

Obituary

Gehan Wijeyewardene (1932–2000)

by James Fox*

Eulogy delivered by Professor James J. Fox, formerly Head of the Department of Anthropology and now Director, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, on 28 July 2000.

How does one honour the memory of a colleague and old friend? We can recount his career and cite his achievements, but each of us harbours his or her own memories of Gehan.

After reading English for his B.A. at the University of Ceylon, Gehan went on to Cambridge to read Anthropology. He was awarded the Stephen Behren Cohen Studentship at King's College. From Cambridge he received a B.A., then an M.A. and eventually in 1962 his Ph.D. Those who knew Gehan and associate him with his long-standing work in Thailand may be surprised to learn that he obtained his Ph.D. for research on Ki-Swahili-speaking coastal communities in Kenya and Tanzania [then still called Tanganyika].

After finishing his thesis in Cambridge, Gehan took up a position at the University of Malaya in Singapore, which became the University of Singapore. He was only in Singapore for something over two years when he was offered the position of Research Fellow at the ANU. He took up this position in the Department of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies on 29 January, 1964. From 1964 until his retirement in 1997 his career was spent doing anthropology at the ANU.

It is interesting to note that already in 1965 Gehan had published his first article on "irrigation and agriculture in a north Thai village. Throughout his career at the ANU his study of Thailand, his involvement in Thailand and his concern with Thailand was paramount. As his corpus of publications on Thailand demonstrates,

Gehan had an abiding and wide-ranging interest in all things Tai. He was a pioneer in Tai studies in Australia and he contributed to making the ANU the Centre that it has become for the study of Southeast Asia.

We anthropologists are a peculiar lot. We take pride in our differences, our eccentricities and the unusual topics that we investigate. Gehan was a master at cultivating these qualities and we all came to appreciate them in his character. Thus, if I may cite one example, his scholarly 'ethnoethological' study of "Fighting Beetles" published in *Mankind* in 1972 set an exceptional standard for all of us to emulate. Long before I met Gehan, I was already intrigued by a fascinating article he had written in *Man* in 1968 on "Address, abuse and animal categories in northern Thailand"—precisely because it dealt with a puzzling issue of ethnographic importance in Southeast Asia that few have properly recognized.

Gehan was a member of the Anthropology Department for 33 years. He added immensely to the flavour of the place. My earliest memories of Canberra include the memory of Gehan's probing at the first seminar I gave in the Department.

Gehan had little respect for forms of authority and he waged his own personal wars against arbitrary decision-making. One memorable battle in which I joined him was over AusAID's decision, at the time, on how scholarships were to be allocated to Thai students. Gehan was convinced, as I was, that Anthropology was relevant to the whole development process.

Another memorable battle Gehan waged alone. The School decided to establish a Divisional structure and to group Departments into Divisions. Gehan objected strenuously to this new bureaucratic arrangement, insisting that he would simply not recognize it. And he

managed to requisition enough stationery with the old letterhead to maintain his principled stand until he retired.

We all share such memories of Gehan and will continue to honour him in our memories. At this point I would like to remember the work I shared with Gehan (and Ted Chapman who was another of Gehan's close colleagues) in the supervision of one particular student, Ananda Rajah, who now teaches at the University of Singapore. Ananda was someone who was particularly close to Gehan and immeasurably indebted to him as a teacher. Were he able to be here—or indeed Gehan's other overseas students, Choltira Satyawathana and Niti Pawakapan, I am certain that they would all wish to

express their deep respect for the teacher.

Finally I would like to conclude by quoting a few lines from the short obituary that Michael Young, another of Gehan's colleagues in the Department, has written for the Divisional Newsletter:

“Gehan was a true skeptic, a sort of intellectual anarchist, who loved to challenge received opinion, just as he relished subverting bureaucratic authority. It would be nice to think of him arguing with Saint Peter about the inequitable seating arrangements in Heaven.”

Note

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