

# Radical Egalitarianism

LOCAL REALITIES, GLOBAL RELATIONS

*Edited by*

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FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

*New York 2013*

# People and Ideas Travel Together: Tambiah's Approach to Ritual and Cosmology in Brazil

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## *Chances and Odds*

The first time I read Tambiah's work was in 1973, in a masters seminar on symbolism held by Peter Silverwood-Cope at the Universidade de Brasília. At that time, Tambiah's article "The Magical Power of Words" (1968b) had recently been published in the journal *Man*, and "Form and Meaning of Magical Acts" (1973), still in manuscript form while the seminar met, would be available in print later that year. When the fieldwork of Edmund Leach's students in the Vaupés region of Colombia came to an end, Christine and Steve Hugh-Jones headed back to England, but Peter Silverwood-Cope decided to move to Brazil. As an enthusiastic admirer of Tambiah, both as a scholar and on a personal level, he introduced his students at the Universidade de Brasília to Tambiah's ideas.

The purpose of this personal introduction is to set the record straight regarding how Tambiah's work landed in Brazil more than three decades ago: it occurred by means of the mere casual fact that Leach had a keen student teaching in Brasília (of all places in Brazil). By another coincidence, some years later, in 1976, as a second-year

graduate student at Harvard, I was thrilled to come across Tambi (as his students and friends called him), who had recently transferred from the University of Chicago to teach there. In fact, in those days of slow communication, I had believed him to be far away, in England.

Of course, Tambiah's strong influence in Brazil nowadays does not result only from chance involving former students, though this is indeed a significant part of it. After all, people and ideas travel together. But a more sociological explanation is also in order. The question becomes this: how is it that, despite Tambiah's main ethnographic interest being located geographically, culturally, and ideologically very distant from Brazil, his work has been so significant for many anthropologists in Brazil? I offer here some short answers.

### *Anthropology in Brazil*

A powerful feature of the practice and teaching of anthropology in Brazil lies in the fact that we tend not to separate ethnography from theory. In general, this means that a monograph is read for its ethnographic evidence and for its theoretical framework, both dimensions fused together. Of course, this is how classical monographs are (or were) also read in the United States, and perhaps elsewhere, in graduate seminars usually titled "History and Theory" or the like. But in Brazil this practice is generally extended to contemporary monographs—that is, present-day ethnographies are read and evaluated as possible new *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, not because of a particular interest in Melanesia, but rather for the theoretical claims made by Malinowski by way of the Trobrianders. Thus, in the same vein, Tambiah's *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflict and Collective Violence in South Asia* (1996a) is read not for a special interest in South Asia, nor for an exclusive concern with collective violence. It is read for its innovative approach to riots as rituals and the cosmological implications of that approach; for the new analytical tools Tambiah provides; and also, because nation-building is a continuous concern in Brazil, for its powerful portrayal of the (difficult) experience of the nation-state project outside Europe. In this perspective, we may say that although theory and ethnography tend to be inseparable in Brazil, the first encompasses the second.

A question then immediately surfaces: why this theoretical eagerness? Not unlike in other places, the modernization project of the 1930s in Brazil included the institutionalization of the social sciences

for at least a twofold purpose: to prepare new political leaders to govern the country on a solid democratic basis, and to attain levels of scholarly excellence so as to allow communication with the world academic centers on an equal basis. Theory thus became a (noble) path to many ends: a modern political elite needed fine analysis to unveil what was supposed to be "Brazilian social reality," and, in due course, to transform it, which would be achieved by way of good analytical tools that would instigate sound theory, in turn making Brazilian social scientists conversable with the world.

Waves of Marxism, structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and so on came into vogue during this time. But, of course, obsession with theory has its down side: when ideas are adopted just for their fashionable appeal, the result is often a loss of analytical power. Lévi-Strauss once remarked that his experience in Brazil as a teacher in the 1930s showed him that students could be so much ahead of their professors in terms of the latest theoretical turn that only the most recently proposed approach seemed interesting to them.

To this day, one striking feature of anthropology in Brazil has been its disinterest in exoticism, though a fascination with "difference" has remained fundamental to the research agenda. A concern with indigenous peoples and their contact with regional populations first defined the field, and this trend dominated the scene until the 1960s; in the following decades, the inclusion of the peasantry was immediately followed by the addition of larger urban contexts; in the 1980s, social scientists' intellectual production itself became an anthropological subject; and, in the 1990s, with globalization came ethnographic interest in the experiences of Brazilians living in other parts of the world, and increased interest in conducting research abroad. The result has been a steady incorporation of new topics and an enlargement of the discipline's research universe. Today, all these modes of conceiving otherness coexist in an attempt to develop an anthropology "made in Brazil."

