Modern Asian Studies **33,** 3 (1999), pp. 581–602. © 1999 Cambridge University Press
Printed in the United Kingdom

Understanding Languages of Modernization: A Southeast Asian View

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Languages of Development

More than most of humanity, scholars are prone to sinking their feet into the quagmire of definition. Words are unpacked, nuances of meaning are debated, and discourses are interrogated. Post-developmentalists have been at the forefront of a re-examination of the languages of development and developmentalism. Arturo Escobar, for example, states that his desire is to analyze 'regimes of discourse and representation' (1995: 10). Jonathan Crush is similarly concerned with the so-styled discourse of development, and expresses the desire to make the 'self-evident problematical' (1995: 3). He highlights work in the humanities and social sciences which concerns itself with textual issues of writing and representation through which this discourse has been framed. Crush suggests that such textual analysis offers 'new ways of understanding what development is and does, and why it seems so difficult to think beyond it'. He goes on to argue that 'we need to not only understand why the language of development can be so evasive, even misleading, but also why so many people in so many parts of the world seem to need to believe it and have done so for so long' (1995: 4). Language, as we have been cajoled into accepting over recent years, is powerful. Language is the vessel that steers hegemonic ideas into ascendancy and perpetuates a particular vision of the world. Many of the accusations levelled at the development discourse—such as Eurocentrism, economism, and ahistoricity—employ the language of modernization and

0026–749X/99/$7.50+$0.10

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X99003480 Published online by Cambridge University Press

development to mount their case. The simple point seems to be that we need to pay greater attention to the language that underpins, sustains and propagates the development ideal:

> These imagined worlds of development writing and speaking often appear to bear very little resemblance to any commonsense reality. To find out about a country, one usually does not read its development plan. In a textual field so laden with evasion, misrepresentation, dissimulation and just plain humbug, language often seems to be profoundly misleading or, at best, have only limited referential value (Crush, 1995: 4–5).

What is notable about this recent work examining the language of development is that it almost entirely concerns itself with the *English* language of development. Though this is not altogether unsurprising, it is notable, given the degree to which post-developmentalists call for an indigenization of development. Local knowledge and local action are stressed and yet the significance of local language receives, by comparison, scant attention. Presumably, if textual issues in English set the parameters of the development discourse, then textual issues in Thai, Burmese, Indonesian, Persian and Shona do the same. Hobart considers whether there is not the risk that such post-developmental academic writings will become just another facet of the process of hegemony which the authors ostensibly set out to contest (1993: 13). The focus on 'textual, literary and linguistic concerns' leaves such work largely Eurocentric in its origins and articulation, so 'replicating in subtler form the presuppositions they set out to criticise' (Hobart, 1993: 17). Although we cannot bridge the gap between the largely literary concerns of scholars and other elites and the oral traditions of most 'ordinary' people, we do in this paper try to reveal at least some of the local linguistic landscape.

The rationale behind this paper is comparatively simple: we wish to investigate the meanings and histories of just a handful of key words in the development lexicon. The emphasis is on revealing the continuities and discontinuities that link and divide the English words from their local 'equivalents' in three Southeast Asian languages—Burmese, Indonesian and Thai. This choice of countries merely reflects the linguistic expertise of the authors. Terms such as 'development' and 'participation' are often coined in the West, translated into local languages (or associated with local equivalents), and then transposed onto the developmental landscape. Western researchers and consultants (often not conversant in the local language) may then find such terms being translated back to them.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X99003480 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The assumption, in more than a few cases, is that these languages of development are comparable.

But it is not simply a question of what words mean. The issue also relates to how words link with the dominant development discourse in *each* country—rather than, as it is usually represented, in terms of the First versus the Third Worlds. As we hope to demonstrate, Indonesian and Burmese development terminologies have strong associative links with entrenched governments in each country and therefore (often) have hidden implications in terms of the architectures of power. In Thailand, too, there is a powerful development narrative which, though it may have strong links with Western ideals, also has an indigenous face that should be appreciated. Languages of development are both universal and locally situated. There is certainly a modernization ethic which links most countries of the world. An ethic of consumerism, an ethic—perhaps—of development as growth. But when it comes to the detailed experience of individual countries, this ethic becomes illuminated for what it is: a broad brush perspective which disguises as much as it reveals.

It has become common to deal with the difficulty of defining development by resorting to the explanation that the word is contextually defined. By this people usually imply that the meaning of development changes according to the systematic context in which it is being used. An economist might, therefore, use development as shorthand for economic growth, while a geographer might wish to include other measures of human well-being. In this paper we argue that development—and many of the other words that compose the lexicon of development—is contextually defined in another sense. According to the places, peoples and cultures where it is being applied. Nor is it just a case of embedding the development discourse within its local context. Words and terms have their own individual histories which may be important in understanding what they mean and what implications they hold for the people who use them.

