


INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT, MEANING, AND POWER

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A discussion of meaning involves questions of context and power in several senses. The recent debate about “Orientalism” has largely been about how Westerners in various ways created a mysterious world of “the Orient.”¹ In so doing they came to assume a power over the peoples they described by imposing meanings from alien contexts upon them. In contrast to the objective, scientific, rational West a strange, mystical, irrational Orient was born. The essays in this volume attempt to break away from the assumptions behind this approach, and explore possible styles of research which do less injustice to the peoples with whom—rather than on whom—we work.

The sweeping and misleading generalizations too often made by students of Southeast Asian societies commonly have their roots in a superficial understanding of the history, culture, and linguistic complexities of what they profess to explain. A scarcely less dangerous tendency has been to constitute an imaginary “object of study” which displaces Southeast Asians to some timeless, distant world.² So we have focused on the impact their neighbors, the colonial powers, contemporary economic and political relations, and their own historical experiences have had, the better to understand the forms which the discourses of Southeast Asian peoples have assumed.

The title of the volume is itself suggestive of the type of problem we are addressing. “Southeast Asia” does not “exist” any more than terms like “context” or “meaning” have any very clear or unambiguous sense, other than within a particular framework. Southeast Asia is a recent, externally defined, political invention and denotes no exclusive internally bounded entity, geographically, ethnically or culturally.³ It is merely a convenient label to refer to one part of the globe in relation to others.

This said, however, there are senses in which such a regional focus is not entirely arbitrary. Long before Jayavarman II returned from Java to found the Angkor dynasty in Cambodia, there seems to have been extensive travel, mutual influence through trade and conquest, and cultural adaptation around the South China and nearby seas. There has been a long history of conscious borrowing, within as well as without the region, as Jacob makes clear in her essay. Such influences may perhaps best be seen as in opposition, or as supplementary, to the dynamics of local cultures. With the growth of Western imperialism and global trade, more distant centers of power tried to impose their ideas upon Southeast Asian societies and change these societies to further what

they perceived as their own or sometimes the colonized peoples' interests. The idea of the region, more recently, has served the aim of some Southeast Asian governments to represent themselves as having something in common. Others have sought to stress broader extra-regional (and often ideological) links, or have taken refuge in more narrowly interpreted "national identities." It is in the shaping of these processes that we are interested.

If the notion of a "region" is a fiction (in the sense of "something made"), so may be its constituent "societies" or "cultures," which are in no small part outsiders' constructions of an amalgam of processes, interpreted and disputed in different ways by those involved. Such hypostatization follows easily from the common-sense model of language, whereby words and sentences have meaning by corresponding to the actual state of affairs in the world. The problem is that much of what people say and do gains meaning, not by reference to the world, but by reference to other things which have been said and done. In other words significance depends upon context. So Correspondence Theory has a rival, or complement, in Coherence or Contextual Theory. Instead of analyzing a subject in search of its essential nature, the appeal to context implies a focus on relationships, and potentially different perspectives. If the former is of use in practical science, the latter comes into its own in interpreting cultural statements and actions, which often make little sense in terms of any simple correspondence with the world. The difficulty is simply that, whereas it is possible in principle to lay down fairly strict conditions for meaning in Correspondence Theory, how is one to circumscribe all the possible contexts relevant to a contextual approach?

Contextualizing also raises the delicate issue of the relation between analysts' and indigenous frames of reference, and poses the questions: whose formulation of relations, and whose criteria of relevance, are at stake? People have different representations (in Goodman's sense)⁴ of relevant context, not just between, but within, cultures. Such representations involve power and knowledge in two ways, as Davidson's essay shows. The ability to assert, and have one's assertions accepted as legitimate knowledge, are important aspects of power, as Jacob and Taylor suggest and as I argue below. At the same time, the knowledge available to different groups or persons in a society delimits the forms of power which are recognized and may be used.

The question of context becomes more complex when it is recognized that, in importing "foreign" ideas, or having them imposed, the political and cultural possibilities are extended. In allowing greater choice in how to contextualize, there emerges a double relationship between knowledge and power. In adopting academically fashionable criteria for selecting relevant contexts in preference to those used by the participants themselves, we may be guilty simultaneously of an act of distortion and a subtle kind of epistemological domination. The illustration of these points is an implicit theme running through this book.

