



STANLEY TAMBIAH

Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah

1929–2014

STANLEY JEYARAJA TAMBIAH, always called ‘Tambi’ by his friends and colleagues, was born in Sri Lanka on 16 January 1929 and died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 19 January 2014. He was the Esther and Sidney Rabb Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Harvard University. Before joining Harvard in 1976, Tambi had held academic posts at the Universities of Ceylon (1955–60), Cambridge (1964–73) and Chicago (1973–6). He was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 2000. Tambi was one of the most distinguished social and cultural anthropologists of his generation and enjoyed a worldwide reputation for his scholarly work, particularly on the anthropology of religion, Thai Buddhism and ethnic religious conflict in Sri Lanka and the wider South Asian region. He was also highly esteemed as a teacher and especially as an outstanding lecturer, and it was in this capacity that I came to know him, first as an undergraduate and then as a research student, in Cambridge between 1969 and 1973. After he left Cambridge, my contact with him was sporadic, but several of his friends and colleagues in America, as well as in England and elsewhere, have recorded their memories of him as a charismatic, inspirational and generous man, always possessed of the ‘booming voice and gentle smile’ remembered by Michael Fischer in Harvard’s ‘In Memoriam’.¹

¹‘Cambridge Social Anthropology Remembers S. J. Tambiah’, <http://www.socanth.cam.ac.uk/2014/01/cambridge-social-anthropology-remembers-s-j-tambiah/>, accessed 3 April 2015; ‘In Memoriam: Stanley J. Tambiah (Harvard University, Department of Anthropology)’, <http://harvardanthro.wix.com/Tambi>, accessed 3 April 2015.

Ceylon and Sri Lanka

Tambi was the fifth son of Charles Rajakon and Eliza Cheilana Tambiah.² The family were Tamils from Jaffna in the north of the island, who had become Anglican Christians. Tambi's father was a lawyer and plantation owner in Jaffna, who stood for parliament in 1947 as a candidate for the United National Party (UNP), Ceylon's ruling party after the colony became independent in 1948. C. R. Tambiah lost the election, but he was later honoured with the Order of the British Empire. Tambi attended school at St Thomas' College, in Colombo, like his father before him, and gained his BA at the University of Ceylon in 1951. All his eight siblings were also educated at university. His father's brother, H. W. Tambiah, was a Supreme Court judge who wrote several books on Ceylon law.

Tambi and the rest of his family, as this short summary indicates, belonged to the English-educated, urban, professional, upper-middle class, which formed the elite of colonial Ceylon. Its members came from all backgrounds—Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Eurasian—and mostly shared a predominantly secularist, anti-communal, nationalist political outlook. After 1948, this elite came to power through the UNP, which it dominated in the early years of independence. But before then, in the final decade of British rule, Tambi was a pupil at a colonial version of an English public school, where he captained the school cricket team, and was taught English literature, English history, Latin and the other subjects needed for a gentlemanly education. At school, he and his fellow pupils were also repeatedly warned against the dangers of sectional loyalties leading to unhealthy, ethnic divisiveness. They were not taught anything about Sri Lanka's history, literature or culture, however, and Tambi described himself to Alan Macfarlane as a member of a 'deracinated' family, part of a class that 'didn't know our own past'.³ This lack of knowledge—as well as the secularist outlook he imbibed from school and his own family—would strongly influence Tambi's anthropological research and writing.

When Tambi went to the University of Ceylon, intending to study history or literature, he met Bryce Ryan, an American scholar who was

²For biographical details and political background, see S. J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago, 1986), pp. 129–41; S. J. Tambiah, *Edmund Leach: an Anthropological Life* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. ix–xiii; interview with Alan Macfarlane in 1983, <http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/Tambiah.html>, accessed 3 April 2015; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE0mlacyU4Q>, accessed 3 April 2015; M. M. J. Fischer, 'Obituary', *American Anthropologist*, 116 (2014), 900–3.

³Macfarlane interview, first section.

setting up a new department of anthropology and sociology. Ryan took undergraduates on short trips to villages to do fieldwork, which was an exciting, new experience for young men from urban, middle-class families such as Tambi, who then chose to study for a degree in economics with anthropology and sociology. After completing his BA, he was appointed as an assistant lecturer and then decided to study abroad for a Ph.D. degree. Ryan persuaded him to go to Cornell University, where he learned a lot of classical social theory and completed a thesis on secularisation in villages in 1954; one of his first publications, a short article on the secularisation of family values in Ceylon, was based on the thesis and co-authored with Ryan.⁴ This article argues that urban contacts promoted secularisation among individuals to varying extents in the three villages studied, but entire communities were not secularised and traditional family values were not much affected. The argument, which relied on statistical analysis of survey data, is a typical example of sociological writing on modernisation in the fifties. Tambi, as far as I know, never explicitly rejected modernisation theory, but a few years later he turned his back on it and it forms no part of his subsequent anthropological writing.

When Tambi returned to his university from America, he started to do fieldwork in villages with colleagues and students, especially on peasant colonisation schemes and rural development, but also on family and kinship systems. One of Tambi's colleagues was Gananath Obeyesekere, who also became a distinguished anthropologist and has spent most of his academic career in America. Tambi and Obeyesekere remained life-long friends and they, together with H. L. Seneviratne and a few others, belong to a remarkable cohort of anthropologists who learned their craft in Sri Lanka when the country was newly independent.

In 1956, when leading a research team of students in newly settled peasant colonies in Gal Oya, in the east of the island, Tambi was caught up in ethnic riots between Sinhalese and Tamils, which broke out shortly after riots in Colombo. Some thirty years later (mistakenly dating the incident to 1958, when serious rioting also took place in Sri Lanka), Tambi wrote an account of this 'traumatic' experience, 'the first time the ethnic divide was so forcibly thrust into my existence'.⁵ Shortly after returning from Gal Oya, however, Tambi had written a report on the riots for his university, which he lost, but later recovered for publication in

⁴ *The Process of Secularization in Three Ceylonese Peasant Communities*, Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 1954; S. J. Tambiah and B. Ryan, 'Secularization of family values in Ceylon', *American Sociological Review*, 22 (1957), 292-9.

