

NEGARA: THE THEATRE STATE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BALI. By CLIFFORD GEERTZ. pp. xii, 295, plate. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press. Review by Mark Hobart.

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Thick description is not a brand of marmalade: it is a method of interpreting culture proposed by Clifford Geertz. Common-or-garden 'thin description', like a policeman's testimony, reports events baldly: the 'thick' kind seeks to evoke the meanings with which men invest such events - not so much sense as sensibility. The richness of traditional Balinese political imagery offers a tempting subject and *Negara*, an essay aimed at a wide readership, and with technical footnotes, is a perfect opportunity to see the interpretive approach at work.

The thesis is simple. Princely palaces were (in the words of Geertz's original distinction) both a 'model of' the cosmos and a 'model for' social order. For the court indeed 'is the state' (p. 13) as well as 'a model, a paragon, a faultless image...paradigmatic, not merely reflective' (p. 13). It 'was essentially directed towards defining what power was; and what power was was what kings were' (p. 124). Excellence was expressed in ritual or pageantry (terms used synonymously) so that 'the more exemplary the center, the more actual the realm' (p. 124). The many senses of 'model' are compounded by others of 'the theatre state'. First, the key function of the state was to enact ritual; second, theatre is a stark metaphor for political organization; lastly, court life was divorced from socioeconomic reality like theatre (Western presumably; Balinese ideas differ) and this ensured the weakness, and the eventual downfall, of the state. The essay ends: 'the dramas of the theatre state, mimetic of themselves [*sic*], were, in the end, neither illusions nor lies, neither sleight of hand nor make-believe. They were what there was' (p. 136). With so many logical possibilities, the interpretive approach serves us an *embarras de richesses*.

Are there more prosaic politics? Geertz rejects the (surely moribund) stress on domination by splitting the state etymologically into: stateliness (pomp); status; and statecraft (government and dealings dirty). Status, as some kind of 'pure prestige', is the motive force behind rival court pageantry; whereas government is over the local populace, and problematic because Balinese social structure militates against central control. The function of the court is as exemplary centre to offset fissile urges. The expressive state stands opposed to instrumental local politics (pp. 13 and 64 esp.). The argument strongly recalls Geertz's 'Ritual and social change: a Javanese example', *American Anthropologist*, LXI, 1959, 991-1012, where structure, or 'causal-functional integration', is set against culture, 'logico-meaningful integration', conceptually and, it seems, ontologically. The shadow of Descartes is no coincidence.

The split between the instrumental (what is done) and the expressive (what is said) is useful in understanding *Negara*. Almost three-quarters is taken up with a reconstruction of the ideal, or typical, pre-conquest Balinese state and dissects the function of kinship, clientship, trade, irrigation, and so on in political alliances between princes and peasants. The account is the best of its kind and is likely to convince the general anthropologist, but not all Indonesian historians are swayed (see Schulte-Nordholt's review in *Bijdragen*, CXXXVII, 1981). The last chapters deal with 'the symbology of power'. For 'two fixed conjunctions of imaged ideas' are central to kingship. The first is the relation of macrocosm to microcosm discussed below. The second consists of the *padmasana* (divine lotus seat); the *lingga* ('the god's phallus, or potency'); and *sekti* (oddly not *sakti*, the usual spelling; the god's energy). These abstractions are embodied in kingship, and more humble forms, through a spatial metaphor of inner (= superior) and outer (= inferior; but not always as even a close reading of pp. 109- 16 shows). The crux is a complementarity of image and realization: the imag(in)ed king is incapable of action. The elements, if not the analysis, will be familiar from the Leiden and Oxford studies in eastern Indonesia.

Negara is Geertz's mature reflection on the problems of interpretation and Bali; and is

without doubt his best work on the island. The eloquence and persuasiveness we have come to expect may give the work a passing popularity among those who unfortunately do not realize the scale of the problems to which Geertz is addressing himself, and on which, in passing, it may be helpful to fill in a bit of background.

