

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on March 1, 2016, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Stanley Tambiah was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## STANLEY JEYARAJA TAMBIAH

BORN: January 16, 1929

DIED: January 19, 2014

Stanley Tambiah, Esther and Sidney Rabb Professor of Anthropology, *Emeritus*, at Harvard University, was a social anthropologist of towering importance who established an enduring intellectual legacy. An innovative analyst of his native Sri Lanka and of Thailand and a social scientist who delved deeply into historical sources, he radically advanced the study of ritual and language, political systems, ethnic violence, and rationality. At Harvard, he also played a crucial role in supporting the expansion of the medical anthropology program created by his colleague Arthur Kleinman.

Born into a Christian Tamil family, he began his university life as an undergraduate at the University of Ceylon. After earning his doctorate at Cornell in 1954, he returned to his alma mater in 1955, moved to Thailand where he worked for UNESCO for three years, then went on to a formative period at the University of Cambridge (1963–72) and a three-year stint at the University of Chicago before coming to Harvard in 1976. At Harvard he is remembered for his unique blend of deep and sometimes morally fierce passion with meticulous attention to detail and context, for his booming voice, and for his gentle smile and subtle engagement with his colleagues' and students' ideas.

Tambiah's work on the Siamese polity brought a judiciously historical perspective to bear on the ethnographic research he conducted during his years in Thailand, as did his exploration of religiosity, monasticism, and amulets in contemporary Thailand (*The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* [1984]). He also made significant contributions to the understanding of local economic practices and to the symbolism of names. His magisterial ethno-historical analysis of the pre-modern Siamese polity, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (1977), is still considered one of the most authoritative studies in Thai history and ethnology; it expanded previous scholars' recognition of the mandala as key to the design of Southeast Asian monuments and cities, showing how it became the underlying principle of governance in what he famously termed the "pulsating galactic polity." This work also deepened and historicized the broad comparative orientation of mid-twentieth-century British anthropology, refining its treatment of

governance in relation to local understandings of territory and hierarchy. By attending to the Buddhist focus on righteous kingship, he articulated a culturally sensitive account of political legitimacy.

As the Sri Lankan civil war intensified, however, he turned homeward, producing works that were both careful scholarly analyses of Buddhism and indictments of its political vitiation. The title of his *Buddhism Betrayed?* (1992) expresses his outrage that this pacific creed, which he deeply respected, could be invoked to justify such heinous crimes; *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (1986) documented the collapse at the political and social levels, while *Leveling Crowds* (1997) placed that conflict in its larger South Asian context. A famed cricketer in his youth and passionate sports fan to the end, he risked his life by attacking the terrible unfairness he saw tearing his beloved native country apart. Dismayed by the superficiality of most reporting on the violence, he sought an understanding that was globally profound and yet also sensitive to local particularities. In a short but influential essay published in *American Ethnologist* in 1989, he invested the global study of ethnic conflict with especially cogent scholarly currency and moral heft.

Tambiah's work, while based on the empirical knowledge that marks good anthropology, was also theoretically rich and subtle. An expert on Weber's views on rationality and economics, he advanced a highly original critique of Western (and especially economic) concepts of rationality, while exposing the more sophisticated forms of cultural prejudice that condemned some forms of reason as mere superstition. His splendidly incisive *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (1990), a work based on a seminar he had taught at Harvard, showed that formal science, cultural varieties of common sense, and religion could all productively be placed in a shared framework of analysis. His restrained relativism was a fitting intellectual counterpart to his impassioned but empirically grounded denunciation of ethno-national extremism.

Tambiah produced some ten single-authored books and numerous other writings over his long career. Among his many significant honors, four stand out as recognitions of exceptional and original scholarship. In late 1997 he received the extremely prestigious Balzan Prize for Social Sciences as well as the Huxley Memorial Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (London). In the following year he received the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize, and in 2000 he was made a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. In 1989–90, he served as President of the Association for Asian Studies. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Chicago in 1991.

Tambiah's affection for Thailand, which he visited for the last time as a revered presence at the International Conference on Thai Studies at Thammasat University in 2008, ran deep, as did his unshakable love of his tormented homeland. His friendship with a distinguished but intellectually very different colleague, Gananath Obeyesekere, a Sinhalese Sri Lankan with whom he had once (in 1957) conducted joint fieldwork, especially demonstrated the

transcendence of ethnic and other divisions that for Tambiah was the essence of human decency. Perhaps the most tangible product of his remarkable capacity for engaging with others is his monumental biography of Edmund Leach, once his senior colleague at Cambridge. Tambiah's work has been hugely influential, a fact reflected in a volume he co-edited (*Radical Egalitarianism*, Aulino, Goheen, and Tambiah, 2013); the contributions from former students and colleagues bespeak the astonishingly large impact of Tambiah's ideas both geographically and thematically and illustrate his legacy of thoughtful, imaginative, and deeply humane scholarship. The Stanley J. Tambiah Lecture in Thai Studies, established in 2013 shortly before his passing, is a permanent annual tribute at Harvard to a superlative scholar and compassionate human being.

Respectfully submitted,

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Arthur M. Kleinman  
Michael Puett  
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