



Stanley J. Tambiah

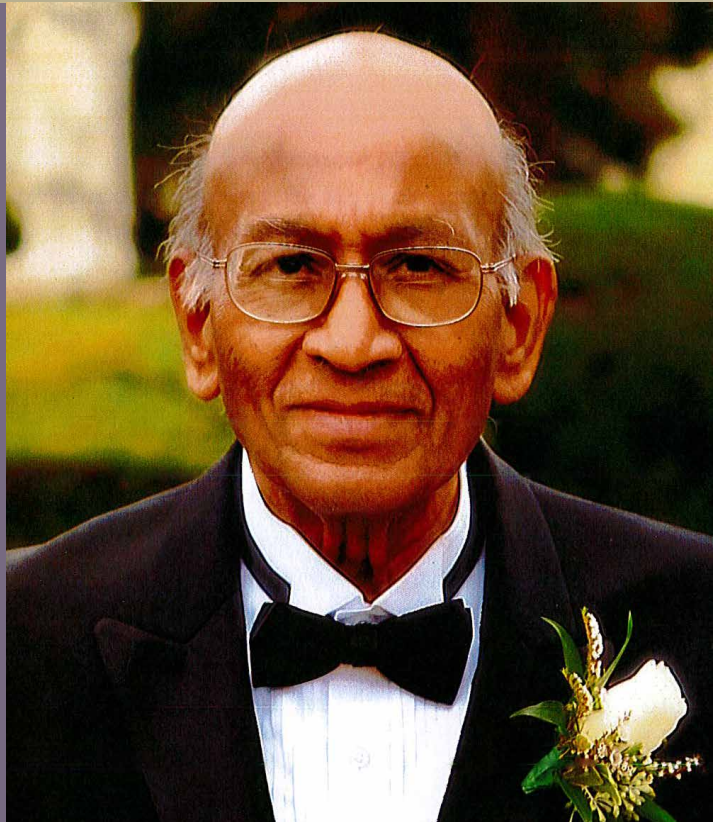
1929–2014

BIOGRAPHICAL

Memoirs

*A Biographical Memoir by
Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney*

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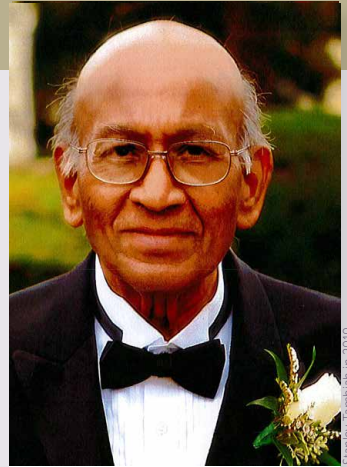
STANLEY JEYARAJA TAMBIAH

January 16, 1929–January 29, 2014

Elected to the NAS, 1994

Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, the Esther and Sidney Rabb Professor of Anthropology at Harvard University, was one of the world's leading figures in sociocultural anthropology and a major theorist in religion and in South Asian and Southeast Asian studies. He was a towering figure, intellectually and physically, with a booming baritone voice, and was a most charismatic personality who encouraged colleagues and students to call him "Tambi."

He was most successful in applying anthropological theories to enriching our understanding of the sociopolitical realities of nation-states and pressing contemporary issues. Tambiah did this with the conviction that anthropology must be firmly anchored in time and local political and historical circumstances—that is, historicized—and that the focus of ethnographic work must be located in global, but not globalized, contexts. This emphasis on current and historical circumstances led him to engage with and analyze the raging violence he witnessed in his own country of Sri Lanka as well as elsewhere in South Asia. Tambiah held these views well before the anthropology of violence took center stage in the discipline. His study of the development of ethnonationalism and violence was one of the few to point out that the seed of local violence grows from the power inequality between the local and the global, dominated by European powers and the United States.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. J. Tambiah".

By Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney

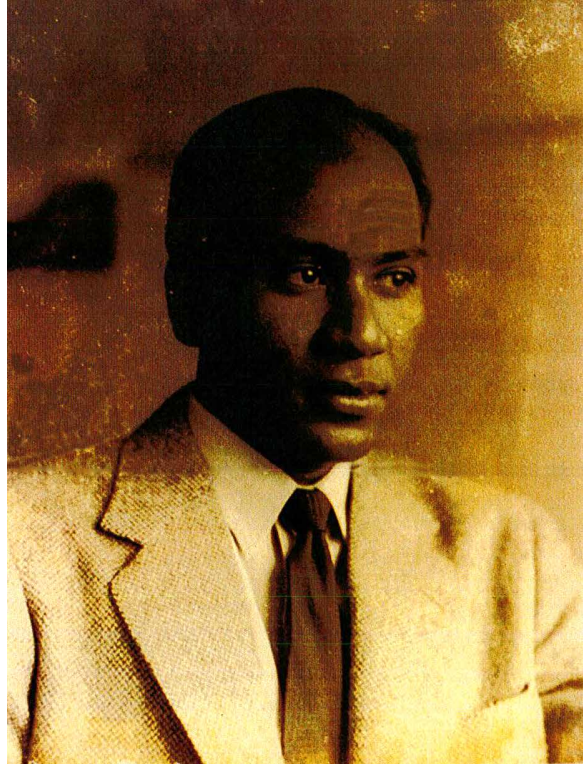
Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah in 2010.
Photograph courtesy of Jonathan Tambiah.

Tambiah never personalized his life experiences for his own gain, so although it may seem inappropriate to connect his personal life with his intellectual and professional life, there was an abiding relationship between the two. I was not his student and never worked in the same institution but was a close colleague for several decades. Once I asked him if he had acquired his superb oratorical ability at Cambridge. He replied that

instead, it was at the family dinner table at home in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

On the occasion of his receipt in 1998 of the ninth Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize—a most prestigious award for scholars of Asia—he explained his upbringing in more detail than he had elsewhere. Tambiah, one of nine children, was born in a northern province of Sri Lanka in a town called Jaffina, most of whose residents were of the minority Tamil ethnic group. He referred to his family as “Victorian”; they spoke English and were Anglican by faith. His father was a successful lawyer, belonging to a landed family that owned coconut plantations. His mother’s family came from a line of what he called “feudal district chiefs” and had inherited land and estates. He fondly described his mother as a very kind woman and a splendid cook, taking care of not only her biological children but also four others whom she and his father had adopted. Given that his family belonged to Sri Lanka’s English-educated elite, he and his siblings attended English

schools and grew up to attain upper-middle-class professions. At age 11 Tambiah entered St. Thomas College, an elite boarding school in Colombo, where he met and lived with other Tamils, as well as with Sinhalese, Burghers, and Muslims. He considered his life at St. Thomas, where he also met other Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims, most influential for his later personal and professional life. During World War II, after Singapore fell to the Japanese army, the headquarters of the Allied Forces moved from Singapore to Ceylon (as it was then called), and the school became a military hospital. Tambiah and some other students were sent to a branch opened by St. Thomas College in the mountains, where he spent an idyllic time, strolling and enjoying picnics as well as studying, far from the war and its atrocities.



Stanley Tambiah in 1954, as a graduate student at Cornell University. (Photo courtesy of Jonathan Tambiah.)

After this ideal childhood and early adulthood, however, Tambiah saw his country wracked by ethnic tension between the Sinhalese, the numerically dominant group, and the Tamils.

After this ideal childhood and early adulthood, however, Tambiah saw his country wracked by ethnic tension between the Sinhalese, the numerically dominant group, and the Tamils. After Ceylon gained independence from Britain in 1948, the new nation's government was dominated by the Sinhalese, who proceeded to adopt legislation and policies favoring their people. Thus began a decades-long reign of mutual antagonism and escalating violence between the

two ethnic groups. A severe blow to the Tamils was the imposition in 1956 of Sinhala as the national language, although Tamil was later added. As an English-speaking Tamil, Tambiah felt forced out of teaching in Sri Lanka.

