



Robert J. Smith

June 27, 1927 – October 11, 2016

Robert J. Smith, the Goldwin Smith Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Asian Studies, died on October 11, 2016. After completing specialized training in Japanese language and serving as an interpreter for the 25th infantry of the U.S. Army in Japan, he completed his BA in anthropology at the University of Minnesota in 1949. Shortly thereafter he joined the then Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Cornell as a Ph.D. student. At the time of his death, he was the last surviving anthropologist to have carried out research during the Allied Occupation of Japan.

Bob, as he was known by his colleagues, remained associated with the Department of Anthropology for his entire academic career. He first joined the faculty as an instructor in 1953 subsequently becoming Goldwin Smith Professor of Anthropology in 1974 and retiring in 1997. Over this forty-four year career on the faculty, he chaired either the Department of Asian Studies (1961-66) or the Department of Anthropology (1967-71; 1976-78; 1979-82) for some 13 years, significantly through turbulent times for Cornell and for the Department of Anthropology in the late 1960s. Among his recognitions nationally and internationally, he delivered the prestigious Morgan Lectures in Anthropology at the University of Rochester in 1980, he was elected President of the Association for Asian Studies in 1988, and received the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays from the Government of Japan in 1993, the latter for his outstanding contributions to mutual understanding between the United States and Japan.

This brief summary of highlights of his career as an anthropologist and a key member of the Cornell community hardly does justice to his extraordinary contributions to Cornell, to anthropology, and to the study of Japan. He was often overheard responding – with characteristic self-deprecation – to those who complimented him on being the leading

anthropologist of Japan of his generation, “I lived longer than my peers.” This modesty was very typical, but very inaccurate. For over 50 years, his research and publications on Japan set the standard and led the field of the anthropology of Japan in North America. In addition to research in both rural and urban Japan, he also conducted a study of ethnic Japanese in Sao Paulo, Brazil. His formal anthropological work was complemented by a deep appreciation for Japanese art and he and his wife Kazuko Smith accumulated an excellent collection of different art forms all of which they have since donated to the Johnson museum along with a substantial endowment in support of enhancing the museum’s collection. From his first publication in 1952 – “Cooperative Forms in a Japanese Agricultural Community” – he contributed almost ninety research pieces and about 60 reviews up through the early years of this century. Among these are eight books he authored, co-authored, or co-edited (omitting from this list the translations of his books into Japanese and other languages): *Kurusu: A Japanese agricultural community* (1956); *Japanese Culture: Its Development and Characteristics* (with Richard K. Beardsley) (1962); *Japanese Painters of the Floating World* (with Martie Young) (1966); *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan* (1974); *Kurusu: The Price of Progress in a Japanese Village: 1951-1975* (1978); *The Women of Suye Mura* (with Ella Lury Wiswell) (1982); *Japanese Society: Tradition, Self, and the Social Order* (1983); *The Diary of a Japanese Innkeeper’s Daughter* (translated by Miwa Kai and edited by Robert J. Smith) (1984). During his long career of research and writing, Bob examined and pioneered many important aspects of the study of contemporary Japanese society and culture, including: the social organization of community life; changing kinship structures; the historical demography of urban life; ancestor worship and popular religion; urban anthropology; and gender studies. Bob Smith’s corpus constitutes exemplary ethnographic work. He found his academic home as much in East Asian area studies as in anthropology. Although he eschewed theoretical cant and obfuscation, his work was analytically sophisticated and subtle. He advised his graduate students to “keep their own voices down” and attend to the voices of their interlocutors, a practice he carried over in his mentoring of students.

Bob trained dozens of graduate students over his years at Cornell and many of those students went on to become leaders in subsequent generations of anthropologists of Japan. He was, moreover, more than generous to other fledgling scholars in Japanese studies from other universities. As one of his graduate students, Jan Zeserson, remarked, he was more of a mentor than a guru who guided students by taking them seriously. He was an exemplary listener who was often skeptical of the latest theoretical fashions and encouraged his students to listen to the voices of the people they studied rather than imposing a particular explanatory grid on their lives. He inspired his students through his own meticulous ethnographic research. His final Ph. D. student, Joshua Roth, remarked, “There was something about Professor Smith that inspired his students to want to prove to him that we were worthy of him.” Bob Smith was also a brilliant lecturer and taught generations of Cornell undergraduates. His lectures were masterfully fluid, well turned, and well timed with a quotient of wry humor.

Bob Smith was born on a farm in the very small township of Essex in southern Missouri. His family moved to Baltimore where he completed elementary school feeling like an outsider with his southern accent. His family later relocated to Washington where he went to high school. His students and colleagues remember him for his capacity for listening and letting others do a majority of the talking. He kept, as one colleague and friend noted, “His own emotions pretty much to himself, and he seemed to have a life as calm and orderly as his uncluttered desk,

something for which I envied him no end.” He will be long remembered by his students and colleagues for his warm collegiality and support, his quips on the outrages and foibles of academic life and politics, his principled and ethical demeanor, all with a genuine sense of humor and respect for the dignity of the people he studied.

Written by David Holmberg (Chair) and Ted Bestor