

**Is interpretation incompatible with knowledge?**

**The problem of whether the Javanese shadow play has meaning**

***The interpretive study of Java***

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My title is a question. Much has been written on the shadow play and on the interpretive study of Javanese culture. The more savants the more styles of interpretation there seem to be. So, instead of adding salt to the sea as the Balinese would put it, I would like to inquire how helpful this proliferation is likely to prove. The arts in Java are so rich a field that, as Leacock's Lord Ronald who "flung himself onto his horse and rode off madly in all directions", anthropologists have often pursued hermeneutic hares. This may keep us in business, but I am not sure it brings us much closer to understanding shadow theatre in Java or elsewhere. So now seems as good a time as any to ask what we are doing.

A little scepticism about our academic assumptions is occasionally healthy. With so many hermeneutic approaches now on offer, how do we settle rival claims over insight, or even validity? May hermeneutics be used on any culture willy-nilly, regardless of its own ideas of interpretation and meaning? What grounds, in fact, do we have for thinking that other cultures and literary traditions share our philosophical presuppositions at all? Indeed what difference might it make whether they did or not? Reflection on such issues, among others, may not be amiss and -to adopt an idiom from the shadow play - may lessen the danger that we shall expend our energies aimlessly like lumbering *raksasa*. I have more personal grounds for asking questions and not trying to serve up certainties, of which there seem too many already. First I have only done fieldwork in Bali, never on Java. The parallels are provocative but, with the present state of ethnographic evidence, it would be premature to say that they are necessarily instructive. Further, cautious inquiry may be more in keeping with the spirit of Javanese and Balinese ideas of knowledge, as I understand them, than would be confident claims.

My argument is simple. It is commonly, if sometimes implicitly, assumed that the Javanese shadow theatre, *wayang*, whether as literature or performance, is a 'text' to be interpreted. Among anthropologists this position has been most clearly adopted by Clifford Geertz and has had fairly wide influence. In view of my present audience's knowledge of the hermeneutic tradition it may be interesting to reflect briefly on the use of interpretive models of shadow theatre, which I shall suggest have serious drawbacks. A recent article by Alton Becker shows some of the shortcomings implicitly, while presenting a forceful case for the relevance of Javanese metaphysics for an understanding of theatre. I shall rather primitively 'deconstruct' the work of Geertz and Becker to suggest that the interpretive bent of their arguments hides a contrary theme of the search for true knowledge despite the snare of symbols. That this is not simply the 'deterioration' of my faculties, rather than the 'deconstruction' of academic texts, will I hope be shown from the work of Zoetmulder. His analysis is strikingly similar to the ideas of Balinese villagers about correct and wrong understanding of literary texts and theatre. It can be argued that interpretation is viewed by many Balinese as a possible hazard to true knowledge to which the shadow play, as is most serious literature and religion, the means. A scrutiny of Balinese terms for signification suggests these are consistent, and consonant, with their theory of knowledge. If this is so, then our use of the analytical construct of 'symbol' may be misleading. Indeed it raises questions of the limits of validity of applying highly pre-constrained western concepts to the study of other cultures. If my argument has any value, either existing styles of interpretation of Javanese culture have weaknesses or, despite the long historical connexions between the two islands and their shared Hindu-Buddhist religious and literary heritage, Java seems to differ from Bali far more fundamentally, or at least epistemologically, than has so far been allowed,

One of the problems in examining interpretations of the shadow play in Java is that it is often far from apparent what assumptions, or for that matter which of several possible approaches, are being used. There are obviously different broader traditions too. For instance I shall not be concerned here with the Dutch structuralist school which predated its French counterpart and is exemplified in the work of W.H. Rassers (esp. 1959) as this has been adequately discussed

already. Because of its influence over Indonesian studies in recent decades and the relative lack of critical concern I shall look rather at the American tradition of which Geertz is an exemplar, if not the founding father.

Fairly early on the different drifts of American and European, or certainly a strong trend in French, anthropology were evident (e.g. Geertz 1967). Perhaps it is that part in every anthropologist for sweeping generalization but I sometimes wonder whether the Entente Cordiale in social sciences is not founded upon an agreed dislike for putting man (in small or capitals, and of either gender) in centre stage. Ever since Durkheim sought to displace the faculties of men from the pedestal (if not always such a distinguished one) on which Kant had set them, much of the French intellectual tradition seems to have been bent in keeping the person out and society, structure, discourse or whatever in turn in. Whatever its complex roots and diverse directions, American anthropological approaches have owed more to Weber, and perhaps through him, to a school which has emphasized the differences between natural and human sciences epitomized in the concern that man should find the world meaningful. The English, typically, have sat on the fence -in this case an empirical one ! Every English schoolboy is taught the dogma that, in the European balance of power, perfidious Albion sides with the weaker. In the context of this seminar it seems only fitting therefore that I should raise doubts about a present orthodoxy in anthropological approaches to Indonesia.

In sharp contrast to broadly structuralist approaches, increasingly under Needham's aegis in Oxford, there has been broached an argument for a direct attack on meaning itself from American academics working in different fields in Indonesia (Anderson 1965; Boon 1975 & 1977; Siegel 1969 for instance). As Geertz has put it with his customary fluency:

The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is...to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them, (1973a: 24)

To this end, ethnographic description is important. It has three characteristics:

...it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms (1973a: 20)

Such interpretation focuses on – or perhaps equally justly one might say it construes its data in terms of – meanings. These “meanings can only be ‘stored’ in symbols”(1973b: 127). In contrast to structuralism which seeks to isolate meaning (sic) as a system from real behaviour,

cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape. (1973a: 20).

What constitutes a better guess is presumably its 'fit' with other aspects of the system, itself constitutes of better guesses It is entirely reasonable to object to the tendency of Lévi-Straussian structuralism to dispose of the diversity of observed actions.<sup>1</sup> Pending clarification of the evident divergence of views within a single society, and the disparity of these with observed actions , it may not be unreasonable however to question whether the contextual study of meaning is a sufficient – there can be fairly few who would argue it is not in part a necessary - explanation of culture.

