



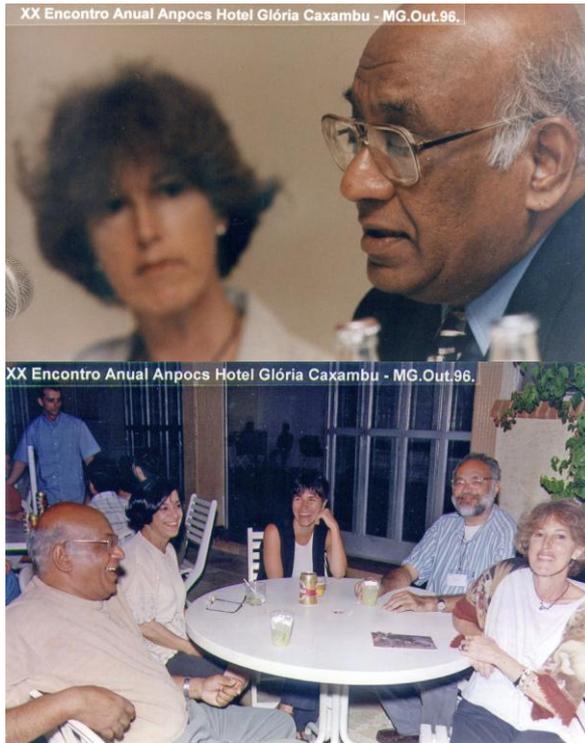
Stanley J. Tambiah  
(1929-2014)

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<sup>1</sup> Photo by Mariza Peirano in Wakefield, Rhode Island, probably 2001, at Monique and David Stark's summer house. Stanley Tambiah died on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2014. He was 85 years old. For the transcription of an interview in which he discusses his career, dated 16<sup>th</sup> November 1996, see [http://www.marizapeirano.com.br/entrevistas/stanley\\_tambiah.htm](http://www.marizapeirano.com.br/entrevistas/stanley_tambiah.htm).