With a Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1954, he became a rural sociologist using a quantitative approach. After leaving his teaching post at the University of Ceylon (1951-60), he worked as a technical assistance expert in Thailand for UNESCO till 1963. He then taught in the three best anthropology departments in the world: ten years at Cambridge University, three years at the University of Chicago, then Harvard, starting in 1976.

For Tambiah and many other young anthropologists, Edmund Leach, at Cambridge, was the most important and influential person in their field. Notwithstanding Leach's disagreement with Claude Lévi-Strauss over the issue of structure and practice (detailed in Tambiah 2002), and despite his at times combative rhetorical style, denouncing a thesis proposed by an opponent as "Rubbish!!," Leach was a most generous man who related to individuals "without status on the forehead." While he was provost at Cambridge's King's College (1966-1979), he discreetly promoted those who were not "entitled" by birth—for example, revamping the thither to unbreakable rule prohibiting women from becoming fellows, making King's the first college in the United Kingdom to do so.

Although it was Leach who brought Tambiah to Cambridge, where he had perhaps the best years of his career (1964-1973), Leach was never condescendingly nice. For example, in 1958 he published a devastatingly negative review of a statistical work by Tambiah and N. K. Sarkar that Sarkar had published the previous year. Leach and Tambiah challenged each other at times as part of an enviable lifelong professional relationship rarely seen in

academia. Tambiah's *Edmund Leach: An Anthropological Life* (2002) is a 504-page labor of love written "in dialogue with Leach, who cannot speak back now."

Leach and Tambiah brought fundamental changes to the discipline at Cambridge and to anthropology in general. First, they played a role in the paradigm shift away from the functionalism of Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, promoted by Meyer Fortes and Jack Goody, who also upheld the descent theory. Instead, Leach and Tambiah emphasized the alliance theory and introduced structuralism, although both examined structure in practice, that is, in the behaviors of individuals in social contexts. Second, the two men expanded the range of anthropological field sites from a heavy concentration on Africa and Oceania to Asia, with Leach in Burma and Tambiah in Thailand and Sri Lanka, thereby helping to develop a cadre of eminent anthropologists of Asia (beyond India) and in Latin America and Europe as well.

Tambiah's magisterial theoretical contributions have had a profound influence on anthropology in general, beyond the ambit of South and Southeast Asian scholars. For example, his Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (1990), became a standard book for most anthropologists. It is a fundamental critique of the body of Western thought that underlay the social theories of scholars, including Max Weber, which propose magic, science, and religion as stages of social evolutionary theory.

Tambiah's reputation for producing densely contextualized work on a complex Buddhist nation-state, Thailand, was primarily established through three major books—*Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (1970), *World Conquerer and World Renouncer* (1976), and *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of the Amulets* (1984). The first was the fruit of his extended stay in the rural northeast; in that book Tambiah introduced an anthropological interpretation of folk religion—that is, the Buddhism practiced by the rural residents—as genuine religion, rather than regarding it as a debased form of Buddhism. Tambiah articulated in this book his lifelong interest in myth and ritual as practice, with a focus on the power of words and how they lead to performative power in social contexts.

As the paradoxical title of the second book suggests, *World Conquerer and World Renouncer* takes a "bird's-eye view" of the Thai polity and its historical changes. The traditional Thai polity had neither a fixed center nor a bounded territory, developing inherent instability; this he named "center-oriented" and contrasted it with a "centralized" type of

society. The last of the trilogy, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of the Amulet*, is the view from the forest, following on his earlier works that provided the view from the village and the view from the capital. He focuses on the relationship between the forest monks and the polity.