Pinning Down Development

Across the university world, in departments of anthropology, economics, development studies, geography and political economy, first-year students are asked to think, debate and write about the meaning of 'development'. As they sit earnestly at their first lectures,

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possibly still excited and enthused by the prospect of higher education, they are told that development is one of the hardest of terms to define. It is a verb, an adjective and a noun rolled up into one word that defies all attempts at neat definition.[1] They may also be told, by those of a more radical frame of mind, that development is analogous to modernization and that the development industry has become the Trojan Horse of capitalism, the means by which poor countries are forced into thinking that their future should be (and can be) a mirror image of the rich world. What tends not to be discussed, though, is what people in the developing world think about this word, this great disservice that is apparently being perpetrated in the name of 'progress'.

The Thai word for development, or at least the one most commonly used, is *kaanpattana*. As Demaine points out, *kaanpattana* was coined relatively recently and only seems to have been embraced by the Thai state in 1957 when General Sarit Thanarat became prime minister (Demaine, 1986). Sarit created the National Economic Development Board (NEDB), giving it the task of drawing up Thailand's first five-year economic development plan (1961–66).[2] *Kaanpattana* means 'progressing' or 'advancing forward' and in many instances is probably better translated as 'modernization' rather than 'development'. It should at least be made clear that 'progress' is often interpreted in economistic terms. *Kaanpattana* is commonly paired with another term, *khwaam charoen* which, Hirsch argues, means prosperity in the consumerist sense (Hirsch, 1989: 50). This, though, is not clear from the word *charoen* itself. Like *kaanpattana* it means to 'move forward', 'to progress' or 'to prosper' but it is not essentially materialist or consumerist. It is also used, for example, as part of the phrase 'Long Live the King'. Awae Masae, in his study of two villages in the southern region of Thailand, found that rural development or *kaanpattana chonnabot* was more exactly interpreted at the local level as meaning *kaan nam khwaam charoen khao naa suu chonnabot* or 'bringing advancement and modernization to rural areas' (Awae Masae, 1996: 221).

Though there may be some areas of doubt regarding the degree to which the Thai terms for 'development' have materialistic under/

[1] As in: 'to develop'; a 'developing' country; and a LDC (Less Developed Country).

[2] Significantly, the NEDB only became the National Economic *and Social* Development Board (NESDB) rather later. While the First Five Year Plan (1961–66) was a national economic development plan, by the time the third plan (1972–76) was published it had become a national economic and social development plan.

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over tones, it seems that villagers and village leaders tend to interpret development in material terms and especially in infrastructural terms: roads, water supply and electricity, for instance. It is also perhaps not surprising that villagers view development as something that is done to them, and not something that they take upon themselves. As Vandergeest has argued, development is a 'gift' offered by the Thai government as part of a social bargain (1991). It is significant that the sorts of 'gifts' offered by the state are usually material, technological or financial and beyond the capabilities of local communities to provide for themselves—like roads, water, electricity and credit. It could be argued that this notion of development as a gift, perhaps as an entitlement, is bedded deeply in Thai history. Kings might be viewed in Buddhist terms as having earned their position through the accumulation of merit in past lives, but this had to be reaffirmed by doing good deeds in the present. The great kings of Thai history, including the present King Bhumibol, have sought to repay the loyalty of their subjects by offering them protection and gifts. Inter-state relations in mainland Southeast Asia operated in a similar manner: weaker, tributary states would give their loyalty while the stronger 'partner' would provide protection against aggression from other competing powers (Thongchai Winichakul, 1994: 83–4). This was righteous kingship, and righteous government is founded on similar principles. (We argue below that the government of Myanmar has lost its mandate and the support of the people because it is no longer viewed as righteous.)

Interestingly, before *kaanpattana* came into widespread use in the early 1960s, *wattana* was the word usually employed to denote 'development' in Thailand. This word, which the dictionary translates as meaning 'to progress, grow', is more in keeping with the multidimensional gloss given to 'development' in most contemporary Western texts (and first-year lectures) as it encompasses all the various elements that might come under the heading 'human advancement'. The word is sometimes paired with *charoen* (in *charoen wattana*), meaning 'to progress and advance'. It is also notable that NGOs tend to prefer to use *wattana* to *kaanpattana* (see Hewison, 1993; Rigg, 1991 and 1993).[3] *Wattana* is regarded as being more appropriate by these Thai NGOs because it equates development not with modernity, but with the less economically-loaded 'progress'. What is clear,

[3] Though *wattanatham* is more usually translated as 'culture' and it is not an active, verbal noun like *kaanpattana*.

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however, is that although *kaanpattana* may have come into widespread use only relatively recently, there were already well-established local conceptions of progress, and terms which might be broadly equated with development.[4]

The official term for development in Indonesia is *pembangunan*. *Bangun* means to develop or to rise, while the affixations *pe-* and *-an* imply that this is a process or activity. However there are also associations of planning, control and direction implicit in the word. Hobart maintains that the term has connotations of guidance and support, the implication being that development cannot be achieved without the helping hand of the state. It emphasizes 'the need for guidance by those with power and knowledge, in this case the government officials who elaborated the notion in the first place' (Hobart, 1993: 7). This, though, is not what the word originally meant; rather it is what the word has come to mean. As in the case of the verb *membangun*, meaning to rise up according to a plan (as in the building of a house), the identity of the architect is not clear. But over time Indonesia's New Order has, as it were, appropriated *pembangunan* so that the identity of the architect—in this instance the state—has become intimately associated with the word (the same has occurred in the case of the Burmese word for development, see below).

