Owen M. Lynch (1931–2013)

Owen M. Lynch, a major scholar of the anthropology of India, died on April 26, 2013, in Boston, Massachusetts. His groundbreaking work, theoretical and practical, had a profound effect both on the way that Indian society is understood to be structured and on the lives of the Dalits, formerly known as the “Untouchables.” His humanistic approach, which placed the subject’s perspective at the center of analysis, combined with his emphasis on links between the global and the local, enabled a reinterpretation of political changes taking place.

Owen Lynch was born on January 4, 1931, in Flushing, New York, the second of four children, part of a large Irish Catholic, working-class extended family. His father worked in a record-producing factory, and his mother was a switchboard operator. He attended Brooklyn Prep, a Jesuit boys’ high school, followed by a short stint at St. Andrew-on-Hudson, a Jesuit seminary, to study theology. Giving up that pursuit, he went to Fordham University, obtaining his BA degree in 1956, and went on to do graduate work in anthropology at Columbia University, earning his PhD in 1966. He spent time at the South Asia Area Studies Institutes of Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania, as well as at the Summer Linguistic Institutes at the Universities of Texas and Michigan, which provided him with a rich South Asian background.

His first visit to India was in 1962, to Madhya Pradesh, with the Munda Languages Project. In 1963 he started research in Agra with the Jatav Dalits. This experience laid the groundwork for his PhD thesis and his subsequent writings on untouchability and political change in India (e.g., 1968, 1969, 1982a). The mutability of cultural change under shifting economic and political conditions became a central theme of his work.

Lynch’s first teaching job was at the State University of New York at Binghamton, starting in 1966 as an assistant professor, with a promotion to associate professor in 1969. In 1974 he moved to New York University as the Charles F. Noyes Professor, a position he held until his retirement in 2003. As one of the early urban anthropologists, he introduced this aspect of the discipline to NYU and was able to bring significant funds to the department for studies of urban life.

Lynch made six trips to India, living and working primarily in Agra, Mumbai, Mathura, and Brindaban. His first book, *The Politics of Untouchability* (1969), is based on his initial 17 months of intensive fieldwork with the Jatavs, traditionally a local caste of shoemakers who, given their work with dead cows, were considered polluting. The observations he made during this period led to his rethinking of the Indian caste-based social system. He emphasized the concepts of equality and identity, and he attended to the perceptions of those frequently not regarded by scholars as part of the Indian tradition, so often conceptualized in terms of the classic hierarchical Hindu system.

A prevailing interest in Lynch’s work was Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the educated and productive Buddhist scholar and politician, a central figure in the Dalit Buddhist tradition (Lynch 1972, 2003). As head of the Constituent Assembly that wrote the new Indian Constitution, and as an active Buddhist convert from Hinduism, Ambedkar became the iconic leader of the Jatavs. The introduction of other changes in India, including new political institutions such as the Harijan Welfare Office and the Scheduled Castes Commission, strengthened the Dalits’ social position. Conversion to Buddhism provided an opportunity to build on these changes. Ambedkar’s projection of Buddhist values of equality and justice resonated profoundly with Lynch.

For Lynch, the importance of understanding particularities of the local was especially urgent in relation to violence. He argued that “there is order in the disorder, culture in the confusion and rationality in the riot” (1981:1951). He showed how the April 1978 Agra riots, for example, were...

In addition to his work on the Jatav Dalits, Lynch carried out multifaceted research in Dharavi, the largest slum of Mumbai, where he focused on three populations (1974, 1979), and later with the Chaube Brahman of Mathura (1996), including the perspective he gained as a pilgrim (1988, 1993). As an urban anthropologist, he was critical of approaches that look at urban life in terms of aggregation of numbers and magnitude. He pointed instead to the diverse conditions of local populations—history, castes, classes, and cultures—that affect their lives and influence their senses of identity and definitions of place. He critiqued the dichotomization of “rural” and “urban” by Richard Fox and others and followed David Harvey’s differentiation of space and “place” giving attention to the role of capitalism, emphasizing issues of ethnicity, class, and the construction of self-identities (1994).

Throughout his life, Owen Lynch showed how the specifics of local places and identities relate to changes taking place at other levels and require an understanding of that context. His work touched on some of the major theoretical issues then being discussed in anthropology and in South Asian studies. In a commentary on the supposed “crisis” in anthropology, he challenged several eminent scholars who saw the discipline as losing its distinctive intellectual role (1982b). He both built on and countered arguments by leading South Asian scholars such as M. N. Srinivas on Sanskritization (1978) and Louis Dumont on hierarchy (1977).