At first sight, the six essays may seem to address somewhat different topics. Some readers may wish to look only at those which seem pertinent to their own fields. To do so would be to miss how far the themes complement and illuminate each other. To classify the essays—this one on Burmese politics, that one about Vietnamese poetry—is to split a complex reality into compartments, an approach from which it was our purpose to suggest an escape. The reason for people interested in literature, politics, economic development, and culture coming together was the shared realization of how similar were the kinds of questions we were asking. We feel it would be a mistake to lose the richness of the plurality of these views for the sake of producing short-lived hypotheses with a semblance of "scientific" comparability.

This introduction will not therefore attempt to generalize about what might seem a common theme, namely how borrowed languages and symbols came, through adap-

tation, to bring about change in Southeast Asia. Generalization of this kind would misrepresent what the contributors have sought to achieve. For we have eschewed the naive model of "social change" (or "political change") which implies a static system to which "change" happens. Societies, politics, and languages are dynamic and continually being reinterpreted and reevaluated in different contexts. Perhaps one should ask not how, or why, change happens but what underlies the impression of continuity.

All the essays make use of linguistic materials in their analyses. A word of warning is therefore necessary against a potential misunderstanding. One can slip into the comfortable mistake of seeing language as a transparent medium for picturing truth and meaning—language as a kind of container, a conduit for the communication of the essence of thought or reality.⁵ However, as Edelman observes:

Language . . . is not to be conceived as something which conveys meaning by itself. Its meanings are always a function of the context from which it issues, of the disparate needs and interests of the audiences involved, and of their respective modes of perception. The realistic study of political language and its meaning is necessarily a probing not only of dictionaries, nor of word counts, but of the diverse response to particular modes of expression of audiences in disparate social settings.⁶

Thus language may indeed refer; but it may also express a speaker's attitude or feelings; it may be prescriptive; it may express shared contact; it may be used to check for misunderstanding; and it may be reflexive commentary.⁷ How the different functions of language may be subtly mixed emerges in the various papers. Whatever language does, it does not just describe. For descriptions do not just "happen": they are asserted, denied, questioned, mused over, and more besides, by people in specific situations.

If the meaning of language is complicated, so *a fortiori* is its use in symbolism. One of the legacies of the structuralist analysis of symbols, as Sperber has pointed out, is that it has "established, all unknowing, that symbols work without meaning."⁸ Worse, symbolism is often appealed to when the analyst can find no criteria which, by his or her standards, are rational. It tends thus to be a residual category, an inheritance of the Romantics' critique of the Enlightenment's vision.⁹ We would do well to refrain from imposing this type of category on peoples who have their own, and different, traditions of argumentation.

The essays collected here offer complementary perspectives which suggest an interesting, if unexpected, picture. To draw out what I see as their implications, I shall discuss them briefly in an order convenient for exposition.

Development, the current soubriquet for planned social change, is a Western notion shot through with universalist assumptions about evolution, as Demaine brings out in his discussion of Thailand. There, successive National Development Plans were couched in the to us familiar language of economic development theories. These plans, however, have come adrift in the context of Thai economic and political relations, which in practice are articulated in terms of cultural presuppositions quite different from what those who drafted the plans imagined. Projects and funds are administered through ministries which operate as semiautonomous fiefdoms; and relations, whatever the formal constitution, are organized in a manner reminiscent of "traditional" ties of patronage.¹⁰ A striking characteristic of the elite responsible for implementing the development plans is its remoteness from the supposed beneficiaries and its image of the latter as "stupid" peasants. Failure of the plans is therefore easily accounted for by superiors in terms of their model of their society's membership. Miscommunica-

tion, and conflicting paradigms, seem to occur at each point in the chain of command.

The "objective," or "scientific," language of economic and social development planners tends to conceal how critical different epistemological points of view and cultural presuppositions are to communication, or (more often) its lack. At its simplest, "development" involves divergent and ambiguous Western models of others' imagined societies and how these must evolve to emulate their creators' self-image or, still more condescendingly, attain the lesser goals thought fit for them. Further, ideals or plans are interpreted and "adapted" by interest groups, typically drawn from potentially rival segments of an elite who proceed according to their idiosyncratic constructions or assertions of what their own society is, or ought to be, about. The miscommunication which often ensues and still passes for "development" stems from the imposition, by virtue of economic and political power, of alien models of invented Others (to use Foucault's trenchant term).

Just how the discourse of development has been shaped by existing power relations, and modified in the light of apparent failure, is clearly drawn out by Demaine. As he notes, "development" is in itself an ambiguous notion, capable of disseminating all sorts of readings. According to the earlier economic version, resources are its focus, and success is judged by increases in gross national product. When this model failed to achieve the ends sought by some Thai, attention shifted slowly—by way of curious hybrids like "human resource development"—to human and social "progress." This idea treated "development" as "a series of stages in the process of man's attempt to realize his potential."

