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Continuity, integration and expanding horizons

Stanley J. Tambiah
(interviewed by Mariza Peirano)

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Stanley J. Tambiah is the Esther and Sidney Rabb Professor of Anthropology at Harvard University. He received his undergraduate education at the University of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and his Ph.D. from Cornell University (1954). Having served as a UNESCO technical assistance expert in Thailand from 1960 to 1963, he joined the faculty at the University of Cambridge, where he taught for ten years, and was a Fellow of King's College. He went to the University of Chicago in 1973 as a tenured professor, and joined Harvard University in 1976.

Tambiah began his field work in Sri Lanka (1956-59), the island of his birth, and since 1960 has concentrated on Thailand, about which country he has written three monographs. Since 1983, he has revived his interest in Sri Lanka, whose disastrous ethnic conflict has engaged him. He is the author of the following books: *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand* (1970), *World Conqueror and World Renouncer. A study of Religion and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (1976), *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets. A study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism and Millennial Buddhism* (1984), *Culture, Thought and Social Action* (1985), *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (1986), *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (1990), *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (1992). His most recent book is entitled *Leveling Crowds. Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* and appeared in the fall of 1996.

Tambiah served as the president of the Association for Asian Studies (1989-90), is a fellow of the National Academy of Sciences (1994), and a member of the National Research Council's Committee for International Conflict Resolution (1995). He was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters by the University of Chicago in 1991.

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The conversation recorded here took place on the 26th of November of 1996 at the William James Hall, Harvard University, soon after Stanley Tambiah's return from a trip to Brazil, where he delivered one of principal conferences at the XXth ANPOCS Meeting, Caxambu, Minas Gerais (see his 'Conflito etnonacionalista e violência coletiva no sul da Ásia', *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, vol. 12, n. 34: 5-24). Tambiah revised the transcription of the conversation, and provided the title and many of the references contained in the text. A Portuguese translation has just appeared in *Mana*, vol. 3 (2): 199-219, 1997.

INTROITO

Stanley Tambiah

This new book [*Leveling Crowds*, 1996] puts together and explores new areas of inquiry, especially those relating to the generation and rise of collective violence as a mode of conducting politics today. It brings together my thinking about these issues over the last few years.

Mariza Peirano

I was reading 'Intellectual Roots', which you wrote for the book edited by Robert Borofsky,¹ and I notice that in all places you've been there were always important exchanges and dialogues (Leach, Goody, Michael Silverstein, Sahlins etc.) but when you arrive at Harvard, they disappear...

Tambiah

When I came to Harvard in 1976, I already had in mind certain matters to develop on my own; I had digested a number of intellectual influences through time, and I was now ready to synthesize my own perspective in an autonomous mode, so to say... By the way, do you remember, some time ago I showed you that essay on analogy and identity relations, which is a continuation of an old theme of mine?² It is now in print,³ and I have received so far only the hardcover. It is due to be in paperback, too. This other book has an essay by me too.⁴

¹ Tambiah published two autobiographical texts in the last decade: the first is the Epilogue to *Sri Lanka. Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*, The University of Chicago Press, 1986, with a title 'Biographical Interweavings' (:129-46); the second is 'Intellectual Roots', which follows his article 'The Politics of identity', published in Robert Borofsky's , *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, McGraw-Hill, 1994.

² 'Relations of analogy and identity. Toward multiple orientations to the world'. Manuscript.

³ Oolson, David & Nancy Torrance (eds.) *Modes of Thought. Explorations in Culture and Cognition*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁴ Edwin N. Wilmsen & Patrick McAllister (eds.) *The Politics of Difference. Ethnic Premises in a World of Power*. The University of Chicago Press, 1996. The essay by Tambiah is on pages 124-43, with the title 'The Nation-state in Crisis and the Rise of Ethnonationalism'.

THE INTERVIEW

MP. There is one main question I want to ask you, which I may phrase this way: given your broad education, just when did you realize you had become an anthropologist?

Tambiah

At Cornell, I was in a Ph.D. program which was a combination of sociology, anthropology and social psychology. This was soon after World War II, and many departments at that time began by combining these disciplines, and later separated out. My main identity at that stage when I got my Ph.D. was that of a sociologist. And my principal teacher at Cornell was Robin Williams, a sociologist, who was himself a student of Talcott Parsons, and was associated with Robert Merton, and other sociologists of that school. But anthropology was one of my fields, and I did take a lot of anthropology as well. My dissertation was on Sri Lanka, in a combined sociological and anthropological mode.

MP. Which of your books is the dissertation?

Tambiah

My dissertation was never published, but it began as a project under the supervision of a sociologist called Bryce Ryan. He came to Sri Lanka after the end of the second world war at the time I entered the university of Ceylon. He was an American who was invited to Sri Lanka to start the sociology department. For the first time sociology and anthropology were being taught at the university. I was reading economics as an undergraduate, and majoring in sociology. Bryce Ryan also came from Harvard, he had been a student of Parsons and a contemporary of Merton. I did fieldwork in Sri Lanka, and I was interested, at that stage, partially under the influence of Bryce Ryan, in Robert Redfield's scheme labeled the 'folk-urban continuum', which he had developed interestingly out of his experience in Mexico. And later Redfield became interested in Indian (South Asian) civilization as well. My dissertation was based on a study of three communities, which were situated at different distances from Colombo, the capital city and the most urban: one community was closer to it, one further up country in the tea plantation area, and the last one still further out in the new area opened up for peasant resettlement and colonization. The study compared the communities with regard to certain

attitudes elicited from formal questionnaires, supplemented by some participant observation. The objective was to place the communities on the folk-urban continuum as Redfield had defined it, and to test Redfield's own hypothesis. The study was never published though there is an article written by me and Bryce Ryan that came out in the *American Sociological Review*.⁵ I did write subsequently some articles on peasant colonization, which again are little known to the profession, but are listed in my CV.⁶

When did I become an anthropologist...? I would imagine the fateful year was around 1955/56, when after I came back to Sri Lanka from Cornell, I started doing some fieldwork. It was in collaboration with an economist, who was also a statistician (N.K. Sarkar), and we did in the Kandy area of Sri Lanka a survey of the economic conditions: land tenure, lord tenant relationships, and landholding patterns in the villages and so on... And I combined with that survey my own fieldwork in the traditional anthropological mode on kinship structure and organization. And it was at that point that I met Edmund Leach. Leach had already done his fieldwork in Pul Eliya in 1954, and he was back in '56 for a final short check up for the monograph he was writing. It was then that I met Leach. I had already completed the survey and my first kinship ethnography, and written some draft papers on kinship and land tenure. My very first paper published in *Man* was accomplished through Leach's sponsorship. It was called 'The structure of kinship and its relationship to land possession and residence' (*JRAI*, 1958).⁷ And the survey, *The Disintegrating Village: Report of a Socio-economic Survey*, was published separately in 1957.⁸

⁵ 'Secularization of Family Values in Ceylon' (with Bryce Ryan), *American Sociological Review*, June 1957.