⁵ Tambiah, *Sri Lanka*, p. 137.

1996.⁶ Much of this report records what he and his students witnessed at first hand, and it vividly portrays the riots' terrifying nature, as well as the confusion and rumours surrounding and exacerbating them. The violence in 1956 and 1958 had multiple causes, of course, especially economic ones, but a crucial trigger was the election victory of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and his revivalist Buddhist, Sinhalese nationalist, Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1956. After Bandaranaike's new government made Sinhala the official national language and promoted Buddhism as the national religion, discrimination against the Tamil minority began to grow and conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils grew steadily worse. By 1958 (or maybe two years earlier), Tambi knew that: 'I wished to get away from the island, for I experienced a mounting alienation and a sense of being homeless in one's own home.'⁷

Not long afterwards, Tambi had a stroke of luck. Hugh Philp, an Australian friend from his Cornell days, who was in charge of a UNESCO institute engaged in research on children and education in Thailand, invited Tambi to join the institute as an anthropologist responsible for field research in rural areas and for training local students in research techniques. Tambi accepted the invitation and in Thailand in 1960–2 he collected the material on a Thai village that he would write up a few years later. Before discussing his work on Thailand as a whole, however, I turn to Tambi's career in Cambridge.

Social Anthropology in Cambridge

In 1956, Tambi met Edmund Leach at the University of Ceylon. Leach was one of the most radical thinkers in British social anthropology, as well as one of the most polemical, and he was visiting Sri Lanka to collect some more data on kinship and land tenure in the village of Pul Eliya, where he had done fieldwork in 1954.⁸ Tambi showed Leach a draft essay he had written on kinship and land tenure, which Leach liked and edited for publication in 1958.⁹ In 1962, Leach wrote to Tambi in Thailand ask-

⁶S. J. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), pp. 87–94.

⁷Tambiah, *Sri Lanka*, p. 137.

⁸E. R. Leach, *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon: a Study of Land Tenure and Kinship* (Cambridge, 1961).

⁹S. J. Tambiah, 'The structure of kinship and its relation to land possession and residence in Pata Dumbara, central Ceylon', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 88 (1958), 21–44.

ing if he would be interested in a one-year visiting fellowship in Cambridge. Tambi said yes and went to Cambridge in 1963. When the fellowship came to an end, Meyer Fortes, the head of the Department of Social Anthropology, offered Tambi an assistant lectureship; he was later promoted to a lectureship and also became a fellow of King's College. Tambi remained in Cambridge until he left for Chicago in 1973.

By the time I met Tambi, he was a fully acculturated member of his department and college, but Caroline Humphrey is surely right that he 'may have had quite a difficult and lonely time at Cambridge', especially when he first arrived. Cambridge has been absorbing outsiders for centuries, but it was (and is) an intimidating place for many people.¹⁰ Tambi came from Sri Lanka's English-speaking elite, but he was still a non-white immigrant from the 'colonies' and almost certainly had to put up with the day-to-day racism that was much worse in Britain in the sixties than it is today. Moreover, even though many of its leading figures—such as Fortes—were themselves immigrants, British anthropology was a small, self-contained world. Tambi became a highly respected member of it, but he must have had to work hard to do so, not only intellectually, but also personally. Jean and John Comaroff met Tambi for the first time at a seminar in the London School of Economics, where they were graduate students from South Africa, in the late 1960s. As they recall: 'In those days, the English academy was a daunting place for callow students from the colonies. . . . We were captivated: not only by [Tambi's] poise and his warmth, but by the fact that, in what was still a rather formal pedagogic culture, he was unusually supportive to young scholars', particularly those from abroad.¹¹ No doubt, in giving such support, Tambi knew its value very well.

In Cambridge, Tambi delivered a course of lectures on magic and religion. Humphrey recalls that his 'lectures were packed—the audiences included graduates, visitors, and people from all over the University—and he always spoke slowly and clearly, with a well-prepared text'. She's probably right about the large audiences, though I don't personally remember them, but she's certainly right about the quality of the lectures, as well as those in his economic anthropology course, which other former students also recall. In Cambridge (and elsewhere) in the sixties, the quality of lectures was generally low and students often didn't turn up. There were exceptions, of course; Leach, for example, periodically delivered spectacular

¹⁰Humphrey, in 'Cambridge Social Anthropology Remembers'.

¹¹Comaroff and Comaroff, in 'In Memoriam (Harvard)'.

lectures on topics that excited him, but on his off days he didn't appear to have prepared anything to talk about. Tambi, however, always had, and everything he said was clear and interesting, even to undergraduates who didn't know much anthropology.

Tambi was also a superb undergraduate supervisor (academic tutor) in Cambridge. Like lecturing, supervising was often done badly, with most of the allotted hour taken up by undergraduates reading out their essays to bored dons, who would then make one or two comments, set another essay topic and sometimes provide a glass of sherry. Tambi's supervisions were never like that. I had the great privilege of being one of his undergraduate students in 1969–70 and still remember the experience very well. In the weekly supervisions I had with a fellow student, the late Michael Sallnow (who became an anthropologist of Latin America), Tambi would discuss our essays; he rarely wrote more than a brief comment at the end, but he explained what was right and wrong in them, proposed alternative ways of thinking about the subject matter, made connections to different questions, suggested further readings and demonstrated in a way that was entirely new to me how every significant topic in social anthropology had to be seen as an open-ended question to be discussed critically in relation to ethnographic evidence. R. L. Stirrat has told me that he remembers undergraduate supervisions with Tambi as a completely new experience in which, for the first time, he was taken seriously and his essays and opinions were properly debated; Stirrat was later supervised by Tambi as a research student and went to Sri Lanka to do fieldwork. For all of us, as his undergraduate students, Tambi's supervisions were a revelation; for my own part, it was in them that I learned, to my everlasting benefit, how anthropological arguments really should be constructed.