Though *pembangunan* may now be associated in most people's minds with the state, what it actually means is less clear (Antlöv, 1995: 43). In general terms, it means the essentials of modernity and progress (*maju*): electricity, surfaced roads, modern health care, new rice technology, education, and so on. It also means, in Antlöv's view, a less obvious agenda which he characterizes as the philosophy of 'betting on the strong'. Villagers are encouraged to become modern and have been encouraged into thinking of modernity as necessarily good. Elmhirst writes of Javanese transmigrants in southern Sumatra referring to neighbouring Lampungese Way Kanan in disparaging terms as 'backward' (*masih di belakang*) and lacking progress (*belum maju*) (1997: 226). *Pembangunan* is all encompassing, ranging from education and the use of modern rice technologies to the culture of what has become known as 'ibuism'—housewifization. Ibuism embeds modern Indonesian women firmly within the domestic sphere, identifying their role in the modernization effort

[4] During the Great Depression of the 1930s, which severely affected many rice farmers in the Central Plains of Thailand, newspapers and government ministers debated at some length ways to ameliorate the misery and poverty of farmers brought about by the precipitous fall in rice prices.

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clearly as mother and wife. Guinness notes how national groups like the Family Welfare Association (PKK or *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga*) map out a clearly defined set of roles for the modern housewife: faithful companion, household manager, producer of children (preferably two), mother and educator, and good citizen (Guinness, 1994: 283). Traditional roles of women as traders, for example, are disregarded in these formulations of modernity.

Pembangunan, then, means more than just 'progress'; it means a change of perception or of stance. Klopfer suggests that *pembangunan* is the true ideology of the New Order, not pancasila, and argues that it has four key characteristics: a preference for the modern as opposed to the traditional; a preference for grandiose physical structures like dams and highways; the domination of nature; and patriarchy (Klopfer 1994: 92–3). It is also something that comes from outside—it is not something that lies within the capabilities of ordinary Indonesians to achieve.

Opposition to the modernization agenda enshrined in *pembangunan* is, Antlöv suggests, 'as political as opposition to Pancasila' (1995: 43).[5] This is clear from the corridors of power in Jakarta to urban back streets and country lanes. In the weeks preceding the parliamentary elections at the end of May 1997, the inhabitants of West Sumatra were once again having it impressed upon them that the gift of development could only come through support for Golkar, the government's political party.[6] One village outside Batu Sangkar in the Minang highlands which voted for the opposition Muslim-oriented United Development Party or PPP in the 1992 elections was noticeably one of the few communities in the area without a sealed road. The inhabitants at least saw this as the cost of their failure to support the government. A vote for Golkar in 1997, they accepted, would 'buy' them a new road. In this, and many other small and large ways, development has become inextricably linked with the articulation of state power.[7]

[5] *Pancasila* is President Sukarno's five guiding principles, effectively the Indonesian state's ideology. They are: belief in one supreme God, the unity of the nation, just and civilized humanity, social justice for all the people of Indonesia, and democracy guided by the inner wisdom of unanimity.

[6] Golkar is the acronym for *Golongan Karya* or 'Functional Groups'. It is, in effect, the State's very own political party and almost everyone with a link to the state (e.g. all civil servants) are members of Golkar. Needless to say, they are expected to vote for Golkar.

[7] This was also evident in Singapore's January 1997 general election. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong warned that those constituencies that elected opposition can-

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'*Pembangunan*', Antlöv goes on to assert in his book, 'has become an end in itself and the word is now an empty mantra, invoked as a validation of economic polarization and cultural disruption' (1995: 43). In selecting *pembangunan*, the Indonesian state has rejected other terms like *perkembangan* which suggests spontaneous growth, and *kemajuan*, or 'progress'. *Kemajuan* also implies political and economic advancement as well as modernity, secularization and urban sophistication.

It is significant that while Sukarno, Indonesia's first president (1950–65) is known as the 'Father of the Country' his successor, President Suharto (1967–98), took the appellation *Bapak Pembangunan* or 'Father of Development'. It has been widely suggested that his legitimacy was based on the country achieving healthy economic growth. In a classic example of traditional Javanese kingship set in the modern era, Suharto presented himself as the man who brings development, modernity and progress to his people through a series of five-year development plans (or *Repelitas*).[8] 'Suharto', Vatikiotis writes, 'grew up in the shadow of the old Javanese kingdom of Mataram, steeped in the medieval palace culture of Jogyakarta', and he 'nurtured a political culture that represents the distillation of indigenous Javanese political instincts, or as some would have it "neo-Javanism", where the emphasis is on the strict observance of hierarchy reinforced by patronage to maintain the harmony of society' (1996: 45). Suharto's central role in the edifice of development creates an explicit link between state legitimacy and modernization. Sven Cederroth hints at this in his account of Golkar meetings in a village in East Java in the run-up to the elections of 1987. 'A concept to which all the speakers returned again and again' Cederroth writes, 'was *Pembangunan* (Development). This was said to have taken place in almost all spheres of life under the wise and careful guidance of Suharto . . .' (1995: 34). Klopfer is rather more explicit when she writes that '*Pembangunan* ideology offers the image of backward Indonesians who require paternal guidance and discipline in order to step to a higher level of civilization' (1994: 344). Of course, 1998 saw Suharto's resignation from the presidency after more than three

didates would be the last to receive government assistance for public housing renovation programmes. 'Then, in 20, 30 years' time, the whole of Singapore will be bustling away and your estate, through your own choice, will be left behind. . . . They'll become slums' (Hiebert, 1997: 17). The ruling People's Action Party won a landslide victory.

