

**It's fine to pull his head off  
just don't disagree with him to his face**

**Master Version**

**How Indonesians Argue  
EuroSEAS Conference**

University of Oxford  
16-18<sup>th</sup>. August 2017

©Mark Hobart September 2017

The Balinese are shy to the point of obsessiveness of open conflict (Geertz 1973a: 446).

In the wake of an Indonesian military coup in October 1965, the island of Bali erupted in political violence in which an estimated 80,000 people, or roughly 5 percent of the population, died. In its intensity and in the proportion of the population killed, the violence on Bali probably exceeded that witnessed on Java in the same period. The populations of whole villages were executed, the victims either shot with automatic weapons or hacked to death with knives and machetes. Some of the killers were said to have drunk the blood of their victims or to have gloated over the numbers of people they had put to death (Robinson 1995: 1).

Sangut: That was Lord Suratma, the one who seals your fate. He kept shouting he wanted you, he really wanted to lay into you, jump up and down on you and smash your head in. He does it by writing you off with red ink. If he does it across your chest, you'll get lung trouble. If his pen goes right up to your head, your brain goes soft.

Dèlem: Oh! That Lord Suratma's not so smart. (*Shouting*) I just want to twist, twist, twist his neck until it's kite string, chop it off with a knife, tug it till it comes off, smash his teeth in with a rock, smash him up, smash him up till he yells out, kick him into hell, so that for once His Excellency Lord Suratma himself should go to hell. (*Then, hearing Détya Kawaca approach, he reverts to an obsequious tone*) I'm coming, my Lord (from *wayang* performance 18<sup>th</sup>. January 1989, *Sang Nata Kawaca attacks heaven*).

Discussing argument in Indonesia raises myriad questions. We are told that Indonesians rarely show anger, never disagree in public and avoid confrontation at all costs. However, a cursory glance shows Indonesian history to be strewn with epic massacres and semi-incessant mundane violence. *Prima facie* there would seem to be a contradiction. Is it possible to have savagery on such a scale untouched by conflict, disagreement or anger? Or is such politesse a veneer behind which people are free to get up to whatever skulduggery they like? And how do you address differences of opinion or interests, make decisions, persuade or question others without discussion and argumentation? Indeed, is the image of Indonesian social life as an elegant frozen tableau borne out by the evidence? Representing Indonesians as suffering cultural amfisbitophobia or allodoxaphobia poses more problems than it clarifies.

For simplicity, let me summarize what follows. To make the case that Indonesians generally avoid disagreement and conflict requires not just presenting evidence to this effect, but also explaining the underlying theoretical arguments involved. After reviewing popular accounts, I examine scholarly expositions from which the former are in part drawn. It emerges that the ideal is Central Javanese aristocratic etiquette, to which a curious inflection is given by the neighbouring Balinese, whose character is reported to be strikingly alien. The question arises though: whose interpretations are these? The answers are informative. Whereas cultural styles of handling confrontation are much discussed, far less has been written explicitly about what might seem to be a quite different topic, namely styles of argumentation. A review of ethnographic case studies is revealing: whether something is argument or disagreement turns out to depend on the context and participants' understandings. I conclude by suggesting two quite different ways of re-thinking such representations.

## Etiquette and Argument as Disagreement

### Much ado about nothing?

Am I not fussing unnecessarily? Why not accept the popular view, reiterated as self-evident by sources such as international consultancy services like Commisceo Global, which specializes in training people for working in different countries?

Indonesians are indirect communicators. This means they do not always say what they mean. It is up to the listener to read between the lines or pay attention to gestures and body language to get the real message... Indonesians abhor confrontation due to the potential loss of face. To be polite, they may tell you what they think you want to hear. If you offend them, they will mask their feelings and maintain a veil of civility (2016).

However what is the evidence, from what sources and subject to what standards of judgement that Indonesians overwhelmingly prefer indirectness and eschew disagreement—and with what demonstrable implications?<sup>1</sup> Note I am not suggesting that many Indonesians do not appear as polite and reserved in public. Evidently they do. But so too do many Japanese, Thai and others.<sup>2</sup> If inquiry is to be elucidative, instead of reiterating bar room stereotypes about Asians, what, if anything, distinguishes Indonesians?

A website aimed at explaining to expatriates what is peculiar to Indonesians expatriates.

Most Indonesians value maintaining the appearance of harmony at all costs... The underlying value being that discussing or using direct communication as a conflict resolution tool makes a situation or problem too real. This could lead to confrontation, which is to be avoided if at all possible, regardless of any possible beneficial effects (Living in Indonesia 2015).

And the US government's advice to executives echoes such generalizations eerily.

For your business contacts, please keep the following in mind: Indonesians like to avoid confrontation and disharmony. One should not lose one's temper or show emotion (Export.gov 2012).

---

<sup>1</sup> This piece is part of a wider project entitled *How Indonesians Argue*. Its main concern is to examine culturally approved or recognized styles of argument in the broad sense of argumentation. Surprisingly little has been written on the topic partly, I suspect, because argument raises question of rationality and so risks inferential racism (Hall 1990). Below I outline how to obviate such concerns. What emerges is the startling range of styles of argument that Indonesians from different ethnic groups and classes use in different situations. The point of such a reorientation is to avoid being confined to the study and interpretation of existing representations and instead to inquire into the practices in context that gave rise to these by asking: who represented what *as* what to whom on what occasion for what purpose? In short, my interest is in developing a pragmatist approach (see Goodman 1968: 21-31).

To avoid confusion, let me be clear about what I am *not* trying to do. I am not questioning whether Indonesians are rational or not. That is a Eurocentric game. Nor am I trying to impose European ideas or standards on Indonesians. Any critical cross-cultural analysis is by definition doubly discursive. It requires both understanding people in terms of their own evaluative practices and also reflecting on the results using current scholarly criteria. Nor am I denying that some Indonesians use elegant styles of public self-presentation. What I do reject is that the assumption that aristocratic Central Javanese ideals should be imposed synecdochically, prescriptively and unproblematically as the norm on the rest of Indonesia. As intriguing as what actually happens in different sectors of Indonesian society and according to whom, is what drives this remarkable insistence on blindly embracing so evidently ideological a vision.

<sup>2</sup> An old friend and long-time Japanese specialist, Dr Rodney Clark, has given me some wonderful examples of how different parts of the Japanese government and armed forces kept information strictly to themselves, and secret from one another, at least until after WWII to the point that the then Prime Minister did not know of the defeat at the Battle of Midway until a month later (Saburo 1978: 38). A forensic examination of events before this battle shows the Japanese military to have carried avoiding confrontation, argument or even discussion to lengths that make the most 'indirect' Indonesians seem positively garrulous (see Parshall & Tully 2007).

Such descriptions and injunctions recur endlessly.

If manners are so important, what advice is given to those whose *métier* it is, namely diplomats or experts who advise on intercultural matters?

Indonesians rarely disagree in public. To succeed in negotiations with Indonesians, do not apply pressure or be confrontational (eDiplomat 2016).

Indonesians avoid confrontation at all costs, as it is again considered ill mannered or uneducated to confront someone in public. In some cases, you will never ever know whether you have offended someone as she/he will remain polite and hide her/his feelings from you. The Javanese are very good at this.

Showing your anger, raising your voice to anybody in the workplace in front of others will cause loss of face to both yourself and the person you are being angry at. If this happens, your Indonesian colleagues will lose their respect for you and the person you shouted at will not be able to bear the 'loss of face' you caused for him/her. Chances are she/he will resign immediately after this incident. Conflicts should therefore be dealt with in private (Centre for Intercultural Learning 2014).

The *Indonesia Handbook* however does not pull its punches.

Indonesians rarely show anger, but when they do they run amok and stab someone (Dalton 1995: 71-2).

Finally, a guide to foreigners on Indonesian business etiquette and communication explains.

There is a strong preference in Indonesia toward the Javanese culture of separation of internal self from external self. When a person is upset, it is habitual for the Indonesian not to show negative emotion or anger externally. They will keep smiling and be polite, no matter how angry they are inside. This also means that maintaining work place and relationship harmony is very important in Indonesia, and no one wishes to be the transmitter of bad or negative news or feedback (Hofstede 2016).<sup>3</sup>

A number of points emerge.

'Losing face' is probably a nineteenth-century translation from the Chinese.<sup>4</sup> Both being Orientals, are then Chinese and Indonesians interchangeable? In any event, if a foreigner breaches etiquette, the results are draconian: either the unfortunate Indonesians risk losing their jobs or they go on a killing spree. We are also told that such indirectness stems from 'the Javanese culture of separation of internal self from external self'. So we may need to differentiate between Indonesians ethnically and establish what part culture plays in all this.

Before addressing these last points, reflect on what one source noted: 'Indonesians are indirect communicators'. Although almost everyone ignores the connection, indirection or evasion necessarily involves issues of communication. What exactly would direct communication look like? Presumably receivers would understand the references and intentions of senders' messages fully, comprehensively, without any indeterminacy, confusion

---

<sup>3</sup> As the introductory statement on Hofstede's website makes clear, the object of study is 'national values', which appears to be another way of saying national character.

Professor Geert Hofstede conducted one of the most comprehensive studies on national values... His most popular book, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, has been translated into 20 different languages (<https://geert-hofstede.com>).

We are promised nothing less than 'a good overview of the deep drivers of Indonesian culture relative to other world cultures' (<https://geert-hofstede.com/indonesia.html>). However, the use of the singular 'the Indonesian', with its assumption of a generic essence, might set off alarm bells. How far are we from racial stereotypes under a soubriquet?

<sup>4</sup> The OED reads: 'B.II.10.b. To lose face [tr. Chinese *tiu lien*]: to be humiliated, lose one's credit, good name, or reputation; similarly, loss of face. Hence face = reputation, good name'.

or loss whatever. Even to die-hard Panglossian mass communications theorists, this is pretty implausible. Such accounts rely on a demonstrably defective and discredited 'transmission model', which reduces communication to how accurately a message 'corresponds' to its referent. However, even on Jakobson's conservative summary, there are five functions of language, other than the referential: the emotive, conative, phatic, meta-lingual and aesthetic (1960). Each raises a quite different set of issues. To take just one example, the meta-lingual function: are we to assume that language in use comprises a single code that lacks any ambiguity, polysemy or equivocation, either structurally, through intention or in use? Lack of ambiguity is engineered to be a feature of computing, but is notably absent in human communication, where opacity, uncertainty, inexactitude, lying, deliberate misleading and tergiversation—let alone plain muddle and confusion—are common conditions in social life. Not only did the founders of the mathematical model of communication go to pains to explain why it did not work for social communication (Weaver 1949: 4-13), but they showed that analyzing the formal conditions of transmission is an entirely different enterprise from unravelling utterances in highly diverse social situations. The claim that Indonesians differ from other peoples when they communicate indirectly presupposes and conflates an ideal or limiting possibility with actuality. Perhaps we should ask: what styles of indirection do which categories of Indonesians recognize or prefer on what occasions by what criteria of evidence?

### **So is it all about culture?**

Making generalizations about 200 million people is a fraught business. For present purposes I take it that we are not seeking to determine the psychodynamics of individual Indonesians, which would be a charming exercise in incoherence.<sup>5</sup> What seems to be at issue is culture. Unfortunately this rather begs the question of what we mean by culture. Inquiring further stirs up a hornets' nest, because culture 'is one of two or three most complicated words in the English language (Williams 1983: 87). Not coincidentally, two of the most celebrated, Gregory Bateson (of whom more anon) and Clifford Geertz, drew upon their field research on Balinese and Javanese character to underwrite their case for the pervasive grip of culture.

In what follows, I shall draw extensively on Geertz's work. Apart from having worked on both Java and Bali, he is one of the most eloquent and reflective commentators on cultural styles of dealing with conflict and argument. His observations are also articulated through a well-developed theory of symbols and culture, which is central to understanding his interpretation of both Javanese and Balinese society.<sup>6</sup> As he famously put it

the concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz 1973b: 5).

Culture is a system of symbols, which are the essence of human thought. They are models for and models of cultural action which serve 'to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men' (Geertz 1973c: 94).

---

<sup>5</sup> For reasons that I trust I do not need to rehearse here, I do not think it necessary to take issue with the cod-Freudian claim that Indonesians' penchant for physical violence is an automatic and inevitable psychic consequence of the repression of 'natural' urges. Bateson and Mead's extrapolating a cultural psychology from some presumed collective Balinese unconscious (1942) should be warning enough.

<sup>6</sup> When presenting a counter-case, it is more cogent if you address the strongest and best thought out version of the argument with which you engage. My aim therefore is not to indulge in the once-popular sport of Geertz-bashing, but to interrogate a celebrated exposition of the theoretical implications of a cultural symbolic approach.

So how does invoking culture work? It makes it possible to comment meaningfully on, or even encapsulate, an entire people's attitude to such general concerns as disagreement and conflict. Consider Geertz on Java.

For the Javanese, evil results from unregulated passion and is resisted by detachment and self-control (1973d: 131).

The whole momentum of the Javanese ritual system is supposed to carry one through grief without severe emotional disturbance (1973e: 153).

In a similar vein Benedict Anderson could write generally of 'the Javanese theory of politics', 'the Javanese idea of power, and 'the Javanese conception of power' (1990: 19; 21 & 41; 72 & 74). So powerful is this theoretical armature that not only anthropologists, but political scientists, can effortlessly generalize about vast populations.

In summary, then, the Javanese see power as something concrete, homogeneous, constant in total quantity, and without inherent moral implications as such (Anderson 1990: 23).

The enabling concepts are 'tradition' (as in 'the Javanese tradition of political thought' or 'the Javanese traditional conception of Power' (1990: 28, 38) and 'culture' (the title of Anderson's essay being 'The idea of power in Javanese culture').

Reliance on terms like culture and tradition however are problematic.

Culture, inasmuch as it served as anthropology's guiding concept, has always been an idea *post factum*, a notion oriented towards the past (to 'custom' and 'tradition'), descriptive of a state of affairs (and often of a status quo), a nostalgic idea at best (when it mixed the study of exotic societies with regret) and a reactionary ideologeme at worst (when it was used optimistically to explain away as 'variation' what in many cases was the result of discrimination and violence) (Fabian 1991: 193; for a detailed discussion, see Hobart 2000a).

It seems we must look more closely at explications of culture, because a curious feature is that they presuppose order and tend to circularity. As culture is characterized as semiotic (namely, about signs, symbols or meanings which by definition comprise ordered systems), the argument in the first sentence of Geertz's definition of culture above is both circular and neatly smuggles in presuppositions of culture being ordered and systematic. Moreover, in such a hermeneutic account, as the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) differ from the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) in not being about the experimental search for natural laws, saying that the analysis of culture is about searching for meaning merely restates the premise. Another distinguished exponent of culture as the master concept, Marshall Sahlins, made the same move, when he stated that the symbol 'is the origin and basis of human behaviour'. 'In all its dimensions, including the social and the material, human existence is symbolically constituted, which is to say culturally ordered' (1999: 214-15). As signs are, by definition, ordered systems, saying that they are 'symbolically constituted' and 'culturally ordered' is synonymous.<sup>7</sup>

There are good grounds at least in the history of anthropological argument for concepts like society and culture. Modern ethnography arguably required a 'style of representation [which] depended on institutional and methodological innovations circumventing the obstacles to rapid knowledge of other cultures' (Clifford 1983: 30, my parentheses; all parentheses and emphases in the original unless otherwise indicated). Anthropology has usually relied on broad concepts

---

<sup>7</sup> It remains useful to be able to refer nominalistically to certain kinds of actions and practices as cultural. However, my definition of culture differs sharply from most, being simply 'how we do things around here' (for a detailed discussion see Hobart 2000a). This account is contextual, involves deictics (who is, and who articulates, the 'we' in any instance) is subject to rival representations and is pragmatic in three senses. It starts with people's practices. It examines how they variously articulate matters in different situations. It also includes my practices as a researcher in framing and analysing such practices.

like culture, society or tradition, treated as systems or structures, by which ‘certain powerful theoretical abstractions promised to help academic ethnographers “get to the heart” of a culture. . . seen as a complex whole. . . In the predominantly synecdochic rhetorical stance of the new ethnography, parts were assumed to be microcosms or analogies of wholes’ (Clifford 1983: 31). Culture is a means of marshalling ostensibly disparate and unrelated customs, beliefs and actions to show their inner consistency and structure. If culture has this embracing coherence, then violence presumably must be part: containable, explicable, perhaps even culturally celebrated. Such a claim ignores the possibility that society might not comprise a coherent whole, but have ruptures, incoherencies, aporia—that some aspects or institutions run counter to this ideal vision, and may well not be subsumable, easily or at all.<sup>8</sup>

When researching a little-known object of study, it is effectively necessary to start with umbrella concepts, broad categories and familiar procedures to select and frame what shall count as evidence (Collingwood 1933). In this instance culture is imagined as a relatively ordered totality in which representations are more or less collective, binding, obligatory and, if not entirely shared, at least generally acknowledged. The need for expert foreign scholars is justified, agentively, because the participants are too busy getting on with their lives to appreciate these ordered patterns more than partially or momentarily. So others must interpret the hidden meanings behind the signs. Such approaches must always presume the natives to be behind the curve. Otherwise the researcher would face the task of explicating the participants’ usage and judgement in context. And they understand language and situational nuances far better than could almost any outsider. The scholar’s analysis would just add one more interpretation, however notionally authoritative, to the mix. Fifty years on, to invoke such totalizing notions as culture when we know vastly more merely inhibits critical inquiry in direct proportion to such concepts initial usefulness.