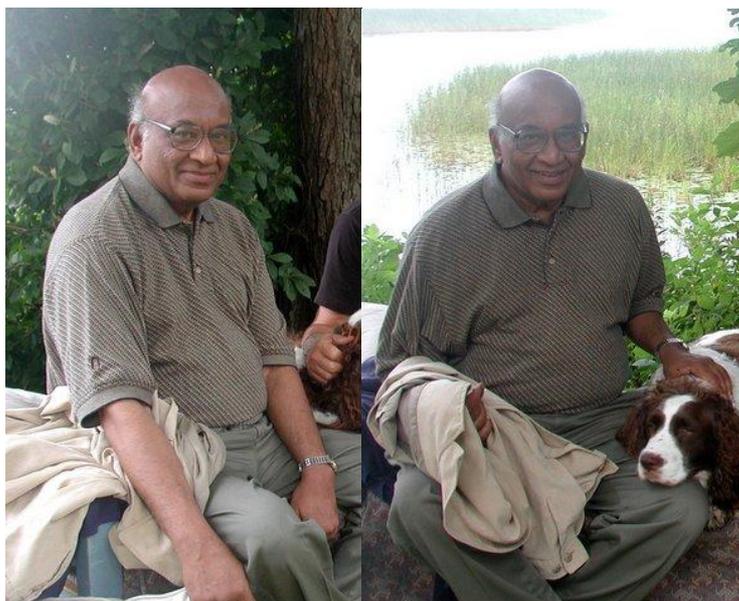
## TAMBI

Of the many serendipities that grace our lives, the greatest for me was to meet Tambi at Harvard as a second year graduate student in 1976. I was introduced to his work three years before by Peter Silverwood-Cope, whose thesis had been supervised by Edmund Leach and who was teaching at the Universidade de Brasília at the time. Peter read my attempt to re-analyze Victor Turner's Ndembu material and recommended Tambi's papers on Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard. I was thrilled by them. When the time arrived for my Ph.D. I chose Harvard (instead of Chicago) only because I thought Tambi was still in England; what a delightful surprise to find him in Cambridge the following year. I took all of his classes. I considered it a rare privilege to attend the proseminar 205b, Economic Anthropology, Ritual as Communication (when Tambi was writing "A performative approach to ritual"), and Magic, Science and Religion (later on his Morgan Lectures). When advising me on my Specials Paper he asked me one simple question that enabled me to round up the final version of the Ndembu re-analysis. As a member of my thesis committee, he was concerned about not being familiar with Brazilian social sciences literature. But after reading the first chapter, he accepted the role and I was blessed by the fundamental questions that only an outsider can ask. It was Tambi who very gently made my interest in a comparison with India germinate. As our friendship and academic exchanges grew over the years, he remained not only a central intellectual reference, but also a model of intellectual honesty and theoretical inspiration. In his writings he always tried to overcome dichotomies by suggesting ways for reconciling and combining opposite sides, a trait that was also manifested in his extreme gentleness, clear conclusions, strong principles and gracious behavior. Tambi was grand in all senses: his voice; his joyfulness; his intellectual interests; and the scope of his theoretical probings. On his 1996 trip to Brazil to deliver a keynote address at the meetings of the Association of Graduate Programs in the Social Sciences he was not disturbed by the long trip from Rio to Caxambu (a spa city on the mountains, four hours away by car) and was delighted that Brazil could remind him so much of his native Sri Lanka – the landscape, the climate, the vegetation, the fruits, the sun. Anthropologists in Brazil familiar with his work were charmed by his fine wit and unpretentiousness. For many years he would ask for news about the people he had met at that time, remembering their specific interests and affiliations, on many occasions referring to that visit as a "memorable" event. I remember his gentle comment about "Brazilians' tolerance for noise" and the joy of being taken as a Brazilian at the airport.



Tambi delivering his address and enjoying a "caipirinha" in Caxambu

*Leveling Crowds* was about to be published, and he seemed very happy. He also seemed overjoyed when, some years later, he received the proofs of *Edmund Leach. An Anthropological Life* to revise. After a long day at Monique Stark's summer house in Rhode Island, upon returning to Cambridge he insisted that we search for an open store in Harvard Square to buy colored pencils because he was eager to begin making corrections on the book that same night.



Tambi in Wakefield, Rhode Island, probably 2001

Over the years, we would keep in touch by telephone, and whenever I visited him he would always be full of ideas and plans for research still waiting to be done. But this

was always followed by a smiling sigh and the remark that “Life is too short, you know?”. I count myself fortunate to have known Tambi and I will continue to be moved by his enduring presence.

Mariza Peirano

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## People and Ideas Travel Together: Tambiah’s Approach to Ritual and Cosmology in Brazil<sup>2</sup>

Mariza Peirano

### Chances & odds

The first time I read Tambiah’s work was in 1973. It was in a Master’s seminar on symbolism, held by Peter Silverwood-Cope at the Universidade de Brasília. At that time, “The magical power of words” had recently been published (in 1968, in *Man*), and “Form and meaning of magical acts”, available in print later that year, was still in manuscript form.<sup>3</sup> When Edmund Leach’s students’ field-work in the Vaupés region came to an end, Christine and Steve Hugh-Jones headed back to England but Peter Silverwood-Cope decided to take up residence in Brazil. As an enthusiastic admirer of Tambiah, both as a scholar and on a personal level, he introduced the latter’s ideas to his students in Brasília.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper was published in F. Aulino, M. Goheen & S. Tambiah (eds.) *Radical Egalitarianism. Local Realities, Global Relations*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013, pp. 137-45.

<sup>3</sup> See Tambiah (1968, 1973), later reproduced in Tambiah (1985).

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, by a mere casual fact that Leach had a keen student of his 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, who had recently transferred from Chicago to teach there. In fact, in those days of slow communications, the last word I had had was that he was far away in England.