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1. “What, incidentally, is it for an action to ‘have meaning’, or, in as far as this meant to be a defining characteristic of an ‘action’, for an event to become an action through possessing meaning?” (Gellner 1973: 55-6)

The dangers of this approach are clear and Geertz puts the problem like this:

The besetting sin of interpretive approaches to anything – literature, dreams, symptoms, culture -is that they tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, *conceptual articulation* and thus to escape systematic modes of assessment. You either grasp an interpretation or you do not, see the point or you do not, accept it or you do not (1973a: 24, my emphases).

And he answers it as follows:

There is no reason why *the conceptual structure* of a cultural interpretation should be any less formulable, and thus less susceptible to explicit canons of appraisal, than that of, say, a biological observation or a physical experiment – no reason except that the terms in which such formulations can be cast are, if not wholly nonexistent, very nearly so (1973a: 24).

Like Althusser's Marx of *Reading Capital* (1970) the problem is the scholar robbed of the theoretical framework to argue his case. Nonetheless Geertz concludes that there is a method much like the clinical diagnosis of symptoms. This is the diagnosis of "symbolic acts" (1973a: 26) which allow a reading of social discourse. While ultimately an interpretive approach is "essentially contestable" (1973a: 29), it is presumably still worthwhile.

As anyone who had read him knows, Geertz expresses himself more persuasively than I every could. Nonetheless, even from my poor synopsis, one wonders whether matters are as simple and straightforward as they are said to be. Despite a sometime disinclination to dwell on the intellectual ancestry of his arguments, Geertz would seem to be firmly inclined to the kind of hermeneutics advocated by Ricoeur, where the aim of interpretation is to recover meaning behind cultural symbols (Geertz 1966a:fn. 36; 1973a: 19). While phenomenology and the work of Schutz receive mention (esp. 1966a) it is not always clear to which stage in Ricoeur's continued development Geertz's debt is to be attributed. From the antipathy to structuralism, one assumes later rather than earlier, although as we shall see this would raise problems of its own. If hermeneutics is to be used in any but the loosest sense it is interesting to consider how this anthropological usage fits within the highly differentiated field of contemporary hermeneutic debate.

It is every anthropologist's right to be eclectic. Indeed respect for the implications of ethnographic evidence can be argued to be one of anthropology's main contribution to twentieth century humanism. It seems unwise, however, to conflate this with the observer's own academic categories. So inquiry into the entailments of our own positions seems legitimate. How then does Geertz's argument fit those of the professional hermeneuts? If one can identify a school which includes Bultmann and Gadamer it would seem to balance the search for meaning against the recognition that it may be hard to find 'objective' interpretations, as it is open to doubt whether there is any privileged standpoint for the observer outside history. The analogy Geertz draws between finding meaning and clinical inference seems to suggest not just that there is a meaning, but that it can be established. His references to the subject being 'scientific' would seem to bear this out. The emphasis in Geertz's work on extracting the meaning from cultural institutions implies that this is possible, which would place him closer to Dilthey, and more recently Hirsch(1967). The latter's concern with the intention behind 'texts' is notably lacking, but this is perhaps explicable in that the issue of authorship can be held not to arise in the cultures under study. The focus on 'meaning' rather than 'context' also appears in two ways. There is relatively little emphasis either on the social conditions under which 'texts' are produced or on the discussion of possible problems where the cultural context of the actors in question differs from that of the observer. Later I shall argue that Geertz's position runs the danger of underestimating

the problems of translation and possible differences in epistemology.<sup>2</sup>

As Geertz acknowledges his main theoretical debt in the defence of interpretation to Ricoeur, it is instructive to compare the approaches of the two in outline. For Ricoeur the distinction between text and social action as variant forms of discourse requires the recognition of delicate shades of difference in method (1979). Here the problem of determining the validity of alternative possible interpretations is far from self-evident. He is sanguine about the value of empirical means and notes the dependence on the logic of probability, akin to that used in western juridical procedure. (That this is not necessarily universally the same was argued by Gluckman 1955, 1965.) Ricoeur's position is explicitly stated to lie close to Dilthey and Hirsch (1979: 89-90; cf. p. 87 on refining Dilthey), closer indeed that Geertz's position would seem to allow.

It is over the nature of symbols that the most interesting, but initially disguised, differences seem to lie. The notion of symbol is key to the argument of each (Geertz 1966b, 1973a, 1973b esp.; Ricoeur 1967, 1970). For Geertz the symbol is defined by reference to a dichotomy between the cognition of 'reality' (a world-view) and emotion in the form of mood and motivation (or ethos; see Rorty 1980 for some of the difficulties of this split). The efficacy of symbols lies in the mutual reinforcement between world view and ethos (1966b: 4ff.) – the result being a sort of Pangloss effect by which 'reality' as formulated by cultural conceptions of the world is fed back to make the conceptions and the mood and motivations seem to fit perfectly. Ricoeur, by contrast, anchors symbols in semantics and in figurative speech (1978). Symbols here are seen as of many kinds, but have the distinguishing characteristic of being only partly reducible to a linguistic order. In other words, they can only be incompletely conceptualized. For there is in symbols a "surplus of meaning (which) is the residue of the literal meaning" (1976: 55, my parentheses). Access to this secondary signification can only be given by way of the first. As Ricoeur puts it:

The sea in ancient Babylonian myths signifies more than the expanse of water that can be seen from the shore. And a sunrise in a poem by Wordsworth signifies more than a simple meteorological phenomenon (1976: 55)

So whereas metaphor is linguistic and conceptual, symbol has also a "presemantic surface in the depths of human experience" in which it is rooted or bound (1976: 69).

