

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the meaning of the cultural construct sex (*phêet*) for students at Srinakharinwirot University (SWU)¹ in Mahasarakham² (see Appendix A for a description of the transcription of language in this dissertation). My purpose is to uncover and describe what students mean when they talk about sex, how they parse it into meaningful categories, and how those categories are applied and experienced in everyday life.

Why Study Sex?

Sex has particular meanings in the United States (and other English speaking cultures), some of which are shared by other cultures, many of which we regard as natural and/or universal. Certainly, sexual behavior, namely copulation, is necessary to the reproduction of the human species. Biological sexual categories, though arguably not entirely arbitrary, nonetheless are culturally constructed in that their criteria and the meanings attached to them are defined variably across cultures. Even in a single culture, meanings may vary geographically, temporally, and based on differing social positions. In an ethnographic description of virtually any aspect of sex, it would be wise for the researcher to first explain what is meant by "sex," or whatever comparable concept or concepts exist in the culture under study.³

In the United States, what do we mean by *sex*? Is there a common definition? Does it always mean the same thing? If one considers how people use the word *sex*, one probably concludes that there are multiple meanings, or that sex has many different aspects. Not all of these meanings are revealed in every use. Consider these uses:

1. Have you had sex?
2. It was difficult to determine the sex of the baby bird.

¹ Srinakharinwirot University (pronounced *sĭnakharinwĭrōot*) was renamed Mahasarakham University in December 1995.

² Mahasarakham is pronounced *māhāsāārākhaam*.

³ The contributors to Ortner and Whitehead's 1981 volume take this approach, defining male, female, and sex in different cultural contexts.

3. There is too much sex in that movie.
4. She oozes sex.

In example 1, and possibly 3, "sex" refers to a category of actions. It may or may not refer specifically to copulation, possibly even more specifically penile-vaginal copulation. In example 2, it refers to different categories of organisms, including, though perhaps not limited to, male and female. Example 3 may, in some instances, refer to more than a category of actions, possibly including imagery or themes. The meaning of sex in example 4 is perhaps the most ambiguous since it suggests that "sex" here is something non-tangible, a quality of being or ability to arouse. Variations on the word "sex" include sexual, sexuality, sexy, sexology, sexed, transsexual, intersexed, sexism, sexaholic, and exploitation. And the plethora of terms containing these words such as sexual addition, sex kitten, sexual history, sex maniac, sex toy, oral sex, anal sex, battle of the sexes, sexual battery, sex change, and sex education demonstrate the range of uses to which the concept is applied. What, then, do we mean by "sex"? I would suggest that the meaning(s) of sex depends on the context in which it is used.

The significance of interpretation of meaning was brought to the fore of public discussion during former President Bill Clinton's 1998 deposition in the Paula Jones case. Following the deposition he stated, "I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me. I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky." He performed a clever, but not unreasonable, semantic dance around the issue based on an ambiguous definition of "sexual relations" negotiated by the lawyers. The President and Ms. Lewinsky had, as is now common knowledge, engaged in fellatio and allegedly vaginal penetration with a cigar. Legal experts may continue to argue about whether his actions were "sexual relations" as defined by the lawyers, but no doubt many Catholic schoolgirls would adamantly support the notion that "sex" or "sexual relations" refers specifically to penile-vaginal copulation. To do so ensures their own "good girl" status when they engage in "everything but..." (see Kawanami, 2001, for a similar logic applied by Midwestern girls in the 1950s). Sex is not simply categories of organisms based on

chromosomes, hormones, or genitals, or a category of actions, or a condition that arouses erotic feelings. It is all these and more. In U.S. culture, the concept of sex is linked to political, emotional, moral, economic, and psychological cultural concepts. Though the purpose of this dissertation is not to discuss the meanings of sex in U.S. culture, I mention them to illustrate that the meanings of "sex" in my own culture are complex, context dependent, and somewhat negotiable. They are also meanings that I, and other social scientists, carry with us when studying other cultures, meanings that may or may not actually exist in those cultures.