Of course, nowadays, Tambiah's strong influence in Brazil does not result only from those chance encounters involving former students, though they were indeed a significant component. After all, people and ideas travel together. But a more sociological explanation is also in order. The question becomes: How is it that, although Tambiah's main ethnographic interest was very distant, located geographically, culturally and ideologically in South and South-East Asia, his work has been so significant to many anthropologists in Brazil? I offer here some very brief suggestions.

### **Anthropology in Brazil**

A dominant feature of the teaching of anthropology has always lain in the fact that ethnography is not separate from theory; they are combined in a single package. Thus, a classic monograph is read for its ethnographic evidence and for its theoretical framework, both dimensions being merged in graduate seminars of History and Theory. In Brazil, where anthropologists have, until recently, limited their research endeavors within the country's borders, this practice is generally extended to contemporary monographs, especially to those displaying ethnographic evidence from abroad. They are, therefore, read and evaluated as possible new *Argonauts*, 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, *Leveling Crowds* (Tambiah 1996) is read not only out of a special interest in South Asia, nor for an exclusive concern with collective violence, but for the innovative approach to riots as rituals and their cosmological implications, the new analytical tools Tambiah provides, and also, because nation-building is a continuous concern, for the powerful portrayal of the (difficult) experience of the nation-state project outside Europe.

Theory has traditionally received special attention for its universalist dimension and also because, given that anthropology is considered one of the social sciences, sociology has been its major interlocutor, forever challenging anthropology's "empiricism". But there are other dimensions to consider. Not unlike other places, the modernization project of the 1930s included institutionalization of the social sciences for an at least 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's academic centers on an equal basis. Theory, or what was considered "theoretical," thus became a 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 local social scientists conversable with the world.

Many waves of Marxism, structuralism and post-structuralism, post-modernism etc. came into vogue during this time. But, of course, obsession with theory also has its downside: when ideas are adopted just for the sake of their fashionable appeal, they often result in a loss of analytical power. Lévi-Strauss remarked that his experience in Brazil as a teacher in the 1930s showed him that students could be ahead of their professors regarding the latest information, making only the most recent theory seem worth absorbing.

Since this observation by Lévi-Strauss, one striking feature of anthropology in Brazil has been its disinterest in exoticism, though a fascination with "difference" has remained fundamental on 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 interest in foreign ethnographic experiences. Otherness has thus shifted from different concepts of (geographical and cultural) distance, but anthropologists could choose different combinations of these at will.

This relative freedom may be explained by some factors: first, anthropologists have not experienced the historical resentment for having been the object of curiosity of outside researchers, as is much the case in other former colonial contexts; second, a concern with some sort 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, still more recently, with the populations of other former Portuguese colonies; and third, the fact that the Portuguese language has produced a sort of relatively isolated community of social scientists, including sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and historians, who are close interlocutors, peers and mutual critics. In brief, as happens in many contexts in which anthropology developed as a field of knowledge during the twentieth century, local related topics combined with a large variety of intellectual influences, and, in this overall picture, the aspiration to theoretically significant contributions became the utopian path to a much desired, though frequently frustrated, international dialogue.<sup>4</sup>

### **Tambiah in Brazil**

It is in 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 so. Instead, Tambiah's approach is seen to provide solid ground for those inclined to combine ethnography and theory, the former being a path to continuous theoretical transformation. Tambiah has provided a firm counterbalance to the domineering emphasis on theory alone.

We have benefited immensely from Tambiah having reminded us, over and over again, that the intellectual dichotomies that thrive in academic circles may be reconciled and combined for the sake of interpretation: that, for instance, structural analysis and cultural accounts are not conflicting analytical frameworks; that the combination of form and content is part of cosmology and essential to the performative character of ritual; that social action and thought are not contradictory domains, but inevitably present and complementary; that semantic and pragmatic meanings are both implicated in transference; that micro-events may clarify macro-histories and vice versa.

