



### Obituary and Remembrance for Professor Theodore Riccardi, Jr. (1937–2020)

Todd Lewis

Professor Emeritus Theodore Riccardi, 83, a linguist, historian, pianist, and storyteller, died on September 14, 2020, from complications of Parkinson's disease, which he had battled with courage and determination for over twenty years.

Riccardi was born into a large extended Italian-American family in Philadelphia, many of whom were professional musicians. His father, who played the cello and double bass in local bands and orchestras, realized very early that his son had perfect pitch and was a musical prodigy. By the time he was barely a teenager, Riccardi played the piano and keyboard with his father and other band members nights and weekends. He played throughout his life, and no matter where he lived, somehow made sure there was a piano nearby. He played mostly classical pieces by Beethoven, Schubert, Rachmaninoff, and others. But, to the delight of his children and grandchildren, he could

always recall the songs from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s that he played as a band member, even when his ability had been diminished by Parkinson's.

His academic talent also became apparent early, and his father enrolled him in Friends Central, a renowned Quaker school outside Philadelphia. Riccardi's experience at Friends Central left him with a life-long respect and gratitude for the Quakers. After completing his undergraduate studies in philosophy at Harvard University, Riccardi engaged in postgraduate studies at the University of Rome (1959 – 60).

Upon his return he was not sure what to do next. To please his parents, he enrolled in law school at the University of Pennsylvania. He liked to tell the story of how he became an Indologist by happenstance: he disliked law school and was crossing campus one day when he met an old teacher of his, who encouraged him to talk to her husband in the Linguistics Department. With a foundation in Latin, French, and Italian, it was already clear he had a gift for languages. One thing led to another and he soon found himself studying Sanskrit with Professor Ernest Bender. He also met a visiting scholar, the linguist T.W. Clark, who was teaching a language new to academia: Nepali. Riccardi followed T.W. Clark to the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, where he studied with Clark, and formed lifelong friendships with Nepali anthropologists Khem and Dor Bahadur Bista.

After the unexpected demise of Clark, with whom he intended to pursue his doctoral studies, Riccardi returned to the U.S. to begin his Ph.D. studies in 1962 in the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. His mentors in Indology there were W. Norman Brown, Ernest Bender, Stella

Kramrisch, and Ludo and Rosanne Rocher. His studies included both classical Sanskrit and its ancient Prakrits, as well as modern north India languages (Hindi, Bengali, Nepali). He and his first wife, Margaret Bush, a fellow student in the department, were married in 1965. He obtained his Ph.D. in 1968, with his dissertation a critical edition of the Nepali version of the *Vetalapancavimsati*, an Indic folklore collection of "vampire" stories (published in the American Oriental Society Monograph Series Volume 54, 1971).

Riccardi joined the faculty of Columbia University in 1968. Over the next thirty-five years, his research, focused primarily on Nepal, spanned an astonishing variety of topics and methods. His connection to Nepal stemmed from his disenchantment with working in Varanasi on a Sanskrit-centered Indological dissertation. After he took a trip to Kathmandu in 1965, he remained in Nepal for three years, captivated by its cultural richness and vitality, and by the excitement of early scholarship in the country, which had only recently opened to outsiders. He would devote much of his life to studying and understanding this region and witnessing its changes over the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st. In Nepal in the 1980s, he met his partner and soulmate Ellen Coon, who shared his deep appreciation for the country and its culture. They married in 1995 and lived together in Kathmandu for extended periods, including the first ten years of Riccardi's retirement while Coon conducted her own research documenting Newar religious practices.

With research in Nepal supported by every funding organization over the years, Riccardi was a productive scholar who published translations of

important Sanskrit inscriptions and Nepali texts into English, highlighting their cultural significance. Riccardi's translations were consistently praised for their exactitude and care. Other articles critically analyzed important case studies in Kathmandu Valley history and art. With Mohan Khanal, he spent several years conducting some of the only archaeological digs in the Kathmandu Valley, at Dumakhhal (1984–85; 1988–89), a site in the north-central area of the Valley. He mourned the fact that so few digs had been allowed in such richly layered terrain; he published several articles and a book reporting the findings in the *Harvard Oriental Series* (2007).

In the last phase of his academic career, Riccardi was drawn to postmodernism and critical theory, questioning the biases and oppressive power relations of traditional Indology as with most “area studies.” Drawing on his knowledge of Western European and Indo-European languages and his musical training, he offered new courses such as “The Orient in Western Music” and lectures on Orientalism in the operas of Richard Wagner. He spent the last ten years of his life working on a novel, *Cosima's Dream*, about the unrecognized Newar pandits working for Brian Hodgson, the 19th century British Resident in Kathmandu, and the misappropriation and perversion of Buddhist thought by Western scholars to justify anti-Semitism. He felt that some stories could only be told with fiction.