Analyses which depend on cultural interpretation are intriguing for what they omit. They are obliged largely to finesse, reinterpret, sideline or ignore social divisions of class, ethnicity, gender and so on to stress harmony or to transform antagonisms into symbolic differences. Because interpretive approaches are in search of order and coherence, their proponents tend to select ethnographic evidence that supports their assumptions rather than start from what people

---

<sup>8</sup> That is the point of my opening quotations. I am suggesting not that the cultural stress on avoiding disagreement, conflict or physical violence is incompatible with, or denies, its existence. Indeed, the counter thesis is more obvious: the more conflict is around, the more necessary are the cultural means of containing, framing and domesticating it. The question is rather: how do ideals of social harmony square with recognizing—or abjuring—violence and its motivations? If public representations concede—or even laud—violence then an account that evades addressing these fully is at best lacking, at worst disingenuous. Now Javanese and Balinese literature is replete with narratives that expatiate on aristocratic ideals and are packed with gory details of anger, aggression, conflict and dispute. So, for instance, Teeuw *et al.* thought it necessary to justify references to violence in their translation of the *Śiwarātrikalpa*. ‘The fantastic weapons and gruesome methods of warfare which the poet’s imagination conjures up are almost equal to what our modern society has actually achieved’ (1969: 32). Creese (2004) noted romantic scenes in *kakawin* invariably involved physical violence against women (for a contemporary account, see Sunindyo 1996). And Raffles’ review of Javanese history using local sources highlights how Javanese rulers’ intense emotion worked itself out in acts of great violence (1817: 173-4). It seems that we are dealing with selective reportage, whether in the colonial period by the powers-that-be or subsequently by media and other censorship. With the lifting of media censorship, it has become clear how widespread social, political and religious, let alone common or garden criminal, violence has been all along (Hüsken & de Jonge 2002; Schulte Nordholt 2007). Social harmony was a meticulously engineered spectacle. So it is not so much conflict as the semblance or simulacrum of calm and order that needs critical interrogation.

actually say and do, which is almost always messy, confused and open to different protagonists articulating what happens in contradictory ways.<sup>9</sup>

Geertz's assertion that cultural symbols act 'to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men' neatly evades explanatory questions. How exactly does it work? Does it work equally on everyone all the time? And according to whom?<sup>10</sup> To what degree and under what circumstances may people question, ignore, disagree with and publicly or privately reject cultural representations or injunctions? And what is the explanatory status of differences in class (status or caste), gender, age, religion and so forth? Here there are sharp differences between scholars. By contrast to the kind of cultural approach popular among American academics working on Indonesia, Stuart Hall, writing about how British Cultural Studies came to rethink culture, pointed out how one of its founders, E.P. Thompson

insisted on the historical specificity of culture, on its plural, not singular, definition—'cultures', not 'Culture': above all, on the necessary struggle, tension and conflict between cultures and their links to class cultures, class formations and class struggles—the struggles between 'ways of life' rather than the evolution of 'a way of life'. These were seminal qualifications (Hall 1980: 20).

Between these approaches there is so little in common that we are left with a stand-off or stalemate.

We are not necessarily condemned to explanatory trains passing in the night. First, both approaches assume that their respective analyses are so powerful and all-encompassing that, except as 'raw material', they can safely omit their subjects' judgements and commentaries on how they variously apprehend their own societies. If you include people's own understandings, things change radically. Second, if we treat cultural statements not as fixed but as articulations made by particular people or groups under particular circumstances that are always in principle open to counter-articulation, the scope of inquiry expands greatly. Third, such a recognition invites us to consider what happens in practice. What are the articulatory practices through which people unite or differentiate themselves through culture, ethnicity, class, gender and so forth on different occasions? Drawing on Foucault and the English-speaking philosophical pragmatists, matters look very different if we rephrase the issue as the practices through which people assert, discuss, evaluate, muse on, question or challenge what is going on. Instead of translating carefully selected instances of what people do and say into abstract totalizing categories into a quite different, and at least partly incommensurate, academic discourse, we are invited to inquire instead into who gets to articulate, enunciate, query or disagree with such articulations under what circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Instead of imagining culture in the abstract as a coherent, relatively stable, meaningful totality or necessarily as the site of perpetual conflict, we can broaden inquiry by asking what people actually say and do in different situations, including how they attempt to preempt discussion by declaring it 'our culture'.

---

<sup>9</sup> On Laclau's development of Gramsci's idea of articulation as a central concept in Cultural Studies, see Slack 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Proponents of culture understandably tend to skirt round the possibilities. Put simply, if culture does not determine what people say and do (I omit what people think, because how could the researcher, or indeed anyone, know?), it cannot really be said to explain. To say it interprets is circular, because that is how culture was defined in the first place. Is it then just one of a number of principles or frameworks for description? That might be fine, but it invites us to consider the relative merits of alternatives.

<sup>11</sup> In Barthes's terms, it is the shift from product to producing, exemplified in his distinction between word and text: '*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*' (1977a: 157). 'The Text (if only by its frequent "unreadability") decants the work (the work permitting) from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice' (1977a: 162).

### Why argument?

The foregoing discussion was necessary background to answering two questions. With so much to research in Indonesia, why choose something as abstract and seemingly irrelevant as argument? Also why use an English term, which has no easy equivalents in other European languages, let alone Indonesian?

As soon as we question culture as a coherent totality, semiotics as the way to understand it and agency displaced onto meaning, the question of who represented culture or society as ordered wholes to whom on what occasions for what purposes with what outcomes emerges as crucial. It enables us to consider how disagreements come to be articulated, developed, dismissed or silenced under different circumstances in any society. At this point argument, whether as argumentation or dispute, becomes relevant. If we start with conflict, short of presuming motiveless violence or completely irrational coercion, different protagonists usually frame what they do by appealing to reasons—be these thought out reflectively, rationalizations, justifications or whatever. If we start with argumentation, whether it takes the form of a coherent explication, narrative or rhetorical exposition, even logical games, it is almost always in aid of achieving something. It may be to convince an opponent, persuade an audience, supplicate those in authority, grind someone into submission and much else besides. Significantly, there is little point in trying to produce a general classification of types of argument, because different people are often busy proposing different ways of explaining or interpreting what something is all about. Indeed, as I shall suggest, whether people are thought to disagree or not depends in large part upon how they and others present and interpret what is happening.

While logicians like to treat argument as about the relationship between abstract entities they call ‘propositions’ independent of the contexts of their use, such a definition effectively presupposes minds to be brains in jars reflecting detachedly on possible truth-conditions.<sup>12</sup> Such an account is of limited relevance if you are interested in the contextual nature of social practice. Bakhtin and his colleague Vološinov rejected existing approaches to languages as involving excessive ‘theoretism’ in favour of a pragmatist account of language as fundamentally dialogic, comprising situated utterances offers a useful way to start with events, shorn of presuppositions about system or structure, because

we cannot break out into the world of events from *within* the theoretical world. One must start with the act itself, and not with its theoretical transcription (Bakhtin 1986a: 91).

On this account of dialogue, neither individuals nor social entities, with all the presuppositions entailed, are primary, but chains of utterances which are always open and unfinalizable.

Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth (Bakhtin 1984: 293).

Take a dialogue and remove the voices, remove the intonations, carve out abstract concepts and judgements from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness - and that's how you get dialectics (Bakhtin 1986b: 147).

Of all the kinds of utterances, those that concern me here are the assemblage of practices that I find it convenient to sum up in the English word ‘argument’.<sup>13</sup> That there are neither easy

<sup>12</sup> This kind of philosophical talk reminds me of the film *The man with two brains* where a rogue surgeon keeps a collection of brains in jars unattached to any bodies or sensory apparatuses

<sup>13</sup> Many of the relevant senses are summed up in the OED's definition of ‘argue’. Perhaps most relevant are:

To bring forward reasons concerning a matter in debate; to make statements or adduce facts for the purpose of establishing or refuting a proposition; to discuss; to reason... To reason in opposition, raise objections, contend,

equivalents in other European, let alone Indonesian, languages, far from being a drawback is an advantage because, provided we use the term reflectively and critically, it destabilizes familiar usage and highlights the problems of imposing Western academic categories on events and requires us to consider how people themselves variously understand what they are doing.

As it happens, although they did not always frame it this way, scholars have written quite often about different Indonesian styles of argumentation. For instance there are studies of how Javanese and Balinese write history (e.g. Ali 1965; Berg 1965; Errington 1979; Sweeney 1987; Zoetmulder 1965) or structure theatrical narrative (Becker 1979; Keeler 1987). What has remained relatively unstudied critically are registers of religious discussion and political rhetoric, modes of academic reasoning<sup>14</sup> and much else besides. Overshadowing discussion is the issue of what comprises proper and acceptable reasoning, which raises the spectre of the notorious earlier debates about primitive thought: that is whether non-European peoples such as Indonesians suffer from defective rationality (e.g. Lévy-Bruhl 1926, 1975; Hallpike 1979; Wilson 1970; Hollis & Lukes 1982; cf. Evans-Pritchard 1934; Overing 1985). A consequence of the belated recognition of the profoundly racist assumptions is that inquiry into differences in styles of reasoning has been rendered largely unmentionable, which is unfortunate and unnecessary. A simple move dispels the racism and turns the issue on its head. It is to treat European canons of reasoning as themselves cultural and their hegemonic imposition upon the rest of the world as subject to critical scrutiny. So doing enables us to inquire into the social conditions under which Indonesians—or, for that matter, Europeans—deploy different cultural styles of reasoning.<sup>15</sup>

## On Javanese

### *An outsider's account*

The accounts above rarely distinguish between different Indonesian peoples. However, it is generally the Javanese who exemplify the representations outlined; and Geertz's *The Religion of Java* (1960) seems often to be the direct, or indirect, source. Geertz was at his most eloquent when expounding upon the white-collar or aristocratic, *priyayi*, worldview.

---

dispute... To bring forward the reasons for or against (a proposition, etc.); to discuss the pros and cons of; to treat by reasoning, examine controversially.

It would be most convenient were the senses of argument and argumentation clearly different. However, as a brief inspection of the OED shows, they overlap significantly for reasons that will become clear.

<sup>14</sup> An interesting exception is the instructions on how to write a thesis from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Universitas Gadjah Mada (FISIPOL UGM, 2016). My thanks to Adrian Vickers for pointing me towards this source.

<sup>15</sup> There is one formidable obstacle to my proposal, namely academic philosophers, who are not noted for treating kindly those outsiders who question their undisputed authority over matters of rationality. They tend to regard their judgements on reason as non-negotiable and universally true, backed by a two thousand-year-old genealogy. Fortunately there is a small number of distinguished philosophers who take issue with such claims, whether about logic itself or the grand narrative of the inevitable growth of European knowledge (e.g. Feyerabend 1975, 1987; Lloyd 1993).

This paper seeks to air, rather than answer, questions that I think need addressing. I skirt round several issues such as the intellectual history of how Indonesians—or, perhaps, more precisely, Javanese and even Balinese—came to be attributed with a horror of disagreement or argument. My aim is to suggest that assertions that Indonesians do not argue, be it engaging in argumentation or disagreement, is ideological and often counter-factual. At least three important topics remain unconsidered. One would be the history of Dutch colonial representations. A second would involve an analysis of accounts, past and present, scholarly and popular, about how Indonesians have represented issues around argument and disagreement among different classes in different ethnic groups. A third would consider how changes in how such issues are portrayed and discussed in different mass media.

Emotional equanimity, a certain flatness of affect, is, then, the prized psychological state, the mark of the truly *alus* character. As the forms which life takes vary from the disordered grossness of animal existence up through the only slightly more refined peasant to the hyper-genteel high-*prijaji*, and, finally, through the divine king to the invisible, intangible, insensible (except mystically), self-sufficient Being of God, so the forms of feeling vary from the vulgar actuality of base passion, through the spiritualized placidity of the true *prijaji* to the ultimate *rasa*,<sup>16</sup> where feeling is but meaning only.

If one can calm one's most inward feelings (by being *trima*, *sabar*, and *iklas*) the poet continues,<sup>17</sup> one can build a wall around them; one will be able both to conceal them from others and to protect them from outside disturbance. . .

Etiquette is the transfer to the level of interpersonal behavior of the calm and muted feeling tone of the inner life (1960: 240-2).

Javanese etiquette, which comprises almost the whole of this morality, focuses around the injunction not to disturb the equilibrium of another by sudden gestures, loud speech, or startling, erratic actions of any sort, mainly because so doing will cause the other in turn to act erratically and so upset one's own balance (1973d: 136).

It is left slightly open how far such concerns are exclusive to the *prijayi* and how far others seek to imitate them.

Geertz then spelled out how the cultural values behind such a world view.

Four major principles animate *prijaji* etiquette: the proper form for the proper rank, indirection, dissimulation, and the avoidance of any act suggesting disorder or lack of self-control. Under the proper form for the proper rank comes the all-important matter of the correct choice of linguistic form. . . One must always be careful in speaking to lower people, one woman said, because they are very easily insulted and once insulted they become uncontrollably angry.

Indirection as a theme of *prijaji* behavior, and of Javanese behavior generally. . . I have quoted the proverb 'to look north and hit south'.

Dissimulation is rather close to indirection. . . we usually have to find some sort of reason for telling a lie. For the Javanese (especially the *prijaji*) it seems, in part anyway, to work the other way around: the burden of proof seems to be in the direction of justifying telling the truth. The natural answer to casual questions, particularly from people you do not know very well, tends to be either a vague one ('Where are you going?'—'West')<sup>18</sup> or a mildly false one; and one tells the truth in small matters only when there is some reason to do so. . . In general, polite Javanese avoid gratuitous truths. . . The same sort of pattern is involved in the nearly absolute requirement never to show one's real feelings directly, especially to a guest. Any kind of negative feeling toward another must be dissimulated; and people are strongly enjoined to smile and be pleasant to people for whom they have very little use (1960: 243-6).

We are offered a tightly coherent world view that links rank, concern over maintaining order, self-control and anticipating others' feelings, which are achieved through being so indirect that truth is avoided even, it seems, when there is little, or nothing, at stake in being transparent.

---

<sup>16</sup> Geertz translates *rasa* as both feeling and meaning, which allows a play of ideas. *Alus* is usually glossed as 'refined'.

<sup>17</sup> The poet is one of Geertz's informants. *Sabar* is the absence of 'impatience, of headstrong passion'; *trima* is acceptance of what life throws at you; *iklas* 'brings psychological peace through a lack of attachment to the external world' (1960: 241).

<sup>18</sup> Balinese routinely just use the same formula when asked where they are going or what they are up to. This is one trivial example of a wider problem, namely whether essentializing distinctions between 'the Javanese' and 'the Balinese' by transforming what may be matters of degree into matters of kind does not obfuscate complex forms of overlap and variation.

Geertz then proceeds to explain at length how this cultural complex is celebrated and reiterated in art, theatre and mystical practices.

Pivoting on the tight link that *priyayi* make between manifest behaviour and appearance (*lair*) on the one hand and the fluid inner world of life (*batin*) on the other, Geertz used 'etiquette' to subsume a congeries of states and actions. These included styles of behaving and also demeanour both in public and private, the range of inner states concordant with these manifestations, the complex of cultural values that frame them and the conventions of understanding and evaluating all the above. As the other sources cited also implicitly make very similar associations, I shall retain the term 'etiquette' when talking about their arguments. Etiquette then becomes a highly-developed strategy for coping not only with other people but also with the vicissitudes of the world. To achieve this however requires accepting the links that Geertz says *priyayi* make into a necessarily indissoluble whole and then accepting this as a basis for a critical anthropological interrogation of such claims. To some that might seem like making the accused, judge, jury, counsel for the prosecution and for the defense at their own trial. Be that as it may, ontologically quite distinct kinds of entities are brought together to forge an unquestionable totality. That, its proponents claim, is the never-ending wonder of culture. While such a system may be plausible as an ideological construct, it is deeply problematic as a critical analysis on both ethnographic and theoretical grounds.

Geertz's—or his *priyayi* informants'—metaphor is striking. It is a world of defense against attack. The *priyayi* person is intensely vulnerable at any moment to attack upon their sensibilities from unpredictable events and shocks, and from other people of whatever rank or inclination. Threats to their inner balance and harmony are everywhere. (Ordinary folk do not run these risks because, being virtually animals, they are too resilient, coarse and insensitive to be attuned to, or disturbed by, such niceties. However, extreme care is necessary when dealing with them, because the risk is that they will become 'uncontrollably angry'.) Fear of victimhood is of course a familiar strategy for getting your own way. This *priyayi* world-view conflates coarse behaviour or language, bad smells or irritating noises and emotional or physical violence, with ethnic, class, gender and religious conflict. It treats quite different sorts of actions and events—probably even to most Javanese—as if they were all of a kind.

Geertz's exegesis on Javanese etiquette excludes as much as it includes. His account is largely of a timeless, unchanging world (the apotheosis of which would be his depiction in later writings of the Balinese theatre state). A perennial problem of such heavily interpretive accounts is that they suffocate any serious analysis of power, class, social hierarchy or oppression. Instead we are offered free-floating intricate strategies of deference, avoidance and maintenance of a ranked order without reference to what these are in aid of or who is on the receiving end.

#### *A Javanese aristocrat's account*

It is informative to set Geertz's work beside that of Koentjaraningrat who, as an aristocrat from the Paku Alaman in Yogyakarta, wrote as both a foreign-trained anthropologist and an insider, for example in *Javanese culture* (1985). The contrasts with Geertz are striking.

