

Communications to the Editor

In Praise of Pacemakers

It may not be common practice to comment on the address given by the president of the Association for Asian Studies at its annual meeting. Professor Robert J. Smith's eloquent defense of the use of cultural concepts in studies of Japan (*JAS* 48.4: 715–23), however, raises some interesting questions about the relationship between old-fashioned cultural determinism and some newer concepts which have emerged in recent years. As the reflection of the lifework of a distinguished cultural anthropologist, "Something Old, Something New—Tradition and Culture in the Study of Japan" merits closer examination.

Professor Smith first discusses some of the current redefinitions of culture which emphasize its changing and historically discontinuous nature. He quotes James Ferguson to the effect that it is "'a dynamic, shifting, contested terrain, constantly shaped by and shaping' a changing social context." Theodore Bestor's study of a "traditional" Tokyo neighborhood that, in fact, was established quite recently is cited to suggest how "(t)he content of the traditions that sustain it [the neighborhood] is being constantly revised, renewed, and renegotiated." However—and the point is an important one—"(t)his does not mean that the vision of community held by its residents is specious or its rhetorical coinage base" (p. 716).

Further along, Smith returns to something which is reminiscent of a more conventional cultural determinism. He cites four examples of Japanese industriousness and "quality control" from the seventeenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries to argue that "despite the attractiveness of the newer definitions of culture which, being more fluid and contingent, offer us more ample room for maneuver, we ought not overlook the possibility that there are perdurable cultural factors that play a part in shaping economic, political, and social outcomes" (p. 721). He is careful, as he is throughout the address, to distance himself from any claims that culture is the exclusive or even most important factor in social change. Yet Smith treads familiar ground by suggesting that early childhood socialization may explain why, as Patricia Steinhoff reports, the ultra-radical Japanese Red Army and large Japanese corporations share similar management philosophies. While the historically contingent nature of culture leads to the conclusion that "we are left . . . without an anchor in time" (p. 718), he is reluctant to ditch older views of culture.

Finally, the two themes are juxtaposed. On one hand, "(i)f there are no enduring cultural constructs, then what are we to make of the testimony of de Vivero and Ellis, Haddon and Kipling [the four historical examples], Bestor and Steinhoff?" On the other: "authenticity is not a function of antiquity and . . . recency is not evidence of triviality." Again, "our anchor never was time" (p. 722). There is also a strong assertion of cultural relativism: "Eric Wolf has warned against embracing the 'ethnocentric, culture-bound notion of common moral impulses, common values, located like a little pacemaker in each person's heart' in a society" (p. 722).

Why is it necessary for Smith to argue for the existence of “perdurable cultural factors”? They may be the best way to explain the alleged persistence of certain sorts of behavior (e.g., Japanese industriousness) over the centuries. But I wonder if there isn’t a second, more intriguing reason, and I would be interested in knowing his reaction to my suggestion. There seems to be a contradiction in viewing culture as something which is being, in his words, “constantly revised, renewed, and re-negotiated” and claiming, through his quotation of Wolf’s hardline comment on pacemakers, that we must not impose a false universalism on cultural particularities.

Arguably, cultural relativism makes sense only if it is coupled with some rather strong assumptions about cultural determinism. From the deterministic perspective, tradition is an organic unity which emerges and sustains itself over the centuries. It develops largely independently of the wills of the individuals who form the cultural community. For example, Murakami Yasusuke’s theory of the *ie* civilization accounts for contemporary Japanese business practices in terms of a social institution which first emerged in eastern Japan around the eleventh century A.D. (Murakami, 1984: 279–364). Such theories are often derided, but they do have the advantage, for cultural relativists, of showing not only that culture itself but the values which define human relations within the community are a natural, organic development. Like the doctrine of Natural Law which legitimized feudal institutions during the European Middle Ages, they downplay or deny the human-centered, historically contingent nature of the status quo.

Once the connection with the “anchor of time” (which I take to be equivalent to historical continuity and/or organic development) is severed, we are left with a situation resembling the condition of Western political thought at the end of the Middle Ages: Machiavelli and others asserted that the state, to use Jacob Burckhardt’s famous phrase, is “a work of art” rather than the reflection of the order of a God-created cosmos (Burckhardt 1965: 52–56).