⁶ Probably Tambiah is referring to *The Disintegrating Village: Report of a Socio-economic Survey* (with N.K. Sarkar), Ceylon University Press, 1957; 'The Co-operatives in Relation to the Economic Needs of the Ceylonese Peasant', *The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, January 1958; 'Agricultural Extension and Obstacles to Improve Agriculture in Gal Oya Peasant Colonization Scheme', *Proceedings of the Second International Conference of Economic History*, Aix-en-Provence, 1962.

⁷ 'The Structure of Kinship and its Relationship to Land Possession and Residence in Pata Dumbara, Central Ceylon', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 88 (1): 21-44, 1958.

⁸ *The Disintegrating Village: Report of a Socio-economic Survey* (with N.K. Sarkar), Ceylon University Press, 1957 (cf. footnote 6).

Leach didn't like the survey. He wrote that essay where he says 'Tambiah is an intuitive anthropologist', but that he disliked quantitative analysis based on survey data.⁹ But he already had the draft of 'The structure of kinship and its relationship to land possession and residence', which he liked, and when he returned to Cambridge, he wrote back and said that I must have it published in the *JRAI*. By that time I had also decided that my own sense of studying social phenomena was more in tune with the anthropological approach. That is, engaging in participant observation, conversing with people, observing rituals, and seeing acts in context, all of which you can't do in a survey, in which you ask individuals set questions without knowing or mapping in depth their interrelationships. So I was being converted myself, and Leach clinched it.

MP. What is the meaning of 'clinch'?...

Tambiah

Clinch means... made it certain for me. Because of his persuasive critique of the survey, and his own demonstration of the significance of kinship and social organization as elicited through ethnographic fieldwork. And I could never figure it out what he meant when he said that my essay had influenced his understanding of Pul Eliya in some way. I don't know how. Maybe it clarified for him something he was trying to work out.

MP. May we then say that Leach made you a legitimate anthropologist?...

⁹ Cf. E.R. Leach, 'An anthropologist's reflections on a social survey'. In D.G. Jongmans & P.C.W. Gutkind (eds.) *Anthropologists in the Field*, Van Gorcum & Comp.N.V., 1967: 'In criticising this book [*The Disintegrating Village*, by N.K. Sarkar & S.J. Tambiah, Colombo, 1957], I am not criticising the authors, who have accomplished an exceptionally able piece of analysis, but the principles of method on which the book is based. The purpose of my criticism is to display, by a process of negation, the crucial points at which contemporary sociological and anthropological investigations differ, and hence to imply that social anthropology has a special contribution to make to Ceylon social studies such as is not at present provided by conventional sociology' (:76). On pages 84-5 Leach says: 'This perhaps reads like a personal attack on Dr. Tambiah but that is not at all what is intended. I find Dr. Tambiah's discussion of Kandyan inheritance truly illuminating, indeed I repeat my patronizing comment that his sociological insights mark him out as a first class anthropologist!' A note mentions that, in 1958, when the essay was written, Tambiah was a professor of sociology at the University of Ceylon. On the occasion of its publication, in 1966, the situation was different: 'Dr. Tambiah is a lecturer in *Social Anthropology* in the University of Cambridge and a close friend and colleague of the author'.

Tambiah

I didn't see it that way, because he was still a stranger to me. I met him for the first time briefly. Just one evening, when he came back in '56 to complete his fieldwork and he came to the University of Peradeniya. We talked, and I told him about my recent writings, and I sent him the stuff. And then he later wrote his critique of the survey, and sponsored the essay, and then I left for Thailand. By the way, before I left for Thailand in 1960, Gananath Obeyesekere joined the Department of Anthropology at the University of Peradeniya in 1957. And Obeyesekere had been trained at the University of Washington at Seattle, principally under Melford Spiro, and was influenced by a psychoanalytic theory. He came with a different perspective from mine. When he came in '57, I was already there, and we decided to do a combined anthropological research of a remote village, in Pata Dumbara, in the Matale district, in the Kandyan area. So, that constituted my first really anthropological fieldwork attempt of any length; it was conducted by Gananath Obeyesekere and myself, and some students whom we were training. Actually we began to live there, and do some fieldwork, but we had to do with very little money. I had by then become firmly an anthropologist.

MP. And Obeyesekere always defined himself as an anthropologist?

Tambiah

Yes, a psychological anthropologist. And, of course, he was interested in quite different perspectives. But we both combined, and out of that fieldwork appeared one article on polyandry in Ceylon.¹⁰ It is a long essay. I had also in 1956, before meeting Leach and Obeyesekere, begun to do work in a peasant colonization scheme, the newly started Multipurpose Irrigation Scheme and Peasant Resettlement Program in Gal Oya. I took students with me, and based on that work, I did publish an essay.¹¹ But that's when the first riots broke out in Sri Lanka in the middle of our field work in 1956 and we had to be evacuated from the field. Incidentally, the experience of that riot, which I wrote as a report to the Vice-chancellor of the University, who wanted us to report on what happened, is now — nearly 40 years later (!) — incorporated in my recent

¹⁰ 'Polyandry in Ceylon'. In *Caste and Kin in Nepal, Indian and Ceylon*, ed. Von Furer-Haimendorf, Asia, Publishing House, 1966.

¹¹ 'Agricultural Extension and Obstacles to Improve Agriculture in Gal Oya Peasant Colonization Scheme', *Proceedings of the Second International Conference of Economic History, Aix-en-Provence, 1962*.

book (*Leveling Crowds*). You'll find it in chapter 4 ('Two Postindependence Ethnic Riots in Sri Lanka'), where I talk about this experience. You want me to go on with the story?...

MP. Yes, please.

Tambiah

While I was doing this kind of research and writing at the University of Peradeniya, in 1959 a friend of mine, Professor Hugh Philp — he was a professor of education at Sydney University — wrote to me saying he'd been appointed as director of a new Research Institute in Thailand sponsored by Unesco and the government of Thailand, would I come and be the anthropologist in that research organization?... I would be given freedom to do my own village research, and at the same time I had to train some Thai students. Now, the main research of this institute was on education; the Thai government had just begun to introduce a countrywide primary education program in Thailand and they needed to know a lot of background information on the rural areas. Ethnographic information was needed to understand what kind of curriculum should be devised for these children. So, I agreed to go but I have to tell you how it is that out of the blue this invitation came.

We have to go right back to 1952, when I first came out to Cornell. I was one of the first batch of Fulbright students selected worldwide to come to this country. This was an innovative effort of the US government after the war. I was selected from Sri Lanka, Hugh Philp was selected from Australia, and a lot of others from various other countries. And we were all sent to what was called an 'orientation course' — that is, orienting us, foreigners, to American culture — and it was held at Bennington College, in Vermont. And that is where I met Hugh Philp. And we became buddies. And he came to Harvard, and I was at Cornell. He worked with Allport, the social psychologist, and we became real friends, and we would visit one another. I would come to Harvard to see him; he would go to Cornell. There was another person involved in this group. He was a Norwegian sociologist, by name Reidar Haavie, and he was also attached to Cornell. And so this friendship became very strong. And when Philp went back to Australia to resume his position, he was senior to me in age, he was invited as the first director of the Thai Institute, and he immediately thought 'Well, I need an anthropologist!... I'll invite Tambi!!!' So, out of the blue this invitation came.