During the decade spent in Cambridge, Tambi radically altered his intellectual approach and became a fully fledged British social anthropologist. Indeed, rereading the articles he published at this time, especially those on kinship and magic and religion, I am struck by how many of them are the products of a particular place and time—Cambridge in the sixties and early seventies—and how they differ both from his earlier work written in Sri Lanka and his later work in the United States.

Although my memories of Cambridge may be distorted by nostalgia, I think there would be general agreement that Fortes, Leach, Tambi and Jack Goody were a formidable quartet, who arguably made their social anthropology department the best in Britain at the time, as well as one of the best in the world. Its prowess greatly depended, however, on the intellectual schism between Fortes and Goody on one side, and Leach and

Tambi on the other. To most outsiders, many points of dispute between the two factions—over descent and alliance theories, or the significance of complementary filiation, for instance—probably looked too abstruse or too minor to matter, and they certainly do so today to almost everyone, although that is partly because most contemporary anthropologists know little about the debates in technical kinship in which the Cambridge anthropologists, including Tambi, displayed their intellectual skills. Thus his 1958 article was packed with the kind of detailed genealogical evidence that demonstrated his ethnographic and analytical expertise. One argument raging at the time concerned the relationship between kinship and economics. Leach concluded his monograph *Pul Eliya* by insisting ‘that kinship systems have no “reality” at all except in relation to land and property’, whereas Fortes, responding to Leach, insisted just as adamantly that ‘kinship predicates the axiom of amity’ and is ‘not reducible to economic factors’.¹² Leach polemically overstated his case at the end of his book, but his fundamental argument about Sinhalese villagers was endorsed by Tambi in his 1965 article about ‘kinship fact and fiction’. Thus Tambi concluded that the connection between kinship fact and fiction—in simple terms, how people actually organise kin relations and how they talk about kinship—‘is largely determined by extra-kinship variables, primarily economic in nature’.¹³ Tambi’s conclusion, more nuanced than Leach’s, partly anticipated later theorising, such as Pierre Bourdieu’s fruitful analysis of the relationship between ‘official’ and ‘practical’ kinship, but I shall not pursue these debates here.¹⁴ Instead, I want to emphasise that in this article, even more plainly than in his earlier one, Tambi demonstrated his mastery of detailed ethnographic comparison and theoretical analysis in kinship studies. The article won the Curl Bequest essay prize, but I suspect the real prize for Tambi was that he had proved he could match his more experienced colleagues in only his first year as a lecturer in Cambridge.

Tambi wrote other essays on kinship in his Cambridge years, but he also wrote on topics in ritual and religion, and cosmology and classification. Much of this work was based on material collected in a Thai village, Baan Phraan Muan, but some of it re-examined the classic ethnography of Malinowski on the Trobriands and Evans-Pritchard on the Azande.

¹² Leach, *Pul Eliya*, p. 305; M. Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order* (London, 1969), pp. 237, 231.

¹³ S. J. Tambiah, ‘Kinship fact and fiction in relation to the Kandyan Sinhalese’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 95 (1965), 131–73 at 169.

¹⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 33–8.

Revisiting Malinowski was one of Leach's favourite exercises, and Tambi's 'The magical power of words', published in 1968, which starts with sacred language in Buddhist rituals, is mostly about Trobriand spells.¹⁵ Leach's influence was not limited to the choice of topics, however, for it was much more pervasive and there is a patently Leachian style to quite a lot of Tambi's work in the broad field of ritual in the late sixties and early seventies; Leach introduced Tambi to Lévi-Strauss's structuralism as well. Tambi's 1969 article on animal categories, based on his Thai data, is probably the clearest example of Leach's influence, although inspiration also came from Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas.¹⁶ Tambi was not just being pious, however, when he thanked Leach for teaching him 'most of the anthropology I know' in 1970.¹⁷

Yet it would be wrong to suggest either that Tambi talked only to Leach in Cambridge or that he was merely his disciple. At the end of Tambi's period in Cambridge, he and Goody published linked papers on bridewealth and dowry.¹⁸ Probably more significant, though, was Tambi's outstanding chapter in Goody's edited volume on literacy, published in 1968, which includes a detailed ethnographic analysis of literacy and its relationship with different categories of traditional literati in Baan Phraan Muan, which had always been a remote and 'backward' village, but also a part of South-East Asian Buddhist civilisation.¹⁹ In his book's introduction, Goody critically discussed anthropological work on 'civilisations' by Robert Redfield and others, which was not required reading among British anthropologists at the time; he also insisted that the functionalist frameworks originally developed by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown to comprehend pre-literate tribal societies were patently inadequate for societies shaped by literacy and world religions.²⁰ Also in 1968, Leach's collection on 'practical religion' came out, with another chapter of detailed ethnographic analysis by Tambi, in this case on merit-making in the Thai

¹⁵S. J. Tambiah, 'The magical power of words', *Man* (n.s.), 3 (1968), 175–208 (reprinted in S. J. Tambiah, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: an Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), chapter 1).

¹⁶S. J. Tambiah, 'Animals are good to think and good to prohibit', *Ethnology*, 8 (1969), 423–59 (reprinted in Tambiah, *Culture*, chapter 5); C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London, 1966); M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966).

¹⁷S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge, 1970), p. v.

¹⁸J. Goody and S. J. Tambiah, *Bridewealth and Dowry* (Cambridge, 1973).

¹⁹S. J. Tambiah, 'Literacy in a Buddhist village in North-East Thailand', in J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 85–131.

²⁰J. Goody, 'Introduction', in Goody (ed.), *Literacy*, p. 10.

village.²¹ In his introduction, Leach—who largely discounted Buddhist ‘theology’ as sociologically irrelevant—praised Tambi’s chapter as ‘a remarkably effective demonstration of Malinowski’s functionalist thesis that the components of a religious system are meaningful’, not only because they are internally coherent, but also because they are practically integrated with people’s ordinary lives.²² I don’t know if Goody and Leach were deliberating criticising each other’s positions; nor do I know whether Tambi told them his opinion. In retrospect, though, it is clear that Tambi’s thinking, in both essays about his Thai village, was actually at least as close to Goody’s as Leach’s, so that in some respects he was moving away from the style of anthropology he had first mastered in Cambridge.