How likely is our received view of a pleasantly pompous, if hopelessly inept, divine king with one eye on his seat, the other out of the worldly window? For so small an island the scale of bloodshed, slavery, colonization, infiltration, and fear suggests that if kings wished merely to be monumental monarchs, they did not always succeed. The itch to divine from subsequent sources what was going on before conquest is best left unscratched. Leaving aside any ambiguity in 'expressive' (does the king express himself, or does the kingship express something?), even if the celebrated cremations are purely expressive now, in what sense were they then? (Ronald Inden has remarked that the funeral vogue in Bali might be ironic comment on their social condition! Such *palebön*, or *tiwa* - Geertz's *ngabèn* is low Balinese and actually a caste offence as he uses it - are dramatic but marginal to the serious business of worshipping gods.) Practically, cremations bring huge profits if enough people can be persuaded to join. There lies the snag. For the other face of pomp - might one hazard like wars? - is political confrontation where great claims must show their coin, the crueller as others' deaths are not always of one's own timing. Oddly, Geertz does not question the Cartesian cast of the argument that politics is more instrumental than expressive. Instead he turns it upside-down.

Perhaps we are missing the point, in not starting with the right theoretical context. Here Geertz draws heavily on the French hermeneutic philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, for whom simple signification is just 'unidimensional' semiotics and far short of the complex meanings found in the predicative structure of discourse. In this latter, metaphor, as intellectually encompassable, is contrasted with symbol which has further primordial, emotive, and so ineffable, aspects. The detail, and kind, of Geertz's 'imaged ideas' look rather to fall into Ricoeur's category of metaphor, which is a little confusing as Geertz refers only to 'symbol' as 'anything that denotes, describes, represents, exemplifies, labels, indicates, evokes, depicts, expresses - anything that can somehow signify' (p. 135). It is inconceivable that someone of Geertz's eminence is unaware of the implications of refusing analytical distinctions which one way or another, are the philosophical props of much Western knowledge, including that of his own mentor. Yet if everything may be treated as a symbol, it is hard to see what calling something a symbol actually tells us. The power, or polysemy, often attributed to symbols stems in part from grouping together discrete kinds of relationship, so that there appears to be a real realm of 'meaning'. Obviously, if interpretation is defined in terms of symbols and meaning, one can never show that culture actually does consist of either symbols or meaning without begging the question.

What status then do the proposed interpretations have? Geertz's method of validation is put simply. It is 'guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses' ('Thick Description', p. 20). The difficulty, as Ricoeur has observed, is how to assess one's guesses such that interpretation does not descend into yet another claim to privileged access to a culture, where one is to admire the author for ingenuity or style. Geertz, wisely, grounds his analysis in the work of the great Balinese Scholar, Hooykaas, who would have been most surprised to learn that traditional Dutch philology was really Ricoeurian hermeneutics. One problem is that the symbols Geertz picks out are a handful among scores of Sanskrit words with a long Balinese exegetical history. What, for instance, are the implications of *lingga* having a primary sense of 'sign'? Or what kind of power is *sakti*, if *kuasa* (not mentioned at all) translates best as 'domination'? In contrasting *buwana agung* and *buwana alit* (literally: big and little worlds) as 'the realm of sentience' as opposed to 'thought and feeling' (p. 105) or again as 'outside' and 'inside', Geertz is caught between a Cartesian ism (he partly recognizes) and catachresis. Without referring to Balinese metaphysical presuppositions *stricto sensu* (cf. pp. 46 and 107) it is questionable how exactly such terms can be adumbrated. Might not assuming core meanings must exist impute an essentialism to the Balinese it has not been shown they have? The supremacy royalty may read into their rites

is not undisputed; nor need other rites be held to say the same. Pageantry is performative, asserting one point of view and defining its terms at times persuasively rather than precisely. Court ceremonial is one claim among many in Balinese culture.

What does 'thick description' aim to study? It is not the epistemological problem of how cultures define the world (in extension or intension) which is largely taken for granted, but with the general 'meaning' with which they invest social life and institutions. Whose meaning is it though? It is striking that the Balinese vocabularies of signification and meaning are not discussed. As it happens, they are incompatible with those Geertz uses. For both use sets of incommensurable technical terms based on criteria involving intention, truth conditions, and so forth. The problems become clear when one considers whose views of theatre are at stake. We are offered, sadly, no evidence of Balinese ideas at all. In fact theatre, however translated, does not stand in easy opposition to reality, the mundane, the instrumental, or whatever contrast is implied in 'theatre state'. It is interesting that the interpretive approach does not stretch to Balinese philosophical premises or categories: it is worrying when it looks as if no one has asked if they have any! If this is the promise of interpretive anthropology, can one blame the Balinese prince who echoes his Roman *alter ego* 'et tu, Brute!'?