I was already quite disenchanted with developments in Sri Lanka, because of the ethnic conflict. The Tamil-Sinhalese problem was intensifying, I had already seen its beginnings in 1956. As I have related before, I was myself caught in the middle of the Gal Oya riots. And there were other riots which took place in '58 and in '60, and so on; a whole series of collisions between Tamils and Sinhalese. Violence was the response of the Sinhalese majority towards the minority Tamil. At the same time, I must explain that issues of language became a part of Sri Lankan politics. English was, under the British, the language of administration; English was *the* important language of the educated, and if one wanted to get on in the world one had to master it.

MP. When did you start speaking English?

Tambiah

From a very small age, because the school I went to from the beginning taught in English with my own language, Tamil, as a second language. The elite schools in Sri Lanka taught primarily in English and produced the civil servants, and professionals, who would be the influential stratum in the country. Now, after independence, there was a surge of nationalism, especially among the Sinhalese majority, focused on issues of identity, revival of culture, revival of religion. All these issues were parcel and part of post-independence politics. Sri Lanka got its independence in 1948. Now, one of the big issues that boiled up soon after was the change of the language of administration from English to the local languages. And this was part of what was considered the democratization process: people at large were cut off from the structures and centers of power, and English was the language of a small, narrow segment of the population.¹² Unfortunately that whole movement also generated in turn the problem of choice between the two local languages, Sinhalese and Tamil (Sinhalese is the language of the majority; Tamil is the language of the minority). Although at the beginning the slogan was 'Let's have both mother tongues', soon afterwards the nationalist Buddhist Sinhalese majority demanded that Sinhalese become the sole official language. That is the beginning of the feeling among Tamils that they were discriminated against by the majority. There were some other issues too, such as peasant resettlement in areas which were claimed by the Tamils to be their own homelands... all these

¹² See *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, chapter 8: 'The Restoration of Buddhism and the Transformation of Education in the 1960s and 1970s'.

issues were boiling up in Sri Lanka at the same time, but by '59 it was clear that the government was going to demand that in due course university education would also be conducted in the native languages. And that legislation was passed, from secondary education all the way up. And I knew that in due course I would have to teach in Sinhalese and I was not up to that.

MP. Do you speak Sinhalese?

Tambiah

I speak just colloquial, I wasn't educated in it, I wasn't literate in it. Professionally it would be for me a backwards step because trying to implement the teaching of anthropology in the native language would have consumed all my energies. And even if I were willing to make that change, I felt that I would be cut off from the international knowledge system... I had to be elsewhere and be professionally open to world developments.

MP. Would it be possible to teach anthropology at all?

Tambiah

Well, subsequently they found that this would become a major problem, especially as regards higher education, this making Sinhalese and Tamil the media of instruction, precisely because it was not possible to translate essential Western language books into these languages. The majority of the students educated in the native languages were virtually cut off from world literature. They received a very narrow education, and standards were lowered. The university that I belonged to, the University of Ceylon (later Peradeniya), was a major university at that time, in the last stages of colonialism, because it had relatively high standards. It was linked to the University of London and the exams were marked by external examiners. Scholastic standards were high. People like me, Gananath Obeyesekere and a host of others, having first graduated from the university in Sri Lanka, taking a B.A. degree for instance, could without any problem come to the West and do graduate education. And a lot of us, of my generation, did that. And not only in my field, but also in economics, politics, the sciences, history and literature. So, at that point I sensed that it was time for me to get away. And this invitation came, and I just took it! And went to Thailand! That was in 1960.

MP. When you decided to study religion in Thailand, was this decision based on ethnographic evidence or was it motivated by your own curiosity, concern... In other words, why religion?

Tambiah

Actually, in Thailand I was not only investigating religion. In the field, I was organizing fieldwork in all aspects of village life. I collected stuff on kinship, social organization, agrarian economy, land tenure, and then, aside from social organization, rituals. Moreover, since most villages have monastic compounds populated by Buddhist monks, I studied the monasteries, the relationship between the monks and the people, and a lot of rituals. Actually, between 1960-63, I participated in the study of three different communities: one, in the Central Plain, about a hundred kilometers from Bangkok, another in the northeast, and the third in the north of Thailand. As it so often happens, one writes up only a fragment of one's fieldwork. I wrote a preliminary ethnography of the central Thailand village in all its aspects, meaning (since I cannot do it *all*) the economy, the kinship structure, family life, ritual and so on. That monograph is still with me. And it was done in quite a different mode from the second one. But it was never published. It was accepted by Cambridge University Press to be published, but I had by then gone to Cambridge in 1963, and I was already writing my second monograph about the second village —

MP. — which is *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults* —

Tambiah

— which is *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand*. I thought the first monograph I'd write about the Northeastern village would be about rituals and religion, and then later on maybe I would sketch the other parts. At that stage also in Cambridge I was exposed to some of Leach's ideas, 'structural functionalism' was being upstaged by 'structuralism'. And this second perspective influenced me. So, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand* was mostly written in Cambridge,¹³ finalized when I went to the Center for Advanced Studies in Palo Alto (that is where I finished the monograph) and then I told Cambridge: 'Don't publish the first one; publish this. And I'll redo the first one.'

¹³ *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand*, Cambridge University Press, 1970.

MP. So, you owe us that first one.

Tambiah

Yes, and the first one was really written in a different mode. In a sense it anticipates some of Bourdieu's writings about strategic choices and practices as outcomes, but in a different anthropological jargon and mode. Because the Thai social organization is very flexible (for example, different ways of contracting 'marriage'), I was hoping to first state what the verbalized norms were, and then how these norms were used and applied, and what the outcomes were as practices. Someday I may try to publish it. Anyway, the second monograph came to be written in a different mode. I have much information collected in the three villages I mentioned earlier, especially about bilateral kinship structures as they work in context, but I haven't found the time to write it up. Because I went on to other things.

MP. So, you went on to other things. How do you see these continuities, one thing leads to another in a continuous way?...

Tambiah

Well, there is continuity and expansion. I forgot to tell you when you asked me how I started studying religion. One of the things (I think I mention in my introduction to *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*) that I realized, when I left Sri Lanka, was that as a minority member, I had to understand what Buddhism was all about, and Buddhist revival as a response to colonialism, and Buddhist nationalism in post-independence Sri Lanka. These are issues from which, in quotation marks, 'I was alienated' in Sri Lanka, but whose significance I recognized as important to grasp as an anthropologist. I felt that while I couldn't fully study Buddhism in Sri Lanka in its political expressions, I could do this in Thailand, a country which was more distant, and therefore with which I could empathize, and which I could study from inside. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults* was written in order for me to understand how Buddhism worked in the villages as a popular religion. Since I was already motivated to want to understand Buddhism as a religion, especially in its ritual and political aspects, Thailand seemed a good site to investigate what I did not understand. Now, the second project, out of which came *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, that was in fact suggested to me as a result of doing the first one, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand*, in which I focused on the village, but also saw the village as a microcosm of the macrocosm. The village

could provide some insights into the larger civilization, and I was interested in how Buddhism as a civilizational force impacted through time on the village, and how in turn Buddhism in its larger sense was woven and worked into village life, and into the village's festival calendar. But I knew that there were other aspects of Buddhism as a religion which were connected with society and politics, and to understand that I had to broaden the scope of my fieldwork and adopt a more encompassing framework. What was Buddhism like, if one tried to understand it in its national, or countrywide, perspective? That problematique was generated by my writing the first monograph and I thought I now have to extent my horizons to understand... 'I'll go the other way'. So, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* was undertaken in order to understand Buddhism in its larger collective expression at the national level.