In 1979, Tambi delivered the Radcliffe-Brown Lecture at the British Academy.²³ His topic was ritual and how to define, analyse and interpret it, which has been a classic problem for anthropologists for a century or more. ‘Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication,’ Tambi declared forcefully.²⁴ In the published text of his lecture, he seeks to describe as comprehensively as possible the kind of communication that ritual is, with special reference to work in linguistics and information theory, as well as anthropology. Many ethnographic examples are cited, including once again the Trobriand Islands, but the detailed case studies are a Sinhalese exorcism and, to illustrate the significance of variation, a Thai tonsure ceremony. These two cases are interesting partly because they do not come from pre-literate tribal societies, in contrast to most of the ones that anthropologists theorising about ritual normally discussed at the time. Since the idea that ritual is primarily a form of communication has been widely (though not universally) accepted by anthropologists, including Leach who wrote incisively about it, Tambi’s approach was conventional enough. Yet the lecture’s ambitious scope, as well as some of its style and key citations, also show that after six years in America Tambi had significantly broadened the intellectual approach he imbibed as a social anthropologist in Cambridge.

Almost thirty years after he left Cambridge, Tambi’s intellectual biography of Leach came out.²⁵ Most of this long book is taken up with

²¹ S. J. Tambiah, ‘The ideology of merit and the social correlates of Buddhism in a Thai village’, in E. R. Leach (ed.), *Dialectic in Practical Religion* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 41–121.

²² E. R. Leach, ‘Introduction’, in Leach (ed.), *Dialectic*, p. 3.

²³ S. J. Tambiah, ‘A performative approach to ritual’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 65 (1979), 113–169 (reprinted in Tambiah, *Culture*, chapter 4).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁵ Tambiah, *Edmund Leach*. A short version of the book was published earlier as a British

discussion of Leach's publications, often in considerable detail, which some readers have praised as valuable and others have found excessive. Ray Abrahams, who was Tambi's colleague in Cambridge, comments that he 'is in general keen to present a sympathetic rather than a critical account' and is sometimes less generous to Leach's critics than Leach himself was.²⁶ As an example, Abrahams cites Tambi's lengthy defence of *Pul Eliya*, which closes with his rebuttal of Fortes's criticisms of the book; he might also have cited Tambi's extensive discussion of the quarrel over Kachin marriage between Leach and Lévi-Strauss.²⁷ The most surprising feature of the account of the Leach-Fortes dispute, though, is its one-sidedness; Tambi, indeed, is more dogmatic about kinship 'fact and fiction' than he had been in his article about it in 1965. Moreover, Leach's polemical overstatements are defended as necessary to get his points across, whereas Fortes is repeatedly accused of failing to understand Leach's argument at all.²⁸ It is an extreme example, but it is of a piece with the book as a whole, in which—for reasons I don't really understand—Tambi's desire to honour Leach is so dominant that the cut and thrust of his teacher's inspirational debates with intellectual opponents often disappears from view.

The Thai Buddhist trilogy

Reflecting on his own career in the 1980s, Tambi explained that moving to Thailand in 1960 not only allowed him to escape from his increasingly alienating homeland, but also to study Buddhism—specifically the Theravada Buddhism of South-East Asia and Sri Lanka—with a sympathy and detachment that was impossible in Sri Lanka itself. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, published in 1970, is a study of Baan Phraan Muan, which looks at how 'Buddhism as a classical heritage and a popular religion was integrated with all aspects of life in [the] village'. In 1971, Tambi did further research in Thailand, primarily in Bangkok, which led to *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, published in 1976. This book is a historical and ethnographic study of 'the complementary

Academy memoir: S. J. Tambiah, 'Edmund Ronald Leach, 1910–1989', *1997 Lectures and Memoirs, Proceedings of the British Academy*, 97 (1998), 293–344.

²⁶R. Abrahams, 'Review of *Edmund Leach*', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 66 (2003), 311–13.

²⁷Tambiah, *Edmund Leach*, pp. 97–121.

²⁸Tambiah, *Edmund Leach*, pp. 197–208.

relation between Buddhism as a vocation of renunciation and its larger linkage with the polity under the aegis of Buddhist kingship', which, Tambi argued, is relevant not only to Thailand, but also to Sri Lanka, Burma and Laos. The final book in the Thai Buddhist trilogy is *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, mainly based on research in 1978–9 and published in 1984, which 'tells the story of the esoteric forest monk saintly Buddhist tradition in Thailand, its classical precedents and its present political and social ramifications'.²⁹ The three books are all long, making a total of more than 1,200 pages of text, and even Tambi's unsympathetic critics have acknowledged the magnitude of his contribution to the study of Theravada Buddhism.³⁰ But because they are complex as well as long, it is not easy to describe this contribution succinctly and only a few of its aspects can be mentioned here.

Reflecting on his Thai books, Tambi justly characterised them as 'situated at the confluence of anthropology, indology (Buddhist and Hindu studies), and history'. In Cambridge, he had been 'persuaded by Dumont and Pocock' that the sociology of India had to be founded on the relationship between it and classical Indology, although he was sure that history had to be part of the combination as well.³¹ Louis Dumont's work was certainly regarded highly by Tambi, as well as by Leach; thus when I was a student on his South Asia course in 1969–70, Tambi was consistently enthusiastic about Dumont's magisterial work on caste, *Homo Hierarchicus*, although he was rather more critical in his review of it.³² In the conclusion to *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, though, Dumont and Pocock are singled out as major inspirations, especially for their analysis of the relationship between 'higher' Sanskritic and 'lower' popular Hinduism.³³

Buddhism and the Spirit Cults and other essays about Baan Phraan Muan written in Cambridge were serious attempts to write anthropologically about a world religion in a literate, peasant society located within a

²⁹ S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults* (Cambridge, 1970); S. J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge, 1976); S. J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge, 1984); see Tambiah, *Sri Lanka*, pp. 137–8, for Tambiah's own summaries.