Javanese etiquette which requires the correct use of the proper style of speech in relation to particular types of interaction makes it imperative for a person first to determine accurately the exact status of the other person he is interacting with *vis-a-vis* his own. When, in the period prior to World War I, social mobility through education and economic achievement disturbed the traditionally-established Javanese social strata based on class, rank, and seniority, the determination of one's position in a social interaction became a very difficult matter... The drastic changes that have occurred in Javanese society, after World War II, have had an even

greater impact on the system. Many Javanese who were born during or after the war do not attempt to master the complicated system, and the current process of change from a traditional agrarian and feudalistic society to a modern industrial and democratic one will no doubt simplify Javanese linguistic etiquette (1985: 18-19).

Apart from fundamental changes to the distribution of political power and class differences, Koentjaraningrat examined the consequences of republican revolutionary thinking, the long-term implications of the Indonesian Communist Party's challenge to the old order, increasingly rapid economic development and education (e.g. 1985: 456-62).

Koentjaraningrat's analysis of the élite vision of the world is informatively different from Geertz's.

The *priyayi* etiquette of human relationships and customs are... very lineally orientated. They are characterized by a great reliance on, trust in, and respect for seniors and superiors, often to such an extent that they diminish the sense of self-reliance. It is obvious that the personality trait which Javanese people prefer so much to see in their children, that is, obedience or *manut*, is consistent with a lineal value orientation, and that this fits in perfectly with the civil-servant mentality.

Such a mentality not only causes a weak sense of self-reliance, but also a low level of self-discipline and little concern for responsibility. Civil servants are used to obeying rules and norms strictly and are very disciplined when there is sufficient control or supervision by their superiors. The moment that control or supervision is removed, discipline breaks down. The civil servant mentality also causes a person to refrain from taking risks, especially in work because he will only feel safe in taking an action if supported by other people so that the responsibility will be shared (1985: 459).

It took a Javanese aristocrat to highlight the serious drawbacks of aristocratic etiquette applied as a basis for action in a post-feudal world.<sup>19</sup>

Koentjaraningrat summarized his understanding of class relations between peasants and officials thus.

Peasants, of course, have especially great respect for administrative officials or civil servants who come from the city. However, their dealings with superiors are only occasional and occupy little of their time in day-to-day life. Once they are forced to confront superiors, they avoid difficulties by refraining from a response or by agreeing humbly, but without feeling any obligation or sense of commitment; or the agreement is expressed in a particular manner, which actually indicates in a refined way (*semu*) a disagreement... Although such beliefs and attitudes may still exist in village communities, the lineal value orientation has, to a great extent, disappeared among village youth, apparently a consequence of the Revolution and the propaganda activities of the rural branches of political parties in the 1950s and early 1960s, like, for instance, those of the Indonesian Communist Party, which stimulated village youth to contradict and criticize established authority (1985: 458-9).

The whole apparatus of *priyayi* etiquette has been undermined among those who were supposed to be kept in place and overawed by it. That leaves it as somewhere between a

<sup>19</sup> Koentjaraningrat is informative about ideas of time.

The Javanese in general and the peasants in particular have a keen perception of time, and have very intricate methods of determining it... The sense of temporal rhythm amongst Javanese peasants is also determined by an established traditional way for calculating the principal points in the agricultural cycle by similarly combining various calendrical systems, all of which are included in the *primbon* manuals. In general, most of their plans, decisions, and orientations of action are focused on the perception of the present.

The *priyayi* perception of time, on the other hand, is very much oriented towards the past. Next to the dull, daily routine of office life and the monotony of the *priyayi* household, a nostalgia for heirlooms, a preoccupation with numerous intricate rituals connected with the care of heirlooms and extreme interest in pedigrees, epical history, mythology, works of ancient poets, etc., characterize the traditional *priyayi* lifestyle and provide some meaning for *priyayi* existence (1985: 456).

nostalgic pastime played by those clinging to dreams of an orderly world of status and, to the extent that it can be imposed on the new cadre of the powerful and rich, the rules of the game to which notional lip service is required. However, even in the good old days, the rules of etiquette may have enjoined the visible display of respect, but left those below free from 'feeling any obligation or sense of commitment'. Crucially, it is quite possible subtly to express disagreement that may appear as agreement. This was a disenchanting world, where little can be inferred from how people speak and act.

In his review of ethnographic writing on the archipelago in *Anthropology in Indonesia* (1975), Koentjaraningrat examined criticisms by three leading Indonesian scholars (Soedjito Sosrodihardjo 1963; Koentjaraningrat 1963; Bachtiar 1973) of Geertz's famous triad of religious variants.

All three critics objected to the way in which Geertz confused the Javanese concepts of *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi*, and the way in which he used these terms to designate three variants of the Javanese religion. There is no question about the fact that the Javanese consider *santri* and *abangan* as terms which denote varying degrees of participation in Islam; *santri* being people who are in that sense 'more religious' than *abangan*. Moreover, Geertz should have been more careful about his use of the terms, and should have taken into consideration both the regional variations in the meaning of the terms in different parts of Java, and the fact that the use of the terms has changed from time to time... The term *priyayi* has, according to the Javanese outlook, very little to do with religion. Throughout most of Java the term refers to a social class, the class of people with a white-collar civil servant occupation... All three critics also objected to the over-simplified way in which Geertz associated the *abangan* world view with the peasantry, and the *santri* world view with traders and the commercial class in Javanese society. Although there might be an element of truth in the latter association (provided that it is borne in mind that there are millions of Javanese '*santri*' who are peasants or who have *priyayi* occupations) his first association, between the *abangan* world view and the peasantry, is definitely erroneous... A *priyayi* for instance, could well adhere to the *santri* world view under particular circumstances or during a certain period of his life, and to the *abangan* world view upon the assumption of other social roles or during a different period of his life society (1975: 200-201).

Koentjaraningrat made two further points. First, the internal coherence of each of the three religious variants, the link of each to a clearly defined social group as well as the clear separation between each variant is a product of Geertz's analysis rather than being ethnographically grounded. The neat totalizations effective pre-empt considering the argument between rival understandings within and between what emerge as far looser congeries of social practices. Second, according to Javanese scholars, the term *priyayi* has precious little to do with religion. Instead it refers to an occupational class. Indeed, in the index to *Javanese culture*, the entry for *priyayi* reads simply 'see Civil Servant class' (1985: 544).

Koentjaraningrat put his finger on what distinguished the *priyayi* world: it was the ideal universe as conceived by a civil servant. It is hard to understand Indonesia without understanding how central and entrenched the *pegawai negeri* are. Just as neoliberals conceive of all human relations as conforming—or being made to conform—to the iron laws of capital, so *pegawai negeri* conceives of society as (to be) modelled on a neat hierarchy underpinned by clear codes of conduct. In the world of the civil service, in the absence of other measures of quality, where substance divorced from status is so elusive, style becomes substantive. Java is singular in that the Dutch removed effective power from the élite centuries ago and left them as bureaucrats, so that etiquette with attenuated authority was what was left. It is this curious, detached yet seductive world of modern *priyayi* that Geertz depicted so well. His analysis paid scant attention to historical and social circumstances because he was describing a cultural ideal

rather than an ethnographic description of how such ideals work in practice. Geertz committed a classic moralistic fallacy. He conflated 'ought' with 'is', or 'was'. Koentjaraningrat's insider's account leaves Geertz's rather dewy-eyed synthesis of art, etiquette and mysticism looking distinctly romantic and Orientalist.

Koentjaraningrat's depiction of ideal Javanese behaviour has implications. What follows from the unquestioning 'trust in, and respect for, seniors and superiors', the priority placed upon 'obedience or *manut*', exemplified by civil servants who 'are used to obeying rules and norms strictly' and 'refrain from taking risks' (1985: 459)? Such attitudes are tantamount to shackles sufficient to shut down any argument that involves dialogue, be it public disagreement, discussion or counter-argumentation.<sup>20</sup> So what remains? What of the narrower sense of 'a connected series of statements or reasons intended to establish a position (and, hence, to refute the opposite); a process of reasoning; argumentation' (OED)? It is certainly not argumentation as 'interchange of argument, discussion, debate' (OED). Even the idea of reasoning as engaging or persuading interlocutors, let alone recognizing or refuting alternatives, is questionable. If complaisance, deference and docility are desiderata, not only is convincing people strictly unnecessary, but laying out one's reasoning *ipso facto* points to there being alternatives. So it is possible to refine argument here as presupposing dialogue explicitly or implicitly. Where discussing or disagreeing is discouraged, constricted or forbidden, enunciating tends to take over,<sup>21</sup> and with it the stage is free for flaccid, pompous, long-winded or complacent speech-making. This in itself gives grounds for distancing ourselves from armchair theorists with their difficulty in digesting the role of the social contexts when argument may be possible, permitted, perilous or proscribed.

Painting with a broad brush is necessary to avoid the widening cracks in the imaginary from being evident. What do such accounts obviate? Crucially, we are not dealing just with representations of ethnicity, class and gender, but with articulations that prioritize and hierarchize certain combinations of subject positions over others. An obvious example is the remarkable extent to which ideal representations of women have been engineered whether, say, under Dutch colonialism or Suharto's New Order (Sears 1996b). Drawing upon the recognition in Cultural Studies that representations are always articulated, Tiwon delineated how such ideals work.

What we may perceive in this seeming sequestration of the female from the general role of laborer is the cumulative effects of the various articulations over time of what it means to be a woman in Javanese / Indonesian culture. As a laborer, the writer finds herself trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and disenfranchisement until she is thrown out of it by the actions of the company for which she works. Only then does she gradually learn that what she had previously accepted as foreordained fate [*nasib*] is largely the result of a history of human manipulation. While it does not bring her journey to a happy haven, it does open up a new horizon through a vision of class empowerment. As a woman, however, she remains trapped.

---

<sup>20</sup> Under what circumstances different groups of people feel free to voice their thoughts to one another privately or prefer to avoid even thinking, let alone articulating, counter-arguments might be worth inquiry.

<sup>21</sup> One version is demonstration. So it is hardly startling that autocrats often favour spectacle, as it is largely unanswerable. Think of Sukarno's determination to bring Egyptian *son et lumière* to Sendratari at Prambanan; and its endless emulation at the Bali International Arts Festival. Indeed the massacres of 1965-66 may be considered a frighteningly effective instance. Élite Javanese styles of public address are not monolithic as the antithesis between Presidents Sukarno and Suharto makes clear. Whereas Soekarno had the 'ability to inspire and arouse audiences' (Sears 1996a: 220), Suharto's protracted monologues often seemed designed to be so boring and tedious as to numb listeners' critical faculties. Both drew on shadow theatre, but in quite different ways (Sears 1996a: 214-25, 233-34).

Although she breaks away from the literal and figurative confinement of an imprudent marriage, she is unable to accept herself as a complete person without the comfortable, if restrictive, bonds of family. She is, in a sense, still incarcerated within culturally determined conventions of what constitutes the 'fate' of womankind—*nasib kaum wanita*—the fate inextricably enmeshed in the Indonesian concept of *kodrat wanita* [intrinsic nature of woman], in spite of her activities as a laborer, for, as a woman, she continues to accept the terms that have been articulated for her rather than attempting to articulate her own (1996: 48).<sup>22</sup>

Similar arguments can be made for other social categories and classes, which are spoken for. Instead of admiring beautifully burnished imaginaries, perhaps we should ask who disarticulates and objectivizes whom as subjects, or even objects, through what kind of 'dividing practices' (Foucault 1982: 208ff.). Far more is occluded than is included. And whose accounts are these? Although such an account privileges a now-vestigial aristocracy, it is in effect the middle classes, a bourgeoisie which includes civil servants, teachers and media producers, which replicate, disseminate and may try to embody such ideals.

My apologies for citing Geertz at length. My purpose is not dismissive. Geertz's work is one of the best thought out and argued examples of a broad approach particularly popular among American anthropologists. It is culturalist, in that it treats 'culture' as an effectively coherent whole to be interpreted by the sensitive scholar, who almost invariably turns out to be a foreigner, whose command of language and cultural subtleties is rarely of the same order as that of most subjects of study. It is also neatly shorn of any inconvenient social, political and economic realities that might get in the way of the seductive picture.

### So what about the Balinese?

The next-door neighbours to the East present a curious comparison, because it is drawn so variously. Academic and popular stereotypes often contrast hyper-reserved Javanese with boisterous Balinese. If these have any substance, it may be because the Balinese aristocracy kept extensive political power well into the late twentieth century, unlike the Javanese.<sup>23</sup> You can have endless fun with mutual caricatures, which is not an entirely fatuous exercise. The mass media offer audiences a remarkable range of images of themselves and other peoples. Javanese especially seem to enjoy parodying themselves. Meanwhile the barrage of foreign representations of Balinese, notably since the 1920s or so, has been so unrelenting, but largely flattering, that it often serves local interests to reimagine themselves in line with such depictions.<sup>24</sup>

The stark contrast between Balinese and the notably quarrelsome and violent Melanesian Iatmul is a leitmotif of Bateson's thinking about the island. Balinese character on his account

---

<sup>22</sup> The Sears' collection should give flesh to the Cultural Studies point, should it need repeating, of how far such elite-centred accounts negate differences of class, gender, ethnicity and so on and disarticulate alternative experiences and representations.

<sup>23</sup> I do not engage in a detailed comparison between Javanese and Balinese styles of dealing with argument and conflict because my present concern is with representations that different commentators have made. So I am interested in the conditions under which, and the purposes for which, people make these representations. The extent to which they are 'true' or not, I consider an incoherent question, because it depends who is making the comparison to what for what purposes.

<sup>24</sup> Vickers analysed what drove the changing images of Bali, including Walter Spies's role in romanticizing the island to foreigners including Mead and Bateson. The latter 'was concerned with locating an unchanging Balinese ethos, as he called it' (2012: 205). Vickers is also informative on how Balinese, trained as artists by Westerners, set out to depict Balinese society as harmonious, which it was neither in pre-colonial nor colonial times, nor indeed since.

was marked by the avoidance of intensive interaction and climax in favour of the steady state of an emotional plateau.

In general the lack of climax is characteristic for Balinese music, drama, and other art forms... Balinese culture includes definite techniques for dealing with quarrels. Two men who have quarrelled will go formally to the office of the local representative of the Rajah and will there register their quarrel, agreeing that whichever speaks to the other shall pay a fine or make an offering to the gods. Later, if the quarrel terminates, this contract may be formally nullified. Smaller—but similar—avoidances (*pwik*) are practiced, even by small children in their quarrels... If this interpretation is correct, this method of dealing with quarrels would correspond to the substitution of a plateau for a climax. In regard to warfare, contemporary comment on the old wars between the Rajahs indicates that in the period when the comments were collected (1936–39) war was thought of as containing large elements of mutual avoidance (1973: 86).

As a consequence, the patterns

which define correct and permissible behavior are exceedingly complex (especially the rules of language) and that the individual Balinese (even to some degree inside his own family) has continual anxiety lest he make an error. Moreover, the rules are not of such a kind that they can be summarized either in a simple recipe or an emotional attitude. Etiquette cannot be deduced from some comprehensive statement about the other person's feelings or from respect for superiors. The details are too complex and too various for this, and so the individual Balinese is forever picking his way, like a tightrope walker, afraid at any moment lest he make some misstep (1973: 92).

As his account of Bali has been so widely cited, it is interesting to note that

many of Clifford Geertz's most important works on Bali, his studies of the nineteenth-century Balinese state, of the Balinese cockfight, or of Balinese ideas of personality, took the best of Mead and Bateson's writings as their starting point' (Vickers 2012: 260).

As Geertz had read this work and completed his field research on Bali before writing *The religion of Java*, was this how the slightly quaint word 'etiquette' came to play so prominent an articulatory role in the latter?

An advantage for researchers of Bali over Java is that Balinese seem to name, formalize and have explicit rules for aspects of social life that others have not thought of. So, what Geertz had to infer Javanese were up to through interpretation and inference, the Balinese made explicit. Geertz refined Bateson's initial sortie into Balinese character analysis by examining how people are referred to and how they are addressed (which are not identical). Geertz identified six orders of 'person definition' (1973f: 368). These are: (rarely used) personal names, fratonyms (birth-order names), kinship terms, teknonyms, status titles (better known as caste titles) and public titles. An explication of how each of these works tells Balinese—and us—more or less all we need to know. For instance:

The purely personal part of an individual's cultural definition, that which in the context of the immediate consociate community is most fully and completely his, and his alone, is highly muted. And with it are muted the more idiosyncratic, merely biographical, and, consequently, transient aspects of his existence as a human being (what, in our more egoistic framework, we call his 'personality') in favor of some rather more typical, highly conventionalized, and, consequently, enduring ones (Geertz 1973f: 370).

The status title system is a pure prestige system. From a man's title you know, given your own title, exactly what demeanor you ought to display toward him and he toward you in practically every context of public life, irrespective of whatever other social ties obtain between you and whatever you may happen to think of him as a man. Balinese politesse is very highly developed and it rigorously controls the outer surface of social behavior over

virtually the entire range of daily life (1973f: 380-1; the parallels with Bateson should not need comment).

On this account, Balinese live in a fixed matrix, which effectively determines their place and relationships with everyone else. Nowadays advanced algorithms can reputedly pinpoint who we are from a couple of dozen items of information. Balinese naming requires only six.

One of Geertz's most celebrated *tours de force* was to interpret cockfighting only superficially as about gambling and money, but ultimately about 'pure status'. We are told that 'much of Bali surfaces in a cock ring. For it is only apparently cocks that are fighting there. Actually, it is men' (1973a: 417).