[8] *Repelita* = *Rencana Pembangunan Lima Tahun*, or Five-year Development Plan.

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decades in power. The fact that it was an economic crisis which precipitated his resignation lends credence to the argument above that his political survival depended, above all, on the country's economic vitality.

There are also some quite interesting semantic implications behind the introduction in 1994 in Indonesia of the three-year Presidential Instruction Programme for Less Developed Villages, or *Inpres Desa Tertinggal* (IDT). The programme was an attempt to move away from the programmatic, top-heavy and overly-bureaucratized approaches to poverty alleviation attempted in the past in Indonesia. A survey by the National Development Planning Board identified 20,633 *desa tertinggal* or 'villages that have been left behind', with a combined poor population of 27 million. The National Development Planning Minister then took the unusual step of consulting with NGOs before designing a programme that channelled funds directly to self-help groups in each *desa tertinggal*. Although *desa tertinggal* has been translated into English as meaning 'less developed villages' it more accurately means villages that have been 'left out', 'left behind' or 'forgotten'. Here the fact of their poverty is linked to their lack of development, the implication being that poverty is something that exists when development is lacking and only through their incorporation into the development process can it be tackled. Furthermore, there is the hidden implication that these villages have missed out through accident.[9]

This interpretation of the Indonesian IDT programme links in with some of the recent post-developmental work which argues that 'underdevelopment' has been wrongly diagnosed as a problem in search of a cure. If underdevelopment, or more exactly an absence of modernity, is seen to have no negative associations then the development agenda becomes little more than one view among many. Taking this perspective, Escobar suggests that development has created whole sets of problems which previously never existed: 'small farmers with low productivity', 'illiteracy', 'poverty', 'underproduction'. Having identified a slate of problems, the development industry then creates a landscape of intervention which platoons of 'experts' can infiltrate to put right. This is certainly the implication behind the IDT programme with its hidden implication that poverty

[9] This view of poor villages has strong links with how 'primitive' people are perceived and particularly the denial of common time that is implicit in such expressions as 'backward'.

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is due to an absence of development—rather than it being a product of development.

Sulak Sivaraksa, a well-known Buddhist intellectual and critic of Thailand's modernization process, argues that a similar process of re-education occurred in Thailand at the end of the 1950s. At that time, US experts were working with the newly-created National Economic Development Board in the formulation of the country's first Five-Year National Economic Development Plan (1961–66). They became worried in the course of their work that the Buddhist ideal of contentedness would retard development (i.e. economic growth). The American advisors reportedly managed to persuade the Thai government to convince the Supreme Sangha Council that monks should stop preaching on the virtue of contentedness (Sulak Sivaraksa, 1996). Only in this way would people accept the core developmental principle that life can be made better in this existence.

In Myanmar (Burma) there is a strong case for arguing that while notions of 'development' were broadly-based and multi-dimensional in the early decades of this century, the terminology narrowed somewhat over the years so that 'development' is now relatively narrowly defined in terms of economic prosperity. In the 1920s, U Thein founded the Youth Improvement Society (YIS), and he was known in Burmese as Kyì-pwà-yày U Thein. A Burman who recalls that period says that at this point *kyì-pwà-yày* did not mean just financial prosperity but improvement in one's life, one's status and one's well-being. However by the 1970s Burmese dictionaries were making a pretty clear-cut association of *kyì-pwà-yày* with prosperity in the consumerist sense:

> In a 1978 dictionary *kyì-pwà-yày* is defined as 'flourish, grow, thrive; increasing, becoming prosperous'; and the noun *kyì-pwà-hmú* is defined as 'development'.
>
> In a 1979 (Burmese–French) dictionary the brief definition is 'to be prosperous, to prosper', while the noun *kyì-pwà-yày* is defined as 'développement'. The example given to illustrate this is actually a double verb 'to progress and prosper' (*tò-tet kyì-pwà*).
>
> In a 1993 dictionary (prepared in Myanmar) the definition is 'prosper, do well, flourish'; and the noun *kyì-pwà-yày* is defined as 'prosperity'.[10]

[10] It is interesting that the earlier word *Kyì-pwà-yày* (self-improvement, prosperity) was used as the name of a famous publishing house established in Mandalay in 1938 by a leading left-wing writer; it is still publishing today, led by his

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The expression 'underdeveloped country' entered the Burmese language following the end of the Second World War. The Burmese word for 'progress' noted above—*tò-tet*—was used to construct the term *matò-tet-thày-dé nain-ngan* which means, literally, 'not-progressed-yet-country'. In the 1960s and 1970s this term was abandoned in favour of the more politically correct 'developing country' or *hyún-hpyò-hsè naing-ngan* (literally, 'country in process of becoming prosperous').[11]