It will be immediately obvious that the two formulations differ greatly. Geertz, it will be recalled, defined the validity of interpretation in terms of "conceptual articulation" (1973a: 24), or formulation of its "conceptual structure" (1973a: 24). This would place his analysis at what Ricoeur views as the level of metaphor and so dismisses as inadequate (the construct 'metaphor' is little used by Geertz). Whereas for Geertz it is the system of symbols "which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men" (1966b: 4); in Ricoeur quite differently symbols are rooted in human experience. Indeed in his example of psychoanalysis, symbols are grounded in desire and impulse as their essential extra-linguistic domain (1976: 58-9). For Ricoeur the efficacy of symbols lies in the opposed tendencies towards

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2. For the present I am following the Oxford English Dictionary, as it fits most definitions, in seeing epistemology as the theory of the method or grounds of knowledge. This is quite distinct from a world-view (Geertz 1973b: 127) which is the "picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society" for a people. I am unclear how far, or indeed in what way, the members of a culture, or sub-culture, must share this world-view. The problem has been discussed by Wallace (1961: 29-44).

I think that this is an accurate summary of Geertz's views, granted the space available. He notes (1973a: 16) that while anthropological writings are interpretations, the threat of uncertainty or relativism is hollow because validity of interpretation can be established by the degree to which it reduces puzzlement. The problem is obviously not just 'whose puzzlement?', but in the difficulty at assuming that criteria of consistency to remove this puzzlement can be established cross-culturally prior to careful debate of the issue.

assimilation where different things become confused in the pre-semantic as against the clarification expressed in metaphor (1976: 68-9). So symbol is always opaque. For Geertz it is the transparency which is essential for conceptions are the meanings of symbols (1966b: 5, following Langer 1960) and must serve as models of, and models for, "reality". While symbols are central to the arguments of both authors their definitions and the implications diverge in such a manner as to be at least partly contradictory

As I grow tedious, my other comments will be shorter. A central focus in most kinds of hermeneutics is context. This may be regarded as a set of meanings; as the "pre-understanding" (Palmer 1969: 24-5) necessary to break into the circle of meaning in any text; as the circumstances under which a text was produced; or even as the philosophical ideas and assumptions of men in a different historical period or culture. In arguing that we should seek meaning in events, Geertz is simply making the point that we must work from social action as text, not from putative abstracted lexicon of meanings, which is what, as I understand him, he sees structuralism as doing. The shift from guesses to better guesses presumably is intended as a reference to the means of validating meanings within the 'hermeneutic circle'. It is interesting that the problems of entering the circle and what exactly is the meaning to be determined are not clearly spelled out (Geertz 1973a: 20 esp.).

Meaning seems to be used in a very broad sense in recent anthropological discussion, so it may be wise to see how it is understood and what implications follow from its use. As a starting point Hirsch distinguishes as meaning

...that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent (1967: 8)

This is opposed to significance which

...names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation...Authors, who like everyone else change their attitudes, feelings, opinions, and value criteria in the course of time, will obviously in the course of time tend to view their own work in different contexts...*Failure to consider this simple and essential distinction has been the source of enormous confusion in hermeneutic theory* (1967: 8; my emphases)

The intention behind a text is then its meaning; what men may read into it under different conditions is its significance. While it is possible to disagree with this position (on the grounds that it relies upon there being a true meaning, so that some schools of hermeneutics, let alone other theoretical approaches, might find this objectionable) it does help to bring out the simple point that Geertz largely seems to fail to distinguish aspects of meaning and context. This point will be developed below when we shall see that the apparent ease with which recalcitrant problems of interpretation crack under his analysis stems from a failure to notice that the culture in question may have different contexts of meaning, or even different ideas of what meaning is. There is a *prima facie* case for arguing that the eminently digestible nature of Geertz's interpretations stem in fact from never really leaving his own conceptual framework to tackle the problems of context and meaning which have vexed the professional hermeneuts. It is curious that Geertz's theory of the efficacy of symbols depends on the sleight of hand, so to speak, by which conceptions are clothed "with such an aura of factuality" (1966b: 4) that they can reflectively make the questionable self-evident (in Douglas's terms, 1975;. One wonders whether there are any echoes of the reflective, self-validating mechanism in Geertz's theory of symbolism in Geertz's method of interpretation?

Before turning to a more detailed discussion of the problems I have sketched, it is important to decide whether the matter can be debated at all, or whether it is essentially contestable, and what this actually entails. Geertz's position is that the validity of what he calls a "semiotic" or

interpretive approach is “essentially contestable” (1973a: 29). At first sight this is irreproachably modest. On closer scrutiny however Geertz’s authority, W.B. Gallie, was designating a class of concepts which were in the nature of things disputable and so could in a sense never be falsified. If something can never be shown to be wrong, one may ask – following Popper – in what sense it can ever be shown to be right? Gallie was trying to distinguish a peculiar class of concepts which had, among others, two features. First, the proper use of the ideas involved endless dispute (1962: 123); second that the terms were appraisive, or evaluative (1962: 125). While it may reasonably be argued that the under-determination of theory by possible experience implies that all approaches involve choice and value judgement (Hesse 1979), it has yet to be shown that meaning is evaluative in this Quinean sense (1960), nor that what is semiotic is inevitably to be disputed in all instances. It is one thing for an attribute to have different status in different paradigms; it is another for it to be differently evaluable in principle within any paradigm. While a particular colour may be classified by Balinese as within a range which it is convenient to translate as ‘brown’ where English informants might respond ‘orange’, what constitutes a ‘good’ footballer introduces a new dimension of evaluation. If we cannot usefully argue alternative interpretations, or the value of interpretive approaches themselves, then it is not clear to me what the point of the exercise is at all.