What makes Balinese cockfighting deep is thus not money in itself, but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen: the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight... The cocks may be surrogates for their owners' personalities, animal mirrors of psychic form, but the cockfight is—or more exactly, deliberately is made to be—simulation of the social matrix, the involved system of cross-cutting, overlapping, highly corporate groups—villages, kingroups, irrigation societies, temple congregations, 'castes'—in which its devotees live. And as prestige, the necessity to affirm it, defend it, celebrate it, justify it, and just plain bask in it (but not, given the strongly ascriptive character of Balinese stratification, to seek it), is perhaps the central driving force in the society, so also—ambulant penises, blood sacrifices, and monetary exchanges aside—is it of the cockfight. This apparent amusement and seeming sport is, to take another phrase from Erving Goffman, 'a status bloodbath' (1973a: 436).

Sensitive to the synecdoche, Geertz then qualified himself.

The cockfight is not the master key to Balinese life, any more than bullfighting is to Spanish. What it says about that life is not unqualified nor even unchallenged by what other equally eloquent cultural statements say about it. But there is nothing more surprising in this than in the fact that Racine and Molière were contemporaries, or that the same people who arrange chrysanthemums cast swords (1973a: 452).

Having just spent over 40 pages waxing eloquent on the cockfight as an interpretive key to Bali, what are we make of this?<sup>25</sup> The murderous conflict that has beset much of Balinese history has been neatly transformed via the cliché of chrysanthemums and swords into the disparity between Racine and Molière. What happened to what wicked—or naïve—Europeans might think of as issues of class and power?

Geertz's mature reflections on Bali are though perhaps best appreciated through his analysis of its polity.

The expressive nature of the Balinese state was apparent through the whole of its known history, for it was always pointed not toward tyranny, whose systematic concentration of power it was incompetent to effect, and not even very methodically toward government, which it pursued indifferently and hesitantly, but rather toward spectacle, toward ceremony, toward the public dramatization of the ruling obsessions of Balinese culture: social inequality and status pride. It was a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience. The stupendous cremations, tooth filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends: they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for. Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment

<sup>25</sup> If I said that cricket was the master key to understand the English, as opposed to Indians, Pakistanis, Australians or West Indians, a few old buffers might snort agreement over their gin and tonics, but I am not sure anyone would think I had just delivered a blinding revelation.

of mass ritual. Power served pomp, not pomp power. . . . The ritual life of the court, and in fact the life of the court generally, is thus paradigmatic, not merely reflective, of social order. What it is reflective of, the priests declare, is supernatural order, 'the timeless Indian world of the gods' upon which men should, in strict proportion to their status, seek to pattern their lives (1980: 13).

Geertz's metaphor of reading a text over the shoulders of the participants (1973a: 452) transforms what was by other accounts complex, ever-shifting dialogues into a tableau. So his metaphor of the state as a frozen steady state should come as no surprise.

Geertz's elegant, sustained interpretation of Bali works only by selecting the evidence and overlooking or disregarding much. The idea that personal names are not used in public as they are 'an intensely private matter' (1973f: 370) is at odds with the routine roll calls for public meetings when everyone's name is shouted out aloud. As they are mostly everyday words, to say that they are 'arbitrarily coined nonsense syllables' (1973f: 369) suggests Geertz's command of Balinese was deficient, which is awkward for an analysis that claims to be uniquely sensitive to native nuance.

Geertz's interpretation of Balinese cockfighting is a brilliant extended riff. However what relationship does it bear to actual cockfights? And what relationship does it bear to Balinese exegeses? Trying to square the circle, Geertz's most loyal disciple, James Boon, argued that

Geertz does not survey the range of Balinese cockfights; rather he telescopes repeated observations into an ideal-typical description of a choice elaboration of the form in one village-area. . . . This is not necessarily what the cockfight averages out to be but what it, apparently, strains to become. . . . Geertz conclusively demonstrates the potential of cockfights to register with raw intensity Balinese status concerns. But if they did this equally always and everywhere, cockfights, it could be argued, would be superfluous, unremoved from reality and thus useless as significant commentary on experience. . . . Any cultural performances—rites, games, dramas—must be distorted from their presumed actual reference if they are to have any impact, if they are to say something (1977: 33-34).

This rather lets the cat out of the bag. Not only did Geertz construct an ideal—indeed, a limiting—possibility, but it must be largely counter-factual and a distortion of experience if it is to work at all!<sup>26</sup>

What about Geertz on the Balinese theatre state? As Schulte Nordholt asked: 'Whose image of the state is described by Geertz?' (1981: 476). His answer was: 'it is Geertz' over-fertile imagination which has created the "classical" Balinese state to which he applies his theatre metaphor, and not the Balinese' (1981: 473). I might add that Geertz has imported a relatively modern European metaphor of theatre, which has little, if anything, to do with how Balinese variously imagine what theatre is about and does. Rather than put the crowning touches on a remarkable cultural style of ritualizing disagreement and conflict, Geertz may have slipped into anachronism, because

from 1920 onwards the [Dutch] preference was to let traditional popular rulers control society. The ultimate result of this was that 'restored' old dynasties put a Balinese face on colonial rule. If the term 'theatre state' is to be applied to Bali, then the 'restored kings' of the 1930s fit the bill (Schulte Nordholt 1996: 334, my parentheses).

---

<sup>26</sup> There are more mundane issues, such as how Geertz extrapolated from what Balinese said. The few pieces of evidence he lets drop are problematic, like the supposed pun on 'cock' and penis working 'in exactly the same way in Balinese as it does in English', let alone 'the deep psychological identification of Balinese men with their fighting cocks' (1973a: 417). Every time and with whomsoever I raised this possibility, I was met with amusement or disdain. Cocks are considered one of the lowest forms of life, exemplified by their viciousness, and so a most unsuitable image for most men's putative pride and joy.

All this is not a digression: it is germane to Geertz's interpretation of Balinese culture, as it enables us to judge what kind of expository status it has. Insofar as Bali served to refine and develop Geertz's depiction of Java, we are offered two recensions on how Javanese and Balinese handle disagreement and conflict. It is, in effect, an ideal to which people strive, precisely because they realize it is largely—or, for many purposes, completely—absent. That does not make it irrelevant at all. It suggests however that we are being offered something closer to an imaginary, one of a number of ways that people might wish to imagine their social existence.

How did Indonesians—be they Javanese, Balinese or whoever—come to be imagined as pre-occupied with the appearance and, if possible, the actuality—of balance and harmony?<sup>27</sup> And what is the provenance of these Pythagorean metaphors? Sceptically I would suggest that such notions are European judgements imposed upon—even if now adopted enthusiastically by—Indonesians. Let me contrast two accounts.

Balinese regard the exact maintenance of spatial orientation ('not to know where north is' is to be crazy), balance, decorum, status relationships and so forth, as fundamental to ordered life (*krama*) and *paling*, sort of whirling confusion of position the scrambling cocks [of the Balinese cockfight] exemplify as its profoundest enemy and contradiction (C. Geertz 1973a: 446-7, my parentheses).

War, in this view, not serene order, is the normal state of the cosmos, and the human world. Conflict is not evidence of chaotic breakdown of the cosmos, but the fundamental characteristic of life. The Balinese world is one in which the many elements are never harmoniously united, in which there is no single encompassing principle, no way of comprehending the whole (H. Geertz 1994: 95).

Whereas the first deftly imposes Western imagery onto Balinese, the latter account is drawn from a later careful study of Balinese ideas about how they understand the world works. We are offered two quite different social imaginaries: one how Balinese may seem to Westerners, the other how Balinese imagine their world.

### A timeless world?

*The religion of Java* offers a thoughtful reflection on what motivates some Javanese. But, epistemologically, what sort of explication or interpretation is it? For example, *priyayi* etiquette is a tightly, indeed nigh perfectly, coherent complex of cultural values: a transcendental, unchanging system that transcends history, place and circumstances. There are no confusions, misconceptions, rival accounts, differing understandings, dialogue or argument (in any sense) that tend to distinguish how humans rub along with one another. It is a monologic world, inscribed authoritatively but without authors, which leaves it effectively beyond challenge, disagreement and disputation, and so—which is the point—beyond argument. In short, Geertz's description imitates—rather than engages critically with—the *priyayi* vision of how the world ought to be, replete with aristocratic disinterest as to how the world with its many *longueurs* actually is.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> My argument owes much to Richard Fox who questioned the genealogy of attributions of harmony and balance in writing about Bali and Java (2011: 300) that deserve close consideration. Part of a full study would presumably include the history of ideas about avoidance of anger, conflict and so on. As Vickers (2012) has shown, outsider's representations of Bali have swung wildly over time from exemplifying extraordinary savagery to being paradise on earth.

<sup>28</sup> The idea that an entire ruling class can impose its will on a population through etiquette, art and mysticism leaves unanswered questions of who or what enforced the conditions so effectively as to enable the rulers to

Sometimes academics seem determined to incarcerate their subjects of inquiry, if not in ivory towers, then in gently decaying palaces. To take just one—ever more pertinent—example, such a move requires tunnel vision, as it studiously ignores what is broadcast more or less daily on national terrestrial television to mass audiences. I suppose you could argue that the riots and violent demonstrations, which have long been a key part of Indonesian politics, are somehow an exception to the rule.<sup>29</sup> However, Indonesians themselves are also in the business of commenting on, playing with and (dare I say it?) arguing over who they are and how to understand what unites and divides them in the modern world. So I wish briefly to examine certain highly public arenas drawing in millions of people daily where such questions are bandied about with abandon. For example, how are these precious *priyayi* ideals portrayed in the mass media?

In the early 2000s, so popular was it that every channel had at least one daily broadcast of 'real crime'. As Chandler wrote of Dashiell Hammett, he 'gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse' (1950), so *Kriminal* served up the deeds and passions of the proletariat and underclass to a mass viewing public of all classes. One series, *Menanti Ajal* (Awaiting the Day of Judgement), went out its way to privilege a decidedly bourgeois gaze. The presenter's voiceover mulled over her thoughts as an upper-middle class Jakartan reporter following in the footsteps of violent murderers. In the final scene, after fade-outs of those she has interviewed awaiting execution, she would play a white grand piano in some amazingly luxurious setting in Jakarta. More rarely, in other *Kriminal* series, the gaze was reversed, as in a battery of broadcasts about the savage murder of a photogenic middle-class young woman, Amanda. Class was on display pitilessly.

As the broadcasting constraints imposed by the New Order were relaxed, investigative reporting flourished. Some, like the crime programmes, explored the world of the poor, who had previously existed as a mute backdrop to the middle and upper classes. However, time was also given to scrutiny of the dirty doings of people obviously of élite backgrounds. Some programmes were devoted to government ministers being shown to be lying in parliament and to the press, of the big interests behind illegal logging, fraudulent electoral expenses, the background and life histories of political party candidates, even a programme about the inheritance disputes in the Kraton in Solo. You cannot get much more *priyayi* than that. That such programmes were suppressed under the Suharto régime suggests that the fantasy of an ordered world in which the obedient masses knew and loved their place was possible only by the often-brutal exercise of power. The proliferation of such openly critical programmes squares better with Koentjaraningrat's analysis of a society arguing through the implications of change and what it was to be Javanese or Indonesian than does Geertz's rosy Orientalism.

During the same period, another genre, *Mistik*, flowered even more vigorously. To Geertz, refined and introverted mysticism was the hallmark of *priyayi*, imitated by the lower social orders, the *abangan*. In *Mistik* figures from all walks of society including *priyayi* came under

---

pretend that authority and power are effortless. There is an interesting parallel in Bali that emerges in Worsley's analysis of traditional painting (1984) and Vickers's of the *Geguritan Padem Warak* (1991). They note how the painter and author respectively went to some lengths to portray two quite different social worlds coming together. One was the ordered, rarefied, calm, detached sphere of the aristocrats who gazed down on the tumultuous, raucous, busy, noisy, animated sphere of ordinary people. The *priyayi* vision seems largely to expunge the latter world that made its own existence possible.

<sup>29</sup> Two examples may make the point. The first is footage from the riots in Jakarta in July 1996 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqaRMISsn80>). The second is a Muslim-led demonstration against the then governor of Jakarta in November 2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccQGM3G04XY>).

examination, be it as participants or expert commentators. What was striking though was that the presenters were almost all highly educated, elegantly coutured, modern upper-middle class women, whose confidence, directness and worldliness signalled a sharp break with aristocratic ideals. *Priyayi* among others found themselves the objects of a new and unfamiliar kind of gaze. Programmes ranged from the documentary or pseudo-scientific to ordeals, to wild spectacle and blunt satire. In one, a participant commented that ghosts left a ghastly smell to which the ghost-buster replied that he had just farted. The Rabelaisian energy and abandon of *Mistik* at its peak points to what it was that *priyayi* etiquette vainly tried to hold in check.<sup>30</sup>

Other genres took delight in lampooning the *priyayi* head on. An example was *Ketoprak Humor* in the early 2000s. The plots were deliberately anachronistic. Set in pseudo-historical courtly Java, the language, body movements and motivations were modern, and the clash of two antagonistic worlds exposed. Every week for two hours the *priyayi* were taken apart mercilessly. Later *Opera Van Java* took over, using much the same format but without bothering with more than a notional plot. Even the underpinning of the great narratives of Javanese history were kicked away, leaving *priyayi* and their etiquette wriggling helplessly under studio lights. *Priyayi* also took the piss out of *priyayi*. Butèt Kartaredjasa, the son of the illustrious Yogyakarta choreographer and artist Bagong Kussudiardjo, became famous for his monologues which mimicked President Suharto's peculiar *priyayi* style of speaking.<sup>31</sup> All this is not to suggest that some Javanese do not continue with, or aspire to emulate, the elegant etiquette of the traditional élite. However, what emerges is that this was one register in a complex dialogue of many other voices, and one that relied for its legitimacy on effectively disarticulating other ways of imagining and living.

### According to whom?

Dogs are often said to be stupid because, if you point at something, they usually look at your finger not at the object indicated. In this instance we might learn from them. A striking feature of most academic descriptions of other peoples is that they effectively airbrush out the subject position of the author. Of Javanese dissimulation, Geertz wrote: 'we usually have to find some sort of reason for telling a lie'. But who are the 'we'?<sup>32</sup> Such deictics are inherently ambiguous. At once they exnominate the speaker (Barthes 1973: 138-49); and collusively situate the addressees as being similar thinking subjects, as having similar kinds of understanding and values to the speaker. In so doing, they naturalize an enunciative position that obscures the many obvious ways that the interlocutors differ. Geertz however was following in famous footsteps: 'Balinese culture is in many ways less like our own than any other which has yet been recorded' (Bateson & Mead 1942: xvi). Here a Balinese idiom is apposite: *ngèmpèlin*—like a duck's foot, it covers many different things. The reader is offered a 'we' that, without qualification, embraces, if not the entire population of Britain and the United States then its educated class, as representing some kind of unitary subject position, which becomes the natural and normal stance from which to evaluate others as different. Usually though the comparison is subtler. Whose image of the state or theatre is at issue? Whose metaphors are these? And what are the implications of deploying them on other peoples who understand themselves in quite different and incommensurate ways? To the extent that

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed discussion of a range of television genres, see Hobart 2006.

<sup>31</sup> See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Es1RQG-O85E>.

<sup>32</sup> The British Cabinet secretary, Sir Robert Armstrong, under cross-questioning emulated *priyayi* in describing a lie or deliberately misleading statement as: 'It is perhaps being economical with the truth'. An adage among senior British civil servants is that, if someone does not need to be informed of something, they need not to be informed.

such a skew is routine in anthropology, the discipline is open to the charge that it connives in hegemonizing those it professes to represent.

To say Javanese or Balinese differ in how they deal with conflict or disagreement begs the question of whom they differ from. There is all the difference in the world between the latter being, say, American or Australian politicians, American trailer trash caricatured on the Jerry Springer Show, upper class English or Japanese.<sup>33</sup> Anecdotally, having had the dubious privilege of undergoing the full rites of the English class system from Public School to Oxbridge, far from finding élite Javanese or Balinese reserved, I find them relatively open and accessible compared to my English peers. Perhaps it is less that the former are weird, but that aristocrats or those with pretensions, may seek to distinguish themselves from the *hoi polloi* by distinctive etiquette.

Finally, does this reliance on culture, defined as textual and semiotic, involve an implicit political position? Arguably it does. Pecora noted Geertz's remarkable denial of the role of military power and international politics, including significantly the US government, in the elimination of the Indonesian Communist Party.

The massacres themselves are presented as an 'irruption' of primordial, internecine semiotic conflict within the culture that had been dangerously 'repressed' by immature symbol-mongering. In this sense, Geertz's conclusions, though arrived at through far more scholarly means, offer nothing substantially different from those presented by *Life* magazine, the Johnson White House, and the new Indonesian regime's chief of security (1989: 258).

Accepting at face value Geertz's claim to elaborate on 'the local expression of local relations', Pecora notes an implication.

But if the presence of Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology behind this theory [the New Historicism] reveals anything, it is that the primary political agenda of a cultural semiotics cannot be anything but conservative of the dominant, ethno-centric concerns: in Geertz, the commitment to the local expression of local relations works to negate the power of the anthropologist's culture to determine the outcome of the events he describes. In the new historicism, such a perspective induces tendencies toward a new kind of formalism, trapping the critic inside the semiotic systems he or she would wish to explain, even as the definition of such formative systems requires the assumption of a non-semiotic, non-textual outside which is to be shaped (1989: 272; my parentheses).