Meanings of "sex" in Mahasarkham are in some fundamental ways remarkably similar to meanings of sex in the United States. But the intersections of those meanings with other cultural concepts result in very different ways sex is played out and understood in social action.

Background to the Project

This project was carried out between December 1993 and December 1994 in the municipal district (*amphæ muang*) of Mahasarakham province. It was funded through a 10-month Fulbright Junior Scholar research grant. I stretched the 10-month grant to 12 months to allow adequate time to collect data. SWU Mahasarakham, graciously agreed to be my host, and my advisor was Dr. Wajuppa Tossa of the Department of Western Languages and the Office of Research and International Affairs.

Fulbright prohibits host institutions from assigning work to Junior Scholars. Regardless, in communications prior to my arrival, I was asked to help the university by teaching English classes. This was not unanticipated and I gladly agreed to teach two classes per semester. However, I was assigned to four and at times taught five, including a weekend course for non-major Master's students (mostly in Thai) and a month-long stint substituting in an English graduate course. To enhance my rather limited research time, I used my classrooms (with permission from the Department) as opportunities to gather data. I am quite sure my experience was not unusual for researchers in Thailand.

Srinakharinwirot University had, in 1994, a total of 2,800 students (undergraduate and graduate) in five faculties and offered certificate, undergraduate, and graduate programs. SWU primarily serves Isan though a small percentage of students come from around the country. The university's goals are, and have been, academic excellence with an emphasis on both "local intellect and universal knowledge." The university encourages and supports the conservation of Isan language, arts, and culture. The Northeastern Center for Arts and Culture is located on campus and there are a number of projects and clubs in which students and faculty are involved.

University instructors demonstrate a keen awareness of the need to provide students with educational programs with long-range opportunities. During my stay I participated in the development of programs in tourism and gender studies within the Faculty of Humanities. The university is also responsive to the needs of Thailand. The International Relations office is very active in bringing guest lecturers and students to campus, as well as in assisting instructors in going abroad for advanced degrees. During my stay, SWU was involved in the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival (and organized and sent an Isan group to Washington, D.C.), brought in Fulbright scholars as guest lecturers, hosted a group of study tour students from Drew University in New Jersey, and hosted two Australian students in short-term programs. Students at SWU are very much aware of and in contact with the world outside of Mahasarakham.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. It is, to my knowledge, one of the few studies to attempt to examine a broad ideology of sex in Thailand since the 1960s (Hanks & Hanks, 1963). There has been research on particular groups, especially marginalized ones, and specific aspects of sex and gender such as sexual behavior, family planning, and mothering, but none look at the bigger picture of sex as does this one, though they all are part of the bigger picture.

This study also contributes to the body of research done in the northeast region of Thailand, known as Isan, which has drawn less scholarly attention than have the central and northern regions, and to a lesser degree the South. Thai people share a national culture, but regional, local, and ethnic identities also exist, resulting in some cultural differences within the country. Research that contributes to understanding local cultural differences is important to avoid drawing over-generalized conclusions.

Finally, an improved understanding of the meaning of sex for youth, such as the university students in this study, will aid educators, policy makers, and medical and social workers in creating more effective sex and gender-related programs for this age group. This information may be particularly useful for those working to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Epidemiological and sociological studies that focus primarily on behavioral aspects of sexuality often lack cultural context. Knowing the social and cultural factors behind behavior is imperative for making accurate comparisons, for example between countries and their response to AIDS (Caraël, Cleland, Deheneffe, & Adekun, 1992). Behaviors may be the same in two populations, but the reasons for the behaviors may differ. It is important to understand the ideas and beliefs behind behaviors and the decisions that resulted in them. This study provides some context for understanding the results of sociological surveys conducted in this area.

Social Background Against Which Meanings of Sex are Constructed

Students at SWU come largely from Isan, many from village farming families. But they have different social statuses and are in different social positions from their parents and neighbors. Their education level, and thus their potential for employment, exceeds that of fellow villagers, many of whom completed only the sixth grade. Few plan to return to their home village on any permanent basis. Precedent shows that a good number will pass the national teachers' exam and be assigned to positions throughout the country. Others will get government jobs in non-educational settings, and still others will be hired by private businesses in or near Bangkok.