³⁰ A 'review symposium' on the Thai trilogy, with an introduction by E. Nissan and contributions by F. E. Reynolds, C. F. Keyes, H. L. Seneviratne, R. Thapar, M. Carrithers, F. K. Lehman and S. J. Tambiah, is in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.) 21 (1987), 1–25, 111–216.

³¹ S. J. Tambiah, 'At the confluence of Anthropology, History, and Indology', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), 21 (1987), 187–216 at 187–8.

³² L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: the Caste System and its Implications* (London, 1970); S. J. Tambiah, 'Review of *Homo Hierarchicus*', *American Anthropologist* 74 (1972), 832–5.

³³ Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, pp. 368–70.

large state and an expansive civilisation. It is important to appreciate that they therefore differed substantially from almost all the publications of his colleagues, including Leach, although Goody, as mentioned above, was starting to move in a similar direction in his work on literacy. Moreover, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults* was the first full-length ethnographic analysis of a world religion published by an anthropologist working in Britain, apart from the pioneering monograph on the Hindu Coorgs written in Oxford by M. N. Srinivas.³⁴ In the United States, a few such studies had appeared in the sixties, such as Clifford Geertz's *The Religion of Java* and Melford Spiro's *Burmese Supernaturalism*, and by the end of the twentieth century there were a lot, but in 1970 *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults* was still a genuinely original work.³⁵

The fundamental problem in the anthropology of world religions, to put it very simply, concerns the relationship between the scriptural, textual, orthodox, canonical, doctrinal, spiritual or transcendental religion of the elite and the popular, pragmatic religion of the ordinary people. The work of Redfield—who coined the terms 'great' and 'little traditions' for the 'higher' and 'lower' religions, or religious 'levels'—has been influential, but the first important sociological discussion of the problem was by Weber, whose work had a major impact on Tambi's thinking.³⁶ The Theravada Buddhist version of the problem is about the relationship between Buddhism itself—the religion oriented towards the other-worldly goal of liberation or salvation (*nirvana*) and the achievement of a better rebirth through gaining merit—and the non-Buddhist cults of the spirits and other supernatural beings, which are worshipped or propitiated for the satisfaction of worldly needs such as material prosperity or good health. The monks are the key personnel and representatives of Buddhism in society; diviners, exorcists and others conduct rituals for the spirits. Different writers on Theravada Buddhism, whether anthropologists or textual scholars, have explained the relationship between Buddhism and the spirit cults in alternative ways.³⁷ Spiro, for example, argued that in

³⁴M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford, 1952).

³⁵C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago, 1960); M. E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*, expanded edn. (Philadelphia, 1978; first edn., 1967).

³⁶R. Redfield, 'The natural history of folk society' (1953), and R. Redfield and M. B. Singer, 'The cultural role of cities' (1954), in M. P. Redfield (ed.), *Human Nature and the Study of Society: the Papers of Robert Redfield*, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1962), pp. 294–302, 326–50; among Weber's various writings, one well-known text is 'The social psychology of the world religions', in H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London, 1948), chapter 11.

³⁷D. N. Gellner, 'What is the anthropology of Buddhism about?' (1990), in Gellner, *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian Themes* (Delhi, 2001), chapter 2.

Burma they are actually two religions, which are distinct and in some respects incompatible with each other.³⁸ Tambi, by contrast, contended in *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults* that Theravada Buddhism in north-east Thailand has to be grasped as a single religious field constituted by both doctrinal Buddhism itself and three other sets of beliefs and practices that make up the spirit cults. The various elements of this field stand in mutual relationships of opposition, complementarity, linkage and hierarchical evaluation that are amenable to structuralist analysis in the manner of Leach, rather than Lévi-Strauss. Tambi criticised Spiro in *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults* and Spiro later replied, restating his position and suggesting that the two of them, 'despite the differences in terminology ... are saying very nearly the same thing'.³⁹ Spiro was making a valid point, I think, although Tambi would almost certainly have disagreed and it is true that there was a real difference of emphasis between them. Moreover, Tambi's insistence on a holistic perspective generally proved more illuminating to other scholars of Buddhism, as well as of Hinduism and other world religions, especially anthropologists striving to understand how ordinary people can be committed to religious beliefs and practices which seem inconsistent or even contradictory.

Compared with *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, *World Conqueror* is a much bigger departure from the kind of anthropology Tambi had written earlier, because its canvas is the entire national society of Thailand, rather than a particular village, and it explores its large themes through a range of ethnographic, textual and historical material. Much of *World Conqueror* was written in Chicago, where Tambi worked in 1973–6, and the book's ambitiousness surely owed a lot to his new academic environment. Social anthropology in Cambridge was not intellectually inferior to cultural anthropology in Chicago, but its scope was narrower and in Chicago—where Redfield had been an influential figure—peasant societies, world religions and civilisations had been important fields of study for many years. Perhaps, too, Tambi was just emboldened by America's more open society after a decade in England.

World Conqueror examines the complementary relationships between Buddhism as a religion of renunciation and Buddhist kingship, and between the *sangha* (order of monks) and the Thai royal polity. The historical period is mainly the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but Tambi located the ideal model for these relationships in the ancient Indian

³⁸ Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*.

³⁹ Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, pp. 41–2; Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*, p. xxxv.

Buddhist kingship of Ashoka. An important and ostensibly paradoxical feature of the connection between monks and king is that men who have renounced the world also legitimated those who rule it, which partly explains the active role taken by monks in political movements, including modern Sinhalese nationalism. The book as a whole is a study of the continuities and transformations, the tensions and dynamics, of the Thai polity against the background of the Buddhist textual tradition and the Ashokan paradigm.