Having been a student of Conrad Arensberg at Columbia, Lynch organized and edited the festschrift to him, Culture and Community in Europe (1984). Carrying forward some of the neglected areas of European studies, the volume’s contributors consider issues of regionalism, history, units of analysis and the impact of the world capitalist system on ways of life in what have been considered “core” and “peripheral” areas. Lynch characteristically applied his analytic lens to an area outside his own specialty, highlighting the ways that external transformations illuminate present local conditions.

Over the years, Lynch’s interests moved increasingly in the direction of examining the cultural construction of emotions and its political implications. His concern with emotions—how they are structured and evolve, and how they are contested and challenged—is best known through his edited book on South Asia, Divine Passions (Lynch 1990b). There, and in other publications, he challenged existing work that claimed the biological and universal nature of emotions. Using linguistic and semantic theory, he demonstrated the flexibility of emotional language and the ways that surrounding political and economic constraints can influence meanings. His view of emotions as culturally constructed was developed in his chapter (1990a) in Divine Passions (1990b) on the Chaubes of Mathura, a Brahman community known for administering to visiting pilgrims. In it he explored alternative perceptions of the relationship between mind and body and how the Chaubes’ conception relates to Westerners’ perception of Indian asceticism.

In his most recent publication (2012), Lynch examined the Dalit parade in honor of Ambedkar’s birthday and the specific floats used in it. He argued that an understanding of the processes taking place requires looking at the visual images in Dalit popular culture in terms of the Dalits’ perspective and cultural history. Utilizing the cultural concept of darśan—which refers to seeing and experiencing the world as it really is (2012:136) and which is so pervasive in Indian culture—entails not only the perception of the engager but also that of the engaged. His analysis of the Dalit procession floats and panels presents a contrasting view to that of caste Hindus. This visual imagery introduced a new way of thinking about Indian transformations today.

Lynch’s many publications touch on a wide range of issues, and some have become a fundamental part of reading in classes on South Asian anthropology. Based on meticulous and carefully gathered and organized research, his writings often focused on Indian themes, but they nevertheless referred back to broader theoretical issues. His discussions about the critical role of culture argued persuasively for the value of anthropological expertise in understanding local situations.


Lynch was honored with numerous awards and honors, including the Distinguished Visitor Commencement Address at Stony Brook University (1980), the Henry Luce Lecture Award at Wellesley College (1986), the Aghananda Bharati Memorial Lecture at Syracuse (1995), the NYU Golden Dozens Teaching Award (1998), and the D. N. Majumdar Memorial Medal Award and Lecture at the Indian Association of Social Science Meetings in Agra (2001). He received many prestigious grants to support his research. On October 5, 2014, at Hotel Grand, Agra, India, the first Indian Social Science Association (ISSA) Professor Owen M. Lynch Memorial Award was presented to Dr. Sanjay Paswan, who...
delivered the initial Professor Owen M. Lynch Memorial Lecture.

Owen Lynch is warmly remembered as a caring, generous, and kind mentor for students and as a valued colleague both within and far beyond the institutions at which he worked. He maintained close relationships with the Dalits in India and the United States, supporting their efforts to enhance their positions. He formed an invaluable link for those moving between continents and cultures. He never married or had children, but his 17 nieces and nephews were devoted to him, as was testified at his memorial service.

Owen Lynch’s professional papers have been deposited in the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian.

Eva Friedlander  
Research Associate, Department of Anthropology, Hunter College, CUNY, New York, NY 10065; PAC Partner, Planning Alternatives for Change, planning alternatives.com; efriedlander@igc.org

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Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah (1929–2014)

Stanley Tambiah, known to friends and acquaintances as “Tambi” (younger brother), the Esther and Sidney Rabb Professor of Social Anthropology at Harvard, died on January 19, 2014, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was
a world-renowned scholar of Buddhism in Thailand, of sources of charisma and legitimation, and of ethnic and religious violence across South Asia.

Stanley Tambiah was born on January 16, 1929, in Ceylon, the son of Charles Rajakon and Eliza Cheilana Tambiah. They were Vellala caste Tamils from Jaffna, who became Anglicans. His father, a lawyer, developed small plantations of coconuts and a mango plantation and so became a member of the planter class. His father’s brother, H. W. Tambiah, became a Supreme Court justice and authored seven books, becoming an important role model. Tambiah was one of nine children, the fifth son. His siblings were all university educated. Two of his sisters became principals of girls’ schools. His brothers became a Supreme Court Justice (H. D. Tambiah), an inspector general of police, a surgeon and head of the Army Medical Corps, and a teacher.

