

Why ask: ‘ How do Indonesians Argue’?

The original proposal

The title of the symposium may seem both deliberately provocative and far too broad. It conjures up spectres of the infamous debate about Primitive Thought. And, at first sight, it claims to take on the impossible. Oddly, these are two reasons among others for addressing the issue. That there are cultural differences in how people are taught to narrate, argue and present ideas to others is hardly contentious. Through Cultural Studies we have become sensitive to how people appreciate and represent the world around them through differences in class, gender, religion, generation etc. Whether an inquiry is coherent or not depends upon the object of study and the theory and methods used. Expressed theoretically, the aim is to examine how far a broadly pragmatist approach can offer a viable, more finely tuned alternative to theories that depend on selective explanatory generalizations about society as necessarily structured and systematic.

Argument

Scholars usually trace the European philosophical genealogy of argument back to Aristotle, whether for logic, dialectic or rhetoric. Despite the existence of other non-European philosophies (e.g. Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika or Buddhist), its sheer epistemological clout is effectively hegemonic so that everyone else’s practice is judged not only according to how far they deviate from the ideal, but presupposes that no other criteria or practice is worth considering seriously. (Such judgements, of course, ignore the argument within European philosophy itself.) The aim of the symposium is to question this hegemony by bringing together scholars of Indonesia from different disciplines, which we hope may undermine this comfortable consensus. The study of topics as diverse as political speeches, story-telling, theatre, the mass media, how history is imagined and everyday discussion has shown that people speak, act and understand one another using criteria in a wide variety of contexts that diverge wildly from European norms.¹ Other topics, such as art, dance and music, are conventionally omitted from such studies because they are non-discursive and so irrelevant to a study of argument. Perhaps it is time to challenge this neat split of discursive and non-discursive, which I suggest is both Eurocentric and ignores what people almost everywhere do in daily practice. Granted how much argument (sic) has been devoted to showing the universal applicability and necessity of European canons of thought, I append a background

¹ Two well-known examples are Becker 1979 and Errington 1979 on Javanese *wayang* and Malay *hikayat* respectively. Reference to ‘Indonesia(n)’ here is intentionally problematic, as it is the contested outcome of rival, often political, articulations (Hobart 2013; bibliographical references are given in the Background paper).

paper that lays out some of the issues. However the aim of this symposium is primarily to investigate the practices through which Indonesians represent, understand, argue, engage with and question the world about them to one another and to outsiders.

Among the issues discussed in the background paper, two are worth mention here. The choice of the term ‘argument’ is not accidental. It has cultural connotations, largely omitted from English dictionary definitions, of confrontation and war, which may differ both from stereotypes about Indonesian indirectness and actual practice. While some expressions in English might seem to have suitable Indonesian equivalents, argument raises problems and so highlights the issue of double discursivity, the disjuncture and incommensurateness between European and Indonesian understandings and practices. Obviously neither of these designations is unproblematic. Those too are also a theme of the symposium. In the first instance I suggest that we concentrate on Javanese and Balinese, as two relatively well-documented societies.²

There is a further issue, which might appear minor. It is that European accounts focus almost exclusively on those who speak, write, represent or produce at the expense of listeners, readers or spectators, as if the latter were purely passive. While this strategy might be an effective way to make interpretation easier for those who claim the right to enunciate, studies of audiences in Indonesia and elsewhere have shown that it is wildly, indeed willfully, wrong-headed. In other words, a study of narrative, argument and other styles of representation that omits for whom these are misses the complex contextual relationships of which such practices are part.³ More generally, any approach through practice should complicate attempts to suture and close meaning around a single agent or moment by showing the assemblages of practices through which such meanings are reworked from initial conception to the subsequent commentaries and uses.

What to study?

At the risk of seeming to pass the buck, I would prefer not to anticipate or close down how colleagues choose to understand and inflect ideas about argument in Indonesia. The whole point is to question the many largely invisible and silent modes of closure around inquiry and to invite new ways of thinking of argument in practice.

Mark Hobart, Hempton, Oxon. May 2015

² The symposium’s aim is to open up a range of issues for discussion, which, if they prove interesting enough, I hope others will pick up and develop. Among these would be how discussions about Java and Bali bear on what happens elsewhere in the archipelago and beyond in the larger Malay world.

³ This point raises difficulties for how far we can address such questions for, say, *kawi* literature, where the audience is unknown. That said, such works may well provide indications as to their intended audience even if they cannot show how they were actually received.