World Conqueror looks at ‘the official monastic establishment’, the monks living in towns and villages who legitimated kingship at the centre, but not the more ascetic, forest-dwelling monks at the periphery of society, who are the subjects of *Buddhist Saints*. The division between the two kinds of monks is a key aspect of Theravada Buddhism. The ascetic monks, who are ‘credited with extraordinary wisdom, love, and charismatic powers’, are venerated by people from all sections of society, including powerful and wealthy urbanites in Bangkok. Closely linked to this veneration is the cult of amulets that have been blessed by famous forest saints. Amulets are a traditional custom, but they have become a ‘fetishistic obsession’ among urbanites, who use them in pursuit of success in the worldly realms of politics and commerce, as well as in love affairs.⁴⁰ Moreover, they are objects made valuable by renunciators’ blessings, which are then bought and possessed as signs of wealth and power in the world. The blessing of amulets, Tambi argued, could best be understood as a transfer of charisma into an object that becomes fetishised. *Buddhist Saints* ends with a critical examination of Weber’s theory of charismatic persons, which was extended to objects by reflecting on Mauss’s discussion of magical power (*mana*) and gifts; thus combined, Weber and Mauss help to make sense of the amulets as charismatic objects that are also modern market commodities.

One chapter of *World Conqueror* was published separately as an essay on the ‘galactic polity’, a phrase denoting the design of traditional kingdoms in South-East Asia that replicate the sacred design of the *mandala*. In the galactic polity, the exemplary centre, a divine kingship, is surrounded by satellites—an unstable set of petty kingships all headed by potential rivals to the central power. Sometimes the centre is strong, but often it is weak and liable to challenge by one or more rivals, who may fight each other as well. In the history of South-East Asian kingdoms, rebellions were indeed perennial, but strong kingdoms arose in some

⁴⁰Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints*, p. 3.

exceptional circumstances. Tambi's essay, which investigates the political, economic and religious causes and consequences of these 'pulsating galactic polities', has been widely praised as a convincing contribution to the understanding of a wide range of pre-modern states built on magnificent kingships that were also politically feeble.⁴¹

The scholarly reception for *World Conqueror* and *Buddhist Saints* was mixed. Some experts on Buddhism, such as Frank Reynolds, expressed enthusiasm about the whole Thai trilogy, especially its holistic approach, and declared it to be probably the greatest single contribution to Theravada Buddhist studies since Paul Mus's work in the 1930s.⁴² Others praised the trilogy highly, but were more sceptical; Charles Keyes, for instance, argued that Tambi tended to overstate cyclical transformations and minimise significant historical changes, as in his analysis of religious reform in nineteenth-century Thailand, so that the holistic, totalising approach was pushed too far and he was led 'to impose misleading historical closure on his rich material'.⁴³ Yet others were unimpressed. Spiro, for example, wrote a severely critical review of *World Conqueror*, which provoked a vitriolic response from Tambi, although even Keyes (whose help was acknowledged in *Buddhist Saints*) was the target of some sarcastic comments about his allegedly 'simplistic notion' of historical interpretation.⁴⁴ Tambi, in fact, rarely reacted well to criticism, even when it was reasonable, and either he didn't see that his style of writing invited criticism or, perhaps, he actually saw it all too well. In any case, though, the very size of the books—most especially *World Conqueror*—and the numerous wordy sentences tax the patience of readers. The recondite nature of some of the material also rendered Tambi vulnerable to criticism by experts on, say, ancient Buddhist texts or early Thai history. Moreover, for some readers, such as myself (and I am not alone), it is difficult to work out what Tambi meant in sentences like this one, which is not untypical; slightly abbreviated, it reads as follows: '[Our] thesis has been that canonical and post-canonical doctrines, the commentaries and the verbalizations of the believers, the structures embedded in their myths and rites, the pattern

⁴¹ Tambiah, 'The galactic polity in Southeast Asia' (1977), in Tambiah, *Culture*, chapter 7.

⁴² F. E. Reynolds, 'Trajectories in Theravada studies with special reference to the work of Stanley Tambiah', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), 21 (1987), 113–21.

⁴³ C. F. Keyes, 'Theravada Buddhism and its worldly transformation in Thailand: reflections on the work of S. J. Tambiah', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), 21 (1987), 123–45 at 142.

⁴⁴ M. E. Spiro, 'Review of *World Conqueror*', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 36 (1977), 789–91; S. J. Tambiah, 'The Buddhist conception of kingship and its historical manifestations: a reply to Spiro' and Spiro, 'reply to Professor Tambiah', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 37 (1978), 801–9, 809–12; Tambiah, 'At the confluence', pp. 190, 194.

of their actions . . . are ridden with dialectical tensions, paradoxes, and ambiguities, which occur as parameters.⁴⁵ In the end, there are so many tensions, paradoxes, ambiguities, continuities, transformations and so on in the trilogy's description and analysis of Theravada Buddhism as a total social phenomenon that it is often hard to see the wood for the trees.

Tambi's last publication—which appeared in a book that was also a Festschrift for him—was an essay comparing Buddhist and Christian saints, the beginning of a study that he described as a sequel to *Buddhist Saints*.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, he was unable to pursue it further, but the essay cogently develops a comparative framework for understanding charismatic saints and related cults in different world religions, from ancient Buddhism to contemporary Catholicism. The literature cited in the end-notes shows that Tambi was reading widely and thinking about old topics in new ways; interestingly, too, the essay's easy-to-read style makes it more akin to his early writings than the Thai trilogy.

It is a pity that the trilogy is so long and dense, because it is nonetheless clear that Tambi had something very important to say about how Thai Buddhism must be understood as a complex whole constituted by popular religion, as well as textual doctrine, and as a social phenomenon, in the widest sense of the term, which varies over time and space. The 'Pali Text Society mentality', as he calls it, is not only a misrepresentation, it is also an elitist disparagement of the beliefs and practices of the great majority of Buddhists themselves, whether they are kings, monks, modern urbanites or traditional villagers.⁴⁷ Moreover, Tambi collected a vast amount of evidence and read a vast amount of literature to support and develop his arguments about Thai Buddhism, which in America ranged well beyond the confines of social anthropology as practised in Cambridge in the sixties.

Teaching at Harvard

In Chicago and Harvard, as in Cambridge, Tambi lectured on magic and religion, and economic anthropology. In Harvard, the course on magic and religion was expanded into a series of twenty lectures. According to

⁴⁵Tambiah, *World Conqueror*, p. 515.