Furthermore, Tambiah has pointed out to us two complementary orientations: first, 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 constant conversations with interlocutors, past

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<sup>4</sup> See Peirano (1998, 2008) for a general guide to anthropology in Brazil.

and present (and here I include his splendid Leach biography)<sup>5</sup>; second, interdisciplinarity, demonstrated in his habit of crossing boundaries to adapt, recreate, and include (albeit not without a twist) achievements of other disciplines, such as linguistics and philosophy, for the sake of energizing anthropology's own understanding. It is from these angles that Tambiah's approach to ritual and its relation to cosmology has been influential – ritual thus serving as a means of analyzing social events in a broad sense (eventually revealing cosmologies), thereby enlarging the focus of this phenomenon so familiar to anthropologists.

A brief survey of monographs, articles, books, theses and dissertations reveals Tambiah's approach, inspiring a great variety of ethnographic themes, all of them sharing the idea that rituals are not for anthropologists to define. Instead, rituals are recognized by the sensitivity of the researcher toward special events that enlarge, focus, highlight and justify what is ordinary in a given society. In this way, ritual is 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 entering into dialogue with and expanding upon previous assumptions, they constitute a sure pathway to theoretical refinement.

Examples of Tambiah's inspiration can be found in many studies related to politics as a whole: an analysis of the "National March of the Landless Peasant Movement" as a long duration (2 months) ritual, in which three columns of demonstrators covered more than 1,000 kilometers of highway to produce and traverse a moral ground, is one such case (Chaves 2000), as are studies on religious-cum-political phenomena, such as short marches to the capital Brasília (Steil 1996 and 2001), and the relationship between political rituals and local festivities (K. Silva 2002, Chaves 2003). An investigation of processes by which congressmen lose office due to a lack of decorum (Teixeira 1998) was later coupled with a focus on boasting (*bravata*) as a ritual genre of politics (Teixeira 2001). The struggle for land on the outskirts of cities and the significant event venues in these contexts have also been inspired by Tambiah (for instance, Borges 2004), as much as the examination of peasant meetings revealing the link between social morphology and the power of leadership (Comerford 1996 and 1999). The latter study was soon expanded to ethnographically examine the relationship between kinship, locality and moral

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<sup>5</sup> For a re-analysis of Malinowski's Trobriand ethnographic material, see Tambiah (1968, 1983); for the reanalysis of Evans-Pritchard's Zande material, Tambiah (1973). All three essays are reproduced in Tambiah (1985). See Tambiah (2002) for the intellectual biography of Edmund Leach.

reputation as they become the foundation for institutional structures of the State and the Church (Comerford 2001).<sup>6</sup>

There are at least three studies more akin to the traditional definition of ritual, all of them emphasizing its performative aspect following Tambiah: 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 Organization as a paradoxical event where the values of equality and symmetry can only be attained behind closed hierarchical doors (Góes Filho 2001 and 2003); a third looks at the Rio Earth Summit as seen from the perspective of an observer who is both a journalist and an ethnographer (Little 1995).

Small events indicating the presence of the State in daily life, such as legal IDs as modern amulets, are investigated following Tambiah's insights into the multiple orientations towards the world (Peirano 2006 and 2009). The many rehearsals leading to a symphonic orchestra recital is the subject of an inspired analysis following Tambiah's approach (Trajano Filho 1984), as is a theater play by Nelson Rodrigues (Moreira Santos 2001) that is well-known in Brazil. The study of the ritual genre of "telling stories" to make political statements was carried out among the Tapuio Indians of Goiás State (C. Silva 2002).