This relative freedom may be explained by various factors. First, Brazil has never experienced historical resentment for having been the object of anthropological curiosity for the metropolitan centers. Second, a concern with the notion of "Brazilianess" has always been present, from the traditional interest in indigenous peoples within the national territory to the new concern with Brazilians abroad, and, even more recently, an engagement with the populations of other former Portuguese colonies. And third, the Portuguese language has pro-

duced a relatively isolated community of social scientists—including sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and historians—who are close interlocutors, peers, and mutual critics. Thus, as in many contexts in which anthropology developed as a field of knowledge during the twentieth century, a large variety of intellectual influences were brought to bear on topics of particular local concern, and striving for theoretically significant contributions became the path toward a much-desired, though frequently frustrated, international dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

### *Tambiah in Brazil*

It is within this scenario that Tambiah's approach has become an important inspiration for many anthropologists in Brazil. Though well known, his work is not faddish or trendy—or, at least, it has not yet become the focus of a fad or trend. Instead, Tambiah's approach is seen as providing a solid foundation for those who are determined not only to combine ethnography and theory, but also to ground continuous theoretical advances in solid ethnographic scholarship. His work has thus provided a firm counterbalance to the dominant emphasis on theory alone.

We have benefited immensely from Tambiah's constant reminders that the intellectual dichotomies that thrive in academic circles may be reconciled and combined for the sake of sound interpretation: that, for instance, structural analysis and cultural accounts are not conflicting analytical frameworks; that the union of form and content is part of cosmology and essential to the performative character of ritual; that social action and thought are not contradictory but inevitably complementary domains; that both semantic and pragmatic meanings are implicated in transference; that microevents may clarify macrohistories, and vice versa.

Furthermore, Tambiah has elucidated two complementary orientations. First is the idea that anthropology is a collective project, permanently revived, renovated, and expanded. We can see this conception at work in his brilliant re-analysis of classical monographs and in his ongoing conversations with interlocutors past and present (and here I include his splendid Leach biography).<sup>2</sup> Second is his interdisciplinary approach, as demonstrated in his habitual crossing of boundaries to adapt, recreate, and include (albeit not without a twist) achievements from other disciplines, such as linguistics and philosophy, in

order to energize anthropology's own understanding. His broad vision is nowhere more evident than in his influential work on ritual and its relation to cosmology—in which ritual serves as a means of analyzing social events in the broadest sense, thereby enlarging the focus of a phenomenon so familiar to anthropologists.

A brief survey of monographs, articles, books, theses, and dissertations reveals the extent to which Tambiah's approach has inspired a great variety of ethnographic themes, all of them sharing the idea that rituals do not conform to a particular anthropological definition. Instead, the perceptive researcher recognizes as rituals the special events that enlarge, focus, highlight, and justify what is ordinary in a given society. In this way, ritual becomes an analytical tool that allows us to detect cosmologies in ordinary events. Following this approach, new ethnographic data not only "surprise" us anthropologists, but, by allowing us to enter into dialogue with and expand upon previous assumptions, they constitute a sound pathway to theoretical refinement.

Examples of what Tambiah has inspired can be found in many studies related to politics as a whole. One such case is an analysis of the two-month-long "National March of the Landless Peasants" (in which three columns of demonstrators covered more than 1,000 kilometers of highway to establish and traverse a moral as well as a physical path) by Christine Chaves (2000). There are also studies of religious-cum-political phenomena, such as short marches to Brasília, Brazil's capital (Steil 1996 and 2001) and of the relationship between political rituals and local festivities (K. Silva 2003, Chaves 2003). Carla Teixeira has investigated processes by which congressmen lose office due to a lack of decorum (1998), later coupling this work with a focus on boasting (*bravata*) as a ritual genre of politics (Teixeira 2001). Studies of the struggle for land on the outskirts of cities and the significant event venues in these contexts have also been inspired by Tambiah (e.g., Borges 2004), as has the examination of the ways in which peasant meetings reveal the link between social morphology and the power of leadership (Comerford 1996 and 1999). Comerford soon expanded his 1999 investigation to become an ethnographic examination of the relationship between kinship, locality, and moral reputation as the foundations for institutional structures of the state and the church (Comerford 2003).<sup>3</sup>