Tambiah's famous theoretical model of the galactic polity, which he introduced in "The galactic polity: The structure of traditional kingdoms in Southeast Asia" in 1977 in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, was included in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action* as "The Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia" (1985). The term "galactic" comes from the concept of a mandala, in Indo-Tibetan tradition, with a core (manda) and a container or enclosing element (la). The central notion, satellites arranged around a center, characterizes Hindu-Buddhist thought and practice on a number of levels. He argued (1985:259):

...[T]his is I hope a novel argument, that cosmological idiom together with its grandeur and imagery, if read correctly, can be shown to be a realistic reflection of the political pulls and pushes of these center-oriented but centrifugally fragmenting polities. In this instance myth and reality are closer than we think.

He further clarified (1985:280-281):

The galactic polity as a totalization is not, as I have indicated, a smooth and harmonious entity but one ridden with paradoxes and even contradictions. If it represents man's imposition of a conception upon the world, it is also a reflection of the contours of the politico-economic reality. The rhetoric and ritual display of the exemplary center and divine kingship is frequently deflated by perennial rebellions and sordid succession disputes at the capital, and defections and secessions at the periphery.

The pulsating galactic polities, he wrote, are "not timeless entities but historically grounded" (1985:281). In Thailand the galactic polity was taken over during the nineteenth century when the Chakri kings introduced a centralized polity in Bangkok.

In addition to its relevance to South and Southeast Asian societies, with their high civilizations, very long histories, and complex polities, the galactic model addresses the perennial and extremely important question of the role of religious/symbolic power. This question remains more than relevant for today's nation-states, even in the contemporary polity of the United States, where President Barack Obama ends his speeches, "God Bless

You” and “God Bless America,” and where the symbolic power of the Confederate flag, with its multiple meanings and dynamic changes, recently took center stage. We must critically re-evaluate Friedrich Schiller’s “disenchantment of the world,” made famous by Weber, while taking account of Tambiah’s proposition of “multiple modernities”—that is, that there are multiple modes of modernity—instead of seeing only a unilinear road toward increasing rationality, which characterizes the Western modernity as conceived by Weber, among others (2000).

Beyond his contribution to theory, Tambiah’s contribution to our efforts to understand the realpolitik, past and present, also looms large. As is most evident in *Leveling Crowds* (1996), his work was rooted in a passionate concern with social and political injustice and inequality. Locating the “local” in historical and global contexts, he understood that the rise of ethnonationalism and the resultant violence at the local level ultimately derives from political inequality in global contexts. His goal was to find “plausible and coherent answers” to the question of why ethnicity and ethnonationalism (or subnationalism) have been, always and ubiquitously, “potent bases for collective mobilization...powerfully at work in many modern contexts at a time when global processes of modernization and homogenization are alleged to be dominant currents” (Tambiah 1996b:138). He identified the root cause, imperialism, and how it prompts ethnonational resistance:

The liberal democracy at home in Western Europe and the United States could assume the fierce shape of authoritarian rule abroad, the exploitation of native labor and resources, and the inferiorization, if not erosion, of the cultures of the colonized. This inferiorization and threat of cultural extinction in large part lies behind the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, Buddhist “nationalism,” Hindu nationalism, and other such reactions, and their retaliatory attitude to Western economic affluence and domination, political supremacy, alleged consumerist values, celebration of sexual eroticism, erosion of family durability, alleged “privatization” of religion and separation of religion from affairs of state, and so on (Tambiah 1996a:14).

Virulent forces of various “nationalisms,” Tambiah asserted, have arisen as a result of the authoritarian rule executed by nations that supposedly espouse liberal democracy but have a history of subordinating other peoples, rather than due to, say, the theological basis of Islamic fundamentalism. Tambiah’s stance harks back to Leach’s (1966) warning in reference to the “Christmas bombing,” in which a powerful bomb was placed in a coin

locker at La Guardia Airport in New York on December 29, 1975. Leach emphasized how the West demonizes terrorists as dog-headed cannibals (as in Pope Gregory IX's depiction of Mongol princes), while mass killings, such as the dropping of the atomic bombs, are sanctioned as legitimate acts for national interests by the heads of governments, like a president of the United States.