After primary and secondary education at S. Thomas’s College Mount Lavinia in Colombo, Ceylon, Tambiah trained in sociology at the University of Ceylon, receiving his BA in 1951. He went on to Cornell University, where he studied sociology and anthropology, and was awarded the Ph.D. in 1954. He taught first at the University of Ceylon (1955–60). His subsequent academic positions were at Cambridge University (1964–73), the University of Chicago (1973–76), and Harvard (1976–2001).

Tambiah’s first studies were quantitative surveys of villages in Ceylon (Tambiah and Ryan 1957; Tambiah and Sarkar 1958) and village studies of kinship, land tenure, and polyandry (1958, 1966). In 1956 he met Edmund R. Leach at the University of Peradeniya (formerly University of Ceylon), when Leach was making a second visit to Pul Eliya, a village built around an irrigation tank in Central Sri Lanka. Leach was supportive and engaging but devastating about the quantitative survey approach. Leaving Sri Lanka, Tambiah worked on a UNESCO-Thai technical assistance project in northeastern Thailand until Leach brought him to Cambridge for two years (1962–1964), after which he joined the faculty there.

At Cambridge, Tambiah transformed himself into a social anthropologist, authoring with Jack Goody a classic in kinship studies, Bridewealth and Dowry (Goody and Tambiah 1973). He also absorbed some of the structuralist insights of Claude Lévi-Strauss, of which Leach was an interpreter. Tambiah abandoned none of his earlier commitments; in his later collection of essays (1985), he continued to refer to himself as a development anthropologist and to invoke E. B. Tylor’s creed that anthropology is a reformer’s science.

Tambiah’s stress on oscillating models of politics parallels Leach’s work on Political Systems of Highland Burma (1954). They remained close friends and eventually Tambiah became Leach’s biographer (2002). Many of Tambiah’s striking analyses deploy structuralist insights, particularly his brilliant handling of the cosmological and mythic reworkings of the histories of Ceylon–Sri Lanka (1992), as well as his signature analysis of the world conqueror–world renouncer dualism in South and Southeast Asian “galactic polities” (1976, 1977b, 1984a).

As an English-speaking Ceylonese, Tambiah felt forced out of teaching in Sri Lanka by the 1956 passage of language laws mandating Sinhalese as the medium of instruction. He turned to the study of Buddhism in Thailand, analyzing the growth of the dominant sect of Buddhism as a tool of state governance and reform and considering the dialectic of forest monks withdrawing into the peripheries of settlement, attracting devotees and settlement after them (1970, 1976, 1984b). His book World Conqueror and World Renouncer (1976) established him as a major figure. In it, he analyzed the balancing act between religious and political institutions in legitimating pre-nation-state polities in South and Southeast Asia.

Carefully deploying historiographic, literary-genre, mythic-structural, as well as ethnographic methods, one of Tambiah’s most important contributions was to deconstruct the Buddhist revivalist ideology that tore Sri Lanka apart and to show the countervailing alternative histories that have been erased by chauvinism (1992). There is, he asserts, “no reason to foreclose on this possibility” of a more tolerant Buddhism “for there are precedents that can be positively employed” (1992:125). But, he continues, forcefully putting forth an anthropological institutional perspective against simple idealistic possibilism or wishful thinking, “new perspectives can be forged only under social and political conditions which are themselves not frozen or restrictive” (1992:125).

Much of his brilliant analysis in Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka is dedicated to charting the freezing and restrictive traps into which Sri Lankan politics has devolved since the 1940s, in what he argued has been a dramatic transformation from Buddhist-Hindu galactic polities to the cosmologies of unitary nation-states. The sin, of course, lies not only with Buddhist ideology or ritualized cosmology but also with the British colonial rule against which the religious revivalism arose—and, in a larger sense, with the transformations induced by nation-state identity politics and the “juggernaut of mass participatory politics” (1992:172). Such concerns endure: in 2006, Buddhist monks renewed their 1956 chauvinist demands and threats against the government if it did not implement their five proposals to arrest the decline of Buddhist values and culture that had set off decades of violence. On its 50th anniversary, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress republished their tract, The Betrayal of Buddhism (1956, 2006), to which Tambiah’s Buddhism Betrayed? was a reply and continues to be needed (Fischer 2013; Perera 2006).

or “galactic” polities; (2) in the field of mythic charters, alternative histories versus ritual mobilization; and (3) in the field of cross-cultural structures of legitimation, chakravarti (world conquerors, universal emperors) politics versus the dharmaraja (righteous king). The dharmaraja or king purifies the sangha (organization of monks) in return for the sangha’s legitimation of royal rule. This follows the Indo-European topos of royal and priestly functions with merchants and farmers as third and fourth wheels of dharma. It also follows the cross-cultural topos found from Fiji to Greece of autochthonous versus immigrant founder schemas, or natives of the soil versus sea-crossing elites (see further Fischer 2013).