Demaine demonstrates the extent to which these two interpretations of "development" in Thailand do not come as isolated concepts but are part of a set of more or less coherent ideas. Each interpretation includes ontological preferences (in other words, what aspect of reality or human action should be treated as primary: material resources or the satisfaction of needs); a theory of human nature and society; and a view of history. Each model postulates some kind of teleological account of the way in which society or Man must—if helped by a little pushing—naturally evolve. Discreetly tucked away in most such models is a metaphorical image, which has a habit of taking on a life of its own.¹¹ So wealth "trickles down" or threatens to "polarize" rich and poor. In the language of progress, ideas like "development" and "society" rapidly become reified: a trend with critical political implications.

Two of the essays examine the borrowing of foreign words and its implications. Jacob shows that there is nothing new in Cambodians importing and adapting vocabulary from others, often by conscious and deliberate borrowing. In pre-Angkorean and Angkorean times, Sanskrit was already used "as the language of prestige and of literature. Loan words relating to law, religion, and politics, and abstract ideas in general, were absorbed into Khmer." By contrast, later borrowings from Thai included "everyday words obviously chosen for literary effect." In the colonial period, certain words seem to have been used more out of necessity than choice, to judge from the strenuous efforts of the Cultural Commission set up by the government after independence to remove French words from the language. Such steps were justified by the state as necessary for the preservation and advancement of what it portrayed as "Khmer culture." They were also a sign of the independent state's attempt to claim to be the arbiter of meaning and the origin of power over language as over everything else.

While Jacob notes the motives behind the borrowing of terms, she is careful not to conjecture about worlds of "meaning" which such borrowings could be thought to imply.¹² Instead she states that "meaning" is used to indicate "the effect which the deliberate use of a foreign term may have or have had" at the given time. Such a loosely

"Wittgensteinian" approach has the advantage of not committing one *a priori* to any particular function of language. It also avoids the assumption that, in importing alien lexical items, the Khmer were necessarily importing ideas with them.¹³ For such terms were not always used with their original referents and could develop quite distinct connotations. For example, where Khmer words were available, to the extent that Sanskrit offered a language of prestige, it was not that one could say something different *in* Sanskrit so much as *with* Sanskrit. A language of prestige is, of course, a language which implies privileged knowledge and therefore power for those who use it as opposed to those who do not. Significance seems to lie metalingually in the choice of codes as much as in the "meaning" (in a correspondence or referential sense of the word). Similar observations could, without doubt, be made for other Southeast Asian peoples.

The other essay which concentrates on the borrowing of lexical terms and alien concepts, is that by Taylor, whose problem is the translation or interpretation of "revolution" in recent Burmese politics. Jacob's and Taylor's contributions point to a process which is in some respects the antithesis of Demaine's Thai example. Whereas in the Thai instance the focus is on an internal Thai discussion of "development" in the context of Western conceptual trends and of the political complexities of the country, the Burmese and Khmer studies note the purposeful attempts of the indigenous authorities to seek to avoid foreign control, or models, in this and other regards.

In both Cambodia and Burma, political elites were at pains to create what Parkin has called an "internal cultural debate."¹⁴ The point of focusing on a debate defined in this manner is that its effects are singularly political. "Internal" implies a legitimate forum, from which others are excluded; "cultural" gives the proceedings an air of identity and asserts the existence of culture; "debate" suggests that conflicts are constructive and do not threaten the proposed boundaries or definition of the culture. Parkin implies this is a strategy adopted by a people who feel concern at being swamped by influences represented as external. Of course, should one party in the internal debate gain sufficient control over the state apparatus, it is likely to try to steer the future evolution of the debate by asserting, in indigenous terms, the "right," or "real," meaning of political language. The results, however, may be surprising, because such strategies are usually based on a naive vision of language. One might add that the identification of a political group with "the people," "the culture," or "the state," and the constructions placed upon conceptions like the state itself, are claims which are part of this notional debate. Before we consider such debates, we should note the extent to which the parameters of discussion are already preempted.

The problems confronting revolutionary nationalist groups in Burma before and after independence from colonial rule included how to present to their intended audience the kind of radical change they wished to bring about. Taylor shows how, for aspirants to power, the image of revolution was designed to give form to an idea of moral and social change; and how, for incumbents, it was used to justify state policy. He further notes that:

Since 1948, however, the concept of revolution has become the metaphor which leaders who intend not only to control but to transform radically the nature of the polity use to convey to their followers the essence of political purpose.