This conclusion however is confused. It is unclear whether the semiotic system in question is indigenous or Western academic. As neither Clifford Geertz nor Pecora consider the former possibility, we must assume the latter, in which case the critic was hardly 'inside' the indigenous system in the first place. It assumes there is a single coherent system, which Hildred Geertz argued is misplaced for Bali. If, however, culture is, as Cultural Studies scholars prefer,

---

<sup>33</sup> What is considered publicly acceptable or even admirable, as disseminated through the mass media, varies greatly. What exactly does it say if Indonesians fail to conform to the standards below?

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Dick Cheney:    | Go fuck yourself! (The Vice President in the US Senate, when questioned about Halliburton's role in Iraq, 24 <sup>th</sup> . June 2004).  |
| Tom McVeigh:    | The honourable member does not know what he is talking about. He is a dickhead. (Australian House of Representatives, 9 <sup>th</sup> . October 1986)   |
| Chris Hartcher: | The Premier will use any excuse and seek any opportunity for political self-promotion, even at the cost of the interests of the State or Australia. He is a total harlot.   |
| Deputy-speaker: | Order! I ask that those words be withdrawn.   |
| Chris Hartcher: | I withdraw the term 'harlot' and I say 'political prostitute.' (New South Wales Legislative Assembly, 21 <sup>st</sup> . November 2002)   |
| Denis Healey:   | I must say that part of his speech was rather like being savaged by a dead sheep. (On Sir Geoffrey Howe, Hansard, 14 June, 1978, Col. 1027. Although belonging to opposed political parties, the two men were in fact close friends.) |

a site—or moments—of struggle, then adopting, as does Clifford Geertz, something akin to the Javanese *priyayi* or Balinese aristocratic ideal worldview against those with which it is in dialogue, is conservative and monologic. If etiquette is so important in constraining, channelling and muting the outbreak of conflict and public disagreement, someone seems to have forgotten to ask how often it is successful, in what classes of society, to what degree, on what occasions? For a population of some 95 million Javanese with such a chequered history, that is a formidable task. So perhaps it is understandable that proponents prefer to circle the wagons around notions of culture that they themselves imported and imposed.

## Argument as Argumentation

### When is argument?

The triumph of form over subject matter is so complete that the possibility that Indonesians might actually argue over issues—and, if so, what?—has all but vanished, which is why I wish to muse about how Indonesians argue and what about. Between the lines, it is evident that different social groups or classes have quite different ways of understanding the world, which Geertz grouped as three religious variants (*abangan, santri, priyayi*). He interpreted the rise of the Communist Party in Bali in the 1950s and 1960s as inter-aristocratic rivalry (1963), so ignoring the furious polemics about the nature of Balinese society, that had been the subject of bitter debate since the 1920s (Picard 2016). What is it that *priyayi* wrap up in language, dissimulate and flatten into ineffectuality? What matters are Balinese imagined to symbolize, ritualize and structure—and so defang—into picturesque, yet curiously voiceless, spectacle? While etiquette has been much pondered over, what people are actually arguing about remains largely unexamined. So it is perhaps best approached through examples, for which I draw upon my own ethnography in Bali between 1972 and 1999. One question is how, and indeed if, it is possible in practice to distinguish between argumentation or debate on the one hand and disagreement or conflict on the other.

### *Collective harvesting*

Balinese village wards, *banjar*, generally have the right to harvest communally rice land owned by their members and exact a tax for the treasury. In Pisangkaja in Northern Gianyar in late 1971 the issue came to a head because the ward headmen were suspected of granting preference to rich landowners, of helping their friends evade the tax and of misappropriating the funds. Most tenant and subsistence farmers wished to stop the arrangement as they tended to lose out. An assembly meeting was scheduled for shortly before harvest. As the outcome was in the balance, it had to be debated publicly at a meeting shortly before harvest.

A well-known orator, evidently speaking for those who wished to stop harvesting, apologized for mentioning the matter. However, in the past the ward had harvested collectively. As the crop was now ripe what was the intention of members? There was a brief pause. He added that he had heard that the system was being abused and quoted the example of a high-caste man who had refused to let the *banjar* reap his rice, claiming it was still green and next day had paid labourers a lower rate to cut it. The speaker concluded that he did not know what the meeting wished to decide but he would, of course, go along with it. His friend seated opposite added that, while he did not want to raise the matter, rumours were circulating that many members' fields had not been completely harvested, forcing them to work at the end of the day. Such rumours were bad and should be brought out into the open.

Another orator, speaking it seemed on behalf of the rich farmers, asked were it not better to work for the community than for money? And, if they stopped, the beneficiaries would be

labourers from other villages, while nothing would be contributed to the welfare of the *banjar*. One of the village officials (also, from what he said, apparently siding with the rich farmers) said that with the capital from past harvests, it had been possible to restore several public buildings and the ward now had large sums to lend to its members. Cooperative work made the ward like a single family. How could they be united if they did not work together? In this matter though he would be guided entirely by the assembly. After further discussion the village officials, sensing that the majority clearly opposed the system, asked if it were agreed that harvesting should be stopped. To this there was a low chorus of *Inggih*. So, the head of the *banjar* announced the system ended and members free to decide their own arrangements.

This abbreviated summary omits all but the main contributions, as well as a singular feature of most speeches, which are almost always succinct, namely that the speaker usually starts by apologizing for taking up people's time by mentioning the matter and ends by affirming that they will acquiesce to whatever the meeting decides.<sup>34</sup>

The tax extracted through communal harvesting was significantly more than the cost of hiring labour on the market. Also large landowners tended to have first pick with smaller farmers fitting in at the end of the day, when sometimes part of the yield was left behind as people grew tired and evening loomed. Accusations of favouritism in extracting dues and misappropriation of funds were also rife. In broad terms—and was understood so by the majority who were small farmers—this was a split between rich and poor. In short, it had elements of a classic kind of conflict. Indeed, because the outcome mattered to everyone, the discussion was more explicit than usual.

What was at issue can be phrased using reasoned argument. Collective harvesting is a culturally valued principle and practice, because it encourages social solidarity and contributes to collective capital. If it were abandoned, outsiders would benefit at the expense of members of the community. The counter-argument accepted the principle fully, but noted that, if it were not implemented justly, it contradicted the premise. Evidence was presented that breaches were not a rarity and threatened to undermine the principle. Tactically the counter-argument was presented first, which highlighted that there was a problem that needed ventilating, so back-footing proponents of the principle. An empirical issue was implicit: how common were failures to apply the principle even-handedly? These seemed sufficiently frequent that, far from underwriting a feeling of community, it risked weakening it. Other matters, such as evading paying the taxes and pilfering funds, went unmentioned. To bring such charges publicly would have required inconvertible evidence and, by stopping collective harvesting, the problems were either eliminated or reduced. Furthermore, such an open challenge would lay its advocates open to the charge of deliberately and possibly irrevocably undermining communal solidarity. While the rich carried clout behind the scenes, there were far more small farmers who appreciated what was at issue and were unlikely to be deterred by vague appeals to collective welfare. Rather than push the matter to a vote, the village heads, sensing defeat, capitulated gracefully.

The kind of arguments on each side differed though. The opponents of collective harvesting phrased their objections using clear, verifiable or falsifiable statements that bore on farmers' experience. The advocates fell back on generalizations that invoked airy symbolism: unity, cooperation, the collective good, the village as a (happy not a dysfunctional) family. As Parkin pointed out, public speakers rely on pious 'symbolic' clichés when proposals are likely to encounter widespread disagreement, the congregation in question is sufficiently riven or it is not possible to advance a workable plan (1975). Styles of argument depend significantly upon appreciation of the inclinations, knowledge and past experience of their audiences.

---

<sup>34</sup> For a lengthier discussion, see Hobart, 2016: 6-7.

Now does such a relatively well-mannered difference of opinions constitute the obsessive avoidance of open conflict, a stylized presentation of alternative arguments phrased so as to avoid a public split and possible communal fracas, a stark disagreement, evidence of class antagonism or a battle in a long-running war? *Pace* Geertz, I never heard anyone allude to the first possibility in this or any other similar confrontation. But then perhaps the natives lacked his felicitous detachment, self-awareness or intellectual sophistication.

All the other possibilities were however aired by one or more people in discussion afterwards. It is here that whether something constitutes disagreement or not comes into question. The *banjar* head, perhaps unsurprisingly, stressed that this was a proper open public discussion of a matter of principle. Here argumentation ruled. A couple of the rich farmers stressed the need to avoid splitting the community. Several of the poor farmers explained how angry they had been at being disadvantaged and expressed great relief at being able to harvest their crops without penalization. Those whom I knew best (none of them rich farmers) and with whom I talked regularly over such matters late into the night framed this in the *longue durée*. It was one episode in a history going back to before the Second World War of the fight of ordinary villagers against the domination of the high castes and rich. So whether this was a straightforward debate, an issue of collective solidarity, a reassertion of the inviolable fundamentals of 'Balinese culture', a straight disagreement and fight of rich and poor, or a stage in a long-running class conflict hinged on who was speaking. More to the point, it depended on the circumstances of the inquiry, who was present and, crucially, who was inquiring. In this instance, it was I, as anthropologist; and so the answers were modulated by how the speakers wished to present not only themselves, but also the village and Balinese society, what they thought I wanted to hear, but also what I might do with it. The assumption that human engagement can be neatly classified into etiquette, argumentation, discussion, disagreement and conflict is a fantasy.

### *Bribing a God*

As part of the annual festival at the temple of the aristocratic lineage of Cokorda Sukawati in Tengahpadang, a shadow play (*wayang*) was performed by a *dalang*, Anak Agung Petemon, himself from a cadet line of the Cokordas, known as one of the bravest in voicing social and political criticism publicly. The play was from a minor episode of the Mahabharata about Aswagani, a son whom Arjuna rejected and who, transforming himself into a demon, Sang Nata Kawaca, threatens heaven itself. The extract below is from an intermezzo, when one of Aswagani's servants, the smart, if unscrupulous, Sangut, bumps into Sang Suratma, the Record Keeper of Souls, who determines humans' deaths by crossing their names off his list. He is a figure who inspires fear. This exchange occurs shortly before the arrival of Sangut's bombastic elder brother Dèlem cited in the opening quotation.

- Sangut: Ooh! I beg your pardon, but is this the king of the *pemedi* or a God?<sup>35</sup> I have never seen anything like it, is it a *pemedi* or a sea slug?
- Sang Suratma: Hey! Who's calling me a sea slug? Don't insult me like that. You are in the Presence of none other than Lord Suratma.
- Sangut: Oh. Are you Lord Suratma?
- Sang Suratma: That is right. I write the letters which seal the fate of human souls. If you do wrong, I cross you off. If I cross you off with red ink, you're dead.
- Sangut: Oh. So that's it. Now, if I offered you money, you wouldn't cross me off?

<sup>35</sup> *Pemedi* are a kind of malignant spirit. They are usually invisible to humans, but by report they are horrifyingly ugly and misshapen. Sangut is being deliberately insulting about a figure whom he knows to be divine.

- Sang Suratma: Ah! If it's a lot of money, I'll cancel it (the crossing-off). If it's only a little, say enough to buy root crops, you'll still be struck off. If it's half, I'll half cross you off. You'll be very ill indeed.
- Sangut: If it's lots and lots and lots of money. I mean as much as I have got?
- Sang Suratma: Ah! If it's really a lot, then I cancel the crossing-off totally. You can live to be two hundred and ninety years old. That's how it is.
- Sangut: Bah! That's wicked of you to be calculating like that. You shouldn't do that, even if you are in charge of the letters. Only if someone's done wrong should you cross them off. Don't mix money up in it, you should be ashamed of yourself.
- Sang Suratma: Why not? If I don't, my children will have nothing to eat.
- Sangut: Worse still! You shouldn't do it. You shouldn't do it. Don't try and talk your way out of it.

The exchange is humorous. Sangut feigns ignorance of someone who expects to be instantly recognized and to inspire terror. Instead of succumbing, Sangut first deliberately insults Sang Suratma, then teases out how corrupt the latter is behind his formidable veneer. Having exposed Sang Suratma's venality, Sangut promptly berates him for being corrupt. (The implication is that humans should be ashamed of behaving like that: still more a deity.) Sang Suratma's response is cringing self-exculpation, as if he were poor.<sup>36</sup>

It does not take much imagination for a reader to treat this exchange as an allegory, in the sense of the 'description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance' (OED). The target in this instance was powerful and potentially dangerous public figures who use their positions to intimidate and extract bribes from ordinary people—something of which Balinese have experience almost whenever they have to deal with government officials. Sangut's questioning reveals a certain logic. Those in authority, *a fortiori* deities, occupy positions, the criteria for which are impartiality, honesty and even-handedness. In this instance, Sang Suratma failed lamentably. What is more, his justification did not hold water. (The rich—far less gods—do not need to worry about feeding their children. It is those from whom they extract bribes who do.)

That is fine so far as it goes, but it leaves open the question of how Balinese understand such exchanges. A striking blind spot of much interpretation—and judgements about what comprises proper use of reasoning—is that they concentrate almost exclusively on the utterances to the exclusion of how these are understood by interlocutors in context. We are back to brains in jars. Needless to say, matters are rarely so simple. Now there is a Balinese term *praimba*, from the Sanskrit and *Kawi pratiwimba*, image, model; shadow, which is perhaps best glossed as analogy. *Praimba* do not exist in the world: they are made by humans from the potentialities of things and depend for their success on being recognized as such. An analogy works insofar as listeners or spectators get the point; even more so if they realize that they are the target and so reflect on their actions.

As much of the village had turned out to watch this shadow play, I asked two young men in their twenties what they thought of this passage. They both laughed and said that they liked it. The idea of a servant trying to bribe a god was funny. When I asked if that was all, they looked puzzled. Others chatting with me at a coffee stall appreciated vaguely that it was about corruption, but seemed unable, or perhaps unwilling, to think further. By contrast, older men, including two actors, with whom I discussed the play (shadow theatre is conventionally more popular with males), immediately pointed to the exchange as a *praimba* and said that they hoped that any civil servants in the audience got the point. Later I had a long discussion with

<sup>36</sup> I am not making up this interpretation, which emerged from lengthy commentaries by a group of Balinese.

the *dalang*, who was forthright about his aims, which were to confront those who abused their power and to galvanize spectators out of their resignation to injustices. So, it would seem that some members of the audience treated a verbal exchange as playing with an amusing incongruity; others had a sense it was something to do with corruption; while yet others understood more or less precisely what the *dalang* intended and appreciated the logic of the argument and the point in saying it. By what criteria are we to conclude whether we are dealing with classical Indonesian indirectness (or obsession with avoiding open conflict), with skillfully expounded argument or with deliberate confrontation designed to disturb the *status quo* and stir people to action?

A well-known Irish joke tells of a tourist who asks a local for directions to Dublin. The man replies: 'Well sir. If I were you, I would not start from here'. What I think this discussion shows is that applying Western criteria to Javanese and Balinese ways of understanding how they set about social exchanges involves category mistakes. To do so involves presuppositions about agency, mutual knowledge, human heterogeneity and how language works that may well be misplaced. Taking for granted that European academic categories are necessary, sufficient or even adequate to understand others is not a good way to start.

Proponents of universal criteria of reason usually take it that an analysis of a speaker's statements is sufficient to determine whether they comply with canons of reason or not. While there has been much debate about the relevance of context, what is notably absent is careful consideration of how such statements are appreciated by hearers. Agency is implicitly, if not explicitly, attributed to the speaker, those listening being largely passive. How far such an account holds for Bali, Java and perhaps some other parts of Asia is questionable. Indeed the historical, social and political conditions under which Europeans and Americans have naturalized and normalized the author as agent, hero or even individual is open to doubt (e.g. Barthes 1977b; Foucault 1980; Rorty 1976). Historically the authors of many Javanese and Balinese texts were scribes or poets subject to the whims of their lords. In effect, however talented, imaginative or brilliant, they were in effect instruments rather than agents, whose task was to present or serve up gifts for the predilection, approbation and judgement of audiences, first among which presumably were rulers, the mighty, rich and powerful. Agency lay therefore largely with those to whom works were offered. The act of witnessing the reading or performing of such pieces constituted a key aspect of agency.<sup>37</sup>

Another problem that looms for most rationalists is how to account for context and for the audience's prior knowledge or mutual understanding between speakers and listeners. Unless these can be somehow wrapped up in the original statements, the possibility effectively vanishes of determining, independent of context, a definitive meaning or even deciding whether what is said is harmlessly oblique or a dangerous challenge. The philosopher, H.P. Grice's attempt to infer relevant context and listeners' knowledge through the idea of conversational implicature (1969, 1975) was developed by Sperber and Wilson into a detailed theory of relevance (1982, 1986). Had it worked, it might have provided a path through the pitfalls we have encountered. Unfortunately, once you leave the safe territory of the highly-contrived sentences beloved of semanticists, the argument falls apart irretrievably. Applying

---

<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere I have analyzed the reading of a manuscript, which was supposed to give details of the founding of a temple in Tengahpadang to determine the rightful ownership. The *sine qua non* was not the reading, but that a senior prince whose lineage owned the work, attended. He said nothing. His witnessing authorized the event (Hobart 1990).

Nor is this some quaint oriental quirk. Note how early senses of the noun 'audience' according to the OED involves activity and indeed agency. 'The action of hearing; attention to what is spoken. to give audience: to give ear, listen'.

Relevance Theory in Bali would guarantee that the innocent anthropologist or semanticist would miss much of the point (Hobart 2015a). Different people tend to understand what was said or done on any occasion differently. While actors, television and film producers widely appreciate this, it ties academics from rationalists to audience studies' scholars into epistemic knots, because it makes neat explanation difficult, if not impossible. Instead of confronting the issue, people tend to think of ever more elaborate reasons for carrying on as before.