They have been exposed to a wealth of popular culture and social options not available to previous generations. The culture in which they live is much more complex. They are small-town kids navigating a path somewhere between the world of their grandparents and the modern, sometimes foreign world they see in TV shows, movies, books, magazines, and in the big city of Bangkok. Globalization has brought to Mahasarakham cultural knowledge that wasn't present 30 or 40 years ago. Students are exposed to a wide range of, at times conflicting, sexual discourses/symbols/concepts.

Ethnographic literature on Thailand has long noted differences between professed cultural ideals and evidence of actual social behavior related to sex and gender (e.g., prostitution, pregnancy out of wedlock). Thai culture has a remarkably high tolerance for what appear to some outsiders to be incongruities. Girls are supposed to remain virgins until marriage, though groups of young women from rural villages migrate to cities to work in the sex industry. Abortions are illegal, but women can obtain them at the local hospital. It is insufficient to write these examples off as outliers or exceptions, because they occur with some regularity. How do students make sense of them?

For years, these incongruities went relatively unexplored, though more recent research has taken them up as central research issues (Chetame, 1995; Cook & Jackson, 1999; Mills, 1999; Sittitrai, Phanuphak, Barry, Sabaiying, & Brown, 1991; Tannenbaum, 1995; van Esterik, 1989, 2000). One approach to examining these ostensible paradoxes is by distinguishing between "culture" and "practice," or the parallel dichotomy "ideal culture" versus "real culture." Culture, however, is not simply the sum of all ideals: It includes all socially recognized possibilities, including those that are not generally favored. Culture (systems of symbols; shared knowledge) is put into practice (social action) through interpretation. Thus, to gain a deeper understanding of how members of a culture group go from a social rule, norm, or ideal, to a particular behavior, we must learn how they interpret the rule, norm, or ideal. For example, students are in full accord

that abortion is wrong, but also suggest that it's the best course of action in some situations. To make sense of this (since we presume it is sensible to the students), we must first look at how students interpret pregnancy and abortion in different contexts. They are much less accepting of a married adult having an abortion than an unmarried student. A number of values and meanings come into play here that must be understood to know the meaning of students' belief that abortion is wrong. In some cases, no incongruity exists at all, but rather the observer fails to account for the entire meaning in the situation. In other cases, genuinely conflicting discourses are present.

The society in which SWU students have grown up is a highly sexed and sexualized one, though one that also has social rules defining appropriate expression of sex. Students' understandings of sex and its associated concepts are set against a background of various tensions which can be source points for negotiation of meaning and culture change.

One of these tensions is between local Isan (Lao) culture and national Bangkok (Siamese) culture. The area and people living in what is now northeast Thailand are historically and culturally tied to Lao. Local Isan culture historically lacked well-defined sex roles and was relatively open about sexual behavior. During the Isan Rocket Festival, for example, participants enjoyed bawdy sexual banter and explicit sexual imagery. Sex was viewed as a natural part of life and sexual satisfaction was an expectation for both the man and woman in a marriage. People were expected to be discreet, but expression of sexuality was permitted in appropriate contexts. From the late nineteenth century, the meanings of sex dictated by the Bangkok elite, who defined the national culture, were rather different. Women's and men's roles became clearly defined and sexual behavior was relegated to the male domain, resulting in a sexual double standard. But SWU students are part of the nation and this national culture of sex is part of their cultural knowledge. The centrality of Bangkok in the conception of the national Thai identity goes back to the 1800s when Bangkok and its administered areas were referred to as "inner towns" and those

beyond, such as the Lao towns under Siamese control, were regarded as "outer towns" (Breazeale, 1975, p. 32).