As Taylor develops clearly the implications behind the changing notions of revolution, I need only make two small points about his argument here. The assertion that an idea or concept has an essential meaning introduces questions of power. If this is claimed by an aspiring elite, the implication is that it is they, rather than any alternative elite,

who are qualified to state what the essential truth is, and thereby claim that others must follow their interpretations and orders.¹⁵ Further, the transformation of a term like “revolution” to the status of a key metaphor in political argument is significant. For metaphors represent neither accurately nor fully—they portray something as something else. In other words they are persuasive rather than descriptive. In this way Taylor introduces us to the complex functions of political language. It is emotive in so far as it suggests the speaker’s attitude to what he or she is saying; it is conative in so far as it implies appropriate action; it is assertive in so far as it claims to portray how things really are.¹⁶

The different ways in which words can mean things comes out clearly in the history of Burmese expressions for revolution. Significantly, at the start Marxist thinkers did not worry about the issue, which only became important as sectarian conflicts grew. For the democratic socialists the preferred expression, *ayēi-daw-bon*, came to indicate “a people’s movement” rather than “a revolution to overthrow established authority and to redistribute values and power,” the latter being encapsulated in the less well-rooted phrase *taw-hlan-yēi*. Where the former included a “struggle for power” among its senses, the latter implied treating “a superior with disrespect or insolence, to be in rebellion.” In creating neologisms with different connotations, the politicians drew on existing semantic uses, but in such a way as to constitute a discourse which at times undermined their own roles and their attempts to restructure popular perceptions of the state and its functions.

Once again we are back not just to what words “mean” but what people do in using them. The critical point in the shift from a theory of connotation and denotation to one of reference is that one now focuses not on an elusive eternal, and essential, meaning but on the ways in which people use language in different contexts with varying effects. As Taylor suggests, to ask out of context what revolution is is largely meaningless.

If Burma’s political leaders exerted conscious control over the kinds of picture they wished to present of themselves and their aims, they seem to have had less control over other aspects of their ideas. Revolution is not a concept *in vacuo*. It has its own context of ideas, and relates to such issues as views of history, human nature, and the relations between human beings and society. The two socialist factions found themselves arguing implicitly, but consistently, for radically different views of the world. Whether these wider issues are presupposed, rather than entailed, in the Burmese instance is not the immediate point:¹⁷ from the evidence presented, it would seem that Buddhist ideas of time were presupposed, the nature of human beings entailed. What is relevant however is the extent to which we mislead ourselves in looking at “symbolism” (here a consciously constructed one at that) rather than at the implications ideas have for one another and the extent to which people find it necessary to appeal to such general issues as history, society and human nature in the course of political and daily life.

McVey’s paper also deals with the problems of introducing alien ideologies to indigenous populations. But where in Burma the debate was between rival views of revolution, in Java the discussion focused on how far Marxism should adapt to existing, and seemingly well entrenched, cultural ideas, enshrined in part in the Javanese shadow play. Perhaps because of Indonesia’s sheer size and diversity, the problems of the Communist Party (PKI) were less with translating foreign imports into culturally acceptable form (although those existed too) as with overlapping, and incompatible, identities. For, while Java is politically and demographically the dominant island in the archipelago, other large islands like Sumatra are economically important and are locked in the struggle for national influence. Cultural, ethnic, religious, and political

differences mesh in an intricate kaleidoscope, and make the formation of coherent mass movements extremely difficult. McVey looks at the complex implications of being simultaneously Javanese and Communist and shows how far the two paradigms were incompatible, not just at the level of formal ideological postulates, but in their philosophical assumptions.

The puzzle with which McVey starts is why a leading Communist, in his last public statement, should identify himself and his colleagues with the "feudal" heroes of the Mahabharata, the epic on which most shadow play (*wayang*) is based. She observes that:

there is a deep difference between the philosophical vision of Marxism and the classical shadow-play. *Wayang* teaches that contradictions are not overcome; they may only be understood and thereby borne . . . (whereas) in Marxist thought, history is the process of man's realization of himself. . . . Marxism is optimistic where *wayang* is not; Marxism teaches that understanding dictates struggle, *wayang* that it enjoins acceptance.

Marxism and shadow theater embody radically different views of social history, conflict and the human condition. In the world portrayed by the shadow theatre, the past is purer and so serves to suggest precedents, "for in its vision all time coexists." In Marxism, on the other hand, the past is something to be transcended. History is pictured in both views by a spatial metaphor of "direction." But one looks back, the other forward.