That took me into an engagement with the relation between history and anthropology. I had to go right back in order to understand how from early times Buddhism as a religion, together with the monastic order, the order of monks, were related to kingship and the polity, in particular, Buddhist conceptions of the universal king which played an ideological role in Southeast Asian countries. From this historical starting point I then came to Thailand and sketched the history of Buddhism and polity there. I knew when I did the first monograph that lots of village monks progressed to the capital city of Bangkok along a monastic pathway of mobility and achievement.

This involved for me a new kind of fieldwork which tried to trace the path of these monks to the political and religious center, and to map the type of relationship between the monastery and the polity, and the monks' engagement with national rituals. Out of this work also emerged my model of the 'galactic polity', as a way of representing the 'traditional' precolonial polity, and my characterization of how it changed in the 19th century to what I called the 'radial polity'.¹⁴ I tried to suggest a way of dealing with historical continuities and transformations in these larger systems over time. I realized when I was doing the second study of how the official sangha, and the establishment monks of Theravada Buddhism, were tied to kingship and the polity and related political structures. I realized then that there was another branch among the monkhood, the forest monks, who were devoted to the meditation tradition.

¹⁴ See 'The Galactic Polity: the Structure of Traditional Kingdoms in Southeast Asia'. In *Anthropology and the Climate of Opinion*, ed. Stanley Freed, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, vol. 293, 1977 and 'The Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia', chapter 7 of *Culture, Thought and Social Action*, Harvard, 1985.

These reclusive monks stood outside the establishment, they were at the periphery. I knew that they represented a different liberation quest, through meditation, and that they were removed from the official centers of power, and that they lived in forests. It was believed that through the meditation and ascetic regime, they had access to certain supranormal powers, mystical powers, which the lay public wanted very much to appropriate. So, I decided that an appropriate way to fill in a gap in *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* was to undertake a new investigation which became the basis for my third book on Thailand.

MP. *Monks of the Forest?*

Tambiah

Yes, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*.¹⁵ In writing that book, aside from sketching a paradigm of what the meditation regime and asceticism meant in the Buddhist tradition in a historical sense, I also became interested in the conception and hagiography of saints, the notion of saints, as necessary preliminary work before tackling the forest monks in Thailand. Here my Weberian interest in charisma and routinization of charisma came into focus once more. What I in a sense stumbled on was something Weber never took up, that is, how charisma can be transferred to objects such as amulets, images and sacra, and their importance in religious-political life. I think a contribution I made, among other things, was focusing on the cult of amulets: how they are produced, how the holy men transfer their charisma to them, how these objects also brought into conjunction holy men and their lay sponsors, and how these objects were used and manipulated in economic, political and historical processes. And that's the sense of what *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* was about. I have maintained my interest in these issues and that article I gave you is an extension of that interest,¹⁶ which I mean to keep up. Also the other article,¹⁷ this is a continuation of my interest in relics.

¹⁵ *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cults of Amulets: a Study of Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism and Millennial Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

¹⁶ 'Participation in, and objectification of, the charisma of saints'. Manuscript.

¹⁷ 'Relations of Analogy and Identity. Toward Multiple Orientations to the World'. In *Modes of Thought. Explorations in Culture and Cognition*, (eds.) David Olson & Nancy Torrance, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

To finish this story: although since 1983 I felt compelled to take up the issues in Sri Lanka concerning ethnic conflict, ethnonationalism, and political violence, there is a long term comparative project that I have begun, which is carried over from *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cults of Amulets*, that is, the conception of saints, the charisma attributed to saints, and the cult of relics, amulets, tombshrines, in some Christian, some Buddhist, some Islamic and Sufi traditions. What are the convergences in these religions which are in other ways quite different? Convergences in regard to the phenomena of holy men, saints, cult of relics, amulets, tombshrines, and what these phenomena contribute to these religions as lived and practiced? I have begun to give seminars on this comparative topic at Harvard, but it will take me some years to collect the relevant information. This is a leisurely long term activity.

MP. A Weberian project by an anthropologist doing fieldwork.

Tambiah

Yes, I was trying to relate Weberian (and other) theories to actual, empirical work...

MP. So, while on the one hand you were writing on Thailand, on the other you were writing the articles which later were brought together in *Culture, Thought and Social Action*. Your pieces of reanalyzes —

Tambiah

— and theoretical, in a different mode.

MP. Empirical and theoretical, in a different mode?

Tambiah

Many of these articles are focused on my interest in classification theory, which was a primary concern of Leach and Lévi-Strauss. ‘Animals are good to think and good to prohibit’¹⁸ is really inspired, first of all, by Leach’s article on... what is that called? ‘Animal categories and verbal abuse’? Something like that.¹⁹ You know, Leach would always give us who were closely associated

¹⁸ Initially published in *Ethnology*, vol. VIII (4), 1969.

¹⁹ The piece by Edmund Leach, ‘Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse’, is published in *New Directions in the Study of Language*, ed. E.H. Lenneberg. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

with him his essays to read, once he had composed them. He gave a copy to me, and that in a sense inspired my own article on 'Animals are good to think and good to prohibit'. I was going back and forth to Thailand in those days, for summertime research, and actually I did special fieldwork for this article. I was inspired by Leach's article, I was also reading Lévi-Strauss... So, the Thai information which I analyze was actually collected in response to their writings.

MP. 'The magical power of words' was written at that same time.

Tambiah

Now, in Cambridge, once again, Malinowski was read closely. One of Leach's influences among many of his students was that we always had a seminar on rereading Malinowski. So, we would read, and Leach was himself doing some reanalyzes of Malinowski, as were some others, and that is how I became interested in Malinowski's ethnography. At the same time, we had read Jakobson's essay where he reinterprets Frazerian contagious and sympathetic magic in terms of metonym and metaphor as general forms of associational thought.²⁰ Thus, because of my interest already in ritual, I was looking at Malinowski, and out of that emerged 'The magical power of words'.²¹ I was invited by the London School of Economics to give the Malinowski Memorial Lecture, and I decided to try out my elaboration and reanalyzes of Malinowski's writings on Trobriand magic.

MP. And the Radcliffe-Brown Memorial Lecture on ritual...?

Tambiah

That was begun a few years later, also during my Cambridge days, but completed at the University of Chicago around 1974. By the way, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* came out of fieldwork that was done while I was in Cambridge.²² I got a grant from SSRC and used a sabbatical leave... The fieldwork for the third book was done after I came to the United States. So, all these activities are relevant to my continuing interest in ritual, and I strive to present the ethnography in interpretative-theoretical terms.

²⁰ Roman Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language and two Types of Aphasic Disturbance'. In R. Jakobson and M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*. The Hague: Mouton, 1956.

²¹ 'The Magical Power of Words', Malinowski Memorial Lecture 1968, *Man* 3 (2), 1968.

²² *World Conqueror and World Renouncer. A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

MP. Returning to what I sensed you had implied before: do you see these articles as more theoretical, and the monographs on Thailand as more ethnographical?...