The problems outlined transform radically if we rethink two sets of presuppositions that underpin the approaches criticized. The first is to reject the temptation to import and impose alien rhetorical terms on peoples who have their own (e.g. Sweeney 1987; Sears 1996a); and to include an analysis of what is said and done that pays due respect to how thinking subjects set about commenting on, judging and criticizing these.<sup>38</sup> The second is to avoid plumping for at best a commonsense, at worst a completely unreflective, model of communication as transmission. As I have discussed the former elsewhere, I refrain from repeating myself (1984, 1999).<sup>39</sup> As to the latter, I would argue that the researcher should perhaps start by inquiring into how people in a society themselves think of and evaluate communication, whether through a more or less explicit set of understandings, through what may be inferred from practice, or both. Choosing the most suitable academic account of communication clearly deserves careful reflection. It so happens that Balinese widely use a strikingly pragmatist approach to communication,<sup>40</sup> be it linguistic or visual, which fits the dialogic model laid out by Vološinov.

Orientation of the word toward the addressee has an extremely high significance. In point of fact, *word is a two-sided act*. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is meant. As word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*. Each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other.' I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong (Vološinov 1973: 86).

Put simply, unless you declare spectators effectively passive and irrelevant, in a sense there is no argument if they do not engage with what is said as argument, as something that qualifies, comments on, possibly criticizes a state of affairs or confronts those responsible.

---

<sup>38</sup> That is not to suggest that the intellectual precepts of Euro-American academic analysis are irrelevant, just that they need to be kept separate and not confused.

<sup>39</sup> Balinese actors have a rich vocabulary for different kinds of allusion, metaphor, indirect praise or criticism, which were fairly widely understood by more mature adults in the early 1970s, but which seemed less generally known thirty years later. Interestingly, many have the prefix 'se-'. The following should give an idea of how nuanced such references may be.

*Sesawangan*      The saying of something when the person referred to is not present. More broadly a parable or metaphor.

*Sesentilan*      An indirect reprimand. In Javanese *sentil* is to draw someone's attention gently to something; from flicking with the finger, touching lightly, so criticizing obliquely.

*Sesèrèt*          Allusion, as when a young man flatters a young woman.

*Sesindir*        Hinting at, speaking indirectly, criticizing (as in Indonesian). Javanese *sindhira* is to allude to or drop hints and *sindhira* is teasing allusion, satire (Robson & Wibisono 2002: 681). *(Me)nyindir* in Indonesian may be ostensibly to criticize one person but another is the intended target. Balinese use *sesimbing* here; or *sesimpirin*, which is to graze someone with a weapon, so implying dangerous attack.

<sup>40</sup> In Speech Act terms, if what you say does not yield a result or outcome for the listener, then the utterance was fruitless and empty. Balinese use a delightful image for recognizing you are the butt of a thrust or remark. It is *sakadi negakin gedebong*: like sitting on a banana stem. They are comfortable to sit on for a few minutes, then the weight of the body starts to crush the cells in the stem and you end up with a very wet behind, at which point the realization of what you have done is brought home to you.

The reader might wonder why I have not obviated all these problems by the straightforward expedient of saying that Javanese indirectness, Balinese formalism and so on are simply different cultural codes that an expert can easily explicate—problem solved. After all, etiquette implies a code. If so, by definition some can read and understand what is being signalled, others not.<sup>41</sup> The alternative is what Wittgenstein considered the impossibility of a private language (1958: §243). More reflectively, what appears as *not* engaging in argument (let alone disagreeing) may be precisely the opposite. The possibilities of silences and the nuances of human communication make hard and fast statements about etiquette and argument in Indonesia, or even in Central Java, absurd.

At issue in such accounts of code is another iteration of a naïve model of communication. It appears to make sense because it relies upon a loose sense of semiotics, which fails to consider rigorously the minimal conditions for a code. Geertz sweepingly writes of his approach to symbolism as semiotic, as a code that he promises to decipher and interpret for the reader. However, two writers on semiotics from opposed intellectual camps agree what code is—and what is not.

The one single condition that would permit the consideration of symbolism as a code is not fulfilled: no list gives, no rule generates, a set of pairs (symbol, interpretation) such that each occurrence of a symbol finds in it its prefigured treatment (Sperber 1975: 16).

Even where symbolic codes are explicated to an extraordinary degree, such as the '*code de politesse*' in France, they remain ambiguous, Sperber 1975: 21). In a side-swipe against one of Geertz's rivals, Lévi-Strauss, which works equally against Geertz, Sperber noted:

Semiologists Saussurian semiologists have completely left aside the what-question, and have studied not at all 'How do symbols mean?', but rather 'How do symbols work?' In this study they have established, all unknowing, that symbols work without meaning. Modern semiology, and this is at once its weakness and its merit, has refuted the principles on which it is founded (1975: 51-52).

Then, crucially:

Symbols are not signs. They are not paired with their interpretations in a code structure. Their interpretations are not meanings (1975: 85).

On Sperber's account, the idea of easily explicable cultural codes is a convenient fantasy.

There is an evident difference between, say, philologists or historians who have to work with written records and the traces of past communications and anthropologists who have their subjects breathing, articulating and disagreeing before them. For the latter there is little excuse for falling back on a panacea like code.

Semiotics deals primarily with the transmission of ready-made communication using a ready-made code. But in live speech, strictly speaking, communication is first created in the process of transmission, and there is, in essence, no code.

A context is potentially unfinalized; a code must be finalized. A code is only a technical means

---

<sup>41</sup> It would be interesting to contrast examples of *priyayi* and British understatement. My favourite examples of the latter include:

Any foreign war of whatever magnitude is: a little local trouble.

Captain Oates (on walking out to his death in the Antarctic): 'I am just going outside and may be some time'.

A man who had survived chronic heart failure and was minutes from death, when informed by a paramedic replied: 'Oh, evidently not indigestion then'.

During the bombing of London in World War II, damaged stores missing, say, a roof or some walls, would continue in business with the sign: 'More open than usual'.

During the battle of Waterloo, on having his leg blown off by a cannon ball, Lord Uxbridge remarked: 'By God, sir, I've lost my leg, sir!' to which the Duke of Wellington replied: 'By God, sir, so you have, sir!'

of transmitting information; it does not have cognitive, creative significance. A code is a deliberately established, killed context (Bakhtin 1986b: 147).

Invoking code is then what Morson and Emerson called semiotic totalitarianism:

the assumption that everything has a meaning relating to the seamless whole, a meaning one could discover if one only had the code. This kind of thinking is totalitarian in its assumption that it can, in principle, explain the totality of things; it is semiotic (or cryptographic) in its approach to all apparent accidents as signs of an underlying order to which the given system has the key (1990: 28).

The charms of cultural codes that the privileged expert can unlock to reveal what is going on behind surface appearances turn out to have some most unpalatable sides.

Geertz's explication of what animates '*priyayi* etiquette: the proper form for the proper rank, indirection, dissimulation, and the avoidance of any act suggesting disorder or lack of self-control' (1960: 243) now takes on a new significance. Each aspect is a strategy for avoiding discussion and dialogue by imposing closure. They preclude the possibility of airing issues and arguing them through to some conclusion that has not already been anticipated and pre-empted. In short, they aim to avoid open discussion by monologizing the rough and tumble of social life.<sup>42</sup> When Koentjaraningrat noted that Indonesian civil servants exemplify *priyayi* ways of acting, he touched on the far wider—and little investigated—issue of techniques that politicians, civil servants and those in power in most societies use to evade debate and argument, with the risk that it will show them wanting.

### Two possible thoughts: 1) argument as myth

So far, I have tried to show what many popular and scholarly representations of Javanese and Balinese are not about. So how might we understand what is going on? I would suggest these sorts of representations are social imaginaries: that is 'ways people imagine their social existence' (Taylor 2004: 50). As such, by definition they are selective and, being ideal, may well be counter-factual. Drawing on Barthes's intriguing epidemiology of myth today, what happens if we treat such imaginaries as mythical? It does not of course follow though that people do not strive to live by, or according to what they imagine, such myths as promulgating.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Such strategies

constitute a monologic form of knowledge: the intellect contemplates a *thing* and expounds upon it. There is only one subject here—cognizing (contemplating) and speaking (expounding). In opposition to the subject there is only a *voiceless thing*. Any object of knowledge (including man) can be perceived and cognized as a thing. But a subject as such cannot be perceived and studied as a thing, for as a subject it cannot, while remaining a subject, become voiceless, and, consequently, cognition of it can only be *dialogic* (Bakhtin 1986c: 181).

<sup>43</sup> Barthes's aim was to outline features of contemporary bourgeois myth. Such a mythology 'is a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form' (1973: 112). On his account, a striking feature of the bourgeoisie is that it insistently exnominate itself (1973: 139).

The flight from the name 'bourgeois' is nor therefore an illusory, accidental, secondary, natural or insignificant phenomenon: it is the bourgeois ideology itself, the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature. And this image has a remarkable feature: it is upside down (1973: 141).

For the moment, I shall make use of Barthes's analysis because it is highly suggestive and explores how one class, the bourgeoisie, may play with imagining and social imaginaries. I would add a few *caveats* though. I think we can justifiably consider Euro-American academic and popular accounts as bourgeois. How far though the category is universal and applies cross-culturally and without refinement to Indonesians is an open question. Another is the use of ideology. My concerns differ from Geertz's who, as one would expect, was unhappy with anything to do

Barthes made it clear that he was interested in the 'rhetorical figures' of bourgeois myth.

One must understand here by *rhetoric* a set of fixed, regulated, insistent figures, according to which the varied forms of the mythical signifier arrange themselves (1973: 150).

Treating representations of Indonesians as myth adds a degree of complexity to Barthes' original idea, because it requires other peoples to fit 'the dream of the contemporary bourgeois world' (1973: 151), which here is authored by Euro-Americans. As these representations deal in 'fixed, regulated, insistent figures', they inform us *not* about Indonesians, but about how Westerners imagine Indonesians.<sup>44</sup> With this in mind, let us turn to the principal figures of such myth.

The first feature is *inoculation* by which

one immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion (1973: 150).

Showing anger or raising your voice are then acknowledged weaknesses to which Westerners may succumb. However, the alternative is that your interlocutor might well feel compelled to resign or run amok. Indonesians live in so constrained a world that such extreme behaviour serves to exculpate the excesses of the West, which pale by comparison.<sup>45</sup>

The second figure is *the privation of History*.

Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History... Nothing is produced, nothing is chosen: all one has to do is to possess these new objects from which all soiling trace of origin or choice has been removed. This miraculous evaporation of history is another form of a concept common to most bourgeois myths: the irresponsibility of man (1973: 151).

Earlier I noted that a precondition for depicting a society as effectively argument-free is that history had to be wiped out. Instead the Western subject is free to condemn, appreciate and comment. 'All that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from' (1973: 151).

Next Barthes turns to the process of *identification*.

The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. In the petit-bourgeois universe, all the experiences of confrontation are reverberating, any otherness is reduced to sameness. The spectacle or the tribunal, which are both places where the Other threatens to appear in full view, become mirrors. This is because the Other is a scandal which threatens his essence (1973: 151).

---

with Marxist ideology, because it threatened the revelatory nature of culture as a Parsonian symbolic system (1973g). My reservations apply as much to Geertz's approach as to paleo-Marxist or Althusserian ones. As Althusser's former student, Ernesto Laclau noted, such accounts presuppose ideology to involve assumptions of a social totality or system, which is both essentialist and implausible (1990). Also they presume consciousness to be unitary, instead of fragmented and situational. Amusingly both criticisms apply with equal force to Geertz's approach. Obviously, you could treat ideal models of Javanese and Balinese as ideological instances of social imaginaries. However, I do not think they add much here to what one can say in plain English.

<sup>44</sup> A finer-grained study would explore different European and American styles and figures used in such cognizing. I deliberately use the vague terms 'Western' and 'Indonesian' because the imaginaries in question tend to assume and normalize the unity of the enunciating subjects and bundle the referents into convenient stereotypes.

<sup>45</sup> These, of course, include what took place under colonialism, two world wars, the routine subversion of properly elected governments by the CIA, mass surveillance by the NSA and GCHQ, and the antics of multinational corporations like Google.

While the stereotypes in diplomatic, business and tourist guides might seem to fit nicely, at first sight professional anthropological writing, such as Geertz's on Java, would appear to give the lie to this mythical possibility. However, Barthes continues:

Sometimes—rarely—the Other is revealed as irreducible: not because of a sudden scruple, but because *common sense* rebels. . . There is here a figure for emergencies: exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home (1973: 152).

It would, I think, be a rather odd reader who did not find Geertz's portrayal of *priyayi* as exotic. However, one aspect of *The religion of Java* is worth a little more attention. Consider these sentences:

I have seen many *prijaji* conversations that seemed to consist almost entirely of an attempt by each of the participants to put himself in the lower position, a kind of obsessive competition to be bottom dog. (The competition is pretense, of course. If either were to flatly acknowledge the other's inferiority in such a situation it would be a grave insult.) (1960: 243).

Difference language in greeting a higher or lower person than oneself. Clearly, a peculiar obsession is at work here (1960: 238)

Presumably Geertz intended to highlight the differences between *priyayi* and 'us' by deliberately drawing on so evidently ethnocentrically evaluative an expression. However, when does a rhetorical device become a mirror in which others appear as pure objects or spectacles?

On the obsession index, Javanese get off fairly lightly compared to Balinese. Geertz writes of 'Balinese obsessive playfulness' (1973c: 119); 'the ruling obsessions of Balinese culture' (1973h: 335); the 'ceremonialization' of Balinese social interaction is 'an obsessing ideal' (1973f: 399); cockfighting as 'a popular obsession of consuming power' (1973a: 417) in which even fixing spurs is 'an obsessive deliberate affair' (1974a: 422). On the theme of argument, anger and conflict, Geertz's interpretation of Bali is fairly unambiguous. Recall my opening quotation.

the Balinese are shy to the point of obsessiveness of open conflict (1973a: 446).

Geertz continues:

Balinese go to cockfights to find out what a man, usually composed, aloof, almost obsessively self-absorbed, a kind of moral autocosm, feels like when, attacked, tormented, challenged, insulted, and driven in result to the extremes of fury, he has totally triumphed or been brought totally low (1973a: 450).

When it comes to Bali, there are no longer any differences between princes and peasants. To a man and woman, they subscribe to a compulsory—and, for them, compulsive—body of collective representations. Where they differ from Javanese *priyayi* seems to be (thanks to Bateson and Mead 1942) that, pushed too far, they go into trance, easily run amok or experience emotional extremes off the Richter scale. I leave it to the reader to decide whether or not such descriptions fit Barthes' characterization of myth.

The fourth figure is *tautology*.

One takes refuge in tautology as one does in fear, or anger, or sadness, when one is at a loss for an explanation: the accidental failure of language is magically identified with what one decides is a natural resistance of the object. . . Tautology creates a dead, a motionless world (1973: 152-3).

Language can only hint at the weird and wonderful world of the *priyayi*, which resists explanation in terms of rational argument and only makes sense through recourse to mysticism. I noted earlier that this world is timeless, suspended, moribund.

The final relevant figure is *the statement of fact*.<sup>46</sup>

Popular, ancestral proverbs still partake of an instrumental grasp of the world as object. A rural statement of fact, such as '*the weather is fine*' keeps a real link with the usefulness of fine weather. It is an implicitly technological statement; the word, here, in spite of its general, abstract form, paves the way for actions, it inserts itself into a fabricating order: the farmer does not speak *about* the weather, he 'acts it', he draws it into his labour. All our popular proverbs thus represent active speech which has gradually solidified into reflexive speech... Bourgeois aphorisms, on the other hand, belong to metalanguage; they are a second-order language which bears on objects already prepared. Their classical form is the maxim. Here the statement is no longer directed towards a world to be made; it must overlay one which is already made, bury the traces of this production under a self-evident appearance of eternity: it is a counter-explanation, the decorous equivalent of a tautology (1973: 154-5).

This figure starts to make sense of the popular penchant for declaring Balinese culture to be, if not *sui generis* and timeless, then of such antiquity as to defy easy reckoning or the need to bother. For example, from received accounts we have scant idea how Balinese styles of addressing conflict dealt with day-to-day problems. Subsequent detailed ethnographic studies have suggested that Geertz's broad depiction is a caricature. Although his study of *priyayi* offers examples, these are mostly as reported to Geertz by his informants. Both the guides' and Geertz's accounts are in meta-language in Barthes' sense. The traces of the circumstances under which styles of self-presentation in public have been neatly buried in favour of facts in a timeless, contextless world. It is interesting to think of such accounts as 'counter-explanation'.

An alternative starting point might have been to consider when people—Indonesians or others—find it advisable to avoid argument and disagreement. An obvious circumstance is when a kind of hierarchy of authority or power prevails, such that disagreeing with those senior to oneself is likely to lead to unpleasant consequences. This strategy is encapsulated in the expression popular under the paternalistic New Order régime: *Asal Bapak senang*, 'So long as the boss is happy'. Arguably this is about survival as much, or more, than some deep, even unconscious, cultural imperative.<sup>47</sup>

May I now complicate my own argument? There are no simple definitive characteristics that distinguish argumentation from disagreement because argument is ultimately an abstract notion. It is subject to being articulated and imagined in different ways, which may involve metaphor. For instance, Lakoff and Johnson proposed that 'we' commonly use conceptual metaphors 'to structure everyday activity', exemplified by 'ARGUMENT IS WAR'. They continue:

It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we

---

<sup>46</sup> Here I omit two figures: *Neither-Norism* and *the quantification of quality*. In a fuller treatment, it would be fun to see if it were possible to develop these two to explore aspects of representations of Indonesian etiquette around argument and confrontation that I have not unravelled here and at the same time extend Barthes' analysis.