As Riccardi's family always knew, he loved spinning fantastic tales that starred characters from his childhood, Columbia, and his travels to Asia and elsewhere. After his retirement from Columbia in 2003, Riccardi had some fun with his erudition by writing two published collections of Sherlock Holmes stories, *The Oriental*

*Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Random House, 2003) and *Between the Thames and the Tiber: The Further Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Pegasus Crime, 2011), which together drew on his unique blend of knowledge of the Indian subcontinent, Western European history, literature, and music.

Riccardi devoted substantial energy to expanding the study of South Asia and its languages at Columbia and beyond. Along with Columbia University's Ainslie Embree and Howard Wriggins, Riccardi wrote and renewed proposals funding a U.S. National Defense Education Act Center in the South Asian Institute that included language fellowship funding for Columbia graduate students. Early in his career, he secured funding to organize a summer program for the study of Urdu and a textbook for advanced studies of Bengali. In 1975, he was a founding member of the International Association of Buddhist Studies. Riccardi's support for South Asian Studies was lifelong, serving on the Board of Trustees of the American Institute of Indian Studies for over a decade, and as Chairman of the Indo-U.S. Sub-Commission from 1983 to 1987. From 1980 to 1982, he served as the Counsellor for Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi and the Chairman of the Board of the U.S. Educational Foundation in India.

Riccardi was one of the founders of Himalayan Studies in American higher education. Along with Gerald Berreman at the University of California-Berkeley, and John Hitchcock at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he offered the first courses treating the region as a distinct culture area. He was instrumental in sustaining journals focusing on the region: he co-founded the journal *Kailash* that was published in Nepal since 1973 and assumed

the role as editor of the *Himalayan Research Bulletin* (with Bill Fisher and Bruce Owens) from 1985 to 1988. Riccardi consistently sponsored and supported academic exchanges bringing scholars from Nepal to be visiting Fulbright lecturers at Columbia and other universities. He supported writer/journalists Kanak and Kunda Dixit in their graduate studies, and in their returning to Nepal to found the journal *Himal South Asia*. Known for his academic rigor and kind mentoring, Riccardi attracted over forty graduate students whom he guided in doctoral studies focused on a broad variety of topics across South Asia.

Riccardi initiated a series of grants funded by the U.S. Department of Education designed to summarize research and enhance the academic understanding of the Himalayan region: “Essays and Readings in the History and Anthropology of the Himalayan Region”; a computer searchable “Bibliographic Database of the Himalayas”; and “The Himalayas: A Syllabus of the Region's History, Anthropology and Religions.” (The first two, comprising one and four bound volumes, never found a publisher; the last was published by the Asian Studies Association in 1995).

For his entire academic career (1968–2000), Riccardi taught at Columbia University in the Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures (where scholars teaching Indian languages were placed then). He served as Chair of this notoriously difficult department for over ten years, where he offered most courses in languages, Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi, Bengali, and Nepali, as well as the graduate introduction to Indology. Riccardi also directed the Southern Asian Institute at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs intermittently for almost ten years.

In 1995, King Birendra of Nepal awarded Riccardi the prestigious Gorkha Dakshin Bahu medal for his service in illuminating the history and cultures of Nepal; in 2004, the Nepal Nagarik Manch presented him with the International Civil Golden Award; and in 2012, he was awarded the Nai Derukha award for his contributions to Nepali letters.

In 2014, at a reception held in Riccardi's honor, his former students presented him with a book of tribute, with thirty contributors: *Sucāruvādadeśika: A Festschrift Honoring Professor Theodore Riccardi, Jr.* edited by Todd Lewis and Bruce Owens, (Kathmandu: Himal Press). *Sucāruvādadeśika* is a compound term that translates as "very beloved/ beautiful/ delightful (*sucāru*) teacher/

guide (*deśaka*) whose speech/music (*vāda*) is delightful." It captures how to his students and colleagues, Riccardi was beloved as a virtuoso musician and as an intellectual who studied, taught, mentored, and served with soul and distinction.

In his final years, Parkinson's deprived him of much of his independence, but thanks to the tender care of his wife, Ellen, and dear friends Rajesh and Chandra Shova Shrestha, he was able to continue doing much that he loved—travel to Nepal once again, play the piano, write, and enjoy visits from friends and former students. He is survived by his wife, Ellen, his four children, Claire, Matthew, Miranda and Nicholas, as well as his son-in-law James Ford and daughter-in-law Alexia Breuvert,

and three grandchildren, Madeleine Ford and Max and Julius Riccardi. A Facebook Group has been created where photographs and memories of Professor Ted Riccardi can be shared.

Todd Lewis is Distinguished Professor of Arts and Humanities at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts. Mentored as Professor Riccardi's student at Columbia University, he has researched and published studies on Newar religious traditions since 1979. Lewis is the co-editor (with Bruce Owens) of *Sucāruvādadeśika: A Festschrift Honoring Professor Theodore Riccardi, Jr.* (Kathmandu: Himal Press, 2014).