

# Clifford Geertz

## An Interpretive Anthropology



Clifford Geertz's award-winning book, *Works and Lives*, is subtitled "The Anthropologist as Author," which could serve as a subtitle to Geertz's own career. No other American anthropologist is as authorial as Geertz. He has written or edited some fifteen books including ethnographies discussing his long-term research in Indonesia and Morocco and several collections of essays sketching out an approach to culture that has been called "interpretive anthropology." Geertz's *Works and Lives* was the 1989 winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for literary criticism, a recognition of the clarity of his prose and its accessibility to educated readers outside the field of anthropology, a discipline not known for its prose stylists. Geertz's essays are published in the *New York Review of Books*, *Daedalus*, *American Scholar* and other intellectual journals; his books are widely reviewed; and he contributes to a broader field of intellectual discussion than any other American anthropologist. His eruditeness and clever contrasting of ideas led the *New York Times* book critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt to coo, "It's invigorating to stretch one's mind on the Nautilus machine of his prose." Clifford Geertz is the anthropologist as author.

It comes as no surprise that Geertz's approach to culture is based on the metaphor of culture as text and anthropological inquiry as the interpretation of text. Those ideas, first presented in a collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Culture* (1973), were a catalyst for a debate in American anthropology which turned on key issues such as, What is the nature of culture? How is it distinct from social structure? How is culture understood? What is the relationship between observer and observed?

These anthropological issues arose against the backdrop of a changing world and world view. Unlike earlier ethnographers, Geertz and his contemporaries conducted their research in the new Third World nations that emerged after World War II. The late-20th century is a postcolonial and obviously interconnected world in which there were no uncontacted societies living in Eden-like isolation. As independence movements transformed former colonial subjects into new national citizens, intergroup conflicts intensified as power was reconfigured and new governments exerted their control. In the face of such change, the idea of functionally integrated societies was difficult to maintain since there were no isolated societies and little evidence of equilibrium.

The anthropologist's role had changed as well; instead of studying an isolated society for a year or two and returning to be "the expert" on those people, anthropologists were working in communities and institutions in the United States, Europe, and developing countries among people who had their own stories to tell and the means to tell them (see cases discussed in Brettell 1993). The relationships between anthropologists and informants also changed, sparking a self-examination of the nature of anthropological inquiry. The works of Clifford Geertz have contributed to that examination, and the changes in anthropology are reflected in his own career.

### Background

Clifford Geertz was born in 1926 in San Francisco and served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. After the war, he went to Antioch College, pursuing interests in English and philosophy. Except for a couple of economics courses, he did not study the social sciences before receiving his B.A. in 1950. Geertz recalls that "The [philosophical] problems I was concerned with—values and so on—seemed to me to be in need of empirical study" (Johnson and Ross 1991:150), and that led him to anthropology. He enrolled in Harvard's Department of Social Relations, and in late 1951 joined a research project in Indonesia. From 1952 to 1954 Geertz was one of a team of social scientists who worked in Modjokuto, Java, on a project funded by the Ford Foundation (Geertz 1963a:vii). The objective of that research was understanding Third World development, with the explicit goal of improving economic growth (Higgins 1963).

Geertz's works from this period differ from his later writings. His book, *The Religion of Java* (1960), is an example of classic ethnography; Evans-Pritchard could have written it. Another book, *Agricultural Involution* (1963b), is a cultural ecological study of Indonesia, an archipelago comprised of the inner islands (Java, Bali, and Lombok), where 9 percent of the land mass supported 65 percent of the population, and the Outer Islands (Sumatra and Borneo, for example), where 90 percent of the land mass was home to 30 percent of the population. *Agricultural Involution* contrasted the agrosystems of wet-rice, labor intensive, paddy agriculture and dry-rice, land extensive, swidden agriculture, and showed how the spatial distribution of those different agrosystems affected local economies, their colonial economic histories, and their future paths of development. *Peddlers and Princes* (1963a) profiles the very different Indonesian towns of Modjokuto, Java, and Tabanan, Bali, with the goal of understanding the ways local cultural patterns may affect economic development plans. At a time when development projects often ignored local realities for top-down socioeconomic engineering, Geertz (1963a:154) argued that "over-all developmental policies need to be much more delicately attuned to the particularities of local social and cultural organization. . . ." Geertz continued his analysis of Modjokuto in *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (1965), a synthesis of political and economic development in the community from its mid-19th-century establishment to the late 1950s.

These studies are solid anthropological contributions that advanced scientific knowledge, international policy, and Geertz's career. After a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford (1958–1959) and a year as an assistant professor at U.C. Berkeley, Geertz went to the University of Chicago in 1960, where he became full professor in 1964 and remained until 1970.