One of the assumptions in much Marxist theory is that its assertions reflect and correspond to dialectically changing states of affairs in the world, both past and future. Otherwise it would be incapable of the generalization beyond immediate context which its predictions of historical inevitability require. In practice, however, Marxism adapts. Apart from being a timely reminder that we need to contextualize general terms like "Marxism," this observation highlights an interesting problem encountered by the Javanese Communist elite (and other Western-derived ideological groupings too). The difficulty was that there was a disjuncture between the image of the Common Man, in the abstract, and what actual common men tended to do.

The Javanese seem to have set about ordering their relations with cultural ideals quite differently. As McVey writes:

the inclination of Javanese [is] to see individuals and events in terms of *wayang* characters and *lakon* (plays) and to choose as exemplars for themselves those *wayang* figures perceived to be most in accordance with each perceiver's character and situation.

Here interpretation is doubly contextual: both according to the specific situation and according to what is seen as fitting for one's personality. The confrontation of Marxism and Javanese culture is not between two symmetrical ideologies or paradigms, as in the Burmese political debate, but between two quite different kinds of metaphysical system, articulated in terms of different theories of meaning and truth.

The question still remains of whether or not we should attribute the importance of shadow theater in Java to its capacity to provide the constituent, or meaningful, symbolism of Javanese life. So phrased the question skews discussion *a priori*. To suppose that the need to understand and order the incomprehensible through symbols is fundamental to human nature begs the question. The intricate polysemy which the

Javanese seem to enjoy so much may be described in terms other than symbolism. There is something to be said, if only for a change of perspective, for thinking in terms of a notion like "text," where this is understood not as a particular work but as field of possibilities permitted at any time by the presuppositions and ideas of style of those who produce (here puppeteers), and those who watch, a play.

Other peoples' kinds of textuality may differ from ours and we are only too liable to misunderstand what the words that are created say and do (as many who have wished to mold shadow theater have found to their cost). We tend to assume that language is there to communicate some truth about the world, whereas it may just as well be seen as instantiating, exemplifying, or hinting at, the ineffable.¹⁸ Reference is only a part of what shadow plays do. The language permits plays on homonymy and folk etymology, and the use of Javanese is valued as a unique and differentiating code. Shadow theater also provides a paradigm of the nature of reality; it serves as a reflexive commentary on Javanese life and customs, as well as on the nature of language and human beings.¹⁹ Rather than being a transparent medium, language in Java, and *a fortiori* the shadow play, provide a reservoir of terms and situations which have been pre-constrained by previous use and in terms of which new situations may be ordered. By the same token, new uses modify the appropriateness of established signs. The problem in understanding wayang stems from imposing alien ideas of communication on a set of practices which are far from fully studied.

How intricate cultural conventions of textuality may be comes out in Davidson's detailed analysis of the dialogue between two Vietnamese poets at the time the French were striving to extend their political control over the country. One scholar and poet, Ton Tho Tuong, had sided with the colonialists. In a famous poem, *Tu Thuat* ("Being Autobiographical"), he set out to justify his allegiance and to persuade others to follow him. His verses were capped by a more patriotic and, as it turned out, a subtler poet, Phan Van Tri, in a long exchange which was at once literary and political. For under discussion were the moral duties of scholar-bureaucrats, ideas about what it meant to be Vietnamese, a confrontation between the ideals and practice of Confucianism and political modernism, and much else besides. Where Javanese shadow plays must reach their audience in a largely *ad lib* performance on a single night, no such constraints operated on these poetic exchanges and so they show the full complexity that literary and artistic forms may attain in Southeast Asia.²⁰

Poetry is the Achilles heel of essentialist theories of language. For words and phrases do so much at any one moment that it is vainglorious to try to say what it is that language is "really" about. "Meaning" here is the revealed intention of the poet, and the better the poem, the more it implies. One could run the gamut of the functions of language in the analysis of the Tuong-Tri poetic dialogue but it would only hint at a few of the tools they used; and one would be saying next to nothing about style and textuality. Nor is it easy to pin down the references of the poems. An allusive use of metaphor can suggest an open set of possible contexts, some of them as yet unrealized. So Davidson concludes with two prophetic lines of Phan Van Tri suggesting that an idea which seemed doubtful when penned, could turn out more powerful and percipient than the gun boats that had served so often as metaphors at the beginning of their poetic dialogue:

The nation, one tomorrow, will change its destiny to one of peace,
The South in common will enjoy reunion in peaceful equilibrium.