Tambiah

No, the monographs on Thailand are ethnographical and also theoretical.

MP. But, then, why the two aspects —

Tambiah

They are intimately related ... In *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults* is, as you know, an interpretation of cosmology and ritual, and how each one relates to the other, in a structural mode. I was also interested in it on how myth relates to actual deeds and so on. All these dialectical linkages were worked out in terms of ethnography. People may read my books as ethnography, but many people may not realize that they are also theoretical. That is the problem I think you noticed or have recognized.²³ Because different anthropologists work in different areas of the world, only some of them at best read ethnographies that do not pertain to their areas of specialization. But all my monographs contain theoretical discussions that refer back to Weber, to Mauss, to Durkheim, to Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss, and those writers who are supposed to have dealt with what I call enduring canonical or classical issues.

MP. Do you believe even anthropologists would read your essays like this?

Tambiah

Yes, my essays are considered theoretical because they address certain canonical problems on which some major figures have written. For example, 'The magical power of words' is a reanalysis of Malinowski in terms of metaphorical and metonymical associations, information theory, the interrelation between multiple media, myth and ritual, and so on. I must mention here that my book based on the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (1990) is considered a 'theoretical' work. It is a continuation of themes broached in *Cultural, Thought and Social Action*.

²³ Tambiah refers to the issue I had mentioned to him, regarding the specialization of anthropologists in geographical/cultural areas, in contrast to how books are read from the perspective of 'anthropological theory and history' (or *theoretical history*).

MP. This is very interesting because it points to the issue of different audiences for academic books.

Tambiah

Yes, I think for the most part, many people will read a limited number of monographs, at least amongst the majority of our profession in this country. So much literature has been and is being produced, they only will read a small sample of work outside their own particular area of interest. What I am trying to point out really, Mariza, is the physical impossibility of reading everything, especially with the increased output of literature. While I'm very familiar with what is written on Southeast Asia and South Asia, I read much less of the works that relate to the Amazon, to Oceania, to New Guinea, or to China and Japan. But I've been reading texts that people that I respect recommend as significant or that receive positive reviews, or that my friends describe to me as their preoccupations in our mutual discussions... So, one picks and chooses. I think that's why, for instance, in my last monograph,²⁴ that whole discussion that appears at the end on Weber, charisma, the notion of objectification of charisma in amulets, people's participation in charisma, is not widely known outside the area of specialists. When people read the introduction in *The Social Life of Things* that Appadurai has written, they are mostly not aware that I have a discussion which centrally relates to this topic. But if I were to compress the later chapters of my book into an essay presented as self-consciously theoretical in intent and published in a journal, then people no doubt will say that it is a theoretical essay! Also, for obvious reasons of length, essays are read, but only the dedicated will plough through a long monograph.

MP. So, your discussion between myth and ritual in —

Tambiah

— in *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand*.

MP. Yes, in the last chapters of that book.

Tambiah

Yes, it too has not been taken as having general theoretical relevance to the study of myth and ritual. Because it is in a monograph and monographs are not

²⁴ Tambiah refers to *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*. Cambridge University Press, 1984.

expected to contain theoretical discussions of general relevance, though of course the ‘area specialists’ did find the text as being of absorbing interest, and as providing a plausible framework for seeing the relations between Buddhism and the spirit cults in the village arena. If I wrote it as a theoretical essay, had it printed in *Man* or *American Ethnologist*, it might have had a wider readership outside the field of Southeast Asia. However, it is gratifying to note that the discussion of a myth and ritual in *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults* was taken up by a scholar of religion, John Strong, for whom it served as a significant point of reference in his book *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta*.²⁵

MP. Well, you should write this ‘theoretical’ essay on ritual and myth.

Tambiah

Yes, but you know, life is short, there is no time.

MP. So, let's go to ritual. In one paper I compared what you had done to ritual with what Jakobson did with aphasia, Lévi-Strauss with totemism, and Freud with dreams...

Tambiah

That is a hell of a compliment to me!... Thank you.

MP. I believe that usually you take a phenomenon which we label in traditional ways, then dissolve it, and finally show how you can find it anywhere, anyplace. The result is that, in the process, what was an empirical object, or a class of objects, becomes an analytical objects. This is what I believe you did with ritual, among other things.

Tambiah

As a preface to that, let me tell you that while in Cambridge I had discovered Austin by accident, and began to read him. And then I integrated my understanding of Austin in ‘Form and meaning of magical acts’.²⁶ That is a personal development on my own. Leach didn't like this trend at all. I think he was critical of ordinary language philosophy as it was developed in Oxford. In

²⁵ John Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia*. Princeton University Press, 1992.

²⁶ ‘Form and meaning of magical acts’. In *Culture, thought and social action*, Harvard University Press, 1985.

this respect, he was old fashioned. I think he probably agreed with Gellner in his attack on Oxford philosophy, in *Words and Things*. I was convinced that Austin's notion of performative utterances was important. Although this may sound self promotional, I proudly claim that I was one of the first to exploit that notion in the study of ritual. My engagement with Austin occurred towards the end of my time at Cambridge. The invitation to give the Radcliffe-Brown Lecture provided the instigation to integrate and extend the notion of performative acts and the challenge to formulate something significant and innovative. Earlier on, the invitation to give the Malinowski Lecture posed for me a similar challenge and occasion. And, 'Form and meaning of magical acts', in which I first used Austin, was written for a Festschrift for Evans-Pritchard.

MP. Would you consider them your privileged interlocutors? Who are they?

Tambiah

I think quite a few. Max Weber, of course, Durkheim, Marx to a lesser extent; then Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard (the Zande book). 'Form and meaning of magical acts' is really my counter statement to E-P's understanding of Zande ritual practices. Then there are Lévi-Strauss and Leach on classification theory, liminality and topics of that sort. And the lists extends to Austin, Peirce, Foucault, Bourdieu, Bakhtin...

MP. What about Marcel Mauss and his notion of efficacy?

Tambiah

You mean Marcel Mauss's on magic? Yes. His formulations on magic, the gift, sacrifice are important parts of our classical legacy and capital, and inescapable reference points.

MP. When did you become interested in Peirce?

Tambiah

I became interested in Peirce at the time I went to Chicago, and others there like Mike Silverstein were also interested in Peircean semiotics. My understanding of Peirce was clarified in Chicago. So, when I wrote 'A performative approach to ritual'²⁷ I said to myself: 'This is an occasion for me

²⁷ In *Culture, Thought and Social Action*. Harvard University Press, 1985.

to integrate different perspectives and bring them together, and demonstrate coherently that they are aspects of a common phenomenon'. Also the essay contains a somewhat hidden criticism of Victor Turner, which you also share. Remember your nice essay, which I thought of very highly.²⁸ I feel that the tripartite structure of ritual, which was van Gennep's schema which Victor Turner exploited successfully up to a point is inadequate to fully understand the dynamic recursive features of ritual, and the ways in which different multiple media and sensory modalities are interrelated. I wanted to say something different from what Victor Turner was saying; I think also that my dipping into structural linguistics, and sociolinguistics, and Chomsky, and Peirce, Langer and so on gave me some leads which posed the question of how they are to be synthesized, or at least situated.