Another tension which exists is between tradition and modernity.⁴ At times, it corresponds to the Isan-Bangkok opposition: Rural Isan is conceptually linked to tradition and old ways of life; Bangkok is linked to modern thinking, consumer goods, and urban opportunities. In other contexts, however, the opposition shifts to Thai tradition versus foreign (Western) modernity. Here, Isan and Bangkok are subsumed under a broader Thai culture. The Thai way may be seen as morally superior (e.g., students' disapproval of Western "free sex") or well established and effective (e.g., Buddhism); but in other contexts, the foreign way may be seen as preferable (e.g., the view of some female students about men's behavior). Globalization and the proliferation of mass media have exacerbated the tension between Thai-ness and otherness, creating a mass of alternative ways to interpret values and behaviors. For young people in Mahasarakham, sex communicates meaning about a multitude of concepts, including tradition, modernity, childhood, adulthood, education, obedience to parents, independence, fun, suffering, responsibility, hierarchy, ethnicity, and morality.

Sex and Gender in Mahasarakham

In the 1960s, anthropologists began differentiating between sex as biologically determined and sex as socially influenced by using the term "sex" for the former and "gender" for the latter, a distinction not recognized consistently by larger American society.⁵ This distinction was not widely adopted and the two continue to be used interchangeably in many circumstances. But still, sometimes only one or the other is appropriate. Gender, for example, never refers

⁴ Mills (1990, 1992, 1999) addresses the relationship of tradition and modernity to concepts of femininity among young, female Isan migrants. The conflict her research revealed is one between Northeast "maidenly modestly and virginal beauty" and modern, Western, consumer-oriented "seductive visions of modern womanhood" found in Bangkok (p. 85).

⁵ Take, for example, the Hawaiian Humane Society's use of "gender" on their 2003 intake cards to indicate whether an animal is male or female, or use of the term "sex roles" in anthropology to indicate social activities assigned to males and females.

directly to sexual behavior. And sex never refers to grammatical categories of words. Over the years, sex has increasingly become associated with copulation.

In the academic world, scholars who work in sex/gender studies frequently differentiate between the two (e.g., Butler, 1990;⁶ Cook & Jackson, 1999, p. 3; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Mascia-Lees & Black, 2000; Rubin, 1984; Sanday, 1981⁷; Suggs & Miracle, 1993). When distinguished in this way, *sex* concerns biological and/or erotic aspects of male, female, and transgenderism. *Gender* relates to the meanings society give to biological sex, often, but not always, mirroring the biological categories. This separation of sex and gender can be helpful from a theoretical and cross-cultural perspective, for example, in addressing the role of biology versus culture in the construction of sex roles, a discussion that peaked in the 1970s, but which continues today (de Beauvoir, 1953; Mead, 1935; Ortner, 1974; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981; Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974; Schlegel, 1977, 1990). However, since about 1980, gender theorists have increasingly viewed biological *sex* also as a constructed category, recognizing that it is not devoid of cultural meaning (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Meigs, 1990; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981). The separation of *sex* and *gender*, in and of itself, is culturally biased. It arises from a particular cultural context and is based on the assumption that biology is free from cultural interpretation.

Sex in Maharakham is a semantic field that overlaps considerably with my own notions (derived from an educated, white, lower middle class, suburban South Jersey upbringing), but it does not match up exactly. The way in which people in Maharakham (and Thailand in general) categorize their world is different. The way in which they interpret and apply those categories is different

In situations in which the anthropologist's culture and the informants' culture have similar concepts, it is very important to thoroughly examine and understand the ways in which those

⁶ Butler does not utilize a sex/gender distinction, but rather analyzes their distinction.

⁷ Sanday makes the same conceptual distinction gender but more frequently uses the term "sex-role plans" to refer to the cultural aspects of sex.

concepts are made meaningful in social practice, in order to flesh out the differences and prevent bias and assumptions from clouding analysis. The differences are sometimes subtle, but significant.