⁴⁶S. J. Tambiah, 'The charisma of saints and the cult of relics, amulets, and tomb shrines', in F. Aulino, M. Goheen and S. J. Tambiah (eds.), *Radical Egalitarianism: Local Realities, Global Relations* (New York, 2013), pp. 15–50.

⁴⁷Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints*, p. 7.

Norbert Peabody, who was Tambi's Ph.D. student and later his teaching assistant, these lectures 'had a cult-like following . . . drawing undergraduate and graduate students from an incredibly broad range of disciplines across the social sciences, natural sciences and humanities' and 'were invariably packed out with overflow audiences'. For those who were taught by him in Harvard, Tambi the lecturer is the figure who features most vividly in their reminiscences. Peabody comments that he was never 'a charismatic lecturer in any conventional sense', for he stuck to his prepared scripts and 'had a monotone style of oratory and static delivery'. Listening to him, however, the audience witnessed 'Tambi's rare ability to play an extremely complex and demanding "long game" of argumentation', in which he gradually introduced different themes until 'he would be juggling a dozen major ideas which he would keep in play for weeks on end . . . before binding them all tightly together' in the last few lectures.⁴⁸

In 1984, Tambi delivered an abbreviated version of his Harvard course as the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, which were then revised for publication as a short book in 1990. Unfortunately, however, he tried to cram far too much of the twenty Harvard lectures into approximately 150 pages. Hence in a couple of pages the reader may be presented with Lévy-Bruhl, the philosopher of 'primitive mentality', his anthropological critic Evans-Pritchard, the French *Annales* historians Bloch and Febvre, as well as Durkheim, Foucault, Wittgenstein and a few others.⁴⁹ It's all too much, so that Tambi's principal arguments—for example, about the impact on modern anthropology of western traditions of thought concerning magic, science and religion—are hard to follow, especially for students and non-specialists who were presumably the intended readership. The 'long game' of the lectures became an obstacle race in the book, so that even vicariously its readers can hardly share in the good fortune of Tambi's Harvard students.

Tambi's two lecture courses on economic anthropology and comparative social stratification are remembered as brilliant and inspiring, like the one on magic and religion. James Ferguson, for example, describes Tambi's lectures as 'a powerful lesson, both in how to think well and clearly and in the performative power of words—a lesson that has stayed with me over the years and continues to inspire me'.⁵⁰ Tambi also participated fully in

⁴⁸ Peabody in 'Cambridge Social Anthropology Remembers' and 'In Memoriam (Harvard)'.
⁴⁹ S. J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 86–7.

⁵⁰ Ferguson in 'In Memoriam (Harvard)'; see also J. Ferguson, 'Cosmologies of welfare: two conceptions of social assistance in contemporary South Africa', in Aulino et al. (eds.), *Radical*

the academic life of his Harvard department and was ‘the intellectual centre of gravity’ for many of its members. James and Rubie Watson, his departmental colleagues, have told me he was always an excellent companion at lunch or dinner, who took a lively interest in their work on China and always wanted to talk about research and writing, but never (thankfully) about departmental politics. On the other hand, Tambi was not a very good supervisor of research students. As I had found out in Cambridge, he was reluctant to spend time completing forms, commenting on draft research proposals or writing letters to his students in the field, even when they badly needed advice. At Harvard, Tambi was no less reluctant and he also spent little time on the increasingly obligatory chore of networking to help his students get jobs, so that he did not produce a large band of younger academic followers. Eventually, too, the strains of research, writing, teaching and other academic duties took their toll. His marriage also ended acrimoniously and his health deteriorated badly in the last decade or so of his life.⁵¹ He was supported by his friends, especially the impeccably loyal Charles Hallisey, his fellow scholar of Buddhism at Harvard, but Tambi’s final years were not very happy ones.

Ethnic and religious conflict in South Asia

Another source of unhappiness for Tambi in his Harvard years was the worsening conflict in Sri Lanka, but it stimulated a major project of research and writing. Arthur Kleinman recalls Tambi telling him that he had to study the conflict because it was ‘tearing apart the homeland in which he as a young Tamil had made the choice to study Buddhism, not just as an academic commitment but as an effort in cross-cultural understanding’. As Kleinman says, Tambi then proceeded ‘to radically reshape his intellectual agenda to make political violence in general his topic’.⁵²

Tambi wrote two books about the conflict in Sri Lanka, as well as *Leveling Crowds*, a larger, comparative work on South Asia.⁵³ The immediate provocation for the first book on ‘ethnic fratricide’ was the Sri Lankan riots of 1983, an ‘orgy of violence’ in which the victims were overwhelmingly Tamils targeted by Sinhalese mobs with the connivance, or

Egalitarianism, pp. 111–18.

⁵¹ Peabody in ‘Cambridge Social Anthropology Remembers’ and ‘In Memoriam (Harvard)’.

⁵² Kleinman in ‘In Memoriam (Harvard)’.

⁵³ Tambiah, *Sri Lanka*; S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago, 1992); Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*.

even encouragement, of the Sri Lankan security forces.⁵⁴ The book is an ‘engaged political tract’, so that Tambi did not pull his punches in describing the suffering of the victims or the government’s responsibility for it. Yet he also explained clearly and soberly the causes of the conflict, many of which lie in the economic problems of modern Sri Lanka, although some have their roots in the colonial period. Rising Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, partly a reaction to these problems, has helped to turn the Sinhalese into ‘a majority with a minority complex’.⁵⁵ This majority therefore believes it must fight for its rights against the Tamils and it looks for ideological justification in the ancient text known as the *Mahavamsa*, with its legends of ancient kings. In the book’s penultimate chapter, Tambi outlined a possible liberal solution to Sri Lanka’s problems.