MP. Have you seen the article on ritual and history by John Kelly, where he portraits you as a Weberian?²⁹

Tambiah

He kindly sent the piece to me. Kelly was a student here at Harvard as an undergraduate and he wrote his honors thesis on Weber. And I was one of his thesis advisors. While he was reading Weber, I was teaching Weber in a course, and had also cited Weber in some of my writings on Thailand. He is partly right in labeling me a Weberian, in that Weber was a significant other for me, even when I was critical of him. Kelly's portrait of me belongs to a particular phase of my biography and his at Harvard. I, in fact, recommended that he should go to Chicago to develop his academic interests. But, as my previous statements to your questions have suggested, I feel that my theoretical and substantive interests are varied. It is gratifying to me, for example, that Silverstein wrote a complimentary review of *Culture, Thought and Social Action* as a contribution to linguistic anthropology.³⁰

²⁸ 'The symbolism of Ndembu trees', Special Paper, Harvard University, advised by Stanley Tambiah, 1977. (Translated and published in Portuguese as chapter 3 in *A Favor da Etnografia*, Editora Relume-Dumará, 1995.)

²⁹ See John Kelly and Martha Kaplan, 'History, structure, and ritual', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 19, 1990.

³⁰ Michael Silverstein, 'Review of *Culture, Thought and Social Action*', *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 16, n. 2, 223-224.

MP. I would like your reaction to my feeling about your inclination to work always towards dissolving dichotomies. For instance: ‘action’ and ‘thought’, ‘causality’ and ‘performance’, ‘semantics’ and ‘pragmatics’, ‘cultural account’ and ‘formal analysis’, and so on.

Tambiah

Well, I don’t know whether I have actually achieved the dissolving of these dichotomies, but I think I have been challenged by them. There is something about my way of approaching issues which I don’t consciously understand. My preference is to dialectically relate components that (some) other people separate and divide. This is true. You may be able to formulate for me this propensity that is not transparent to me. And there is another preference that is personal to me. I always like to think one has to work within the tradition in order to transform it. A lot of people say ‘I’m saying something new’, and ‘this is really revolutionary’, and these large claims to being all together innovative, abolishing the past, don’t sound right to me. I myself would prefer to say that I’m thinking of how to move further, to expand existing horizons, resolve some antinomies, push back existing boundaries, and so on. I have to work from within the tradition, build on what others have said, pick out existing components and recombine and reformulate them, rather than refuse to recognize the past, and claim ‘I’m saying something marvelously new’. That is my preferred way of doing things. And I react against brash and very ambitious people, who state ‘This is all wrong in the past’, and ‘this is the new way to go, it is innovative’... Temperamentally that is not my way of pursuing things or making claims.

MP. Interestingly, Lévi-Strauss himself said he was doing something completely new when he was also building on...

Tambiah

And, as you know very well, a form of creative contribution is to take a perspective, or some idea from another field, and apply it to another domain in your field, and that opens up new possibilities. That is the way in which frequently biology and physics, and other so called hard sciences, have proceeded. That is the way in our profession too; there is no *tabula rasa*. Lévi-Strauss proceeded in the same way too, when he applied in a transformative

way the linguistic theories of Saussure and Jakobson to mythology (and even kinship). But I think some people may have a sense of being innovators. I don't think myself as one.

MP. Speaking of innovators, Henri Lefebvre, Lukacs and others, who were vanguard in my school days, they are all fashionable again.

Tambiah

Yes. Recycled. Another way in which people are thought to be original is when they put new labels on old phenomena. Coining new labels is also seen as a theoretical exercise, it gives the labeler cachê. This activity again is not truly innovative, because it consists in repackaging, recycling, putting a new gloss on a known phenomenon.

You asked me, do I continue my interest in religion, ritual, politics...? My last book is concerned with politics and violence, with collective violence as a mode of conducting politics in ethnonationalist conflicts, especially in arenas where political democracy is practiced. When you read the book you'll see how my ideas on performative ritual are centrally deployed in explicating the role and patterning of collective violence in modern politics. The address I gave during the meetings of ANPOCS in Brazil was a summary of portions of my book. Since you know most of my work you will recognize that I am applying and extending my ideas to a new context so as to illuminate ethnonationalist politics and collective violence in our time.

MP. And finding new interlocutors.

Tambiah

Actually I went back at the end of my book to reread and reconfigure Durkheim and Le Bon. But I also have conversations with scholars who proposed the notion of 'moral economy', such as E.P. Thompson, with Natalie Davis who wrote on 'Rites of violence', and subsequently with George Rudé, Jim C. Scott, and the Subaltern School of modern Indian historians. Themes and issues raised by these writers were commented upon and evaluated at the end of the book.

MP. So, again, Durkheim.

Tambiah

There is something that Durkheim wrote in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which readers have not always noticed. In the latter part of the book he

submits that it is the collective participation in totemic rites that generates the euphoria and experience of religious force. Readers know about this formulation but never use or think about it. Of course, Durkheim was influenced directly by Le Bon on the crowd. Le Bon had an aversion for what happened in the French revolution, but he recognized the passions that were generated among crowds. Durkheim recognized such sentiments, but used them to say something quite different. For Le Bon political crowds generated irrational violence, but for Durkheim collectively performed rites generate positive religious forces which in fact celebrate society. I consider these two discussions, and transform them by considering communicational and inter-subjective and semiotic processes that occur when crowds are mobilized for action, and how these processes might explain certain features about collective violence. Thus some classical issues opened up by Le Bon and Durkheim have been, I hope, clarified, refined and taken further.

MP. Durkheim was poorly appropriated even by anthropologists as someone interested only in the level of 'representation'.

Tambiah

Yes, this is partly true, as exemplified by Lévi-Strauss on totemism. He only reads that part of Durkheim, the totemic animals and totemic objects as they relate to his own notions of classification. He is not interested in Durkheim's discussion of how totemic rites themselves generate sentiments and interpersonal fusions. Most discussions of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* I think ignore what Durkheim had to say on crowd effervescence, and euphoria in the course of collective rituals, in which people coming together engage in special kinds of interaction. It is interesting and relevant to consider collective violence by large crowds in two respects.

The violence is part of purposive politics, and is directed by certain interested politicians and their agents. At the same time, rioters engage in destructive arson and violence against humans, when they agglomerate and breach norms which most of them observe in their every day lives. I try to address both sides of the question. Are these riots purposive, and are they directed, and in mobilizing crowds, are certain components from public culture and public ritual used in staging processions and forming collective assemblies? At the same time, all this taken into account, yet there is always something more that happens in these crowds: the play of collective passions and the inciting role of destructive rumors, the escalating intertwining of rage

and panic, all this you cannot adequately explain from the preceding things that I have talked about. There is something there that Le Bon and Durkheim, and Freud — who was also influenced by Le Bon in his ‘Group psychology and the analysis of the ego’ —, and Canetti in *Crowds and Power* have discussed in terms of group psychology that should be salvaged and reformulated and taken in new directions.

MP. You must go back sometime to Brazil to finally watch a football game.