In both the Thai and Lao languages, *phêet* is typically defined as both biological sex and grammatical gender. It is not defined in dictionaries as behavior. Most students, however, first think of sexual behavior when the term is raised out of context. For example, when asked what I was researching, I usually replied, "I am studying about the subject of sex [*phêet*]." Almost everyone initially thought I was studying about (erotic) sexual behavior. There are many terms, both polite and vulgar, to indicate sexual intercourse. Those using *phêet* include *phêetsāmphān* (sexual relations) and *rūam phêet* (literally to mix sex/es, or to have sex), both rather polite forms.⁸ One also sometimes hears "*mii sêk*," borrowed from the English "to have sex." One time when I was looking through Thai journals in the university library, I found one with a picture of Michelangelo's statue "David," on the cover. A student had written across it in Thai letters, "*sêk*." There is noticeable borrowing of English words associated with the domain of sex. For example, the Thai (and Lao) lexicon has no word for sexy. Students in Maharakham have borrowed the English word "sexy" and use it to describe something or someone who exudes what we would refer to as sexuality or sexual attractiveness. Perhaps because of that, sexy is most often used to describe things that are modern and/or Western. Of course, their criteria for "sexy" differ.⁹ Even when they use English words, the meanings are localized ones.

⁸ There is a rich lexicon for copulation as well as other sexual behaviors, from the euphemistic to the vulgar. Students did not use vulgar terms in my presence since it would have been inappropriate. It is agreed by most students that men use vulgar terms (e.g., *yét*, "to fuck") more than women, though I was unable to verify this. It can be said with certainty, however, that it is considered *less* appropriate for women to use vulgar language than it is for men.

⁹ A fourth year, female English major exclaimed with delight upon my arrival at the university to pick up my housemate on my motorcycle, "Ajaan, you look so sexy!" I had been working at home and was wearing a loose-fitting, sleeveless, crewneck, cotton shirt and knee-length khaki walking shorts with socks and sneakers. My appearance was not so much erotic as modern and Western. Western femininity, however, is inextricably linked to sexual permissiveness, and consequently my appearance was "sexy."

Phêet is also a way of categorizing organisms and language, as we do in English. There are two primary categories of (human) sex: *phêetyĩng* (female['s] sex) and *phêetchaay* (male['s] sex).¹⁰ These are translated as female and male. These categories are based largely on one's physical body -- some people are born *phêetyĩng* and some *phêetchaay*. Of course, sometimes a person is born with ambiguous genitalia or some other intersexed condition. These people fall somewhere in between or in both categories and are referred to as *kàthæy*, or hermaphrodites. I recall a front page picture in a Thai language newspaper of a child of this type, posed spread-eagled to display the perceived abnormality.

More common in everyday language than *phêetyĩng* and *phêetchaay* are *phûuyĩng* and *phûuchaay*. *Phûu* means "person" and these refer to categories whose criteria are the social roles one plays.¹¹ They are usually translated as girl or woman and boy or man (they are not age restrictive). Normally, people who fall in the category *phêetyĩng*, female, also adopt the social roles of a *phûuyĩng*, woman, and those in the category *phêetchaay*, male, adopt the social roles of a *phûuchaay*, man; but not always. One may be what is conceptually a "male woman" or a "female man" though these are not the terms used – they are also referred to as *kàthæy*. Because students' categories of sexual identity appear so similar to American ones, it is tempting to assume that they convey the same meanings. As this study shows, they do not, at least not exactly.

Though there is no word meaning "gender" in Lao or Thai, students' use of *phêet* and *phûu* in different contexts evidences a linguistic and conceptual differentiation between biological and social sex that is also displayed in social practice. Americans have different terms, but inconsistently differentiate those terms conceptually and show little differentiation in practice.

¹⁰ It is noteworthy that these categories are applied to humans only. Male and female animals are referred to as *tuaphûu* and *tuamia*, respectively.

¹¹ Although another meaning of *phûu* is "male," male is not regarded as the default or root, like it sometimes is believed to be, or is accused of being, in English (e.g., man, woMAN, MANkind). *Phûu* meaning "male" only refers to animals, never to people. It should be noted that *m[]*, the female counterpart to the male *phûu*, also means "mother."

There is, for example, no normal or socially accepted ways to understand and categorize transgendered individuals (who themselves distinguish between the biological body and the social psyche; Fausto-Sterling, 2000, pp. 107-108).