In fact Geertz’s view of interpretation has been contested, if indirectly. Within what seems to be a notionally shared frame of reference Ricoeur’s position is incompatible with Geertz’s. As one instance their definition of symbol is quite different; while Ricoeur’s view that the validity of interpretations is open to methods of assessment disagrees with the essentially contestable thesis in so far as interpretation can be applied at a higher analytical level as well. Ricoeur defines his position with such care that it is possible to take his argument about symbols, for the purposes of demonstration, to suggest an alternative approach. The surplus of meaning, or signification (the synonymy is relevant), which attaches to the sea in ancient Babylon or the sunrise in the works of Wordsworth relies upon the distinction between reference (the object referred to by the word ‘sea’) or extension (that sea as a member of the class of seas) on the one hand, and the connotation (attributes of sea – saltiness, wetness, expanse, danger etc.) or intension (defining characteristics of the class of seas). Ricoeur’s ‘surplus’ seems close to the connotation, or intension, viewed as that not covered by the referent, or in his terms the •literal meaning\*. Further the complexity of attributes of symbols may be expressed in different ways according to one’s philosophical tastes. The links between the various ‘meanings’ of symbols may be treated as the potential overlap of ‘subjective’, or maybe better •conventional’ connotations of terms (Copi 1978: 144). In a more Gallic idiom this may be expressed as the difference between semiological code as a “system of explicit social conventions” and hermeneutics as a “system of implicit, latent and purely contingent signs” (Guirard 1975: 41). Yet again, following Barthes, the difference can be seen as one of signs as against signifiers (1972). I am therefore unclear in what sense Geertz intends that interpretive anthropology be essentially contestable, except perhaps to claim the dubious distinction of being unfalsifiable.

With these opening observations out of the way, it is high time we turned to the interpretive study of Javanese shadow theatre. Here we can see Geertz’s model in action. The shadow play, or *wayang* (it is not necessary for present purposes to distinguish different forms), is a central element of that cluster of sacred symbols which in any culture, in Geertz’s view, constitutes religion (1973b: 129). The symbols dramatize cultural values and present an image of reality for, quoting Weber, Geertz notes that ‘events are not just there and happen, but they have a meaning and happen because of that meaning... The Javanese term *rasa* provides the key as it “has two primary meanings: “feeling” and “meaning”’ (1973b: 131, 134). This allows the Javanese – or

Geertz – room for phenomenological speculation. In the past, it would seem, the shadow play may have been a ritual form among the elite but it has

become a fairly secularized art-form. But this secularization on the ritualistic side actually tends to liberate speculation about the ‘meaning’ of the wajang, to encourage – its formal ritual meaning gone – interpretation of its content (1960: 269)

It would seem then that there was less speculation prior to its (presumably) fairly recent secularization. The general drift of the Javanese predisposition is to find ultimate reality in their own feelings so that

the time-bound realities of good and evil, pleasure and pain, love and hate are dwarfed and rendered *meaningless* by the timeless and *ultimately amoral* background against which they are fought out (1960: 270, my emphases).<sup>3</sup>

The shadow play belongs then to the class of sacred symbols. It is a particular instance of something to be found in all cultures, presumably by definition, as these symbols are the (sole?) vehicles of values and images of reality. The notions of the sacred, and of symbol, are it would seem firmly in the observer’s conceptual framework, not that of the Javanese because otherwise they could not be an example of a universal trend. Now the problem arises of what happens if the Javanese do not possess exact equivalents of ‘sacred’ or ‘symbol’, or if they do not give them places of similar standing in their explanations. The hoary Durkheimian dichotomy of the sacred and the profane has long been recognized as having equally hoary, but serious, drawbacks (for a summary see Lukes 1973: 24-8). In fact it may form parts of totally different semantic sets (Das 1977: 114-31). I do not know the position for Java; but there is no convenient vernacular equivalent to sacred in Bali. I would add most emphatically that there is no easy rendition of ‘symbol’. As we shall see the Balinese lexical field of signification is divided among several terms. In passing one might ask whether ‘good’, ‘evil’, ‘love’ or ‘hate’ can unproblematically be translated. Certainly, according to a contextual, or correspondence, theory of meaning of the kind which is often implicit in hermeneutic analysis translation is made hard by the lack of correspondence between different cultural contexts (the classic case has been made, if overstated, by Winch 1958). At a more formal level, the connotations of such terms are multiple and so they can be applied in more than one way. Rather less long-windedly we must be cautious of applying cross-culturally ideas which are so much shaped by the history of western philosophy and theology. Otherwise we run the danger of Pangloss, of ignoring the evidence, while believing ourselves to be in the best of all possible worlds because we simply survey our own categories, and images, reflected back of the surface of the ethnography.

Does all this really matter? Surely reality is made of tough enough stuff that we do not have to tiptoe round it? This is not the place to debate the argument between naturalism and rationalism. As interpretive approaches start with some form of the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, we can simply note that this commitment -and presumably to some notion of *Verstehen* – requires a minimal distinction between a self-evident reality and one which by definition requires careful understanding. An empirically inclined disciple of Dilthey might argue for the generality of the drive to impose meaning on experience across cultures. As we shall see the rescue of the concept of meaning is at the expense of insight into how representations are articulated, classifications used and connexions made between ideas in different cultures. Of course the other tack is to use meaning so loosely that any assembly of readings is ‘a meaning’, although Hirsch would doubtless – and rightly -object.

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3. I must confess that I am not quite able to square this with the “deep moral seriousness” (1973b: 126) which is the *sine qua non* of religious, or symbolic, forms.



For Java matters are somewhat simpler. Geertz is clear that the aim of interpretation is to gain “access to the conceptual world in which our subject live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them”(1973a: 24). We must be sure, however, that we do not extend the sense, or meaning, by extending Javanese concepts. For it has not yet been established, except by fiat, that distinctions like sacred : profane fit Javanese classifications; nor is it yet shown that complex ideas like symbol, evil, good, love and so on have easy equivalents in Java and therefore are transparent (in Quine’s sense 1960: 144ff.). The translation is made the harder by the view, cited above, that such notions are meaningless in the ultimately amoral background of *wayang* (is it the ultimate which is amoral, or is just so in the last analysis, or indeed are they the same?) Here we meet a dilemma. As the shadow play in Bali is the epitome of the moral problems of mankind – and indeed narrative sequence has its own rationale – either the Javanese shadow play differs more radically from the Balinese than anyone has suggested, or meaning here is a synonym for importance which is a dangerous extension of the core analytical concept without any justification.