Today in Myanmar, the commonly used word for development is *hpún-hpyò* (as in developing country). This is derived from two verbs, *hpún* (be/grow fat) and *hpyò* (plentiful, abundant). Although the word implies prosperity it does not mean modernization, which is more closely associated with the alternative word for 'progress' discussed above. Like 'prosperity', *hpún-hpyò* was well established by the 1960s and in a sense, therefore, predated the arrival of development as an explicit policy goal. More interesting still is the increasingly state-centric association of development in people's minds. In September 1993 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) established the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) to replace the discredited Socialist Programme Party.[12] In Burmese this was called *Kyán-hkaing-yày-né Hpún-hpyò-yày Athìn*, using the word for development (*hpún-hpyò*) noted above. The USDA attempts to rally and organize mass activities like marathons and other sporting events, parades of flag-waving school children, and 'cultural' activities of one sort and another. People, and especially government civil servants including school and university teachers, are coerced into taking part in these activities so that now so-called 'development activities' (in Burmese shortened to *Kyán-hpún*) have become unpopular. In this land of double-speak, it was perhaps no accident when General Than Shwe, Patron of the USDA, said that 'nearly two million people unanimously attended' mass rallies of the USDA (quoted in Steinberg, 1997: 6). As many people resent the heavy-handed activities of the USDA, 'development' has reportedly begun to acquire not just an intimate link with the state but also (and not coincidentally) unpleasant associations for many.

wife, formerly a communist, now a rallying figure for anti-SLORC/SPDC writers. A more fitting translation for the name of the press might be 'Progress'.

[11] The 1993 dictionary defines this as 'prosperous; developed' and does not even include the current word for 'development' which is *hpún-hpyò-tò-tet-yày* (fat+abundant+progress).

[12] For background on the USDA see Steinberg, 1997. In 1997 the SLORC was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The semantic implications of this change of name are discussed later in the paper.

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The last of the five explicit objectives of the USDA is the 'emergence of a prosperous, peaceful and modern union'.[13] This phrase occurs many times in USDA literature and is clearly the official translation of the Burmese. However, looking back at the Burmese original a slightly different meaning emerges: 'The development [*hpún-hpyò-tò-tet-yày*] of the state, and the emergence of a peaceful and modern state'. The first part of the sentence in Burmese ('the development of the state') has been translated into English by the one word 'prosperous' implying that the Burmese word is now taken to mean material prosperity. It also seems to imply that the development of the country and the maintenance of the state are one and the same.

In 1997 the SLORC reformed itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Significantly, 'Law', 'Order' and 'Restoration' go out to be replaced by the much more amenable 'Peace' and 'Development'. There are two things to note here. First, the word for peace used in not *nyèin-chàn-yày* ('be extinguished'+'be cool' as in 'end of war' and 'world peace movement') but *ày-chàn tha-ya-yày* ('tranquility'+'pleasantness'). Life, in modern Myanmar, is good (*tha-ya-yày* can also be translated as 'doing well'). In addition, 'peace' is linked with 'development' (*hpún-hpyò-yày*) and with the 'state', providing a highly attractive image of the SPDC promoting both peace and development. The irony, of course, is that it has done quite the reverse.

Participation and Participatory Development

Moving from broad concepts such as 'development' to more specific terms like 'participation', it becomes clear that the differences in meaning remain significant. Hirsch notes that in official development discourse the Thai term for participation is *kaan khao maa mii suan ruam*—'coming in and having a part within the group'. This 'connotes participation as a willingness of villagers to conform with projects initiated by government development agencies . . . [and] . . . is devoid of the principles of initiative, variety or spontaneity' (Hirsch, 1989: 51). As noted earlier, Vandergeest (1991) sheds some

[13] The other four are: 1. the non-disintegration of the Union; 2. non-disintegration of national solidarity; 3. perpetuation of sovereignty; and 4. promotion of national pride.

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light on this view of participation when he suggests that development, from very early on, was framed as the government's 'gift' to the people. Importantly though, this gift also created obligations for those who benefited from it: to receive the development 'gift', people would also have to donate labour for what is sometimes styled the 'common good' (*suan ruam*).[14] Thus 'participation' in development became a variant form of forced labour (see also Tapp, 1988).

Indonesia, though, probably has the strongest tradition of 'participation'—at least if state pronouncements are to be taken at face value. *Gotong royong* or 'mutual assistance' is said to be derived from Javanese village traditions of communal work and responsibility where individuals owed certain moral obligations to wider society. Today the term is enshrined in the state ideology of *pancasila*. President Sukarno, who embraced *gotong royong* at independence in 1945, saw it as a vehicle, rooted in tradition, through which national unity could be promoted. However, as time went by it became more and more detached from its village roots. Bowen notes how by the 1960s it had become attached to the names of various state projects like Kosgoro (Koperasi Serba Usaha Gotong Royong, or All-purpose Gotong Royong Cooperative) until finally, under President Suharto's New Order, it had metamorphosed in meaning to become the means by which the state legitimizes intervention in community affairs (Bowen, 1986: 552).[15]

Today, *gotong royong* is invoked by village leaders whenever some project needs completion—the building of a village road, for example. Villages are 'commandeered' to take part—they have little choice in the matter—and, as in Thailand, it comes closer to corvée labour than to the voluntary work for the communal benefit of the village that the word at first seems to imply (Antlöv, 1995: 59). The motivation that originally lay behind the term has been turned on

[14] Whether it is for the 'common good' in the sense of being of benefit to all the members of a community is doubtful. Rather it means donating labour for a shared experience or activity, which may well not benefit everyone, and usually will benefit some more than others.