In passing one might note the connection between metaphor and context, and why poetry is so hard to classify linguistically. What a sentence denotes (sentence meaning)

is different analytically from what it is used to refer to on a given occasion (utterance meaning). So context is already relevant to understanding exchanges like the poets' dialogue. Even in literal sentences, where arguably the sentence and the speaker's meaning coincide, "the sentence only determines a definite set of truth conditions relative to a particular context."²¹ On this view context cannot be eliminated from even simple description.

How metaphor works is a much disputed topic, but by most accounts it involves the existence of one or more contexts beyond that implied in the sentence meaning; and what it hints at is usually reached by considering the full context of the utterance. Guessing what someone "has in mind" is a tricky business because of the amount of information needed, and because people vary in their allusive skills. So metaphor resists attempts to circumscribe its potential range of implications and its contexts of application.²²

To gauge just how contexts are alluded to in much discourse, the reader can do no better than to follow Davidson in his unravelling of the stanzas of the poets' exchanges. For example, at one point Phan Van Tri compares Ton Tuo Tuong to an opera actor. In one phrase he draws upon actors' duplicitous reputations and unfitness for high bureaucratic office, takes a sideswipe at the nobility among whom opera was popular, and opens the way for an extended double play between actors on stage and Tuong in politics.

Another important aspect of metaphor is the stress it allows on perspective. By viewing one situation in terms of another, it permits parallels to be asserted in a fluid classificatory field. The argument between Ton Tho Tuong and Phan Van Tri was whether the former was a true patriot in urging collaboration with a formidable foreign state, so as to learn the secrets of its power, or whether he was simply an opportunist and traitor. Through the sustained use of metaphor Tuong sought similarities in the classical literature to his actions; while Tri, playing on homonymy and the different potential contexts of key words, offered a radically different perspective. The situation as such offered no clearcut interpretation. Determining its nature depended on the rival poets' deployment of comparison and contrast, and their implications. Metaphor here is political: and it was in part through Tri's greater skill and subtlety in matching and rephrasing Tuong's claims that his view came to be accepted.

Furthermore, poetic dialogues in Vietnam were not a rarified communion between scholars of little relevance to anything else. Where we tend to treat power and poetry as antithetical and substantively different, the Vietnamese did not. Davidson remarks that "in Vietnam, poetry and politics have never been very far apart." Not only were the literati in charge of the country's administration, so that power underwrote knowledge and knowledge power; but what kinds of power there were, and how they were to be managed were delineated by discursive rules. For it was expertise in Confucian texts which defined a person as fit for power and also defined what powers were recognized.

My own essay discusses explicitly the relation of meaning, context and power. It considers how the definition of context in Bali turns on questions of power. This point leads to an examination of the theories of human nature which observers have imputed to the Balinese to explain their culture and actions; and how the Balinese represent the position in quite different—and incommensurate—ways. I suggest that most accounts, whether they see the Balinese as "constructing," "dramatizing," or "negotiating" their culture are *prima facie* wrong, because the models of human nature invoked are quite alien to those the Balinese themselves use in accounting for their actions.

All the contributors are concerned to avoid grand generalizations of the kind

which positivism made popular. Theorizing is the easier the less one knows about the history and culture of the people under study. Detailed knowledge of context is vital to an understanding of the kinds of issues with which we are interested. Part of the relevance of context in Southeast Asia arises from the weakness of correspondence theories of truth and meaning which, my essay suggests, may also be alien to at least one such society's style of argument. It is true that one drawback of coherence, or contextual, theories is that they make it hard to generalize. This difficulty may be no bad thing if we consider how far the alternatives have led to hypostatizing what happens and turning labels into realities.

Correspondence theory rests on a referential view of language which the authors in this book show to be inadequate for finely detailed research. The theory presupposes the existence of essences in things, events or states, such that words can depict, or denote, what is relevant or essential with reasonable accuracy. It is far from clear, however, that the peoples we are discussing share this view of language and the world. In any case, culture is not a "thing": it is asserted, challenged, and misunderstood by people on different occasions. The stress on metaphor in several of the essays is a way of looking at how language is used in actual situations. The link is at once semantic and political. People recognize different styles of argument and ways of producing texts; and knowledge is not just power to influence interpretations but also the ability to state, or even instantiate, whatever culture is, or what the correct context should be.