How clear in fact is the sense of ‘meaning’ which Geertz uses? It seems that it may extend to include the semantic opposition: meaningful v trivial/irrelevant. There is a more serious problem, however. For “formal ritual meaning” is contrasted with “interpretation” of “content” and further some evolution, or development, is postulated from the first to the second. If formal meaning is opposed to informal, then we need to be told what the differences are, what authority the formal meaning has, where it stems from and so on. If formal should be read as something like ‘surface’ in contrast to ‘deep’, or ‘outer’ as against ‘inner’, or even as ‘proximate’ rather than ‘ultimate’, we run into the nasty problem that as the formal meaning is also ritual meaning it implies that ritual is superficial, outer or in fact opposed to the ultimate. In this case the need for clarifying how formal differs from informal and ritual from non-ritual as two dimensions of meaning grows more urgent. It is possible of course that ‘ritual’ is the antithesis of ‘religion’. Unfortunately this also seems not to be so, because we are told elsewhere that it is in ritual that the “really real” of religion is realized (1966b: 26-30). So we seem to have several, largely unexplained, senses of meaning in the observer’s framework.

Geertz’s account of meaning for the Javanese is agreeably simple. The result is regrettably to compound the difficulties further. To speak of the “meaning” of *rasa* is apparently to extend the observer’s senses to include the notion of definition, itself a complex term. Indeed “meaning” here seems to be neither an essentialist definition, nor the reference of the term, for Geertz goes on to discuss the varying connotations (in the loose sense of personal associations) individuals may read into *rasa*. So, while *rasa* can apparently unproblematically be translated as “meaning”, it is not clear how we are to understand the translation. Nor indeed is it always straightforward whether it is the observer’s (by now highly polysemic) notion of meaning or the (apparently simple) Javanese.

At this point it is useful to turn for help to Zoetmulder, who approaches the translation of *rasa* by placing it in textual context. In considering the Javanese equivalents of the Hindu idea of the divine element in man (*atman* in India; quite possibly *atma* in Bali) he notes these may be rendered in different ways by *rasa*, *urip* (life) or *suksma* (the immaterial, or the soul; Zoetmulder 1971: 94). *Rasa* is held to derive from the Sanskrit *rasa*, essence or taste. It may therefore refer either to the essence of life, or to a sense of ultimate truth (Stoehr and Zoetmulder 1965: 305). As well it may be a homonym of *rahsa*, from the Sanskrit *rahasya*, which is mystery or secret (the same as its common translation in Bahasa Indonesia). In so far as etymology and context are relevant, ‘truth’ might be a more fitting provisional gloss than ‘meaning’.

Truth, or knowledge, gets short shrift in fact in favour of meaning. Mysticism brings amoral

knowledge – for good or evil which are mere human values (Geertz 1960: 273). Gnosis, when it appears, is merely comprehension of the ultimate *rasa* (1973b: 137; at this point the translation of *rasa* obviously becomes critical). When the ethnographer steps back and we can glimpse the ethnography in the edited accounts of Javanese informants, a quite different picture begins to emerge. The Javanese commonly see the five Pandawa brothers, heroes of the epic of the Mahabharata, as analogous to the five senses which must be united in order to achieve gnosis (1973b: 137). When the informants discuss among themselves the relative value of different religions, these last are seen as basically similar and the metaphor is used of there being many different roads, presumably to a single goal. It is hard to see meaning in so far as Geertz has described it for the Javanese as being this goal. The notion of truth in some sense seems more apposite. Could it be that *rasa* is an aspect of knowledge not *vice versa*?

In a recent collection of essays dedicated to Geertz, the possible differences between western and Javanese ideas of metaphysics are explored by Becker in a highly original and stimulating article. Starting with western, or in effect Aristotelian, ideas of plot Becker notes the degree to which Javanese theatre may rely on quite unrelated notions of sequence, coherence, language and time. He spells some of these aspects out in sufficient detail for us to gain some idea of the context and so makes it clear that plots unfold within a system of classification and presupposition of which there was little evidence in Geertz. The context which I suggested on theoretical grounds ought to be there turns out to be. If some form of *Verstehen* methodology is to be applied to the study of Javanese theatre it seems to be far less “barren if it recognizes context in the form of indigenous classification and potentially different metaphysical presuppositions (Collingwood 1946). If Javanese theatre is as different as Becker shows it to be, then one wonders whether Geertz’s use of Shakespearean imagery – the clown Semar as an oriental Falstaff and so forth (1960: 277; 1973b: 134) – does not obscure more than it reveals.

Becker’s position is too closely argued, and his ethnography too rich, for me to summarize what I hope is only an opening shot at exploring what he has shown to be fertile terrain. His questioning of “basic assumptions about theatre and so the issue of indigenous metaphysics is particularly exciting. So I hope it will not be taken amiss if I suggest that it is precisely where he turns away from this exploration back to the notion of interpretation that problems seem to start. In fact it might be said that any reliance on the interpretive framework may reflect his intellectual transition, as alternative bases for grounding his argument in Javanese metaphysics are clearly there. Confusion tends to lurk round his notion of “epistemology” (1979). As the term is crucially connected with the issue of knowledge by general definition, and also by Becker with meaning (1979: 212), it is necessary that we examine its use and implications carefully. It is here that a metaphysically radical approach seems to part company from some form of Geertzian interpretive one. For part of the time epistemology approximates its usual sense; part of the time it seems the synonym for world-view. Becker’s main uses are listed below:

	Page	Citation in Becker 1979	Possible Synonym
1	212	...whose contexts (or epistemologies)...	Context
2	212	In a multi-cultured world, a world of multiple epistemologies...	Culture
3	219	If meaning comes from temporal-causal sequences, then epistemologies do not, and cannot, change from episode to episode...	That which stands independent of meaning and empirical events
4	219	When Arjuna and Cakil (one of the five Pandawa brothers and a hero in the epic, and a ‘demon’ or <i>raksasa</i> ) meet, two worlds, two epistemologies coincide for a moment... Arjuna	Conceptual world

- and Cakil live in different conceptual worlds...
- 5 224 In the coincidence of epistemologies...the real subtlety of wayang appears. (These are:) (1)...the direct, sensual epistemology of raw nature...(associated with demons)  
(2)...the stratified, feudal epistemology of traditional Java... (associated with ancestor heroes) World view?  
(3)...a cosmological epistemology (cont.) of pure power...(of the gods) world-view?  
(4)...a modern, pragmatic, epistemology of personal survival... (of the clowns)  
(5) (others which include)...the epistemology of the Islamic saints, that of the modern military, or that of some strange land...
- 6 224 Between each of these epistemologies there may be – and usually is – a confrontation and *perang*, a battle... Interests/sets of interests
- 7 224 Each epistemology, each category of being, exists within a different concept of time... Category of being
- 8 230 Deep change would be change in the Javanese conception of time and event, change of epistemology... Basic categories of experience/ transcendental categories
- 9 235 ...*wayang* epistemology differs... (from the dominant western notion of reference) Epistemology?
- 10 236 A favoured form of discourse in this epistemology is the commentary or essay...(referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson's theory of reference) ?
- 112 241 In all its multiplicity of meaning, a well-performed wayang is a vision of sanity. (The footnote to this sentence states:) This essay... suggests the possibility of a single set of constraints running through the whole of the traditional Javanese epistemology... Something broader than epistemology in 5. perhaps classification?

All parentheses are mine in the quotations above.

It is hard to read into this myriad of uses the limp synonym 'theory of knowledge'. So why should Becker's usual clarity break down so badly over the term 'epistemology'? It will be clear that only some of these references are strictly to do with the grounds of knowledge, or its categories (perhaps 3, 7, 8, 9, 11; to read any standard definition into 6 would produce a category mistake). 'Conceptual world' or 'world-view' would appear to fit as many, or more, better (1?, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6?, 7?, 8, 11). From the evidence it is hard to argue conclusively, but there does seem to be a serious tension between an interpretive notion of 'world-view' or 'conceptual world' of a Geertzian kind and a more radical metaphysical analysis of the sources of knowledge themselves. The possibility of working on this latter view seem far more exciting.

Before moving on perhaps it is worth noting that the study of metaphysics is not easy. The tendency to carry across culturally specific categories is great, the more so as these often are close to self-evident. Becker, for instance, has gone far in showing how Javanese categories may differ. Has the switch yet been radical enough though? Is it legitimate, for example, to treat time as a comparable category to the English, or German? The difficulty can be seen in Becker's intriguing account of the importance of coincidence in encounters in theatre scenes. The term he uses is *kebetulan* (which is also the word in Bahasa Indonesia) and – one wonders if it should be surprising – translates as 'truth'(1979: 225), as one of the equivalents. How close is the Javanese idea of *kebetulan* to the English coincidence? The Balinese certainly recognize a class of events, the Indonesian of which is *kebetulan* in common rendition, that they distinguish by the

phrase *sedeng\_luwunga*. Without going into the problems of translating syntactical terms the form of this is roughly:

<i>sedeng</i>	<i>luwung + a</i>	
present continuous (in the course of emphasis on continuity of the action)	the good (in roughly English on the evaluative sense)	+ suffix normally found for converting words indicating action into passive, or 'acted upon' sense

To my delight the usage of this expression has baffled any attempt to date on my part to find a single class of events to which it seems to refer. It certainly can not be used where one might say coincidence in English, nor paraphrases of the Balinese such as coming good, just so, happening that etc. The problem raises an amusing issue in translation. Anthropologists in their daily work have to use the provisional translational schemas urged on them by sensible philosophers (e.g. Quine 1960; Hollis 1970). In effect this often operates through use of a bridgehead of roughly comparable notions. The difficulty, at least for Balinese and I suspect most other peoples, is that the vital concepts upon which much of the clarity of the more" easily rendered depend are all defined in terms of one another. *Sedeng\_luwunga* is explained by reference to *suksma* (cf. Zoetmulder above) and so on. In such matters we are wise to *festina lente*.

Let us return to the theme of meaning. Becker is quite clear as to the meaning of wayang (as a text, 1979: 212):

1. the relation of textual units to one another
2. the relations of texts to other texts
3. the intention of the author(s)
4. the reference of the part of the text to events/states in the world

Two points are obvious. First that Becker unequivocally places his theory of meaning in a western hermeneutic setting and, in marked contrast to Geertz, spells out major aspects: coherence, context, intention and reference. He notes others are possible. Second that, granted such a range of aspects to meaning,

There can be no single, intended correct response to a play, no one complete interpretation. This multiplicity of events and perspectives builds the kind of thick texture that Javanese favour (1979: 230).

If this does not have quite the lyric flow of Geertz, for the simple scholar trying to represent fairly what people say, it is a pleasure to see matters spelled out so carefully.