[15] Sullivan quotes an Indonesian minister explaining *gotong royong* in the following rather confused way: '*Gotong royong* is a form of institutionalized spontaneous cooperation containing elements of voluntary reciprocity between members of a *desa* or *kelurahan* . . . to fulfill incidental *desa/keurahan* needs' (Sullivan, 1992: 176). In his study of an urban ward in Yogyakarta, Sullivan states: 'Little if any of the cooperation classed as *gotong royong* in kampung circles could reasonably be termed 'spontaneous' and the only kampung reciprocity of a notably "voluntary" character is that found within cells—and that does not qualify as a *gotong royong* manifestation' (1992: 176).

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its head. From being a community-based communal work and support ethic, *gotong royong* has been coopted to become just another arm of state intervention in people's lives. Antlöv writes:

> I noted two sets of reactions to gotong royong work. Some participants show up because they must, either because of intimidation (such as the arrival of the soldiers) or because they need the prestige that participation in village development can give them. Others have crasser objectives and visit the hamlet chairman after having completed their tasks to ask for recompense (1995: 59).

Notions of participation in Myanmar show clear links with the experience of Indonesia although the historical threads are, perhaps, even clearer. Historically, the Burmese kings used large numbers of forced labourers to carry out major public works such as the construction of the embankments enclosing the large reservoir at Meikhtila and the Maha Nanda Lake at Shwebo, and the building of massive pagodas (chedis). This labour included prisoners of war and also men drafted in from outlying territories. During the Japanese occupation of Burma between 1942 and 1945 local labourers—although ostensibly recruited into the fighting forces—found themselves drafted into constructions projects of which the most notorious was the Burma–Siam railway. These volunteer recruits became, appropriately, the so-called 'sweat army' or *chwei-tat* (*tat* = army, force). To begin with, according to U Khin (a former Burmese journalist and member of the BBC Burmese Service), they were honoured like heroes, but as conditions on the Burma–Siam railway and other such projects deteriorated, so these willing volunteers began to flee their grim working environment. As a result, the Japanese took to forcing men to join the 'sweat army', turning volunteer labour into 'forced labour' or, in Burmese, *chwei-tat hswèh* (literally, 'pull/drag into sweat army').

In the post-war period when a great deal of reconstruction was required, people were encouraged to 'give (their) labour'—to volunteer to assist on major projects. In Burmese this was termed *lok-à pày*, literally 'work+strength+give'. An early dictionary mentions that this type of work could sometimes be for pay, and sometimes not.[16] It seems that when this phrase was first introduced after the Second World War it had no connotation of 'forced labour'. The difference, perhaps, with pre-War community labour projects was that *lok-à pày*

[16] Under socialism in many countries of eastern Europe young people especially would volunteer to spend their free time working on public projects. This can be seen reflected in one definition of *lok-à pày* in a 1970s Burmese–Russian dictionary: 'to spend the weekend'.

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had implications of state sponsorship and support while building a small road or digging a village well would often have been done by villagers on their own initiative. Thus, around about 1945, we begin to see notions of voluntary labour being embraced by the state for national (rather than local) purposes. In the same way that voluntary labour under the Japanese relatively quickly became a form of forced labour, so *lok-à pày* made a similar transition as coercion replaced encouragement. The term, though, remained the same perhaps because the government wished to disguise the fact that people were being forced to work. The result was that the *lok-à pày* began to acquire associations of forced labour.[17]

It is this tradition of voluntary work that the SLORC/SPDC constantly refer to when they deny that they are resorting to widespread use of forced labour to carry out all types of infrastructure projects, including building camps for the army in border areas. There are fixed rates for households to buy themselves out of their assigned 'labour' task, so that wealthier people do not actually have to do the labour. This is one way that the government raises money to pay for raw materials. But the situation is rather more complicated than this. Take the well-publicized project to clean out and rebuild the moat around the palace walls in Mandalay in time for the 1996–97 Visit Myanmar Year. Different types of labour were used to complete this task:

> convict labour—who had been given hard labour as part of their prison sentence. It has been claimed that some of these were also political prisoners;
> soldiers, as part of their military duties;
> local householders, recruited as so-called 'voluntary labour' with each household contributing so many hours of work or payment in lieu.

It is because of this blurring between 'forced' and 'voluntary' labour, that the SLORC/SPDC are able to claim that there is no forced labour in the country (see Fishman, 1996 and *Burma Debate*, 1996). The SLORC/SPDC also reportedly rounds up large numbers of

[17] It should perhaps be made clear that there remains a strong and continuing tradition of working voluntarily (or donating money) for religious purposes. So, the staff from a certain office might go out early on Sunday morning to sweep down the platform of the Shwedagon pagoda, or they might carry bricks to build a new pagoda. The driving force is religious rather than civic: one acquires (Buddhist) merit from such actions.