It is the potentially infinite range of relevant contexts which makes it so hard to define their implications in practice. The contributors, however, have attempted, more or less directly, to explore at least some of the possibilities suggested by the interplay of semantic contexts and social, political, and other situations.²³

The degree to which ascertaining, or arguing, the relevant context is a matter of daily concern is discussed in my own contribution. Even so apparently simple a matter as the jural definition of "the village" depends upon context, in the sense that different interest groups may argue for the relevance of different sets of relationships. The ability to interpret events by defining what kind of situation is at stake and what ties are germane is a vital part of all political activity in Bali. We often take too narrow a view of power by confining it to the mobilizing of support for winning confrontations. Yet to be able to classify how events are to be considered, i.e., the relevant context, is crucial in political power in Bali and probably elsewhere.

It is, of course, also possible to discover, or invent, new ideas and uses of power: definitions of new offenses against the state or person, positing extended areas of personal responsibility (over sexuality, one's intentions and so on) or simply refined techniques of surveillance.²⁴ Part of the difficulty in seeing the part which knowledge plays in forming (new) power comes from our tendency to regard the terms as denoting quite different sorts of substantive entities.

Strictly speaking, then, the title of this book might refer simply to contexts and meanings.²⁵ It is of little import so long as it is clear the words are simply labels for kinds of relationships. Each of the contributors has been looking at the ways in which meanings and powers are recognized and incorporated (Jacob), argued over (Taylor, McVey), reinterpreted (Demaine), and constituted or expressed in different forms (Davidson, Hobart). We are not talking about meaning as being some separate realm, intuited through symbols or enshrined only in language; nor is power conceived of as linked exclusively to the state, law, violence, and so on. Besides these phenomena there are other powers which may be summoned up and bring complexity, uncertainty, and potentiality to people's lives. After all, in some circumstances a grasp of meanings is a form of power, while powers are culturally celebrated and challenged in poetry, thea-

ter, and everyday life. And new possibilities always threaten to disturb the comfortable predictions of scholars.

What categories like religion, theater, and literature have in common is that they are about knowledge, a knowledge which is made manifest or attains its potentiality by people using it in different contexts. Neither knowledge, meaning, nor power exist *in vitro*. If knowledge concerns the potentialities of situations, power may usefully be seen as the uses, or exemplifications, of such potentialities. In a way, knowledge and power are two aspects of the same kinds of process, or better the same process seen from two different perspectives. So perhaps it is fitting that the provenance of this book, its context if you like, is an institution whose motto is:

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

1. The controversy was started off largely by Edward Said's book, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). The lasting brunt of Said's criticism of the grounding of traditional Orientalist studies has been succinctly stated by an historian of India.

"Orientalist discourse presents itself as a form of knowledge that is both different from and superior to the knowledge that the Orientals have had of themselves . . . the knowledge of the Orientalist, known nowadays as an 'area studies' specialist, appears as rational, logical, scientific, realistic, and objective. The knowledge of the Orientals, by contrast, often seems irrational, illogical, unscientific, unrealistic, and subjective. The knowledge of the Orientalist is privileged . . . (and) has appropriated the power to represent the Oriental, to translate and explain his (and her) thoughts and acts not only to Europeans and Americans but also the Orientals themselves. . . . In many respects the intellectual activities of the Orientalists have even produced in Asia the very Orient which it constructed in its own discourse." (Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India," *Journal of Modern Asian Studies*, forthcoming.)

I am grateful to Ron Inden for letting me use his forthcoming article on Orientalism, and for many stimulating conversations, of which this introduction is in part an offshoot. I am also grateful to the other contributors who made many helpful suggestions. Special thanks goes to Bob Taylor who took the trouble to redraft and greatly improve the original version of this essay.

2. Cf. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

3. Donald K. Emmerson, "'Southeast Asia': What's in a Name?" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 15: 1 (1984), pp. 1-21.

4. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), pp. 27-31.

5. See Michael Reddy, "The Conduit Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 284-324.

6. Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 130.

7. These are, respectively, the referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic functions (see Roman Jakobson, "Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style and Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960], pp. 353-58). No doubt, these distinctions will be superseded. As they are the product of a particular culture at a particular time, any reference to their applicability to Southeast Asian societies is provisional, pending more detailed studies of indigenous ideas about language use.

8. Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, trans. Alice L. Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 52.

9. For a telling criticism of the symbol-as-irrational, as well as a useful distinction between the internal and external motivation of "symbols" (roughly, what is significant by virtue of its place within a set of ideas, and what by virtue of reference to a perceived world), see Nigel Frederick Barley, *Symbolic Structures: An Exploration of the Culture of the Dowayos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). On the history of Western ideas about symbolism and sign theory, see especially Tzvetan Todorov's *Theories of the Symbol*, trans.