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

A venture of the last two decades, the crossing of Brazilian territorial borders have included a research on rumors as a narrative genre for nation-building projects in Guinea-Bissau (Trajano Filho 1993, 1998 and 2004); another on "capacity-building" rituals for public administration in the State-formation processes of East Timor in relation to the larger scenario of international cooperation (K. Silva 2004); also 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); the

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<sup>6</sup> Tambiah's approach to ritual inspired the large research program "For an Anthropology of Politics: Rituals, Representations, and Violence" (NuAP 1999), which lasted from 1997 to 2005 and resulted in the publication of more than 30 books [see [www.ppgasmuseu.etc.br/museu/pages/nuap\\_publicacoes.html](http://www.ppgasmuseu.etc.br/museu/pages/nuap_publicacoes.html)].

foundation of cities in Argentina as analyzed from XVI century sources (Boixadós 1994). Tambiah's interest in Thailand was ethnographically re-situated in Brazil in the 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>7</sup> Finally, a three-day seminar, held in 2000, was a tribute to Tambiah, which resulted in a collective book by anthropologists who had been touched by his approach to ritual (Peirano 2002).

### **Ritual as an analytical strategy and ethnographic approach**

All 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, but that it is for "natives" (be they politicians, common citizens, or even social scientists) to point out what a special event is, Tambiah's original proposal about its performative force not only helped solve the old puzzle about the efficacy of social acts, but opened up the possibility of gaining insights into actual ethnographic theories (such as a "South Asian theory of democracy", or a "Thai theory of the State"). When rituals are conceived as more formalized, more stereotyped, and more structured than everyday events, but are not qualitatively different, all of them become equal accesses to public cosmologies. This heightened aspect of ritual was of major interest in the studies mentioned above, making ethnographic theories parallel to cosmologies, and, in this case, both becoming goals to be achieved.<sup>8</sup>

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 constitutions), for example. Whether communication is 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 an act of society. Tambiah thus helps us reach a fundamental conclusion: anthropology always incorporates, implicitly or explicitly, a theory of language. Peirce, Jakobson and Austin are thus invited to join the effort to put together speech (as a communicative event) and cosmologies, both combined within ethnographies proper.

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<sup>7</sup> I am referring to Tambiah's trilogy on Thailand (Tambiah 1970, 1976, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> See, especially, Tambiah's performative approach to ritual (Tambiah 1979), later included in Tambiah (1985).

*Leveling Crowds* was the great example.<sup>9</sup> By looking at riots as rituals, Tambiah shows us their pattern in the triggering events, sequences, participants, places of incidence, organized and anticipated features, and recurrent phases, and the elements selected from routine forms of sociality. They lead 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 fact 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. Proposing to dedicate the first part to cases of violence in different places and times in South Asia, and the second to a dialogue with Le Bon, Durkheim, E.P. Thompson and subaltern studies, this clear division is blurred when new concepts for dealing with micro-events that acquire larger dimensions are proposed in the first part, and new data on riots are introduced during the theoretical discussion. This is a grand picture of what anthropological analysis is capable when combining micro-ethnography and macro-sociology. 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 of political science, anthropology, religion, violence and South Asia. Transported to the graduate classroom, however, the book becomes one of the modern classical works, not only for specific interest in South Asia, but for its theoretical accomplishments.

### **A debt to Tambiah**

I conclude by looking ahead. Despite all the due recognition Tambiah has received for his major proposals, we are still indebted to him. Not yet properly explored are the notions he presented in *Leveling Crowds*, which account for the dynamic transformation of micro-events into major issues, and vice versa. These notions release us from the common sense grid of what is conceived as local, national, global. The concepts that Tambiah calls "focalization" and "transvaluation" refer to the processes by which a series of local small-scale conflicts, involving

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<sup>9</sup> The book received two reviews in Brazil, Comerford (1998) and Chaves (1999), and a longer essay (Peirano 2000).

people in direct contact with one another, build up into ever larger clashes: 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, there are two other 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).<sup>10</sup> In a world where distortion is often the basis for incidents and clashes that are later combined into larger collective issues, and, vice versa, 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 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 them on. Thank you, Tambi.

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<sup>10</sup> See Sahlins (2005, and as chapter 10 of this book) pioneering use of the first two notions.

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