Similarly, if the student of culture admits that people create and recreate culture, two things are apparent. First, insofar as groups of individuals have their own “space” (to use a currently fashionable term), the possibilities for culture-creation, if not limitless, at least are numerous. One can easily imagine a Japan very different from what it actually is today if certain groups or individuals had acted differently. What if the Tokugawa régime had not imposed the *sakoku* (closed country) policy in the seventeenth century? The most interesting themes in the current debate on *kokusaika*, or “internationalization,” concern changes in deeply entrenched cultural attitudes toward non-Japanese outsiders.

Secondly, insofar as “cultural space” is dominated by those who have superior political, economic, and technical resources, it will be moulded by their priorities. As anyone familiar with recent Japanese history knows, the formation of culture is more often than not a matter of power. This is a point which Smith is willing, perhaps reluctantly, to concede: “It is not only elites who formulate tradition, however, but when they do so the product that I have called culture is usually dismissively labeled ‘ideology’ ” (p. 718 fn).

Culture-creation is often characterized, as Smith acknowledges, by bitter conflict. But when the process is demystified, the new definitions of culture make it difficult to retain the kind of reverence for established traditions which I believe the relativist position entails. This is why, I think, Professor Smith must return to some modified version of cultural determinism.

Just as Machiavelli’s concept of the state as a product of human will posed a fatal challenge to the Natural Law doctrine, the redefinition of culture as artifice undermines the ultimate appeal in issues of value to the cultural community, which

is what I understand to be Wolf's point on pacemakers. Discarding the validation of cultural forms through organic development is equivalent to conceding that tradition and all it encompasses are "up for grabs." In our era of "information management," computers, and other high technology, the manipulation of culture by the state, the mass media, and business interests already has become pervasive.

This leaves us, I believe, with two options. First, we can accept the status quo and refuse to judge it. That was the approach of Machiavelli in his evocations of Roman and Italian history, but for our times that amounts to a validation not of culture *per se* but of the historically contingent actions of the individuals who manipulate culture. Second, we can refuse to abdicate the freedom to assert, for example, that certain aspects of Japanese or any other culture are "dehumanizing." That refusal entails certain assumptions about "common moral impulses" which are distasteful to cultural relativists.

I wholeheartedly agree with Professor Smith that the concept of culture is too valuable to be discarded. But I am probably less sanguine than he about the benevolent nature of culture creation, and also more skeptical about the validity of even a modified cultural determinism. Culture is important in the study of Japan not because of the uniformities it imposes but because some Japanese individuals—perhaps many more people than we imagine—struggle to overcome its limitations—as, indeed, Westerners struggle to overcome the limitations of their culture. For all the talk of harmony and homogeneity, the really interesting thing about Japan is the emergence of those people who express the values of autonomy described almost four decades ago by David Riesman: "(t)he people I speak of live in urbanized conditions in every land, but they are world citizens in thought and feeling. Sensitive to wide perspectives of time and space, they have largely transcended prejudices of race or time or class. Their guides are diverse, and they feel empathy and solidarity with their colleagues across all national boundaries" (Riesman, 1954: 118).

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Robert J. Smith replies as follows:

Indeed, it is not common practice to comment on a presidential address, but we may hope that Professor Seekins has established a precedent. I found his remarks

stimulating, and suspect that some of our apparent disagreements may stem from my having compressed too much in too brief a compass. Some, but not all.*

Professor Seekins detects a contradiction in my viewing culture as something which is being constantly revised and renegotiated and claiming at the same time that we must avoid imposing (via the pacemaker metaphor) the ethnocentric notion of common moral impulses and common values. I fail to see the contradiction, for if culture is a pacemaker, then there is no hope at all of revising or renegotiating its terms.

Next, there is the matter of our having “lost our anchor of time.” That is not what I wrote, and as my Japanese students routinely and ruefully note, the preposition makes all the difference. I said that we had lost our anchor in time, and by that metaphor meant only to suggest the utter futility of attempts to establish that ever-elusive grail of the modernization folk—“the baseline for change.” I do not think we have lost our anchor of time, for in any cultural analysis time, history, and tradition all are essential ingredients. It is in historical time, after all, that people create and recreate culture.