Tambiah's contribution in the field of religious studies is monumental in both scope and theoretical vigor. Though reared as an Anglican, he concentrated his research on Buddhism, although he extended his study in Thailand (1984) to a comparative study of religions, including “*some* [sic] Christians, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions” (2013). Interested in “the travels of Buddha statues, such as those of the Sinhala Buddha or the Emerald Buddha Jewel, [that] provide a chain or genealogy of kingdoms and polities that these statues have legitimated” (2013:50), he focused on how religious images—amulets, talismans, and relics—were “recognized as permanent embodiments of virtue and power” and “helped provide their temporary possessors with legitimation, and at the same time embodied a genealogy of kingship by serving as the common thread that joined a succession of kings and polities with separate identities” (2013:50).

His interest in religion and polity led him to confront the political situation of his own beloved country, torn by conflicts and tensions. His key books, *Ethnic Fratricide* and *Dismantling of Democracy and Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (1992), represent this courageous and passionate endeavor. *Ethnic Fratricide* is unavailable in Sri Lanka, and *Buddhism Betrayed?* is banned outright. In these books Tambiah offers a detailed study of how Buddhism's nonviolent philosophy was violated through ethnic conflict and collective violence. Tracing the historical processes of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflicts, which he experienced firsthand, offers a way to understand the long-term history. It is a plea for an end to hostilities (which did abate toward the end of his life). He advocated multiculturalism and tolerance and sharing of political power, rather than centralized government.

Studying individuals in northeast Thailand and the materiality of their relics, talismans, and images, Tambiah ultimately connected what he learned to global political inequality, while critically addressing the contributions by Marcel Mauss on mana, Karl Marx's fetishism, and Max Weber's charisma and legitimacy. He focused on myth and ritual: words, not as frozen texts but as behavior, with power for social action. This was part of a response and development among British anthropologists, whose concern had been observable behavior, to the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, with his almost exclusive

emphasis on myths—that is, texts. Victor Turner and others focused on the behavioral counterpart of myth—that is, ritual. Although Tambiah’s well-known article, “Animals are Good to Think and Good to Prohibit” (1969) is somewhat Lévi-Straussian, he consistently pushed the inquiry further, emphasizing the power of words in social action, as in his “The Magical Power of Words” (his Malinowski Memorial Lecture), in “A Performative Approach to Ritual” (his Radcliffe-Brown lecture), and in *Culture, Thought and Social Action* (1985).

Tambiah’s fascination with people and their behavior was without limit. For example, when we once had lunch together at a restaurant near the Sorbonne, a group of young people from Poland came into the restaurant and he virtually leapt from his seat to go and initiate conversations with them. In 1994, while we were attending a conference in Japan, Professor Miyata Noboru, a well-known Japanese folklorist/anthropologist, arranged a post-conference tour for us. In Oku-Nikkō region Tambiah thoroughly enjoyed a hot-spring in an inn. We visited Nikkō Tōshōgū, where Tokugawa Iyeyasu, the most powerful shogun, is enshrined, and Tambiah posed for a snapshot in front of a poster on which the three monkeys—“See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil”—were painted (the theme was self-mockery by the folk who suffered harsh censorship under Iyeyasu). On the busy streets of Asakusa and Shibuya, Tambiah was all eyes and ears, thoroughly amazed by hundreds of young couples walking while holding hands, and exclaimed that this was “the dating capital of the world.”

Although some of his immediate students are now leading figures in anthropology, a few becoming fellows of the British Academy, he seems to have had a sense of mission to extend his generosity and professional capital to others in the field, including those without “blue blood.” He selflessly nominated them to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was quite involved in professional organizations, taking leading roles, such as the vice-president of the Association for Asian Studies for 1988-89 (serving as its president the following year) and as a member of the National Research Council’s Committee for International Conflict Resolution (1995). His election to the most prestigious honorary societies include being named a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1984), a member of the National Academy of Sciences (1994), and a corresponding foreign fellow of the British Academy (2000). Among the awards he received are the Curl Bequest Prize (1964) and the Huxley Memorial Medal (1997), both from the Royal Anthropological Institute; the Balzan Prize (1997); and the Fukuoka Asian Academic Prize (1998). Although the Balzan Prize is given to scholars in the “fields of humanities, natural sciences, culture, as well as for endeavours for peace and the



Stanley Tambiah at the time he received the Fukuoka Asian Academic Prize, 1998.

brotherhood of man,” Tambiah is perhaps the only social anthropologist to have received it. The Fukuoka Prize is for those who have made outstanding contributions to academia, the arts, and the cultures of Asia.