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ethnic minority men and even at times young urban men to work as porters alongside soldiers during battles against rebel forces. This is called *paw-ta-hswèh*—'pulling in to [act as] porters'—and once again shows clear similarities with forced labour during the Japanese occupation. At both the 1995 and 1996 annual conferences of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Myanmar was asked to explain why it continued to overlook its obligations regarding forced labour under Convention no. 29 (which Myanmar ratified in 1955). In 1995 the SLORC claimed that there was no forced labour and that it was actually 'the age-old cultural tradition of "voluntary labour" to gain Buddhist merit' (Fishman, 1996: 33). In 1996 the explanation took on a new twist, and the SLORC's representative explained that as the wars against the country's ethnic minorities had ended there was a need to find some work for the 400,000-strong military. In both instances, Fishman reports, the ILO found the SLORC's claims so unconvincing that the ILO cited the SLORC in Special Paragraphs of its final reports and 'in the strongest terminology available to the [ILO's] Committee' (Fishman, 1996: 33; see also *Burma Debate*, 1996).

Self-reliance, Self-help and Empowerment

The notions of self-reliance and self-help clearly link in with some of the discussion above, particularly when truly voluntary labour is used at the local level to meet local needs. Antlöv states that *pembangunan* villages in Indonesia—communities that have embraced the development ethos—are supposed to be *swasembada* or 'self-sufficient' and villages should be *mampu* or 'self-reliant' and 'independent' (1995: 43 and 87). But self-sufficiency in this instance is not to be equated with self-reliance, and thereby with alternative development's notions of locally-rooted and sourced development and the associated de-linking of villages and people from the market economy. Quite the opposite, in fact. By embracing modernization and becoming *pembangunan* villages, they are supposed to have freed themselves from the limiting strictures of tradition. Modern technology and economic and administrative organization provide villagers with greater freedom and more choices. Thus, while alternative development workers may regard modernization as promoting dependency, the Indonesian development discourse parades tradition as limiting and con-

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straining, and modernization as providing an avenue of escape to the wide open spaces of the modern market economy.

Take the Burmese word *ko-htu-ko-htá* which is sometimes translated as 'self-help' in the context of the construction of village schools. These schools are, indeed, built by villagers but only after the government has claimed that it does not have sufficient funds or that it has already made adequate provision in the neighbourhood. The word itself reveals the extent to which self-help in Myanmar really means 'self-pay' and 'self-do': 'self+erect, put up+self+stand up'.

Like participation, empowerment is a problematic term, because it is both so loaded with meaning and because that meaning is often unclear. As Jo Rowlands argues, some of this confusion is because the very concept of 'power' is disputed (1995: 101). To some it means power 'over' others—of men over women, of the wealthy over the poor, or of one ethnic group over another. For others, empowerment means the power 'to'—to decide whether to have another child, or to plant a particular crop or crop mix, for example. Furthermore, Rowlands suggests, 'Empowerment is a process that cannot be imposed by outsiders', though it can be encouraged and facilitated. Taking the Burmese word *ko-htu-ko-htá*, it does imply that the initiative for action comes from local people rather than from the state. However, rather than the state redistributing resources and control to local areas so as to empower people by providing both resources and power, the Burmese state effectively relinquishes its obligation to the people. This links in with the idea noted above that states have a 'bargain' with the people. The reason why, it might be argued, the SLORC/SPDC has lost its legitimacy is not just because it so clearly failed to win a mandate in the elections of 1990, but equally because they have reneged on their side of the development bargain. If the state does not provide adequate schooling and health care, for example, but instead coerces people into working on national projects with little local relevance, then it is no wonder that legitimacy is lost. In Buddhist terms, the government in Myanmar has lost its mandate because it is no longer righteous.

Languages of Action

Just as apparently equivalent words mean slightly different things in different languages, so they may also mean different things to differ-

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ent groups within any society. Of course ordinary villagers and workers may be unfamiliar with technical terms. But there is more to it than just unfamiliarity. Words take on different nuances for a member of the urban elite as opposed to, say, a farmer. Further, words and language are used in different ways. Lohmann emphasizes that while elites tend towards literacy, non-elites favour orality; while the former tends to be impersonal, the latter is firmly bedded in personal relations; while elites are usually not space-bound and emphasize the universality of ideas, non-elites are locally bedded and stress morality and (local) community relevance. Lohmann suggests that it is when interest groups make strategic alliances, but accept that each will speak in, and on its own terms, that alternative voices are loudest and most powerful.

> Thus, villagers can speak in their 'own' voice at meetings and demonstrations . . . while newspapers expose abuses, dissident academics speak credibly in scientific or economic language against corporate consultants, students take the political offensive, bureaucrats fight turf wars within ministries, *phuu yai* [big/powerful people] approach *phuu yai* at the top levels and non-governmental organizations arrange forums at which the diverse members of alliances learn how to co-ordinate with and use one another better, look at themselves from the points of view of the other groups present, and maintain mutual respect across systems of thought (Lohmann, 1995: 226).