If people do just that, as Professor Seekins quite correctly argues, then he is right also to imagine that there are numerous alternative versions of Japanese society that might have come into being. Not many historical developments are inevitable. It is a point of view I have long held, and in my 1975 book on Japanese ancestor worship I remarked that there was no discernible imperative that caused its rites to be cast in the Buddhist idiom in Japan. Given even slight shifts at crucial moments, it could well have assumed another form.

Next, there is the issue of ideology, in which Professor Seekins misunderstands the sentence he quotes. I do not believe that the formation of culture is more often than not a matter of power. I have never believed it, and cannot see how the idea can be entertained seriously following the massive counterevidence pouring out of Eastern Europe. Those who possess superior political, economic, and technical resources would have us buy their claim to be the creators of culture. But so did the Wizard of Oz use smoke and mirrors to conceal his haplessness.

I do not understand why Professor Seekins concludes that we are therefore left with either the option of accepting the status quo and refusing to judge it, or that of adopting a critical stance. It is an oddly constraining dictum, for it seems to me clear enough that achieving an understanding of the status quo is the one essential prerequisite for making judgments of it.

Professor Seekins has selected his option, as his concluding paragraph makes abundantly clear. He writes: “Culture is important in the study of Japan not because of the uniformities it imposes but because some Japanese individuals . . . struggle to overcome its limitations. . . .” The tone is, by now, a familiar one for there has been no dearth of observers ready to identify the shortcomings of Japanese society and culture. The observers are foreigners who, beginning in the nineteenth century, were quick to find a very great deal about Japan that was wrong and worth setting right. Their attempts to implant their own brand of pacemaker have largely failed, fortunately. As for those Japanese who have struggled to overcome the limitations of their society, their name is legion. Thus, I heartily concur in Professor Seekins’s surmise that there are perhaps more of them than we imagine.

Where I cannot follow him is in his claim that “For all the talk of harmony and homogeneity, the really interesting thing about Japan is the emergence of those

*I received his comments just as I was leaving for Japan and write this from Tokyo, where I have no access to my files and library. I apologize for the insufficient documentation of what follows.

people who express the values of autonomy” as spelled out by David Riesman. The *really* interesting thing? However strongly we may endorse autonomy and admire those who seek it, why must we take their version of being Japanese to be the really interesting thing about the country? I am reminded of a review of my book on a rather unexceptional agricultural community on Shikoku, whose author expressed regret that I had not conducted my research in the one place in rural Japan of real interest—Sanrizuka. It seemed to me then, as it does to this day, reasonable to suppose that the really interesting thing about Japan was that hundreds of thousands of farm households then lived in rapidly attenuating versions of what they thought of as traditional village life—as the people of Kurusu did—and not that the future, as was often maintained, was to be discerned in the bunkers and towers around the Narita International Airport at Sanrizuka.

However that may be, let me conclude by noting that it appears to me that the balance of relativism and determinism I propose is the means by which we can understand the emergence of divergent views and populations. In due course, clearly, there is no reason why those who perceive the possibility of creating an alternative to contemporary Japanese society may not do so. People are neither merely victims nor merely puppets, as we see in every day’s newspapers. In fifty years, barring universal catastrophe, the Japanese will have a very different kind of society, part of which is already in place, part of which is as yet undreamed of. I see such progressions in all societies as being like the game of dominoes—like fits to like as the sequence unfolds, but the end result cannot be predicted.

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Michael R. Dove has sent the following response to the review by John R. Bowen of his edited volume, *The Real and Imagined Role of Culture in Development*, that appeared in *JAS* 48:4 (November 1989: pp. 932–34):

What is it that leads most anthropologists (and indeed most social scientists) to view “native” utterances as proper objects of *study*, while viewing official utterances as items of *information*? Why do native statements prompt intense inquiry and debate, while official statements are simply recorded and reported without qualification? Why, in anthropological fieldwork in the developing world, don’t we treat official discourse the way we treat native discourse?