The second book, *Buddhism Betrayed?*, examines the changing character of Buddhism and its relationship with the state in colonial and post-colonial Sri Lanka. Tambi argued that after independence, especially since the late 1970s, the ethical aspects of Buddhism became less prominent and the religion grew increasingly politicised as a vehicle for anti-Tamil, Sinhalese nationalism. Particularly in the villages, the monks’ role as the guardians of supreme Buddhist values has declined in importance. On the other hand, monks have become more and more active in politics as vehement advocates for Sinhalese nationalism, and sometimes as violent participants in its campaigns. It is in this sense that Buddhism, a religion with non-violence as one of its pre-eminent values, has been betrayed in modern Sri Lanka, especially by the *sangha*. The academic quality of *Buddhism Betrayed?* was questioned by some scholars. Thus Sasanka Perera, while praising aspects of the book, also criticised the sweeping generalisations about monks and pointed out that they were not based on data collected through interviews or fieldwork. Tambi, of course, reacted vehemently.⁵⁶ Political reaction to the book overshadowed its academic reception, however, because *Buddhism Betrayed?* provoked fury among Buddhist extremists, whipped up (as is common in such cases) by a troublemaker posing as a respectable academic. The extremists denounced Tambi as a propagandist for the Tamil Tigers—the terrorist wing of the Tamil separatist movement—and demanded the banning of the book, which next to none of them, of course, had read. In 1993, a statement in the Sri

⁵⁴Tambiah, *Sri Lanka*, p. 21.

⁵⁵Tambiah, *Sri Lanka*, p. 92.

⁵⁶S. Perera, ‘Review of *Buddhism Betrayed?*’, *American Ethnologist*, 23 (1996), 905–6; S. J. Tambiah, ‘On the subject of *Buddhism Betrayed?*: a rejoinder’, *American Ethnologist*, 24 (1997), 457–9.

Lankan press condemning the campaign against the book and calling for tolerance was signed by a large number of academics and human rights activists, headed by Obeyesekere and including Perera, and Tambi was certainly not without supporters in his homeland and among scholars with a Sinhalese background.⁵⁷ The Sri Lankan government, however, decided to ban the book; around this time, Tambi periodically received death threats and he stayed away from the island for several years.

Leveling Crowds, which is a longer, more academic book than the previous two, is a comparative study of ethnic and religious conflict across South Asia, mainly in the late twentieth century. The case studies include riots in colonial Ceylon and Sri Lanka (including the 1956 incident that Tambi witnessed), as well as the anti-Sikh riots organised by Hindus in Delhi in 1984, the ethnic conflict in Sind in Pakistan, and the Hindu-Muslim riots following the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque in north India by militant Hindu nationalists in India in 1992.

The title encapsulates Tambi's thesis that rioting ethnic crowds are mainly motivated by a desire to wipe out unfair advantages allegedly enjoyed by their enemies, who typically belong to an ethnic minority, so that inequalities are levelled—usually by killing people and destroying their property. Although riots do not normally last long, they can develop into a more permanent state of conflict, as the victims recover and are then attacked again. Tambi also analysed collective ethnic violence as an unfolding process in which, in particular, local disputes are stripped of their particularities and assimilated to wider ethnic divisions ('focalisation' and 'transvaluation'), or they are portrayed as national ones and then replicated in numerous other places ('nationalisation' and 'parochialisation'). Collective violence, he suggested, is also typically routinised and ritualised. Tambi's arguments about levelling and violence as a process generally make good sense and are well supported by the evidence of his case studies, although they sometimes suffer from an excess of words that once again tends to hide the wood behind the trees. Some arguments in the book are less convincing, however; for example, the evidence as I read it is that the

⁵⁷'A plea for tolerance', <http://www.scribd.com/doc/201386650/A-Plea-for-Tolerance-In-Defense-of-Prof-Stanley-J-Tambiah-s-Buddhism-Betrayed-Religion-Politics-and-Violence-in-Sri-Lanka>, accessed 3 April 2015; see also S. Perera, 'Tambiah, cultural components beyond criticism and the construction of mass hysteria', in Perera, *Living with Torturers* (Colombo, 1995), pp. 226–36; H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: the New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago, 1999), pp. 308–9; H. L. Seneviratne, 'Obituary' in *Colombo Telegraph*, 25 January 2014, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/stanley-jeyaraja-tambiah-anthropologist-and-patriot/>, accessed 3 April 2015.

line between aggressors and victims is not necessarily clear cut, notwithstanding Tambi's reiterated insistence that it normally is in his typically forceful (and sometimes unfair) reply to his critics, myself included.⁵⁸

When it was published in 1996, *Leveling Crowds* was certainly the best monograph on ethnic violence in South Asia. (Unlike the books on Thailand, it also benefited from good copyediting, so that it isn't hard to read.) In the next few years, many things changed in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and India, and the literature grew markedly. Tambi, however, when answering his critics in 2005, also surveyed the more recent work quite comprehensively and sought to relate it to his own study, showing that he had not lost his determination to understand ethnic and religious conflict, including as always the conflict in his own homeland. Since 2005, yet more has changed and the literature has continued to expand. *Leveling Crowds*, however, is still a valuable work and still one of only a handful that are genuinely comparative.

Conclusion

Tambi was a superb teacher and lecturer, but in the long run his scholarly reputation is bound to be defined mainly by his published work. Tambi's readers have not all agreed about the quality of particular books and articles, as we've seen; nor have they all agreed about the relative merits of the different bodies of work. Probably nobody has ever thought that everything written by Tambi is excellent and a few people have been severely critical. But in my own judgement and, I believe, that of the great majority of his readers, the best articles he wrote in Cambridge about kinship and magic and religion are masterly essays; the Thai Buddhist trilogy, taken as a whole, is an enormous scholarly achievement; and *Leveling Crowds* is a major contribution to the understanding of ethnic and religious conflict in South Asia and probably the most important scholarly work from his Harvard years. Very few anthropologists have worked on such a large canvas during their professional careers and very few have accomplished so much.

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⁵⁸S. J. Tambiah, 'Urban riots and cricket in South Asia: a postscript to "*Leveling Crowds*"', *Modern Asian Studies*, 39 (2005), 897–927.

Note. I am grateful to Jonathan Parry, Norbert Peabody, Jonathan Spencer, R. L. Stirrat, and James L. Watson for their comments on a draft of this memoir.

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