At least three studies based more on the traditional definition of ritual but emphasizing its performative aspects are indebted to Tam-

biah. One deals with the relationship between regional and national festivities, where the fascination with exoticism (which is the basis of international tourism) is contrasted with anthropology's own past inclinations (J. Silva 2007). A second looks at the elections of the General Assembly of the United Nations as a paradoxical event in which the values of equality and symmetry can be attained only in the context of a firm hierarchy and behind closed doors (Góes Filho 2001 and 2003). A third looks at the Rio Earth Summit from the perspective of an observer who is both a journalist and an ethnographer (Little 1995).

Tambiah's insights into the ways in which small events can indicate the presence of the state in daily life have led to studies such as those that look at legal IDs as modern amulets (Peirano 2006, 2009, and 2011). An inspired analysis of the ritual aspects of the many rehearsals that lead to a symphonic orchestra recital also follows Tambiah's approach (Trajano Filho 1984), as does an analysis of a theater piece by Nelson Rodrigues (Moreira Santos 2001) that is well known in Brazil. An important study of the ritual genre of telling stories to make political statements was carried out among the Tapuio Indians of the state of Goiás (C. Silva 2002).

Western cosmologies *per se* have been the subject of at least two studies, one of them an examination of messages carried by the Voyager spaceship in the hope of finding extraterrestrial life (Aranha Filho 2001), and the other focused on the conjunction of science and religion in the search for UFOs (Ferreira Neto 1984).

Crossing Brazilian territorial borders over the last two decades, anthropologists have produced research on rumors as a narrative genre for nation-building projects in Guinea-Bissau (Trajano Filho 1993, 1998, and 2004); a study of public administration state-formation rituals in East Timor in relation to the larger scenario of international cooperation (K. Silva 2004); work on the presence of the dead in state affairs in South Africa, as documented at burial sites and the public policy of land restitution (Borges 2007a and 2007b); and research on the foundation of cities in Argentina as analyzed from sixteenth-century sources (Boixadós 1994). Tambiah's interest in Thailand was ethnographically re-situated to Brazil in a study carried out at the Thai Embassy in Brasília, focusing on the relationship between religion and politics in the diplomatic dealings with local authorities (Taminato 2007).<sup>4</sup> Finally, a three-day seminar that was a tribute to Tambiah was held in 2000 and resulted in a collection of essays by

anthropologists who had been inspired by his approach to ritual (Peirano 2002).

### *Ritual as an Analytical Strategy and Ethnographic Approach*

All the studies mentioned above derive from Tambiah's transformation of ritual from a classical empirical subject into an analytical tool. Based on the idea that ritual does not have an absolute definition, that it is for "the natives" (be they politicians, common citizens, or even social scientists) to point out what is a "special event," Tambiah's original proposal about the performative force of ritual not only helped solve the old puzzle about the efficacy of social acts, but also opened up the possibility of gaining insight into actual ethnographic theories (such as a "South Asian theory of democracy" or a "Thai theory of the state"). When rituals are conceived not as events that are qualitatively different from everyday occurrences, but rather as more formalized, more stereotyped, and more structured versions of them, then all of these events become equally revealing of public cosmologies.<sup>5</sup> This heightened aspect of ritual was of major interest in the studies developed in Brazil, making ethnographic theories parallel to cosmologies.

Furthermore, focusing on rituals puts us into the realm of social action. In the context of shared world views, communication between individuals reveals implicit classifications among human beings and between human beings and nature, human beings and objects, and human beings and gods (or demons, or constitutions), for example. Communication may be carried out by means of words or acts; these differences in media do not minimize either the action's purpose or its efficacy, given that the use of language is also a social act. Tambiah thus helps us reach a fundamental conclusion: anthropology always incorporates, implicitly or explicitly, a theory of language. Charles Sanders Peirce, Roman Jakobson, and J. L. Austin are invited to join us in the effort to interpret speech (as a communicative event) in the context of cosmology, and to include both with ethnography.

Tambiah's *Leveling Crowds* (1996a) is the great example of such breadth.<sup>6</sup> By looking at riots as rituals, Tambiah shows us their patterns in terms of the triggering events, sequences, participants, places of incidence, organized and anticipated features, recurrent phases, and the elements selected from routine forms of sociality. His work



leads us, first, to the recognition that the cultural repertoire of South Asia does not offer a foundation for the Western European model of the nation-state, and second, to the conclusion that electoral politics and collective violence may be integral components of democracy at work.