<sup>47</sup> Over the last forty years I have taught many courses in Indonesian universities. Students always started out being courteous and skirting round questions that might be construed as taking issue with what I said, until I made it clear that I welcomed such questions. Sometimes it took one class, sometimes only a few minutes, before the students became as splendidly argumentative with me and with one another as students anywhere else that I have taught. They were, sensibly, waiting to find out the rules of the game. On occasions, during the cut and thrust of these arguments, I have quietly said to myself: 'Cliff, I wish you were here to hear what you have to say to all this'. In short, before we invoke exotic essences, we might look to more prosaic considerations.

find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument—attack, defense, counterattack, etc.—reflects this (1980: 4).

Alternative obvious possible metaphors include argument as dance.<sup>48</sup> As the uncritical reference to 'we' above indicates, as it stands this exposition is Eurocentric. Whether, when and under what circumstances Europeans and Americans employ metaphors when such connotations are pertinent remains a matter for inquiry. To assume people in other societies adopt similar ideas of argument, discussion or debate, insofar as there are comparable terms, or deploy metaphor with equal abandon is unjustifiably hegemonic. In short, a first step is to inquire into how different classes and categories of people in any society variously evaluate practices of arguing. That is no small project.

### Two possible thoughts: argument as performance

An alternative—treating argument as performance—throws certain aspects into relief, but also raises complications. Public arguments, by definition, involve presentation, use of potentially multiple media (language, extra-linguistic elements, sound, gesture, facial expression and so on) and not least an audience. To attract or hold people's attention may require spectacle. To reach out to them effectively calls for skilled delivery. To receive a sympathetic response, it helps to appear trustworthy. To persuade your listeners you need to reason credibly and cogently, by whatever criteria your audience consider compelling.<sup>49</sup> To amplify, I draw on ethnographic examples from *Beyond words* (2015b).

Starting with formal meetings (such as *banjar*), as villagers are obliged to attend, spectacle is unnecessary; but to win support, delivery, credibility and cogency are. When visiting a local healer (*balian*), several elements may come into play. As would Europeans with a doctor, petitioners expect the setup and *balian*'s presentation to be appropriate, while imitating the voice or mannerisms of the presumed communicatee lends authenticity. As with the Balian Lantang Hidung though, the reasoning must be persuasive and convincing (2015b: 13-18). During the *Sendratari*, Pandawa Asrama, what engaged the spectators? For a start of course, as a piece of theatre, it was a splendid spectacle (2015b: 18-19). While my account could only touch on what the *dalang* said, as also an exceptionally fine actor-orator, the para- and extra-linguistic aspects of his speech were skilled and drew the audience in, as did his ability neatly to weave in a quite separate set of references. His reputation for independence and truthfulness however marked out what he said. And juxtaposing a moral injunction about the behaviour expected of rulers with the actuality known to the spectators made the point elegantly and convincingly. In the limiting case, spectacle may be paramount, as when the decline in aristocratic authority was cruelly exposed by Cokordas being obliged to shoulder a bier, while villagers calmly looked on (2015b: 8). Finally, when Ketut Mara walked into the village trailing cloth over his shoulders, it was the combination of his character and the audacity and originality

<sup>48</sup> When I first joined the Anthropology Department at SOAS in 1968, during question time after the weekly seminar paper, you could work out the precise academic hierarchy from the order of questions. First the head of department spoke, then the other professors, then the readers, then, if there were time, lecturers were permitted a brief twirl. I still recall the look of shocked surprise when right at the end I, a mere postgraduate, dared to ask a question. The entire proceedings were reminiscent of some intricate, ritualized choreography, an image that discussion at seminars and conferences often brings back to mind.

<sup>49</sup> I draw here on Aristotle's definition: 'every drama alike has spectacle, character, plot, diction, song and reasoning' (Aristotle 1996: 11; Butcher's translation gives 'thought' for 'reasoning', 1902: 25). Phrased this way, public argument invites critical analysis using Cultural Studies, not least Audience Studies.

of his act that made words redundant (2015b: 23-4). *Prima facie* these encounters seem to have elements of the theatrical.

Earlier European sources underwrite the idea that arguing involves a demonstration or display in which effective persuasion depends on skill in the 'style of expression' or the deployment of dramatic technique (Aristotle 2014: 112ff).<sup>50</sup> So far so good. However, the term in contemporary English alone has a wide fan of quite distinct connotations, melding which gives the notion much of its frisson and appeal. So we need to disentangle some of the senses of performance.

Anthropologists have often invoked the idea of society as involving dramatic theatrical presentation in different ways—whether as aiming to impress or express. Perhaps most simply, theatre may be used, following (Goffman 1959), explicitly to refer to a 'kind of performance' aimed at determining 'the impression they will create on the people with whom they interact' (Hendry 2017: 267). People may express thoughts and ideas through social action, to which the European analogy of drama lends itself. So Geertz framed the Balinese state as theatrical because on his account its politics were not, as one might expect, instrumental but explicitly and persistently expressive. Drawing upon a similar hermeneutic pedigree, Turner spelled out why social action may be considered as expressive (so making the anthropologist a dramaturg).

In a sense, every type of cultural performance, including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre, and poetry, is explanation and explication of life itself, as Dilthey often argued. Through the performance process itself, what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of sociocultural life, is drawn forth—Dilthey uses the term *Ausdruck*, 'an expression', from *ausdrucken*, literally, 'to press or squeeze out' [which] cries out for penetrative, imaginative understanding... An experience is itself a process which 'presses out' to an 'expression' which completes it... Experience is incomplete unless one of its moments is 'performance', an act of creative retrospection in which 'meaning' is ascribed to the events and parts of experience (1982: 13, 18).

This kind of argument presupposes, as Johannes Fabian noted, framing what other people do through a series of classical European dichotomies of body *versus* mind: 'reference versus connotation, instrumental versus expressive behavior, material versus symbolic aspects of society and culture' (1990: 6). But what if other peoples fail to articulate, organize, understand or evaluate their social life using such European distinctions? Balinese do not do so. Moreover they desist from applying theatrical analogies to other kinds of social practice.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Arguing is a performance in the sense of 'the doing of any action or work' (OED).

Acts are done from habit which men do because they have often done them before. Actions are due to reasoning when, in view of any of the goods already mentioned, they appear useful either as ends or as means to an end, and are performed for that reason (Aristotle 2014: 38)

Arguing however is a singular kind of action because it involves rhetoric, which is a complex art in that it requires an audience.

Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion... Of the modes of persuasion some belong strictly to the art of rhetoric... Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself (Aristotle 2014: 7-8).

Persuasion itself

is clearly a sort of demonstration, since we are most fully persuaded when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated (Aristotle 2014: 5-6).

In Book II of Rhetoric, Aristotle goes on to discuss in detail the role of dramatic performance in argument.

<sup>51</sup> Balinese are, of course, celebrated for their theatre and dance. However, when I remarked that some other activity seemed to me distinctly theatrical, people looked puzzled, because Balinese generally eschewed such

A more nuanced way of thinking about expressing is as becoming aware of, or bringing something about, that before was perhaps abstract unclear or inchoate (e.g. Collingwood 1938: 105-24). Fabian complicated the play of such familiar, convenient, but potentially misapplied, dualisms, by asking when are social actions informative as against performative? Anthropologists

have been ingenious in extracting hard information on social structure or ecological adaptations from myths, rituals, music, masks, and other 'representations' of culture. What has not been given sufficient consideration is that about large areas and important aspects of culture no one, not even the native, has information that can simply be called up and expressed in discursive statements. This sort of knowledge can be represented—made present—only through action, enactment, or performance. In fact, once one sees matters in this light, the answers we get to our ethnographic questions can be interpreted as so many cultural performances. Cultural knowledge is always mediated by 'acting' (1990: 6-7).

A theatrical image of culture as expressive is set against a pragmatist account of doing. However, there is an ambiguity in the English connotations of 'acting' as bringing about, making, doing as against re-presenting, mimicking, dissimulating, which carries over into whether performance implies artifice as against authenticity, a simulacrum as against creation and change. It is not always clear whether, when and to what degree treating society as theatre is metaphorical, substantive or deliberately ambiguous.<sup>52</sup> In stressing seeming similarities, it neatly obscures all the differences and even that such events are open to conflicting understanding. Invoking a dramaturgical image is as titillating as it is ultimately vacuous.

There is a quite different sense of performance, namely the performative, a term made famous in Austin's *How to do things with words*. As the title suggests a performative utterance 'indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action' (1962: 6), which may be more or less explicit (1962: 32). Judith Butler developed Foucault's idea that discursive actions bring about states of affairs, as when 'juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent' (1990: 2), into a full-blown account of the performative as constitutive. Despite much confusion and sometimes wilful misreading of her, what Butler said was pretty clear.

It is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject,

---

sustained analogies, regarding them as plain category mistakes. Whether the contemporary Indonesian expression '*Kehidupan adalah panggung sandiwara*' (Life is a stage) is Shakespearean or Qur'anic in derivation, I leave to others to investigate.

<sup>52</sup> Deleuze spelled out the stark difference between the conventional account adopted *inter alia* by Geertz and Turner and a pragmatist one.

Theatre is real movement, and it extracts real movement from all the arts it employs. This is what we are told: this movement, the essence and the inferiority of movement, is *not opposition, not mediation*, but repetition... [Hegel] represents concepts instead of dramatizing Ideas: he creates a false theatre, a false drama, a false movement... The theatre of repetition is opposed to the theatre of representation, just as movement is opposed to the concept and to representation which refers it back to the concept. In the theatre of repetition, we experience pure forces, dynamic lines in space which act without intermediary upon the spirit, and link it directly with nature and history, with a language which speaks before words, with gestures which develop before organised bodies, with masks before faces, with spectres and phantoms before characters—the whole apparatus of repetition as a 'terrible power' (1994: 10; my parentheses).

It is not coincidental that Deleuze uses the image of theatre to such different effect. He was drawing upon Artaud's writing about Balinese theatre (1978). For Deleuze, repeating is not doing the same thing again and again, but to renew, to question, to refuse to remain the same.

Fabian himself was ambivalent about his usage. At a colloquium in Heidelberg many years ago, Talal Asad pressed Fabian to clarify whether his sense of performance involved dissimulation. After lengthy reflection, he said that he thought it did.

but the latter contests the very notion of the subject... it's useful to turn to the notion of performativity and performative speech acts in particular—understood as those speech acts that bring into being that which they name. This is the moment in which discourse becomes productive in a fairly specific way. So what I'm trying to do is think about performativity as *that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names...* Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed. [So] performance needs to be rethought here as a ritualistic reproduction, in terms of what I now call 'performativity' (1994: 33-34; my parentheses).<sup>53</sup>

The differences between the two ideas of theatre could hardly be starker. The theatrical image purports to achieve a remarkable act of cross-discursive translation by delivering a unique, intimate and otherwise inaccessible understanding of what other peoples say and even what they think. By contrast the performative account is rigorously analytical in that it provides a critical academic framework for investigating another society that makes no claim to privileged access to others' minds.

Austin's explication of the performative is problematic. Set against the constative (utterances that are descriptive or evaluable as true or false), it presupposes that saying and doing something with words is ultimately a tenable distinction.<sup>54</sup> A strong pragmatist account however would recognize that even the most apparently neutral descriptions or statements are implicated in assemblages of articulatory practices through which social actuality is continually being reworked. This is not highfalutin theory. The conventional anthropological literature on Bali emphasizes the remarkable stability, cohesiveness and continuity of village corporate groups. However a closer ethnographic examination show how social groups and institutions in Bali endlessly make and remake themselves (e.g. Hobart 1979). Despite an ideology to the contrary, who exactly comprise the membership in any instance, what status the regulations have, how they are to be interpreted and implemented on any particular occasion, and what legitimate authority devolves on leaders all vary significantly depending on the context and occasion. Also, not only is what is ostensibly agreed in public often undermined by private, indeed secret, political dealing, but there is far more uncertainty and indeterminacy between what is formally decided at meetings and what actually happens afterwards (Hobart 1975). The reasons are many. One is that much knowledge remains oral and, if written, is subject to selective inscription and interpretation. Crucially though Balinese groups mostly operate using precedent. What exactly is the case jurally depends on past decisions. So it hinges on who remembers what, and how they interpret and represent it on different occasions for different purposes. Balinese society, considered in terms of articulatory practices, is thoroughly performative in more ways than most accounts suggest. Utterances do things because, not least where precedent is so important, decisions and events are continually being re-presented and

---

<sup>53</sup> In *Gender trouble*, Butler treated expression as performative.

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (1990: 25).

Acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality (1990: 136).

In returning performance to ritual, Butler incidentally outlines the genealogy of Turner's move from ritual to theatre. Ritual however is another of those Eurocentric notions we love to impose on others. So, instead of 'ritualistic reproduction', I prefer to think of pre-articulated practices, because both religious rites and much theatre is monologic. Depending on the circumstances, theatre plays in Java and Bali may be more or less dialogic (Hobart 2000b).

<sup>54</sup> Derrida (1988) addresses some of the issues in a sympathetic reading of Austin.

reworked. As philosophers, Austin and Butler work remotely from the circumstances of daily practice, in which the complexities of context, occasion and motivation make contingency and performativity ineluctable conditions under which most social action happens. It is in this ethnographic articulatory sense that I use the notion of the performative.

Both commonsense theatrical and post-Austinian analytical senses of performance have a European pedigree. Thought-provoking as their interpretive use elsewhere may be, so doing easily obscures, or even negates, the need for a critical examination of how other people understand and evaluate their social practices. And, asking how to translate 'performance' in different non-European languages is an exercise in futility, if not bigotry, because it presupposes there to be some cross-cultural essence that only needs identifying, which puts the aprioristic cart firmly before the ethnographic horse.<sup>55</sup> So, has my suggestion that we consider argument as a performance run into intellectual quicksand? The answer is no, for two reasons among others. First, I invoked 'argument *as*'; in other words, rather than try to find an essence of argument. The formulation invites us to ask under what circumstances examining argument *as* performance may prove revealing as a critical interrogatory exercise, which is potentially worthwhile, provided we do not conflate or confuse it with local understandings and practice. How the members of any society identify, talk about and engage with what we would call 'arguing' is a quite distinct, but vital, issue. Second, shunning Eurocentric analogies enables us to inquire with less prejudice how people do actually set about categorizing, appreciating, commenting on and evaluating their own practices.

Balinese usage of the panoply of expressions for discussing, arguing and so forth is instructive. Let me start with two: *mabligbagan* and *majugjagan*. Both have the sense of discussing, debating, arguing. However, when Balinese use *mabligbagan*, it implies thinking through in the hope or expectation of finding a reasonable and agreed solution to the matter in hand. By contrast, *majugjagan* (as the onomatopoeia suggests) implies arguing to and fro, arguing over, thrashing an issue around, but in the anticipation that discussion may well not end in agreement (which is why it may be glossed as 'quarrel'). The terms are potentially both descriptive and evaluative. The participants may indicate how they are approaching, or approached, a discussion by using one or the other. However, going into a discussion involves uncertainty: you do not always know how others will react, what the outcome will be, or even whether everyone agrees what it was. So interested parties may deploy the terms retrospectively to judge or frame what happened.<sup>56</sup> As Balinese use such expressions, they are

---

<sup>55</sup> Leaving aside Balinese, even Indonesian, which has been subjected to the rigours of Western grammarians, has no comparable broad notion of performance. Instead the various senses are split between words that are not cognate. For instance, *pertunjukan* is show, display, exhibition, performance, act, engagement; *tontonan* is performance, presentation, show, exhibit, exhibition, spectacle, something that people look at (in a negative sense); *permainan* is play, toy, performance, show, game, woman as a plaything; and *tamasya* (from the Persian), tour, excursion, scenery, performance, spectacle. That leaves aside the senses of performance as carrying out a command or accomplishment (*penyelenggaraan*), or *pelaksanaan* as execution, implementing, performance, fulfilment, completion or practice; *perbuatan* as act, deed, action, behaviour, performance; or *prestasi* (from the Dutch) as achievement, performance (definitions from Stevens & Schmidgall-Tellings 2004). There are others.

<sup>56</sup> Needless to say, matters are not so simple. These glosses are extrapolated from the contexts in which Balinese actually use them. As Appendix 2 to *Beyond words* indicates, there is a battery of words and expressions for chat, discuss, argue, disagree and so on. Skilled speakers add nuance, which skilled listeners appreciate, both the contextual overtones of a particular word and through the resonances of the terms that they did not use. Two examples from a *Prèmbon* play, Gusti Panji Sakti, broadcast by TVRI Denpasar in December 1990 may make the point. Both are said by a court servant (Wijil) to his elder brother. The Balinese and English glosses for 'argue' are in bold. The translations were suggested to me by Balinese as most fitting in the context.

not necessarily mere descriptions but become part of a series of articulations that establish what kind of event took place. In short, the boot is on the other foot. Rather than resort to the tired exercise of trying to establish what native words translate European categories, why not start with how different peoples use and reflect on how they engage with others, draw out the implications and review what is at issue in European presuppositions?