Tambiah’s account of transformations of the kingdom of Kandy shows how the royal line passed from patrilineral Sinhala to matrilineral Nayyakars (Tamils from Madurai in south India). They used trips to Siam to bolster their dharmaraja roles, building new viharas (monasteries) upon their return and elevating the role of the Tooth Relic in the annual perihara (procession). Because the kings continued personal Hindu Saivite practices, two (Buddhist) monks attempted to assassinate the “evil,” “heretic,” “Tamil” king. Tambiah read the mythicized 17th- and 13th-century histories of efforts to legitimate or delegitimate Buddhist kings as commentaries on this contested incorporation of Tamils into Sinhala identity, and he pointed out that the history of the marriage alliances establishing the Nayyakar kings all have the same structure. They fit the cross-cultural, structural myths of the origin of power and its creative transformation—of a disgraced prince trying his luck anew by invading a new land (Sri Lanka), breaching the periphery with barbarism and violence but becoming domesticated and reconstituting legitimate order, turning wilderness into rice cultivation (with imported Tamil labor). On a cosmological register, the Buddhist genesis myth is also about the “creation of world as devolutionary differentiation,” with disorder increasing through the workings of human desire until order is reestablished.

The point is that there is a rich tapestry of incorporation, exchange, and reworking of traditions that often gets lost in mythic charters intended to advance particular interests at particular moments of competition and that it is the anthropologists’ calling to not allow such erasures to pass unremarked.

Tambiah described the cosmic rituals of galactic polities as rites of dispersion and rites of aggregation. The former include agricultural cycle rites that begin in the royal palace, then proceed to provincial courts, and “ripple” down to the rice fields of villagers. The latter include annual Oaths of Allegiance as well as the royal multiple-marriage arrangements, and the sequestering at court of members of lower allied royal or provincial families to ensure their loyalty.

Tambiah’s (2013) essay, “The Charisma of Saints and the Cult of Relics, Amulets, and Tomb Shrines,” which he chose to open his coedited volume Radical Egalitarianism (Aulino et al. 2013), provides parallel accounts of Christian and Buddhist cults of saints and relics. Christian monks boasted of their ritual kidnappings of sacred relics—breaking, in the dark of night, into saints’ tombs and Roman catacombs to steal bone and ash, nails, wood, and linen with which to consecrate churches in new territories. We tend to forget that the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 C.E. decreed that no church was to be consecrated without relics and that the Vatican continues to maintain a supply room of ash and bone and other relics to consecrate new churches. Tambiah noted that, as in Buddhism, the church changed its doctrines about the relics, originally treating remains as inviolable but then instituting the partibility, distribution, and redistribution of relics.

After colonial rule, the effort to transfer constitutional power to dominant groups and the sudden production of volatile vote banks, Tambiah argued, extending the ideas of Émile Durkheim, produced affect-charged crowds of “effervescence,” labile surpluses of affective energy that can suddenly flip from pack attack to panic flight and vice versa. In Leveling Crowds (1996), although he suggests that most South Asian ethnonationalist riots are short-lived—the heightened affect and suspension of individual reason wane as quickly as they arise—his own account of the traps in which mass “democratic politics and ethnonationalist politics are related in South Asia” and in which “violence as mode of conducting politics has become established and institutionalized” is considerably darker. “Industrial employment, professional skills and the practice of Western medicine,” writes Tambiah, “have become retocategorized as entitlements and sumptuary privileges indexed as quotas assignable to preexisting ethnic or racial or indigenous groupings” (1996:342). Collective violence orchestrated to defend or contest these entitlements creates massive internal contradictions. “Systematically organized ethnic riots by politicians, parties, and police” (1996:330) destroy the very agencies that then are required for repair: health care systems, hospitals, welfare agencies, refugee camps, and relief administration.

Anthropologists are often curators of popular cultural logics, and among Tambiah’s essays (1985) are lovely expositions of Trobriand deep sea “lying” canoes that are charter myths for male and female power; Thai animal classifications; and both Sri Lankan exorcisms and Thai royal tonsure rituals, which enact the transformation from theater state to nation-state.

Stanley J. Tambiah, the author of ten books, was awarded the Balzan Prize (1997), the Huxley Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (1997), and the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize (1998). He became a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy (2000) and was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The essays in his festschrift volume (Aulino et al. 2013) provide a taste of the wide range of his influence and demonstrate his interest in the work of his students
and colleagues. His generosity and support for the work of others will be greatly missed.

Michael M. J. Fischer  STS (Science, Technology and Society) and Anthropology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02142

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