Tambiah

Well, now you know why I wanted to see a football game in Rio!... Just a few days before my visit, was it in Guatemala that a serious accident took place when many people were crushed to death?... I go with Byron Good to see American football games. I’m interested in sports for other reasons too, but the games as crowd phenomena and mass spectacles interest me. The cheering of the crowds in the stadium is fantastic. They stand up in rhythm, and engage in orchestrated movements of waves of cheering, and then shout insults of vilification at the supporters of the visiting team, the ‘enemy’, cursing them, and even staging fights or near-fights, and hurling the language abuse to demonize them, and so on. And who are these participants? They are drawn from a cross-section of the population of Massachusetts: working class, middle class, professionals, young and old, men and women, all come together in physical contiguity in this enactment of mass culture.

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[It follows a chitchat on riots in British football, and also during other national and international games.]

*

MP. May we change the topic? Let’s talk about your return to Sri Lanka as a subject of research after your work in Thailand?

Tambiah

The last section in *Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* contains a part of my biography which we haven't talked about.³¹ Take a look at it; it tries to explain my return.

The riots that took place in 1983 were horrendous. Nothing on that scale had taken place in Sri Lanka before, in terms of sheer destruction of property and arson, and the purposive targeting of the Tamil minority, especially in the city of Colombo, but also in other parts of the island. Although there have been periodic riots since 1956, they were much smaller in scale, but this time it was really a big bang. I was at that time outside of Sri Lanka. But when I heard about it, it really pained me a great deal, and caused a sort of trauma. I am a member of that victimized minority community. And the people most affected in Colombo were a spectrum of middle-class, established members of the elite, businessmen and so on, who had no idea that this could happen to them. It was a kind of pogrom, a purposive and direct attempt to do damage to a certain population. Some politicians and agents of the state were also involved, and colluded in this work of destruction. And although I had left Sri Lanka, I always carry the recognition that I'm Sri Lankan, and a strong part of my persona is that I am simultaneously of Tamil origin... But this event fractured two halves of my identity as a Sri Lankan and as a Tamil. (I also of course have a transnational identity by virtue of living and working abroad and certain other identities as well.) To return to my narrative, *Ethnic Fratricide* was written so as to find my way out of a depression and to cope with a personal need to make some sense of that tragedy, which was the beginning of worse things to come.

MP. Do you have relatives there?

Tambiah

An older brother, who is a doctor, lives in Colombo and his house was attacked but no one was injured. Other members of my family were not injured in Colombo. One sister lived in a suburban settlement which was half Sinhalese, half Tamil in composition. Fortunately my sister's home, which stood side by side with a Sinhalese one, was spared, because the Sinhalese lady owner came over and told the rioters to keep out. But my sister had to evacuate her house temporarily, and together with her daughter and granddaughter seek safety in a

³¹ See the Epilogue of *Ethnic Fratricide...*, where Tambiah places his biography in the context of the contradictions and ambivalences present in the careers of two illustrious Sri Lanka's prime ministers, the two 'founding fathers of the new nation state'.

refugee camp. There were many Tamil people whose homes were burned and businesses destroyed and who were displaced by the thousands. The riots were mounted primarily to erase what the majority perceived to be the disproportionate advantages enjoyed by the Tamil minority.

I started *Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* in order to examine the genesis and course of the violence, and I used available materials to reconstruct the political dynamics. The subsequent *Buddhism Betrayed?* is a continuation of that topic, but it was motivated by more remote issues. People kept asking me: if Buddhism advocates non-violence, why are Buddhists in Sri Lanka engaged in violence? That's why I started to write the second book to try to explain the participation of Buddhist monks and Buddhist leaders in 'political Buddhism'. It is not a book in favor with the Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka. It has been banned. Of course, many of them (there are significant exceptions) think of it as in some ways tendentious. But that inevitably would be the case if one wants to comment on contemporary politics and one has a political position... I see that development as part of a modern discourse; one opens oneself to both criticisms and accolades. I don't mind that; what I do mind is that there is a group of leading activist monks, and leading activist 'intellectuals' who have clamored to ban the book by vilifying it as 'an attack on the Buddha and on Buddhism'. It is *not* an attack on the Buddha or on Buddhism, it is my attempt to characterize the way in which Buddhism has historically unfolded in Sri Lanka. They have accused me of being an agent of the LTTE. This is the part one regrets. Most of my accusers have not even read the book! In Sri Lanka it became a pawn in local right wing politics with neo-fascist tendencies.

MP. And *Leveling Crowds*, the third book, is a continuation?...

Tambiah

A continuation but also an extension that includes events happening in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It examines the issues, and the convergences and differences surrounding ethnonationalist conflicts and also focuses on the implications of using violence as a mode of conducting democratic politics. I hope Sri Lankans will understand that I am not saying that ethnonationalist politics is peculiar to Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism or Tamil nationalism. I have been trying to cast ethnonationalist conflicts in more general terms, and to explain what ethnonationalistic movements are about and what kind of politics they develop. There are certain ways in which majority and minority relations

develop and crystallize. And you are unlucky if you find yourself among the minority.

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MP. Marcio Goldman is curious to know your reaction to the different locations of anthropology: in ‘central’ and, let us say, ‘peripheral’, ‘from the edge’ places. In my own phrasing: is it worthwhile to be an anthropologist outside the mainstream?

Tambiah

I think so, because one thing that certainly the Subaltern school in India — the ideas of subaltern historians also inform some of the anthropologists’ writings as well — is certainly effectively and with originality writing about colonialism and postcolonial developments in a mode that challenges the primacy of a certain kind of a colonialist orientalist perspective. They are trying to read events that happened in British India in terms of the subaltern agenda, which contests the official British version of colonial history.

MP. They are quite influenced by Gramsci.

Tambiah

Yes, by Gramsci, perhaps Foucault, and by ‘the moral economy’ thesis. In fact my book [*Leveling Crowds*] indicates the intellectual genealogy of their writings such as E.P. Thompson’s seminal essay on the moral economy of riots in England in the 18th century, and Jim Scott’s application of it to Asia in *The Moral Economy of the Peasants* (1976). Some historians have characterized certain peasant movements under colonialism as legitimate resistance, which is not the interpretation given in the official literature.

So I see Brazil being a large and socially and geographically differentiated country with a colonial past as a site for — that is why I was fascinated by what you people were trying to tell me —conducting its own complex internal dialogues, and contestations, about a number of issues relating to nation state making, cultural and social pluralism, ‘ethnicity’, ‘race’ and stratification, identity and so on, which will have relevance not only for the

West but for Asia as well. You yourself were prescient when you wrote a comparison of intellectuals and intellectual traditions in Brazil and India.

MP. You mentioned that after your visit you understood better the circumstances of our location.

Tambiah

Brazil seems to have certain interesting singularities. From one point of view, it is part of a triangular relationship: Brazil is in a relation to the United States, and in a second relation to Europe, and that triangulation gives you a particular vantage point to engage in a dialogue with the metropolitan centers. In that sense you are a third different component to this dialogue. And then within Latin America, you are differentiated from other countries, because you alone are primarily Portuguese speaking, and a great amount of your literature is in Portuguese and addresses a local intelligentsia. There are important dialogues in your language within your own country, which is to me a very special situation.

MP. That is the nice part.