Nonetheless, just as some academics have been quick to espouse local ideas, so local people have embraced scientific terminology to promote their causes. Thus, villagers in Thailand now talk of *niweet witthaya* (ecology), *paa thammachaat* (natural forest) and *paa chumchon* (community forest), all terms which have been imported from the elitist lexicon (Lohmann, 1995: 222–3).

Discussion

Where then, does this leave us? Clearly—and perhaps self-evidently—words mean different things in different languages, and when they are used across cultures there may be a degree of misinterpretation and this can lead to misinformation. More to the point, perhaps, words and their meanings take on a life of their own after they are prismatically absorbed into a country's lexicon. Among most English-speakers 'development' today is taken to mean a process of change embracing all the facets of human advancement. In Myan-

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mar, while it may have begun with such a broad meaning, the term has, through time, become relatively narrowly conceived in terms of economic (material) progress and prosperity. The multi-dimensional gloss with which it was endowed during the early years of this century has been lost as development has become redefined as a technocratic, largely economic, exercise orchestrated by the state (in this instance the SLORC/SPDC). The fact that the state in Myanmar lacks any semblance of popular legitimacy also means that development has become highly politicized.

The words for participation in all the countries discussed here also have strong statist overtones. They can therefore be associated, and this is particularly true in the cases of Indonesia and Myanmar, with dominant political entities that direct and manage development and maintain a tight grip on people's lives. It could be argued that the discourse of development as it is articulated in these countries of Southeast Asia is closely tied to the global development discourse which has colonized the minds of the elites in question. Western notions of progress, prosperity, growth and modernization are to be found embedded in the words and actions of governments across the countries of the South. But this quest for modernization is not limited to the economic and political elites. It is clear from local studies that the quest for prosperity has filtered down to the paddy field and the factory floor. Success and well-being now appear to be largely framed in terms of modernization:

'I hope the lives of my children will be different from my life. I want their futures to be the same of those of rich families' children.' (Luong Xuan Hoang, a Vietnamese farmer in Thanh Hoa province, quoted in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1994.)

'In former times we were happy when we had enough to eat. We were happen when life was stable and peaceful. But today we need more. Now we know about the necessity of development, we know better what we really need and how we can get it. But to reach it we have to work hard, we need a higher output . . .' (Mr. A., a 'peasant' in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, quoted in Weber, 1994: 199.)

'My dream is to buy a car, a pick-up. I am trying very hard to save money in the bank, for keeping cattle as capital is like hanging money in the tree. People see and steal it. You have to guard the cattle both day and night. Last year I sold cattle to be able to buy a small tractor. Some villagers asked to borrow it. They pay me a small amount or buy benzoin or oil for me. Life has changed for the better during the last five years. Step-by-step we have bought cattle, a motorbike, tractor, shop and now we have [a

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vehicle] repair shop. People will soon need to have repairs done. I wait for them. Sooner or later they will come.' (A 41-year-old man in a village in Laos, newly exposed to commercial opportunities by the upgrading of route 13, west of Pakkading near the Mekong River, quoted in Håkangård, 1992.)

This does not mean that everyone subscribes to the modernization dream. There are clearly some dissenting voices among the educated elite. There are also some farmers who appear to lament the passing of subsistence innocence. A farmer in the village of Tosari in the Tengger Highlands of East Java, complained to Hefner (1990: 1):

'It's not like before. In the old days people here [in the highlands] were different from those in the lowlands. They weren't interested in wearing fine clothes that drew attention to themselves, or in eating special foods like those you see today. Even though some people owned more and some less, people dressed and ate the same . . . Now its different. Those who are well off want to give orders and keep their hands and feet clean of earth. They keep track of everything they give and everything they get in return. It's just like the lowlands. Everything is counted up and owned.'

So, for Southeast Asia at least, development as modernity is now a largely uncontested goal, except among certain sections of the region's educated elites. However, although at this level it is no doubt true that there is a powerful global development discourse, it is also true that this discourse takes on local colour as it is selectively adopted and adapted at the local and national levels. Further, it is also clear that these words were not imposed after the Second World War on some sort of developmental linguistic and mental vacuum, as some scholars would seem to suggest (e.g. Escobar 1995: 3–4). There were conceptions of progress and poverty, of material needs and destitution, that pre-dated the Second World War and which, indeed, can be traced back several centuries (see Reid 1993: 267–325). Key terms like 'development' were therefore integrated into a context where, in many instances, similar terms were already in use.

There is no uniform canvas on to which ideas are inscribed. 'Development' and 'participation' do not mean the same things in different cultures and languages. They emerge within unique cultural and historical contexts, and reflect existing power relations and hegemonies that are local or national rather than global. Development takes on a different character in each country (and sub-units within countries) and an analysis of the languages of development can help to reveal some of the important differences that fragment what, from a distance, appears to be a universal discourse. The thesis of this paper

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is therefore a relatively simple one: we should be wary of ascribing similar meanings, across languages, to key terms in the lexicon of development. We are not always talking the same language.

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