The book's combination of theory and ethnographic material has been of great interest. Although the first part of the book is officially dedicated to cases of violence in different places and times in South Asia, and the second to a dialogue with Gustave Le Bon, Emile Durkheim, E. P. Thompson, and subaltern studies, this division is blurred when, for example, a consideration of microevents in the first part leads to concepts of much larger dimension, or the theoretical discussion of the second part demands mention of newly discovered data about specific events. This is a grand picture of what anthropological analysis is capable of when microethnography and macrosociology are combined. Investigating collective violence by means of ritual analysis, Tambiah indicates how old theories may serve new purposes when the empirical object is properly delineated in the tense confrontation between native ideals and values, on the one hand, and anthropological comparison on the other.

In university libraries, *Leveling Crowds* finds its place in the sections devoted to political science, anthropology, religion, violence, and South Asia. Transported to the graduate classroom, the book has become one of the modern classics of social science theory.

#### *A Debt to Tambiah*

I conclude by looking ahead. Despite all the recognition Tambiah has received for his work, our indebtedness to him has not yet been expressed fully. Nor have his contributions been fully explored. For instance, the notions he presented in *Leveling Crowds* about the dynamic transformation of microevents into major issues, and vice versa, release us from the commonsense grid of what is conceived as local, national, and global. The concepts that he calls *focalization* and *transvaluation* refer to the processes by which a series of local, small-scale conflicts, involving people in direct contact with one another, build up into ever-larger clashes.<sup>7</sup> The first process strips local incidents and disputes of their contexts; the second distorts, abstracts, and aggregates the incidents into larger collective issues (Tambiah 1996, 81). In addition, he presents us with the concepts of *nationalization*

and *parochialization*, the first referring to the radiating out of a local cause or event to become a condensed symbol, the second referring to a process in which a national issue is reproduced in diverse local places, "exploding like a cluster bomb in multiple context-bound ways" (Tambiah 1996, 257). In a world where distortion is often the basis for incidents and clashes that are later combined into larger collective issues, and in which larger issues reproduce themselves in multiple places, Tambiah has given us analytical tools for the present and for the future. Though not anticipated, these four kinds of actions are not randomly or arbitrarily situated, as one would tend to imagine at first. Instead, Tambiah has shown us their structural movements and their possible developments in terms of the path that leads from the micro to the macro level, and vice versa. Indeed, he has given us a blueprint for the challenge that the perlocutionary effects have always represented for the anthropologist and the sociologist when thinking about social action. It is for us to carry on the investigations he has inspired.

PEOPLE AND IDEAS TRAVEL TOGETHER: TAMBIAH'S APPROACH  
TO RITUAL AND COSMOLOGY IN BRAZIL

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1. See Peirano 1998 and 2008 for a general guide to anthropology in Brazil.
2. For a re-analysis of Malinowski's Trobriand ethnographic material, see "The Magical Power of Words" (Tambiah 1968b) and "On Flying Witches and Flying Canoes" (Tambiah 1983b); for the re-analysis of Evans-Pritchard's Zande material, see "Form and Meaning of Magical Acts" (Tambiah 1973). All three essays are reprinted in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action* (Tambiah 1985b). See Tambiah 2002 for the intellectual biography of Edmund Leach.
3. Tambiah's approach to ritual inspired a great part of the large research program "An Anthropology of Politics: Rituals, Representations, and Violence" sponsored by Núcleo de Antropologia da Política (NuAP), which lasted from 1997 to 2005 and resulted in the publication of more than thirty books. See NuAP 1998, and [www.ppgasmuseu.etc.br/museu/pages/nuap\\_publicacoes.html](http://www.ppgasmuseu.etc.br/museu/pages/nuap_publicacoes.html).
4. I am referring to Tambiah's trilogy on Thailand, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (1970), *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (1976), and *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (1984).
5. See especially Tambiah's "A Performative Approach to Ritual" ([1979] 1981), later included in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action* (1985b).
6. *Leveling Crowds* received two reviews in Brazil (Comerford 1998 and Chaves 1999), and was the subject of a longer essay (Peirano 2000).
7. See Sahlins 2005 (a version of which appears as Sahlins's contribution to this book) for a pioneering use of these two notions.