The honorary degrees he received include Doctor of Letters, Jaffna University, Sri Lanka, 1980; Doctor of Humane Letters, University of Chicago, 1991; and Doctor of Letters, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, 1991. He delivered nearly 20 distinguished lectures. They include the Malinowski Memorial Lecture, London School of Economics, 1968; Radcliffe-Brown Memorial Lecture, British Academy, 1979; Radhakrishnan Memorial Lectures, Oxford University, 1982; Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture, Cambridge University, 1982; Lew Henry Morgan Memorial Lectures, University of Rochester, 1984; Fifth Sri Lanka Endowment Fund Lecture, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1987; Distinguished Lecture, American Ethnological Association, 1988; Presidential Address,

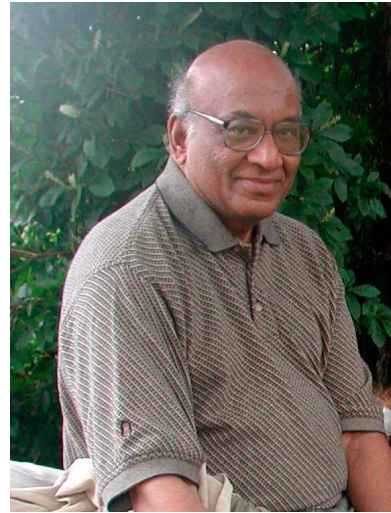
Association for Asian Studies, 1990; Daryll Forde Memorial Lecture, University College London, 1991; Punitham Tiruchelvam Memorial Lecture, International Center for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 1992; Hilldale Lecture, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1996; Huxley Memorial Lecture, Royal Anthropological Institute, London, 1997. Mary Keatinge Das Lecture, Columbia University, 1999.

Toward the end of his life Tambiah suffered acute pain from numerous physical problems. Once, he told me that it was partly due to his intensive playing of cricket. To cheer him up I made occasional calls at his apartment and then at the Neville

health-care facility in Cambridge, but even talking on the phone became increasingly painful for him, and we could no longer engage in sustained conversations. We were able, however, to discuss a request by *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* to reprint his “The galactic polity in Southeast Asia,” which was finalized thanks to his son, Jonathan Tambiah. His former students who remained in the Cambridge area and his colleagues extended warm collegiality till the end, as is shown in his festschrift, *Radical Egalitarianism: Local Realities, Global Relations*, edited by Felicity Aulino and Tambiah and published in 2013. Tambiah himself contributed a 50-page article, “The Charisma of Saints and the Cult of Relics, Amulets, and Tomb Shrines,” in which he expanded his earlier work on Thailand to compare Buddhism with other religions.

Tambiah died on January 29, 2014. He is survived by his two sons—Jonathan of Cambridge and Mathew of Boston—and Jonathan’s wife, Tina, and their son, Logan.

Jonathan works for the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, which is responsible for allocating federal and state funds to builders to construct affordable housing. Mathew works as an educational consultant. Tambiah was very proud of the professions they chose, as he once told me. His former wife, Mary H. Tambiah, had a long and successful career as a senior principal gifts officer at Boston University. His sole surviving sibling, his sister Beechi Appadurai, and numerous nieces and nephews are in Sri Lanka; many other relatives are in the United States, Australia, and England.



Tambiah in August, 2001,
in Wakefield, Rhode Island.
(Photo by Mariza Peirano.)

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