Fortunately Becker does not allow his view of meaning to strangle the ethnography. In his final section on reference the importance of epistemology starts to emerge. As Becker notes we must confront the possibility of cultural differences in theories of reference (1979: 235). As I have argued elsewhere for Bali, such differences may have important implications for what discourse is held to 'mean' (Hobart n.d.). The Javanese authority quoted opens his work with the sentence, in Becker's translation: "Traditional shadow theater is a signification of the life of man in this world." (1979: 235). The relevant words are: *sebagai perlambang*, provisionally 'like a sign'. These are glossed as "signification" and "signifies".<sup>4</sup> The translation is obviously careful and an

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4. The method of collecting material on such topics obviously plays an extremely important part in the kind of results that one obtains. The full range of sources is discussed in the forthcoming publication referred to above. Briefly during the year of fieldwork I interviewed selected villagers of both sexes drawn to include members of different social, educational and economic backgrounds, temple priests, actors, shadow puppeteers, members of traditional princely families and high priests. More important, as I have worked in the same community for several years, it was possible to sit in comfortably on conversations in the village and to tape them on an inconspicuous cassette. Much of my information is from such discussions in which I played little or no part. People cannot be assumed to be responding entirely as normal if there is an observer present, let alone a recorder even if not very obtrusive, least of all to the

excursion into the Balinese ethnography may give some idea of its possible import.

The Balinese have no single word to translate the English 'symbol'. (They have a fair idea of its uses, as Indonesian has adopted *simbul* as a loan word.) One of the more startling consequences is that it is quite impossible to frame any question of the order of "what does that symbolize?". This has led me to suspect not only that profound meditations on the meaning of key symbols in Bali would leave an intelligent informant gasping (he would have to be intelligent as the conversation would have to take place exclusively in Bahasa Indonesia at this point, so the poor man is already having to engage in one translation), but also it hints that much of our stress on 'meaning' and 'religion' as discrete, and important, classes of phenomena cross-culturally stems from the pivotal place of the concept of symbol in our own cultural tradition. The problem does not disappear if we rephrase the issue in terms of metaphor. Current usage covers several distinct relationships of comparison (Sapir 1977), which were quite clear to Aristotle (Poetics Ch. 21) if not to all his successors. As Culler has noted metaphor itself is widely used metaphorically (1981). We would be advised against assuming, however, that all cultures are as ensnared as we. The point can be made with a simple example of the tendency of the English language to express time catachretically as space. This gives rise to dangerous misunderstandings, such as the myth that time involves passage (Williams 1951). In English time is often expressed spatially: a long time, an endless wait etc. Some may be used of both as: before the house stood...; before he came in... As far as I know time and space expressions in Bali are distinct. Long of time (*suwé*) or end (*puput*) are quite distinct from their spatial counterparts in English of long of distance (*lantang*, *edoh*) or end (*tunggu* etc.). Not only do the Balinese seem not to have a simple translation for symbol, the use of metaphor widespread in English does not seem to occur in Balinese at the same level (indeed the Balinese consciously eschew it as simply a form of falsehood, *bogbog*).

The Balinese material may throw light on the issue of signification in the Javanese shadow theatre in at least three ways. The western academic preference for broad, but polysemic, notions like symbol are replaced by narrowly defined specific concepts. Three are immediately relevant. These are: *ciri* – a sign with fixed and specified referents (see Sperber critique of the sign/ symbol confusion in western thought 1975); *saih* – comparison; and *pra(tiw)imba* – analogy, or 'external metaphor' (Sapir 1977).<sup>5</sup> A sign is a far more direct statement of what is the case than the elliptical analogy. The latter is by definition as inaccurate as it may be illuminating to some.

A Balinese speaker's commitment to the truth value of his utterances is also often shown. This is done through modifiers between subject and predicate. The two most common are *sakadi* and *satmaka*, usually glossed as 'like' and 'as if'. The distortion in this translation should be obvious. Assertions can then be finely tuned to indicate the speaker's degree of commitment to what he says. (When I have the chance to argue this fully it should show some modification to be needed in Jakobson's theory of language functions. The relation of emitter to message is usually stated as the 'emotive' function. In Bali it is far nearer a statement of expected truth-value.) The point can be made with a simple example:

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Balinese. This bias is a problem, but it must be confessed that much anthropological data are collected under far more distorting circumstances. The problems of assessing the degree and kind of distortion in my material will be discussed in detail in due course.

5. It could be argued that, in so far as the Balinese share the ecstatic view of beauty with the Javanese, that this surely is *kamomoan*, or something like it. There are several points. First the Balinese have an ideal similar to the Javanese, but also seem to like a more detached approach. Second as no one could ever remember sufficiently clearly having felt this ecstasy during a performance of theatre, they were disinclined to be definite. Finally the general view was, provisionally, that the two were quite different.

*Batara Brahma, Ida... ...sakadi/satmaka... geni* Batara Brahma (high title of god), He (is) fire.

*Sakadi* and *satmaka* are qualifiers. Priests, or laymen with great textual knowledge, would often commit themselves to the unmodified form of assertion. Unless a layman were a tourist guide, or for some other reason unusually arrogant, he would use one of the weakening modifiers, to show that the statement was hearsay (from priests usually). Precision in such matters in Balinese village society is carefully kept – in mind.

Knowledge might appear irrelevant in one other topic. Becker notes “the pervasiveness of etymologizing as an explanatory strategy” (1979: 236). The difficulty is that much of this is written off as folk-etymology. In Bali this takes the form of playing on the links between words, using punning or homonymy (Hobart 1978). Remarkably homonymy is held to be of the few ways to true knowledge. The implications of this shatter the narrow frame of western ideas of knowledge. In three ways then – the possible semiotic status of *perlambang*, the truth conditions of *sebagai* (the Indonesian equivalent of *sakadi*) and the use of etymology – Becker’s account of the Javanese suggests Balinese parallels which have to do with truth rather than meaning.

There is a further source for Java which may clarify a little the relationship of meaning and truth (the latter is still used in a loose sense pending clarification). Writing with Javanese philosophy clearly in mind, Zoetmulder notes that the literary tradition is concerned with “a higher knowledge, a gnosis” which looks at questions about “the meaning of life and existence and the end of man” (1971: 85). In keeping with his observations on *rasa* as *rahasya*.

