

Thomas Kirsch

May 29, 1930 — May 17, 1999

When A. Thomas Kirsch died, we all lost a valued scholar, colleague, and friend. An anthropologist, a Southeast Asia specialist, a student of religion, and an experienced academic administrator, he was an ideal colleague and is sorely missed. Born in Syracuse, he was educated at the Christian Brothers Academy, Syracuse, and Syracuse University. After serving in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, he entered Harvard University and obtained his Doctorate in Anthropology, studying Phu Thai religious syncretism in Northeastern Thailand. He remained at Harvard as an Instructor until 1966 when he moved to Princeton University. In 1970, he joined Cornell's Department of Anthropology and Southeast Asia Program. In 1984, he married Yohko Tsuji, a fellow anthropologist. They were a happy couple. Yohko won the admiration and gratitude of all for the encouragement she gave Tom in continuing to lead a full life after his surgery in 1992. During his Cornell career, Tom served as the Department of Anthropology's Chair for nine-and-a-half years and was Acting Chair of the Department of Asian Studies.

Tom Kirsch's graduate training in the 1960s coincided with a very special period in the history of social anthropology in the United States. He studied in the Social Relations Department at Harvard, the forerunner of all interdisciplinary programs that sought to integrate anthropology, social and clinical psychology, and sociology. All of his subsequent teaching and writing bears the strong stamp of Talcott Parsons and the particular understanding of the concept of evolution that Parsonian theory entailed. One of the enduring criticisms of Parsons's work has been that it remained unattached to empirical data, and it was one of Tom's most enduring achievements that he linked the two in such profitable ways. His research focused primarily on religious syncretism and changes in religion and society in Northeast Thailand. He returned to Harvard to write his dissertation. In the roughly 25 years between the time he took his Ph.D. degree in 1967 and was stricken by cancer, he was able to return to Thailand for four more periods of research.

With James L. Peacock, he co-authored, *The Human Direction: An Evolutionary Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*, published in 1970. His subsequent publications deal almost exclusively with religion and their style of argument is both clear and remarkably trenchant. Tom's steady stream of reviews are models of what an academic book reviewer ought to aim to do, but perhaps his most impressive contributions to scholarship on Theravada Buddhism and syncretism were delivered in the form of (uncollected) lectures, panel papers, workshop contributions, and seminar presentations. At the time of his death, when many anthropologists were engaged in

renouncing empirical research in favor of disembodied theory, Tom never wavered from his commitment to the project of fostering their interaction.

Kirsch's influence as a Southeast Asian specialist was the result of the disciplinary approach he brought to his studies of mainland Southeast Asia and especially of Thailand. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, he was always concerned with the dynamic relation of culture and society, maintained a special focus on religion and worldview, and possessed a keen sense of the influence of history. An awareness of the role of human agency and motivation informed his work.

Early in his career, he came to see culture as a system of values, concepts, and ideas that shaped and controlled individual action and the structure of society. When, in 1962, he began fieldwork in northeastern Thailand, he discovered a Buddhist country with ample cultural resources to engage his particular interests. Continually exploring the ramifications of the Buddhist concept of merit, over the years Kirsch undertook important studies of, for example, Thai gender roles, Thai economic activities, Buddhist monastic reform, and the persisting relationship of animism and brahmanism with Theravada Buddhism. However, he was more than a fieldworker. He also wrote on early Thai and Khmer history and mobilized his anthropological expertise to challenge conventional historical wisdom on such topics as the significance of kinship systems or the rise and fall of political systems. In the context of Khmer history, he argued that more attention should be paid to the achievement of social integration through, among other things, polygamy or the varying relationship between the cosmological claims of divine kingship and of the Buddhist monkhood. His Southeast Asian interests were even more extensive, and by many he is best known for his classic study in 1973 of religion and society in upland Southeast Asia, where his focus was on religion and world view rather than on the political explanations preferred by others. In this study, Kirsch avoided seeing rituals and feasting simply as part of the traditional cultures of "tribal" groups and, instead, saw them as being dynamically connected with the negotiation and contestation of social arrangements and rank. In the field of Thai studies, his influence was considerable. Some might say that it was profound. His judgment was invariably sought.

Kirsch's work in the anthropology of Thai village life also situated his work within the field of Religious Studies. Because of his extensive fieldwork in rural Thailand, he became a leading ethnographer of Thai Buddhist village life. During the years he worked and conducted research in Thailand, the central structures of Thai village life shifted dramatically. His ethnographies, therefore, made not only important theoretical contributions, but also became some of the last anthropological descriptions of Thai village religious life when the forest monk tradition was a

vibrant modality of religious expression. The attention to religious institutions and structures in his scholarship was also passed on to his many doctoral students.

At Cornell, he played a central role in the establishment of the academic study of religion as a field of study in the College of Arts and Sciences. In 1989, he was one of several scholars in the college asked to serve on a Religious Studies steering committee charged with creating an academic program for the study of religion at Cornell. With his active participation and often-direct intellectual leadership, Religious Studies was approved as a major in 1991, and the Religious Studies Program adopted a curriculum with core offerings the same year. He served on the steering committee for the program until his death. During that time, he chaired the curriculum committee, advised many Religious Studies majors, and served on numerous Honors committees.

No memory of Tom would be complete that failed to emphasize his delight in teaching and his success as a teacher. He was one of the most deceptively memorable teachers we have known. No orator, Tom quietly and patiently went through materials, questions, and issues with no attempt to entrance the listener with high-sounding terminology or performative aplomb. Yet, as the students engaged him in discussion, they inevitably found a stronger “push back” than they expected, a mind that insisted on clarity and logic and rejected puffery. Perhaps the detail that most captures this sheer intellectual intensity is what happened to his classes after his throat operation in 1992 left him with an electric monotone voice. For most academics, this would have signaled the end of lecturing and seminar leading. For Tom, it seemed to clear away the remaining underbrush, leaving the pure ideas only.

After his surgery, if anything, his classes were more intensely exciting to students. We all remember walking by his office during this period, hearing the monotone and seeing the students on the edge of their chairs, in the kind of rapt attention we always seek but rarely attain. Those of us who supervised students with him most remember his delight in them. What struck us most was Tom’s pure pleasure in students’ creativity, accomplishments, and intelligence. No professorial jealousies there, no need to hold the ground as their intellectual superior, just sheer joy. His students responded by outdoing themselves and by struggling to meet a standard that they alone set, thinking somehow they were trying to meet his expectations when he was simply enjoying the process of watching them grow as young colleagues. The symposium in his honor, organized by the Anthropology Department in February 1999, enabled them to express their gratitude clearly.

As a colleague, Tom embodied the virtues of judiciousness and patience; he was always ready to discuss issues with students and colleagues alike and enjoyed nothing more than trading critiques of newly published work and

reviewing yet again for the uninformed an anthropological classic that, more often than not, he had just re-read or found a reference to.

There was little he had not read, and he was the most generous of colleagues in his willingness to share his opinions and debate them with anyone who valued academic exchange. He will also be remembered by his colleagues as always being ready to take on responsibilities even when he was already shouldering more than enough. He set a tone for the rest of us that we will have to struggle to maintain.

Jane Marie Law, Robert J. Smith, Oliver W. Wolters, Davydd J. Greenwood