Throughout my study I often use the word *phêet*, instead of *sex*, to remind us that we are not talking about the American concept of sex, but rather the students' concept. However, to more accurately reflect use and meanings of *phêet*, when I do use English, I use the term *sex* in reference to erotic sexual behavior, biological categories, and social roles. I also use female and male as glosses of *phêetyǎng* and *phêetchaay*, and woman/girl and man/boy as glosses of *phûuyǎng* and *phûuchaay*. In this way, explanations rely on local linguistic categories for explanatory purposes.

Approach to Studying the Concept of Sex

To describe the meanings students attach to *phêet*, how they divide it into meaningful categories, and how they apply those categories to lived experience, I adopted an approach influenced by traditional ethnographic description, ethnographic semantics, and symbolic anthropology.

Most helpful in clarifying my approach were Michele Rosaldo's *Knowledge and Passion* (1980), a semantic analysis of two Ilongot concepts, which are key to understanding headhunting, and Malinowski's work on the Trobriand Islanders, particularly his semantic study of the language of magic and gardening (1965) and his work on Trobriand sexuality (1929, 1955).¹² I also found the symbolic approaches of Clifford Geertz (1961, 1973) and Sherry Ortner to be very informative, though in my own study I am not dealing so much with antecedent references of specific symbols, but rather representations of meaning through social action and social

¹² Malinowski's (1929) *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*, though more on topic with this study, is a straightforward descriptive ethnography, of remarkable detail at times but lacking the intensive analysis of meaning found in *Coral Gardens* (1965).

relationships. Because human social action conveys shared meanings to the social group, it is symbolic in a broad sense.

To effectively address the research question "What does sex/sexuality mean for SWU students and how is it expressed in their social lives?" I looked at sex (*phêet*) in terms of both conceptual ideology and performance. It is at the intersection of ideology and performance where contested areas of culture are negotiated, so it is necessary to look at both to understand the range of meanings we encounter. Both Rosaldo (1980) and Malinowski (1929, 1955) focus on meaning as evidenced in verbal discourse and experienced in social action.

To understand Ilongot headhunting, Rosaldo delves into the Ilongot construction of emotion. Headhunting is both an expression of and response to emotion, primarily passion (*liget*). *Liget* is closely tied to knowledge (*beya*), which controls and shapes the expression of *liget*. As she explains, passion and knowledge for the Ilongot are similar to the English concepts, but they are not exactly the same. Passion, sometimes translated as anger, contains some elements of anger, but belongs to a "unique semantic field" (1980, p. 22). To get at the underlying meaning(s), she examines sentences in which the terms are used, as well as the social processes and activities they describe.

In my previous research on domestic prostitution in Chiang Mai (DaGrossa, 1989), I described the situation and was able to partially explain how, in a culture which emphasizes female self-control and virginity before marriage, teenagers volunteer themselves or are sent by parents to be prostitutes. But my analysis was incomplete, largely because I didn't pay enough attention to the meaning of sex (both sexed social roles and erotic and reproductive behaviors) for the people involved in prostitution, particularly indirectly related values and beliefs. In this study, I also initially sidestepped this fundamental issue in favor of focusing on sexual behaviors. But I later realized that before I could grasp the meanings in students' sexual behaviors (let alone find an effective way to learn what they are), I needed to understand more about their conceptual

domain of sex. Rosaldo's (1980) explanation of passion and knowledge are keys to understanding the meaning of headhunting for the Ilongot. In my study, I attempt to explain key concepts which help outsiders understand sex for university students in Mahasarakham.

Although this is not a symbolic study in the way usually meant in anthropology, it draws on the work of Clifford Geertz (1961, 1973) and his student Sherry Ortner (1973, 1974; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981).¹³ Geertz (1973) sometimes uses the term "symbol" in a broad way as anything that conveys shared meaning about some other concept, object, action, emotion, or relationship. Human behavior is "symbolic action" (Geertz 1973, p. 10) in that it conveys meanings that are understood by the social group. A symbol here is anything that conveys collectively understood direct or associated meanings. Ilongot headhunting does not represent passion (*liget*). But headhunting has an association with and conveys information about *liget*. One might even say that *liget* is the reason for headhunting, and so an understanding of *liget* is essential to understanding headhunting. In this dissertation, I use the term *concept*, rather than symbol, though I maintain that it functions much as symbols do for Geertz. Headhunting and *liget* are related symbolic concepts because they each convey meaning about the other in contexts in which they are associated.