Tambiah

So, Brazil I think, again, constitutes a seed bed and a site from which something important and different can be and is being said. Take the case of Thailand. When I went there in the early 60's, it had a very small number of people who knew English and other European languages. Increasingly since the 1960's and the 70's, an enormous number of scholars were sent abroad for higher education, and also US universities conducted teacher training and university programs in Thailand itself. Now there is a fairly large and growing autonomous intelligentsia in Thailand in universities and the professors, who are fully cognizant of the Western sources and forms of knowledge, they are also generating their own subaltern critical literature. Of course there are also western scholars who have espoused the notion of resistance. A bottom up perspective in contrast to a top down perspective can enable the mounting of resistance to political authoritarianism in Thailand. The so-called transition to democracy is a continuing problem in Thailand as it is in Brazil. In Thailand, authoritarianism is well entrenched, and there is an attempt to make a transition to full democracy, and the student movement, democracy movements, and uprisings are a form of resistance to authoritarian power. These political trends are also producing a rethinking about the way the traditional past is to be

conceived, especially as regards political upheavals in the nineteenth century. The orthodox master narrative about Thailand is that it is the Chakkri monarchy that modernized from the 19th century onwards. The nation state project was not exactly smooth as different segments of the population in the north, northeast and the south were coercively integrated by the bureaucracy and armed forces. But the new intellectuals, historians, and social scientists of today are depicting the reactions and resistances of local peoples to this centralizing process. I think that from the so-called periphery and third world countries you are going to have an increasing number of similar intellectual productions which will differ from these crafted by some of the older metropolitan intellectuals.

MP. In this respect, how do you evaluate your own work in Thailand?

Tambiah

World Conqueror and World Renouncer (1976) is in a sense a narrative about Thailand's nationalization and nation-making processes, and it narrates developments up to the early seventies, just before the student rebellion broke out in 1973. That work on Thailand does not deal with recent political happenings, and there has been no direct attack on it by Thai intellectuals. There has been interest in my notion of a transition from a 'galactic polity' to a 'radial polity'. My second book on the Buddhist monks and the cult of amulets and how that interacts with the political processes speaks to a modern interest, and it has had again an appreciated impact.³² I have not produced any significant work on Thailand pertaining to events in the late 80s and nineties. But I did begin a study in the 80s of 5 *wats* (temple complexes) in Bangkok, and perhaps even more interesting for me, a study of Bangkok's largest squatter settlement called Klong Toei, which remains to be completed. It was because of this interest that I was keen to visit some favelas in Rio.

I began to document the forms of life being established in Klong Toei. The attitude of the state and city authorities toward the dwellers is one of studied neglect on the ground that they are criminals, drug dealers and prostitutes. While some of them may be so involved, many of them are workers in the construction industry or engaged in loading and transport work in the

³² *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (1984) has been a primary point of reference for a subsequent study by J.L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation State: an Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*. Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993.

port, or, especially the women, employed in sweated industries, in food packing etc. In other words, these people participate in Bangkok's economy as semi-skilled and skilled workers. My intention is to describe these positive features, and also investigate how they are coping with the existential problems and tasks they face in a harsh urban environment, how they are continuing as well as transforming the social practices and ritual cults and other social capital with which they came from the rural areas. I have already discovered some interesting aspects of a colorful social life. One is the importance of body tattooing for members of youth gangs for purposes of physical protection against accidents and against injury in fights between rival gangs. Each gang has its distinctive tattoo design devised by its tattoo master, who ritually transmits invulnerability through the tattoo inscription. (As you can imagine, this cult is a variant of the cult of amulets which I have described earlier in a different context!)

Another interesting activity is the flourishing of Thai style boxing schools in the slum. Thai boxing is a national sport, and the majority of the boxers emerge from the slums. For the youth it is a path to fame and money through the cultivation of this kind of athletic prowess. Such careers are actually of brief duration, but boxing is the focus of intense addictive betting and gambling, which thrives in the atmosphere of uncertain poverty spiced by the luck of windfall fortunes. Gilberto Velho told me how much he has been working in urban anthropology. Well, the study of Bangkok's largest squatter settlement will, if completed, be my contribution to that same field. There is, however, another study I have completed but which I have not written up yet, a study of five *wats* situated in different localities of Bangkok.

MP. Is there a difference between *wats* and *pagodas*?

Tambiah

In Thailand the word *wat* refers to a Buddhist temple and monastery complex. (The word *pagoda* refers to a temple in the form of a many storeyed tapering tower: it is not a Thai word.) One *wat* is located in an affluent middle and upper middle class section, the second in a suburban working and lower middle class section, the third at the edge of Klong Toei slum, the fourth in the main governmental administrative quarter, and the fifth in Bangkok's commercial 'Chinatown'. Each *wat* thus caters to a different segment of Bangkok's urban population, and together they serve as multiple windows opening onto the

city's religious and social life. Actually, my interest in Bangkok's urban *wats* began at the time I was doing the work for *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*. These studies of urban life in metropolitan Bangkok — the large shanty settlement, the five different *wats* — are ethnographic studies of local forms of life, but they are connected to the larger issue of globalism, and the distinctive outcomes of the interaction between global influences and local forms of life.

MP. Would you expand this idea about anthropological approaches to global influences and local forms of life?...

Tambiah

I think that the strength of the anthropological method lies in seeing how global and metropolitan forces are refracted through local forms of life, and how local forms in turn adapt them to their purposes and creatively generate their distinctive patterns. I have so far not yet begun to consider such phenomena as transnational processes and diaspora populations. It seems to me that many of the so-called post-modern treatments of transnational processes are ethnographically superficial and sparse, because they skim over vast distances and many sites without vertically cutting deep into the life forms operating at local and regional levels. In a way, in my last book I tried to incorporate some features of postmodern contributions, especially the notion of narrative and the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that lead to open outcomes rather than closure. At the same time I have tried to write my text in a direct and simple language so that a wider readership than anthropologists can understand it. One of the failings of postmodern prose is that it indulges in opaque jargon and buzzwords and cultic, formulaic expressions. Fashion words serve as a substitute for communicable ideas. It should be our aim to express ideas in simple language, a language that does not defeat the purpose of communication. Moreover, it is a misconception to think that authors like Foucault, Bakhtin and others are prophets and exemplars of postmodernism. They are important to all of us moderns.

MP. There is something odd in the fact that when American anthropologists bring the discipline home, anthropology disappears.

At least in one strong sense, 'cultural studies' seem to represent an effort to empty anthropology from whatever vestiges of exoticism.

Tambiah

The postmodern questioning of the authorial power and objectivity, of the asymmetrical power relation between anthropologist and the indigenous 'other', and its highlighting the activity of negotiated understandings between anthropologist and informants have tended to destabilize, even subvert, anthropological writing, especially in the United States. My own view is that anthropologists should ponder these concerns, digest the criticisms, and then get on with their anthropological fieldwork and writing, which should creatively incorporate the postmodern concerns but also hold fast to the view that forms of life can be documented and that the circumstances and contexts of information gathering and authorial representation be a part of the text. It would be a mistake to dissolve anthropology as a discipline, or to reduce it to highly personalized narcissistic amounts of egotistic encounters which highlights the neurotic preoccupations of an invasive outsider rather than the richness of the forms of life of other societies, knowledge of which will deepen and illuminate our own lives and societies. This is the reason and justification for the practice of anthropology.

MP. Thank you, Tambi.

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