to see it, was a far more dynamic process that involved endless practical, psychological and other reactions to changing economic and other conditions.

To Dr. Wolf, who outlined his position in a 1964 book, "Anthropology," the notion of unified and unchanging cultures amounted to little more than misleading ethnic stereotyping, sweeping generalizations that failed to notice or account for the variety of differences within a single culture.

Having concluded that established cultural anthropologists tended to neglect many nonconforming elements of a given society, Dr. Wolf helped rectify things with his 1966 book, "Peasants," which traced the common threads of peasantry in otherwise diverse European cultures.

In 1982 he developed another favorite theme, the sometimes cataclysmic impact of colonial capitalism on indigenous cultures, with "Europe and the People Without History," which tracked the impact of colonial economic expansion on less developed societies.

If Dr. Wolf was a champion of the idea that all people, even tribal societies and peasants, are equally important, he also practiced that philosophy in his life as a teacher or, as he saw himself, as a perpetual student for whom life was an endless and delightful field trip.

A brilliant man known for his charming and uncanny ability to make even ordinary people feel he was intensely interested in them, as indeed he was, Dr. Wolf was such a nurturing teacher that he was the preferred go-to guy when his students came up with brilliant but untested ideas. While other professors, they knew, might dismiss such brainstorming as harebrained, Dr. Wolf could be counted on to become as excited as they were.

Even after his retirement in 1992, Dr. Wolf, who was awarded a \$375,000 MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" in 1990, continued his quest for new answers to old questions, among them the explanation for the Nazis' rise to power.

Finding parallels between the rise of Nazi Germany and both the widespread human sacrifice by the Aztecs and the development of a frenzied tradition of Potlatch feasts in the Pacific Northwest, Dr. Wolf examined them in his last book, "Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis," published this year by the University of California Press.

Dr. Wolf, whose first marriage ended in divorce, is survived by his wife, Sydel Silverman; two sons from his first marriage, David, of Burlington, Vt., and Daniel, of Los Angeles; two stepdaughters, Eve Silverman of Wilton, Conn., and Julie Yorn of Santa Monica, Calif., and three grandchildren.

Photo: Eric R. Wolf