Cultural concepts are subject to individual interpretation, but in general are collectively imbued with meaning -- that is, they are culturally constructed. They are "produced, perceived, and interpreted" by social actors (Geertz, p. 7) who in turn produce them to be perceived and (re) interpreted by others. Because of this, they have the ability to develop new meanings. As contexts change, meanings change. It is a regenerative process that can both reinforce and reconstruct aspects of culture, thus, the "making" of sex is part of the "making" of culture, to borrow a phrase from Ortner (1996). It is a common observation by Thai and non-Thai alike that cultural change

¹³ Ortner also subscribes to practice theory (1989; see Bourdieu, 1977, de Certeau, 1984, Giddens, 1984, Sahlins, 1981, on practice theory). There is some overlap between symbolic, semantic, and practice theory approaches since cultural meanings are expressed through speech, nonverbal communication, and social action.

is taking place around the domain of sex. Culture change involves the acquisition of new concepts and/or new meanings associated with existing concepts. Different meanings are not only produced over time, but over social space. People in different social positions may have different interpretations of the same concepts since each views them from his or her own particular perspective, limited by his or her position in the social organization. Thus, in cultures where men and women occupy different positions within the culture, each may understand sexual concepts such as *male* and *female* differently, at the same time that broader cultural meanings exist.

The meaning of cultural concepts, whether objects, actions, emotions, or relationships, can only be understood in relation to other cultural concepts and categories, for this is how they make sense to people within the culture (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981). In Rosaldo's study, headhunting does not exist separately from passion and knowledge and must be understood as it relates to them. Malinowski (1965) describes how Trobriand gardening activities are intertwined with magical practice and meaning. For Ortner, symbols (i.e., concepts) of sex do not exist in isolation from symbols of, for example, prestige, wealth, or virtue. Social actors understand them in relation to each other as they "are articulated through social behavior" (Geertz, 1973, p. 15). Some connections between cultural concepts are more obvious than others, which is why it is important for ethnographers to observe concepts in social context. Separating cultural concepts from their social context results in a meaningless collection of unrelated items. They must be studied in relation to the social events in which they occur.

A symbolic (and in this case semantic) approach to sexuality is efficacious because it is "particularly powerful in dealing with the tangled domain of gender problems" and directs the dialogue away from (our own) naturalistic assumptions (Ortner & Whitehead, p. ix). In my original study of domestic prostitution in Chiang Mai, my analysis was constrained by my culturally biased assumptions, particularly about sex and morality. A conceptual approach, based on an exploration of the domain of sex, has allowed me to understand both prostitution and

student sexuality better. This approach also limits the temptation to look for gender determinants, single factors in a cultural system that allegedly account for statuses of gender.

Through an examination of the conceptual domain of sex, related concepts, the social actions in which they are invoked, and the contexts in which individuals in different positions communicate them, we can understand how social actors, in this case university students, make sense of their sexed world.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 gives background to the study, describing Mahasarakham and Srinakharinwirot University in greater detail. Mahasarakham and the University have changed since the study was done. The University has added a second campus in another district of the province and the student population has increased. New commercial, governmental, and residential buildings have been erected throughout the city. I have not returned there to witness these changes; I have received this information from friends at the University and from the Internet. The province continues on a course of modern development as planned by the provincial administration. This has certainly resulted in greater cultural complexity, though meanings of sex and concepts associated with sex have probably not changed a great deal during my nine year absence. The description and analysis presented here I believe apply today.

The literature review in Chapter 3 is grouped by research focus: history, household organization, religion, marginal groups, and sexual behavior. These topics cover a large part of the relevant research done in Thailand. It is important to note that there are differences between the Northeast and other parts of Thailand, so it should not be assumed that features found in a village outside of Bangkok are also found in Mahasarakham. However, the dominant Bangkok culture permeates the entire country so many of these non-Isan studies are relevant and applicable.