My queries are prompted by John R. Bowen’s (1989) review of my edited book, *The Real and Imagined Role of Culture in Development*. This review (a generally useful assessment) includes some pointedly uncritical references to official actions and statements. At one point, for example, Bowen questions my argument that development projects in Indonesia are never designed to strengthen indigenous efforts, by stating that “the Indonesian government has frequently *claimed* [emphasis added] to be doing precisely that” (pp. 933–34). In the context of the thesis that I presented in the book’s introduction, namely that there is a meaningful gap between official rhetoric and underlying purpose in Indonesian government, and given a post-war history of uncompromising opposition by this government to any political, economic, or religious initiative not originating with itself, Bowen’s appeal to government “claims” is ingenuous.

An assumption of disinterest in government rhetoric is especially surprising given the current interest within anthropology in the political aspects of dialogue

and discourse. Bowen (1989a) himself has analyzed political influences on tribal poetic discourse in Indonesia. Not all discourse is tribal, however, nor all politics poetic. The articulation, explication, and justification of government policy by the governing to the governed (and to international donors, and to themselves), is clearly discourse, and discourse with political implications.

This discourse merits attention not least because it affects the lives of Third World peoples as directly as anything else that anthropologists study. In contemporary Indonesia, the central government enhances its ability to restrict local initiatives in development or local opposition to central initiatives by monopolizing not discourse per se, but the acceptable subjects of discourse. As I said in my introduction (Dove 1988:29), peasant unhappiness with central government programs is consistently construed as peasant "misunderstanding" of them: "the possibility of government error is thereby categorized out of existence: there are no bad projects and mistreated peasants, but only 'misunderstood' projects and 'misunderstanding' peasants." This construal has obviously significant implications for where blame is placed for development failures, and for what types of remedial actions are undertaken.

For the same reason that the central government in Indonesia opposes local initiative, so does it oppose local culture: both are perceived as threatening central control and the development of a national consciousness that will remain under central control. Exercising its monopoly on the parameters of debate, the central government maintains that it opposes traditional cultures and lifestyles because they hinder national development and are themselves "signs of underdevelopment." Bowen's review questions (p. 933) this imputed opposition of the government to traditional culture when he notes that "the Indonesian government has vigorously promoted shadow plays, court dances, and even Acehese *seudati* dance as the elements of a national identity."

But do such "promotions" constitute evidence of genuine support for local culture? To draw a metaphor from the shadow plays mentioned by Bowen, it is always necessary in Indonesia to distinguish between frontstage performance and backstage intent. While the government's stance towards local cultures may be represented frontstage as "promotion," backstage it more closely resembles cooptation. The aesthetic aspect of local culture is promoted, but all social, political, and economic aspects are suppressed. The government's purported encouragement of cultural diversity is most felicitously analyzed by Acciaioli (1985:162), who writes that "Most groups may dance their way to the national goals, each with its own ethnic steps, as long as the underlying ideology, the tune to which the dance has been called, is what the state has ratified."

One may ask if it matters if the state calls the tune, as long as it is in the interests of national unity. Unity is certainly a problematic matter for Indonesia, an island-nation comprising an incredible variety of peoples and interests. Only by conscious attempts to forge a national society has Indonesia the nation been able to come into being. Indonesia is truly a quintessential example of the "imagined community" (in Anderson's [1983] sense). The imagining of a nation state is not a disinterested act, however: the type of state that results and the priorities that it holds and serves, vary according to *who* does the imagining—even if it is the government. As Anderson writes (1983:137), "Official nationalism was [and is] typically a response on the part of threatened dynastic and aristocratic groups—upper classes—to popular vernacular nationalism." There is little question that central elites in Indonesia today routinely use appeals to national interest to disguise self-interested policy decisions.

It is a regrettable state of affairs when anthropologists need to be reminded that government officials are political actors, when tribal poetry is plumbed for political import while government statements are accepted transparently. The oft-lamented irrelevance of anthropology to the exigencies of the times, and especially to the needs of Third World peasants and tribesmen, will not be redressed until this lacuna is redressed. This is a challenge for all of anthropology (cf. Colson 1989:3), not just for the reviewer of my book, who has, indeed, shown evidence elsewhere (Bowen 1988) that he is well aware of the problem. The first step towards meeting this challenge is to cease to reflexively treat official statements in a fundamentally different way than folk statements—as something to use in explanation, as opposed to something to be explained.