The supreme wisdom is not something to be communicated in plain and unambiguous terms or to be revealed in its naked truth. It has to be partly veiled and hidden. In this way it remains a mystery. To the seeker of wisdom perhaps it is more attractive and valuable in this form... (1971: 87)

Part of the relevance of figurative forms is suggested:

...comparisons and allegories play an extremely important role. They serve to enliven and to make palatable expositions which by their very nature are theoretical and somewhat arid (1971: 87)

And the status of symbols is unambiguously stated:

Creation is like a piece of writing, left by God to be read by those that love Him, a communication from Him by which they may learn to know Him, or at least may be *incited* to inquire into the *full truth that is expressed by these symbols in an imperfect way* (1971: 90, my emphases)

*Wayang*, to the wise, is then “a mere symbol pointing to God” (1971: 89).

**We should** hardly be surprised that Zoetmulder as a theologian is equally clear about the relationship of meaning, knowledge and truth. The ignorant man

...goes astray on a path full of obstacles for, lacking *the right knowledge, the true meaning* of all that appears before his eyes continues to evade him (1971: 89, my emphases)

Truth is only available to the man with real knowledge. One must reach for

...perfect insight, *the deeper meaning of the wajang, the innermost truth and reality*...reveals itself to the initiate only (1971: 88; my emphases)

Zoetmulder might be held to be speaking of the textual tradition or an élite self-consciously removed from the common man. In everyday life, it can be argued, Javanese are far more concerned with interpretation or “speculative, non-empirical thinking” (Mulder 1978: 107). As this is largely a matter of the Javanese ethnography I am in no position to comment.

That knowledge and truth are not necessarily the concern of only a small minority is suggested by Balinese ideas of theatre. Obviously actors and puppeteers have greater technical and literary resources than do most laymen. Also part of the audience is mainly interested in the entertainment and these prefer popular drama to the more traditional genres. Nonetheless the criteria of most ordinary villagers (of either sex) for judging the value of performances shows marked concern with truth and precision. To make the point forcefully the views discussed below are taken from conversations between villagers who were not performers at all.<sup>6</sup>

The different genres of theatre and dance are all based in Balinese conceptions on stories, *sattwa*. It is considered vital that these stories be *sayuwakti*, or *wiakti*, which I shall gloss for the moment as ‘true’, in the sense that the events are thought to have happened in the past to the persons described. Were the story to be entirely fictitious it would have no value (*sing maguna*, to be of no use – obviously this only applies if it is known to be untrue). The glaring difficulty of this generally held view is that while plots are taken from texts, or sources, held to be accurate much of the detail, and the dialogue, consists of embellishment by the performers, *reragragan*. The explanation of this apparent inconsistency by professionals may be quite complex. For villagers received wisdom allows alternative explanations and so makes falsification hard. First the truth of the story and the detail must in practice be taken on trust from the performers. It is they who therefore are responsible for inaccuracy. Second the more serious genres take much of their text from written or handed down oral sources according to villagers ideas. (The clowns are recognized to stand apart from this and to show the inventiveness of the performers.) The third and fourth views are partly incompatible. On the one hand it may be argued that the actors are striving for the ideal of truth. This position relies on widespread recognition both of human frailty and of the gap between how the world ought to be and how it in fact is. On the other the less critical, or reflective, may simply accept the performance as being true. Among professionals two common views are of some interest here. If a performance is not amusing, people will not watch and so they will be unable to learn at all. If the spectacle has no point, however, then it has been without use and the audience would have been better off catching up with their sleep in bed. The second view is complex as it hinges on Balinese theories of personality. Truth is particularly effective if re-presented in a beautiful form. It is interesting that Zoetmulder should build his study of literature in Java around the idea of *kalangwan*, beauty, especially the ecstasy of losing oneself in the experience of beauty (1974).

How far are my inferences from the Balinese ethnography inconsistent with the interpretive thesis? After all it could be replied, meaning remains central as it would not be so important were it not to contain some truth. I suspect that this position confuses means and ends. To become absorbed in the entertainment, or in the play on words, is *kamomoan*, the desire for attractive things in this world. This is the epitome of bad qualities, even for the Balinese who often seem to prefer a balance of opposing drives to the single minded pursuit of perfection.<sup>7</sup> Also, however elegant an allegory, if the events did not actually occur, it is *mogbog*, lying, and can have no moral value whatsoever. The relation of different interpretations to truth is often expressed by an explicit analogy (*praimba*) of the many paths to one goal. It is striking that Geertz’s informant used the same metaphor. Zoetmulder also noted the role of “comparisons and allegories” in Java. Whereas comparing, *masaih*, is a widely used technique, allegory in so far as it does not refer to real events is of little value as far as I can tell in Bali. Is it that the Balinese like their truth more literal?

Let me end – as I began – with questions. The interpretive approach stresses features quite different from those I suggested might be relevant, certainly in Bali. How much of this difference stems from the theoretical perspectives and how much from differences in the cultures concerned and their epistemologies? This touches on a little asked question. In what ways do

Java and Bali differ? It is almost a truism that the two islands have been locked for over a millennium in political, and cultural, dialogue in a way which makes de Béranger's epithet quite apt 'nos amis, les ennemis'. There seems to be a dilemma. Either past anthropological approaches have been inadequate to the full study of the Javanese shadow theatre, or else we are faced with a radical difference between the metaphysics of Java and Bali which would require rethinking our presuppositions about what is significant about history and culture-contact, and indeed what is culture.

Of course it is perfectly possible my argument is quite wrong. Either truth may not be as important as I think it is; or the apparent opposition between truth and meaning may grow out of inadequacies in my definition of them, or even out of the history of the concepts themselves. Against this we might be faced with irreconcilable images of the place of culture and the human condition which, like the war between the Pandawa and Korawa, are perpetually at odds. Perhaps this view is too grandiose? Might the matter be more humdrum and the protagonists of meaning or truth are just taking part in a *perang wayang*,<sup>9</sup> after which we shall be stuffed back into that chest full of forgotten academic wrangles? Across what we see as time, let the last word go that oriental philosopher who, as we received it, wrote:

'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days  
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:  
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,  
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

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