Chapter 4 details the methodology of the study. A truly mixed-methodology was used with the bulk of data coming from participant-observation, formal and informal interviews, students' class writing, and survey questionnaires. Utilizing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was quite valuable in that different research techniques resulted in different kinds of information, which when considered together give a much richer picture of the meanings of sex for students. The mixed methodology also helped to highlight assumptions made by the researcher, confirm accurate understandings of the students' interpretations, and point out areas that require further exploration. Methodological problems are discussed and include problems with the research methods themselves, as well as problems arising specific to my situation as a researcher and teacher.

Chapter 5 is an analysis of primary categories of sex. I first examine *male* and *female* as major categories of sex, describing their similarities and differences. I then flesh out other categories of sexual identity, including gays, lesbians, and transgendered people. The meaning of each category is explored from the perspectives of students who position themselves within and outside the categories.¹⁴

Chapter 6 is devoted to the concepts that help us get at the meaning of sex for students in Mahasarakham. *Mobility* and *modernity* affect everyone in Isan. The movement of men and women to find jobs away from their home villages has had profound impacts on many aspects of life, not the least of which is sex and sex roles. *Sexual discourse at a national level* is heavily influenced by the government and other elites in Bangkok. The meanings government agencies and their representatives attach to sex are powerful and have immediate and profound effects on how people conceptualize sex. Laws and public policy provide written statements about sex that carry with them the authority of the State. Public health agencies are longstanding authorities on sexual behaviors. Schools are charged with the task of providing students the information they

¹⁴ To my knowledge, I spoke directly with no lesbian students, though I bring in other research.

need to be successful citizens. However, perhaps the most effective purveyor of sexual meaning is the mass media, some of which is controlled by the government. Movies, television shows, music, and magazines provide countless images for students to interpret. More traditional expressions of and influences on sex include festivals and celebrations. They give a historical sense of the role of sexuality, but also reveal some very modern aspects of sex. Incorporated in all aspects of social life are three values that are discussed in this chapter: hierarchy, *jay yen* (cool-heartedness), and social harmony. Other values, such as modesty, are more obviously related to the concept of sex, and are mentioned elsewhere in the dissertation. I cover hierarchy, *jay yen*, and social harmony in some detail precisely because they are more easily overlooked.

Understanding how they impact sex is necessary to understand how students' concept of sex differs from my own. Finally, an understanding of sex is not complete (at least in Thailand) without giving attention to *religion* and *moral action*. Although Buddhism says very little directly about sex, it structures moral thought and action in Mahasarakham and so is essential to understand sex, particularly in social contexts. It is also necessary to understand how students interpret morality and moral action in order to see how sex, especially sexual behavior, is different in Mahasarakham than in the US, although the meanings overlap.

The focus of Chapter 7 is how meanings of sex are expressed in social relationships. It focuses on students' roles in the family and among friends. They are primarily sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters and these roles have the greatest significance for most students. But I also describe students' views of husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers, for university students are approaching the age of marriage and have given thought to it. I also discuss relationships that have some romantic component or long-term possibility, primarily those in which the participants put themselves or their partners into the categories *fiancé* (explained in the chapter), boyfriend, or girlfriend. I describe the qualities they desire and avoid, and to a limited degree, sexual behaviors.

Chapter 8, Conclusions, summarizes the findings of this study and some of the more salient points. Students at Srinakharinwirot University have been sexually enculturated in a world that is both locally traditional and globally modern. Their concept of sex is broad and complex. It is insufficient to talk about traditional Isan or Thai culture as the source of their information, for they have been exposed to a far wider range of cultural concepts. Their culture is a blend of local, national, and international, traditional, and modern.

In this dissertation, I describe key concepts related to sex for university students in Mahasarakham and expound in areas where they differ from my own. Like Malinowski, Rosaldo, Geertz, and Ortner, I am looking at meaning and concepts. This is a study of the semantic field we call "sex" in an attempt to fill in contextual meaning so we know what we're saying when we talk about it in Mahasarakham.