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John R. Bowen replies as follows:

Michael Dove's claim that I have ignored the study of Indonesian government discourse ignores the bulk of my recent work, which happens to concern precisely this topic. Dove may be a new reader of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, but a recent article of mine in these pages (1986) dealt in its entirety with government manipulation of a key sociopolitical category (*gotong-royong*) in the postwar period. Dove also apparently missed a subsequent study (1988a) that examined the relations among Indonesian Supreme Court decisions, Islamic court rulings, and local property categories in Sumatra. He also may not have seen the political analysis of official provincial histories (1989). He does cite my study of the political sources of changes in Gayo sung poetry (1989a), in which the one extended example (concerning government justification of its position on the 1965 massacres) concerns precisely the state's use of cultural media for, as Dove puts it, the "articulation, explication, and justification of government policy." Far from being limited to the study of "tribal poetics" (I thought "tribal" was out of the vocabulary, and especially among Borneo specialists!), these studies were designed to capture the interaction of diverse official and local discourses.

What seems to have prompted Dove's response is my objection to several of his sweeping assertions about "the government" (a blanket term that ignores the savage infighting between various ministries over precisely the issues in question) and "traditional culture." In response to one claim ("Never does one hear of a project expressly designed to quicken or strengthen some wholly indigenous or spontaneous development effort" [p. 22]), I suggested that the government has indeed "expressly designed" some projects to "strengthen" local efforts, however mixed the motives or unfortunate the outcomes may be. I mentioned as an example the *Inpres Desa* program under which fixed sums were given to each village head to be spent on village development projects and with the stated goal of supporting local efforts. Having spent two years analyzing the outcomes of this program (see Bowen 1983), I am as aware as anyone of the degree to which villagers were pushed toward particular projects, sums were skimmed off the top, local contractors diluted their cement, etc. Further, in the *JAS* article mentioned above, I showed how the government drew on pseudo-traditional categories to claim that, because Indonesians had traditionally given their labor freely, they ought to work for the government without pay on village projects. But the point is that political interests were ad-

vanced precisely by directing and coopting, rather than opposing, village-level decision-making. On this and other issues, I doubt whether I (or “most anthropologists”) “need to be reminded that government officials are political actors.”

A second blanket category, that of “traditional culture,” could come in for far more searching criticism than Dove made in the review. To take this category seriously one would have to sort out the traditional and the imposed, the genuine and the spurious. Is East Javanese Qurʾān recitation “traditional culture?” How about Malay shadow puppetry, derived from Java? In any case, my point as stated in the review was that, at least for the larger societies in Indonesia, the central government appropriates elements of local culture as part of its attempt to regiment local identities under the image of a unified national culture. This strategy is far cleverer and more successful than simply “opposing” all local culture would have been (as Dove has it), whatever such a policy could have meant. (How could a Javanese president “oppose” the *keris* if his own standing draws from its power?) Nowhere did I claim (nor would I) that these appropriations constitute “genuine support for local culture”: the naïveté of looking for “genuine support” aside, the entire weight of the studies just mentioned has been precisely on the incorporation of local cultural elements into national political discourse. (It may be that when Dove says, “Indonesian traditional culture,” he is thinking of certain practices found among several Kalimantan groups, but then he should make his claims somewhat more precisely.)

Dove’s attack on “most anthropologists” who ignore government discourse is surprising not only because so many of us have made the issue central to our work but also because Dove, at least in the book reviewed, has not. The reader of the above letter who turns to Dove’s book might expect empirical studies of official discourse: speeches, publications, and actions of state agents in particular ministries and on different levels. But Dove’s own piece (which, incidentally, I praised in my review) is a rather standard account of local meanings and practices, and his introduction makes no reference to the substantial literature on Indonesian political rhetoric (by Anderson, Emerson, the Archipel group, and so on). The book is a good one, but a sustained analysis of official discourse it is not.

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