Catherine Porter (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) and his *Symbolism and Interpretation*, trans. Catherine Porter (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

10. There is a regrettable tendency to find behind current behavior an unverifiable, earlier *font et origo* from which the present is presumed to devolve by some massive inertia. One of the oldest, but hardest, fallacies about "the Other" is that it is bound by illogical habit whereas we are rational and adaptable. We have very little detailed knowledge about what the Thai bureaucracy was like in the past.

11. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1962); and the commentary on Kuhn's ideas in Margaret Masterman, "The Nature of a Paradigm," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 59–89.

12. Her reticence contrasts sharply with David P. Chandler's "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perception of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, ed. David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven: Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph Series No. 24 (1982), pp. 53–77.

13. The best known version of such a view is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. J. B. Carroll [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956]). The strong interpretation that, roughly, language determines available meaning and so thought, is as absurd as is the contrary that there is no connection at all. This suggests that there is something wrong in the formulation of the problem and its constitutive concepts. If "language" and "meaning" are ambiguous and misleadingly coherent ideas, then "thought" is just as vague. Latter-day essentialism requires the conscious experiencing subject as a cornerstone of any theory, dubious as this assumption may be (see Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975]). Where I refer to thought or ideas here I mean them in the sense of *ex post facto* assertions about what has happened.

14. David J. Parkin, *The Cultural Definition of Political Response: Lineal Destiny among the Luo*

(London: Academic Press, 1978), pp. 286–330.

15. The constitution of an audience as those to be governed, an electorate, or the masses is one of the more interesting and ignored aspects of the modern political process. For a good discussion, see Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities . . . or the End of the Social*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983).

16. In keeping with my point that the language of academic argument involves representation as much as any other, the use of metaphor in this introduction needs comment. "Borrowing," "importing," or "adapting," which I have used to describe how certain terms or ideas were taken up in parts of Southeast Asia, are mercantile, or material, metaphors, just as references to "clarity" or "perspective" are visual. It is questionable whether trying to find some neutral language would solve any problems. Our stress in this book is on how much epistemological usages, including our own efforts, are part of a long history of relations between peoples. At least we can be aware (in part) of the consequences of our own categories!

17. See the discussion in Ruth M. Kempson, *Presupposition and the Delimitations of Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 15, 1975).

18. See Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 59–60.

19. Speaking of the complex blend of religions, philosophy, and practice known as Agama Jawa, McVey comments that "the Agama Jawa is powerfully syncretic, capable of turning something alien into an avatar and confirmation of itself." *Wayang* is the classical vehicle for expressing, or embodying, Agama Jawa.

20. Where Vietnamese poetry involves two media, speech (or song) and music, shadow theater further introduces iconography (as well as movement) between which a lively play is possible.

21. John Searle, "Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Ortony, pp. 92–123, at p. 94.

22. See Goodman, *Languages*, pp. 68–80. As this Introduction explores the potential uses of Goodman's approach to representation—

which attempts to formulate an alternative to correspondence or copy theories—I have followed his nominalism in avoiding postulating more than is necessary. Accordingly, I have not sought to draw any hard and fast line between “context” and “situation.” (Cf. the use of “context of situation” in Bronislaw Malinowski, “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Language,” supplement in *The Meaning of Meaning*, ed. Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards [London: Kegan Paul, 1923], pp. 451–510, at pp. 506–10.)

23. Here it may be useful to mention the unjustly ignored, pioneering texts of Malinowski: “The Problem of Meaning”; and *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1935), vol. 2. My concern here is not to formulate a theory of context as such; I have discussed the problems involved in “Meaning or Moaning? An Ethnographic Note on a Little Understood Tribe,” in *Semantic Anthropology*, ed. David J. Parkin (London: Academic Press, ASA Monographs in Social Anthropology No. 22, 1982), pp. 39–63, and

“Texte est un con,” in *Contexts and Levels: Essays on Hierarchy*, ed. Robert H. Barnes, Daniel de Coppet, and Robert J. Parkin (Oxford: Journal of the Anthropological Society, Occasional Paper No. 4, 1985), pp. 33–53. See also my essay in the present volume.

24. See Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1977) and *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1979).

25. Following Foucault, who prefers to speak of “truths” rather than “Truth,” one might also speak of “powers,” keeping “Power” for those systems of representation which portray diverse powers as part of some transcendental construct. See the texts cited in the note above, as well as his “Truth and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, ed. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979); and Paul Patton, “Of Power and Prisons” in the same volume.