### What now?

A lengthy conclusion would be out of place. The purpose of this piece was to question a range of popular and academic representations of Indonesians—which usually meant an idealized version of Central Javanese court society—as going to extremes to avoid the appearance of argument or disagreement and to emphasize calm, a distinctly hierarchical, but secure and unquestioned, order, underwritten by a hegemony exercised through art, theatre and mysticism. The account only works by adopting the same rigid closure and negation of what is actually going on as does its object of study.<sup>57</sup> However, as the brief discussion of television genres shows, far from an elegant monologue appreciated by a vast cast of uncritical, gullible political subjects, a lively—even ferocious—argument is going on, which exponents of the *priyayi* model have to downplay, deny or oblivate.

In short, the accounts we considered earlier are representations by a particular class aimed at the rest of society with the purpose of maintaining their previous, ‘feudal’ privileges under changed social conditions. In order to carry conviction, these articulations have to aspire to be hegemonic and so to silence, or at least marginalize, counter-articulations. It is instances of these latter that abound in the mass media following Suharto’s resignation. Earlier I raised the question of the epistemological status of etiquette, as a shorthand for a way of life that of necessity seeks to eliminate even the possibility of argument. Argument as argumentation implies the possibility of an alternative account. Argument as disagreement shows its actuality. If, instead of regarding this deadening of discussion as a statement of fact but as a performance, rethinking argument becomes not only possible, but urgent.<sup>58</sup> Otherwise we are left with the absurdity of being authoritatively informed the one hand that Balinese obsessively avoid open conflict, on the other watching the same Balinese enjoying *Dèlem* threatening to pull Sang Suratma’s head off.

---

Wijil: Let's go for a stroll in the palace, so that we will have longer to **chat**. I have something to tell you. (*Adi jalan-jalan di Puri baosang Adi, apang maan makelonang mabligbagan. Ada pabuat ané lakar raosang Beli.*)

Wijil: You and I do not need to **quarrel** about what made the State of Mengwi great. (*Sing sedeng buwin Beli jugjagan buat kamelahang Panegara Mengwiné, ané ngaranayang ento.*)

In the first example, Wijil hints that the chat is a way of introducing something that he wants to discuss with his brother. In the second, the use of *jugjag* is rhetorical: there is nothing we could possibly disagree about.

<sup>57</sup> Koentjaraningrat once remarked to me that one should not underestimate the epistemological importance the Dutch invested in *wayang* (shadow theatre) in Java as a synecdoche that gave them a way of totalizing, and so comprehending, Javanese society, which they had struggled to understand. He added that he had conducted a large survey, which included trying to establish what proportion of Javanese watched *wayang*. He discovered that only a minority of Javanese questioned had ever actually seen a *wayang* performance.

<sup>58</sup> If performance is to become a concept doing serious work, it requires us to develop a way of thinking about, judging and criticizing performance. Otherwise we have merely replaced etiquette or its synonyms with performance.

## Bibliography

- Ali, M. 1965. Historiographical problems. In *An introduction to Indonesian historiography*. eds. Soedjatmoko *et al.* Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Anderson, B.R. O'G, 1990. The idea of power in Javanese culture. In *Language and power: exploring political cultures in Indonesia*. London: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Aristotle, 1902. *The poetics of Aristotle*. Trans. S.H. Butcher, London: MacMillan.
- 1996. *Poetics*. Trans. M. Heath, London: Penguin.
- 2014 [1954]. *Rhetoric*. trans. W. Rhys Roberts, New York: Modern library; web version 2014, eBooks@Adelaide.
- Artaud, A. 1978. Sur le théâtre Balinais. In *Œuvres complètes*, Tome IV. Paris; Gallimard.
- Bachtiar, H.W. 1973. The religion of Java: a commentary. *Madjallah ilmu-ilmu sastra Indonesia*. 5, 1: 85-118.
- Bakhtin, M.M. 1984. Towards a reworking of the Dostoevsky book. Appendix 2 to *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. Trans. C. Emerson, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- 1986a. Towards a philosophy of the act. Trans. G. Morson & C. Emerson, from K filosofii postupka 1984-85 issue of *Filosofiia i sotsiologiia nauki i tekhniki*, a yearbook of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Moscow: Nauka.
- 1986b. From notes made in 1970-71. In *Speech genres and other late essays*. trans. V.W. McGee, eds. C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Austin: Univ. of Texas Press.
- 1986c. Towards a methodology for the human sciences. In *Speech genres and other late essays*. trans. V.W. McGee, eds. C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Austin: Univ. of Texas Press.
- Barthes, R. 1973. Myth today. In *Mythologies*. trans. A. Lavers, London: Paladin.
- 1977a. From work to text. In *Image-music-text*. trans. S. Heath, Glasgow: Collins.
- 1977b. The death of the author. In *Image-music-text*. trans. S. Heath, Glasgow: Collins.
- Bateson, G. 1973. Bali: the value system of a steady state. In *Steps to an ecology of mind: collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution and epistemology*. St. Albans: Paladin.
- & Mead, M. 1942. *Balinese character: a photographic analysis*. New York: Academy of Sciences.
- Becker, A. 1979. Text-building, epistemology and aesthetics in Javanese shadow theatre. in *The imagination of reality: essays in Southeast Asian coherence systems*. eds. A.L. Becker and A.A. Yengoyan. New York: Ablex, 211-243.
- Berg, C.C. 1965. The Javanese picture of the past. In *An introduction to Indonesian historiography*. eds. Soedjatmoko *et al.* Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Boon, J.A. 1977. *The anthropological romance of Bali 1597-1972: dynamic perspectives in marriage and caste, politics and religion*. Cambridge: Univ. Press.
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge.
- 1994. Gender as performance: an interview with Judith Butler. *Radical philosophy*. 67: 32-39.

- Centre for Intercultural Learning, 2014. *Indonesia: cultural information*. Government of Canada. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup>. June 2016.
- Clifford, J. 1988. On ethnographic authority. In *The predicament of culture: twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. London: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Collingwood, R.G. 1938. *The principles of art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Commisceo Global 2016. Indonesia: country guides. <http://www.commisceo-global.com/country-guides/indonesia-guide>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup>. June 2016.
- Creese, H. 2004. *Women of the kakawin world: marriage and sexuality in the Indic courts of Java and Bali*. London: M.E. Sharpe.
- Dalton, B. 1995. *Indonesia handbook*. Chico, CA: Moon.
- Deleuze, G. 1994. *Difference and repetition*. trans. P. Patton, New York: Columbia Univ. Press.
- Derrida, J. 1988. Signature event context. In *Limited Inc.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press.
- e Diplomat 2016. *Indonesia*. Cultural etiquette. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup>. June 2016.
- Errington, S. 1979. Some comments on style in the meanings of the past. *Journal of Asian Studies* 38, 2: 231-244.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1934. Lévy-Bruhl's theory of primitive mentality. *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts, Egyptian Univ. Cairo*. 2, 1: 1-26.
- Export.gov. 2012. Useful tips. Doing business in Indonesia. <http://www.export.gov/indonesia/doingbusinessinindonesia/index.asp>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup>. June 2016.
- Fabian, J. 1990. *Power and performance: ethnographic explorations through proverbial wisdom and theater in Shaba, Zaire*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin.
- 1991. Culture, time and the object of anthropology. In *Time and the work of anthropology*. New York: Harwood.
- FISIPOL UGM, 2016. *Standar operasional prosedur penyusunan skripsi*. Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta.
- Foucault, M. 1980. What is an author? In *Textual strategies: perspectives in post-structuralist criticism*. ed. J.V. Harari, London: Methuen.
- 1982. The subject and power. Afterword to *Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. eds. H.L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow, Brighton: Harvester.
- Fox, R. 2011. *Critical reflections on religion and media in contemporary Bali*. Leiden: Brill.
- Geertz, C. 1960. *The religion of Java*. London: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- 1963. *Peddlers and princes: social change and economic modernization in two Indonesian towns*. London: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- 1973a. Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight. in *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1973b. Thick description: towards an interpretive theory of culture. In his *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1973c. Religion as a cultural system. In *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1973d. Ethos, world view, and the analysis of sacred symbols. In *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1973e. Ritual and social change: a Javanese example. In *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

- 1973f. Person, time, and conduct in Bali. In *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1973g. Ideology as a cultural system. In *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1973h. Politics past, politics present: some notes on the uses of anthropology in understanding the new states. In *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1980. *Negara: the theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali*. Princeton, N.J.: Univ. Press.
- Geertz, H. 1994. *Images of power: Balinese paintings made for Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead*. Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press.
- Goffman, I. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Goodman, N. 1968. *Languages of art*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill
- Grice, H.P. 1969. Utterer's meaning, sentence meaning, and word meaning. *Foundations of language* 4, 225-42.
- 1975. Logic and conversation. in *Syntax and semantics 3: speech acts*. eds. P. Cole & J. Morgan, London: Academic Press.
- Hall, S. 1980. Cultural studies and the Centre: some problematics and problems. In *Culture, media, language: working papers in cultural studies, 1972-79*. eds. S. Hall *et al.* London: Unwin Hyman.
- 1990. The whites of their eyes: racist ideologies and the media. In *The media reader*. eds. M. Alvarado & J.O. Thompson, London: British Film Institute.
- Hallpike, C.R. 1979. *The foundations of primitive thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hendry, J. 2017. Humidity, hygiene, or ritual care: some thoughts on wrapping as a social phenomenon. In *An anthropological lifetime in Japan: the writings of Joy Hendry*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hobart, M. 1975. Orators and patrons: two types of political leader in Balinese village society. In *Political language and oratory in traditional society*. ed. M.E.S. Bloch, London & New York: Academic Press
- 1979. *A Balinese village and its field of social relations*. 2 vols, Ph.D. thesis in the Univ. of London.
- 1984. *Understanding a thing: some problems in Balinese naming*. Paper to the University of London Intercollegiate Seminar in Anthropology 1984; available at <http://www.criticalia.org/bibliographies/select-bibliography---mark/understanding-a-thing.pdf>.
- 1990. The patience of plants: a note on agency in Bali. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian affairs* 24, 2: 90-135.
- 1999. As they like it: overinterpretation and hyporeality in Bali. In *The problem of context*. ed. R. Dilley, Oxford: Berghahn, 105-144.
- 2000a. *After culture. anthropology as radical metaphysical critique*. Yogyakarta: Duta Wacana Press; freely accessible online at <http://www.criticalia.org/Books.htm>.
- 2000b. Live or dead? How dialogic is theatre in Bali? In *To change Bali. essays in honour of I Gusti Ngurah Bagus*. ed. A. Vickers and Ny. Darma Putra with M. Ford. Denpasar: Bali Post.
- 2006. Entertaining illusions: how Indonesian élites imagine reality TV affects the masses. In *Entertainment media in Indonesia*. eds. M. Hobart & R. Fox, special edition of *Asian journal of communication* 16: 4: 393-410.

- 2015. Beyond the Whorfs of Dover: a study of Balinese interpretive practices. *Heidelberg ethnology, occasional papers* 1: 1-20.
- 2015. Beyond Words: Some thoughts about how Balinese argue. Paper to symposium on *How Indonesians Argue*, July 2015; <http://www.criticalia.org/symposia--panels/hobart---beyond-words.pdf>.
- 2016. Of Popes and soaps: on argument, authority and audiences. Paper to symposium on *How Indonesians Argue*, July 2016; <http://www.criticalia.org/bibliographies/select-bibliography---mark/hobart---of-popes-and-soaps.pdf>.
- Hofstede, G. 2016. *Indonesia: Indonesian business etiquette, vital manners, cross cultural communication*. Geert Hofstede Analysis, <http://www.cyborlink.com/besite/indonesia.htm> accessed 12<sup>th</sup>. June 2016.
- Hollis, M. and Lukes, S. eds. 1982. *Rationality and relativism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hüsken, F. & de Jonge, H. eds. 2002. *Violence and vengeance: discontent and conflict in New Order Indonesia*. Nijmegen: NICCOS.
- Jakobson, R. 1960. Concluding statement: linguistics and poetics. In *Style in language*. ed. T. Sebeok, Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.
- Keeler, W. 1987. *Javanese shadow plays, Javanese selves*. Princeton, N.J.: Univ. Press.
- Koentjaraningrat, R.M. 1963. Review: The religion of Java. Clifford Geertz. *Madjallah ilmu-ilmu sastra Indonesia* 1: 188-91.
- 1975. *Anthropology in Indonesia: a bibliographical review*. Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Bibliographical Series 8, The Hague: Nijhoff.
- 1985. *Javanese culture*. Singapore: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Laclau, E. 1990. The impossibility of society. In *New reflections on the revolution of our time*. London: Verso.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. London: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Lévy-Bruhl, L. 1926. *How natives think*. trans. L.A. Clare, London: Allen & Unwin.
- 1975. The notebooks on primitive mentality. trans. P. Rivière, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Living in Indonesia 2015. Cross cultural understanding. *Doing business in Indonesia*. <http://www.expatri.or.id> accessed 12<sup>th</sup>. June 2016.
- Morson, G.S. & Emerson, C. 1990. *Mikhail Bakhtin: creation of a prosaics*. Stanford, Ca.: Univ. Press.
- Overing, J. ed. 1985. *Reason and morality*. ASA Monographs in Social Anthropology 24, London: Tavistock.
- Parkin, D.J. 1975. The rhetoric of responsibility: bureaucratic communication in a Kenya farming area. In *Political language and oratory in traditional society*. ed. M. Bloch, London: Academic Press.
- Parshall, J. & Tully, A. 2007. *Shattered Sword: the untold story of the Battle of Midway*. Washington DC: Potomac Books.
- Pecora, V. 1989. The limits of local knowledge. In *The new historicism*. ed. H.A. Veenser, London: Routledge.
- Picard, M. 2016. From *Agama Hindu Bali* to *Agama Hindu*: two styles of argumentation. Paper to symposium on *How Indonesians Argue*, July 2016. <http://www.criticalia.org/symposia--panels/picard---from-agama-hindu.pdf>.

- Raffles, T. S. 1817. *The history of Java*. 2 vols, London: Cox and Baylis; reprinted 1965, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Robinson, G. 1995. *The dark side of paradise: political violence in Bali*. London: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Robson, S. & Wibisono, S. 2002. *Javanese English dictionary*. Hong Kong: Periplus.
- Rorty, A. 1976. A literary postscript: characters, persons, selves, individuals. In *The identities of persons*. ed. A. Rorty, Berkeley: California Univ. Press.
- Saburo, I. 1978. *The Pacific War 1931-1945: a critical perspective on Japan's role in World War II*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Sahlins, M. 1999. Two or three things that I know about culture. *Journal of the royal anthropological institute*. 5, 3: 399-421.
- Stevens, A.M. & Schmidgall-Tellings, A. Ed. 2004. *A comprehensive Indonesian-English dictionary*. Athens, OH: Ohio Univ. Press.
- Schulte-Nordholt, H. 1981. Negara: a theatre state? *Bijdragen tot Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 137, 4. 470-476.
- 1996. *The spell of power: a history of Balinese politics*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- 2007. *Bali: an open fortress 1995-2005*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Sears, L.J. 1996a. *Shadows of empire: colonial discourse and Javanese tales*. London: Duke Univ. Press.
- Sears, L.J. ed. 1996b. *Fragile identities: deconstructing women and Indonesia. Fantasizing the feminine in Indonesia*. London: Duke Univ. Press.
- Slack, J.D. 1996. The theory and method of articulation in cultural studies. In *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies*. eds. D. Morley & K-H. Chen, London: Routledge.
- Soedjito Sosrodihardjo. 1963. *Religious life in Java: sosiografi Indonesia dan hukum adat*. Yogyakarta: Jajasan Pembina Hukum Adat 17-31.
- Sperber, D. 1975. *Rethinking symbolism*. Cambridge: Univ. Press.
- & Wilson, D. 1982. Mutual knowledge and relevance in theories of comprehension. In *Mutual knowledge*. ed. N. V. Smith, London: Academic Press.
- & Wilson, D. 1986. *Relevance: communication and cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sunindyo, S. 1996. Murder, gender, and the media. In *Fantasizing the feminine in Indonesia*. ed. L.J. Sears, London: Duke Univ. Press.
- Sweeney, A. 1987. *A full hearing: orality and literacy in the Malay world*. London: Univ. of California Press.
- Taylor, C. 2004. *Modern social imaginaries*. London: Duke Univ. Press; eBook version Public Planet Books.
- Teeuw, A., et al. 1969. *Śiwarātrikalpa of Mpu Tanakuñ*. Bibliotheca Indonesica 3, The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Tiwon, S. 1996. Models and maniacs: articulating the female in Indonesia. In *Fantasizing the feminine in Indonesia*. ed. L.J. Sears, London: Duke Univ. Press.
- Turner, V. 1982. *From ritual to theatre: the human seriousness of play*. New York: Performing Arts.
- Vickers, A. 1991. Writing ritual: the song of the Ligya, or the killing of the rhinoceros. In *State and society in Bali: historical, textual and anthropological approaches*. ed. H. Geertz, Leiden: KITLV Press.
- 2012. *Bali: a paradise created*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. North Clarendon VT: Tuttle Publishing.
- Vološinov, V.N. 1973. *Marxism and the philosophy of language*. trans. L. Matejka & I.R. Titunik, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.

- Weaver, W. 1949. Some recent contributions to the mathematical theory of communication. in *The mathematical theory of communication*. Eds. Shannon, C. & Weaver, W., Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press.
- Williams, R. 1983. *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*. Revised edn., London: Flamingo.
- Wilson, B. ed. 1970. *Rationality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein. L. 1958. *Philosophical investigations*. trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd. edn, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Worsley, P.J. 1984. E74168. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*. 18 (Winter), 64-109.
- Zoetmulder, P.J. 1965. The significance of the study of culture and religion for Indonesian historiography.' In *An introduction to Indonesian historiography*. eds. Soedjatmoko *et al.* Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.