Geertz's first books do not break with traditional anthropological theory, although some interesting cracks were beginning to show. For example, in *Agricultural Involution* Geertz invokes the cultural ecology of Julian Steward and takes a systems approach shaped by functionalism, although he denies the privileged explanatory role for cultural ecology, arguing that it is important but not all-encompassing (Geertz 1963b:10–11). And the final chapter of *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* introduces an approach called "the document method" (following Harold Garfinkel), which Geertz develops in his subsequent work:

In this approach a single naturally coherent social phenomenon, a found event of some sort, is interpreted not so much as an index of a

particular underlying pattern, as in most quantitative work, nor yet again as the immediate substance of that pattern itself, as in most ethnographic work, but rather as a unique, individual, peculiarly eloquent actualization—an epitome—of it.

The document (which might better be called the "example" or as this method is often referred to as clinical, the "case") is seen as a particular embodiment, a specific manifestation of a more comprehensive pattern which has a very large, in some case virtually infinite, number of such embodiments and manifestations, the one at hand simply being regarded as particularly telling in the fullness, clarity, and the elegance with which it exhibits the general pattern. In it the paradigm is made flesh: the ineradicable specificity of actual events and the elusive generality of meaningful form render one another intelligible. [Geertz 1965:153–154]

With that, Geertz turns to an examination of a bitterly contested election in Modjokuto in a section titled "A Village Election as a Social Document." It is that approach to culture as text, first broached in *The Social History of an Indonesian Town*, which became distinctive in Geertz's subsequent work.

## Thick Description and Culture as Text

The course of Geertz's approach was set out in "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," the introductory essay to the collection, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. The essay clearly and forcefully outlines Geertz's view of culture and the nature of anthropological insights. After reviewing the multiple definitions of the word "culture," Geertz states his own position:

The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. [1973:5]

This is a key, widely quoted passage (e.g. Barrett 1991) with a complex series of implications. In a 1990 interview Geertz said, ". . . that's exactly what I still think. It's just that I didn't know exactly what I was getting myself into by thinking it . . ." (Johnson and Ross 1991:151).

Semiotics is the analysis of signs and symbols, and Geertz argues that cultural behavior is the interactive creation of meaning with signs: ". . . human behavior is seen as . . . symbolic action—action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music—signifies . . ." (1973:10). The relevant questions concern the meanings of such signs, as Geertz contends (1973:10):

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior.

In *The Interpretation of Cultures* Geertz outlines the notion of thick description, which draws on the work of Gilbert Ryle, especially his "winking" analogy. Ryle used a seemingly silly example—the difference between a twitching eyelid and a winking eye—to show that these similar behaviors were different because the wink communicated meaning and the twitch did not. Building on that difference, Ryle points out that one could see parodies of winks, practice parodies of winks, fake winks, and so on, producing multiple possibilities with even such a simple form of communication; unraveling and identifying those contexts and meanings requires "thick description."

Geertz argues that this is precisely what ethnographic writing does, except most of the time we are unaware of it. To make that point, Geertz reproduces an account from his Moroccan field notes, which, quoted raw, is readable but cannot be understood until it is interpreted.

In finished anthropological writings . . . this fact—that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to—is obscured because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined (Even to reveal that this little drama [from his fieldnotes] took place in the highlands of central Morocco in 1912—and was recounted there in 1968—is to determine much of our understanding of it). There is nothing particularly wrong with this, and it is in any case inevitable. But it does lead to a view of anthropological research as rather more of an observational and rather less of an interpretive activity than it really is. [Geertz 1973:9]

Asserting that "Culture, this acted document, thus is public," Geertz (1973:9–10) argues that debates over whether culture is materialist or idealist, subjective or objective are misconceived: culture consists of created signs that are behaviors, and anthropology's task is "sorting out the structures of signification" in order to determine "their social ground and import." What makes other cultures different is "a lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs" and the goal of anthropological analysis is to make those signs interpretable.

Geertz distinguishes this point of view from other conceptions of culture. Obviously, a semiotic emphasis does not give priority to technology or infrastructure or any other conception of the nature/culture interface as do materialists like White or Harris. Equally, culture does not exist in some superorganic realm subject to forces and objectives of its own as Kroeber suggested; culture cannot be reified. Neither is culture "brute behavior" or "mental construct" subject to schematic analyses or reducible to ethnographic algorithms. Just as a Beethoven quartet is not the same as the score, the knowledge of it, the understanding of a group of musicians, a particular performance of it or a transcendent force, but rather is irreducibly a piece of music (Geertz 1973:11–12), culture consists of "socially established structures of meaning" with which people communicate; it is inseparable from symbolic social discourse.

## Javanese Funeral

The implications of interpretation are exemplified in Geertz's analysis of a funeral in Java, a case of social discourse in which shifting political divisions and their symbolic expressions affected core rituals and emotions surrounding death (1973 [1959]). Geertz first outlines a critique of functionalism, focusing on its inability to deal with social change, and then sketches the distinction between culture and social system, "the former as an ordered system of meaning and of symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place; and to see the latter as the pattern of social interaction itself" (1973:144).

Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations. Culture and social structure are then but different abstractions from the same phenomena. [Geertz 1973:145]

But these two different abstractions are integrated, Geertz argues, in very different ways. Social structure is bound together based on "causal-functional integration," the articulation of different segments which interact and maintain the system. Culture, in contrast, is characterized by logico-meaningful integration, "a unity of style, of logical implication, of meaning and value." It is the sort of coherent unit "one finds in a Bach fugue, in Catholic dogma, or in the general theory of relativity" (Geertz 1973:145). Such distinctions become important in the Javanese funeral when changing associations between symbols and political parties create dissonance in the integration of culture and disrupt the organization of society.

To oversimplify, peasant religion in Java had been a syncretic mix of Islam and Hinduism overlain on an indigenous Southeast Asian animism. "The result," Geertz writes (1973:147), "was a balanced syncretism of myth and ritual in which Hindu gods and goddesses, Moslem prophets and saints, and local spirits and demons all found a proper place." This balance has been upset increasingly during the 20th century as conservative Islamic religious nationalism crystallized in opposition to a secular, Marxist nationalism which appealed to pre-Islamic, Hinduist-animist "indigenous" religions. Those positions became sufficiently distinct that the difference between the self-conscious Moslem and self-conscious "nativist" (combining Hindu and native elements with Marxism) became polarized as types of people, *santri* and *abangan*. In post-independence Indonesia, political parties formed along these dividing lines: Masjumi became the conservative Islamic party and Permai, the anti-Islamic mix of Marxism and nativism. These differences were epitomized at a specific Javanese funeral.

"The mood of a Javanese funeral is not one of hysterical bereavement, unrestrained sobbing, or even of formalized cries of grief for the deceased's departure," Geertz (1973:154) writes. "Rather it is a calm, undemonstrative, almost languid letting go, a brief ritualized relinquishment of a relationship no longer possible." This willed serenity and detachment, *iklas*, depends on the smooth execution of a proper ceremony that seamlessly combines Islamic, Hindu, and indigenous beliefs and rituals. Javanese believe that it is the suddenness of emotional turmoil that causes damage—"It is 'shock' not the suffering itself which is feared" (Geertz 1973:154)—and that the funeral procedure should smoothly and quickly mark the end of life.

But in this particular case, the dead boy was from a household loosely affiliated with the Permai party, and when the Islamic village religious leader was called to direct the ceremony, he refused citing the

presence of a Permai political poster on the door and arguing that it was inappropriate for him to perform the ceremony of "another" religion. At that moment, *iklas*—the self-willed and culturally defined composure surrounding the death—unraveled.

Geertz describes the emotional chaos that ensued, tracing its roots to a central ambiguity: religious symbols had become political symbols and vice-versa, which combined sacred and profane and created "an incongruity between the cultural framework of meaning and the patterning of social interaction" (Geertz 1973:169). Not only is this an interesting point about the dynamic uses of religious and political symbols, but it is a fine example of thick description. Nothing about this case—its selection, its historical background, the political dimension, the cultural expectations, the motives of distraught family and neighbors—none of it can be explained except by exposing

... a multiplicity of conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which the anthropologist must contrive to somehow first to grasp and then to render. [Geertz 1973:10]

## Conclusion

The process of rendering or evocation is, Geertz argues, the essence of ethnography. Once ethnography moves beyond simple listing, interpretation is involved as the ethnographer provides a gloss of the gloss that informants provide. Geertz distinguishes the experience-near "native point of view" from the experience-distant realm of social theorists and argues that the ethnographer's task is to explicate the links between the two:

To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, than putting oneself into someone else's skin. The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil *they think they are up to*. [Geertz 1983:58; emphasis added]

And that requires interpretation, distinct from either description or invention. Discerning the connections between multilayered cultural

phenomena is not the same as inventing those connections (Geertz 1988:140). The presentation of ethnographic interpretations as observed facts simply reflects the selection of a genre, not an epistemological reality.

Geertz's works, ethnographies and essays, exemplify this kind of self-cognizant balancing act between literal and literary. It is a body of work which draws on developments in neighboring disciplines and speaks to thinkers in other fields. It has also raised some sharp debates about verification: if ethnography is interpretation, then how can we know if the interpretation is correct? Most of us cannot go to Modjokuto or northern Morocco and check the interpretations; we need some other ways to evaluate the ethnographer's claims, but what are they? In traditional ethnographies we could search for various validating points: Is the ethnographer fluent in the local language? Did she live in the culture for an extended period? Was he methodical or biased in his observations? Were the informants "representative" of a larger culture?

But if cultural knowledge is inherently interpretive, how can we invalidate the "truth" of an interpretation since there are potentially as many "true" interpretations as there are members of a culture? And, to extend this logic, if all such claims are equally valid, then the most anthropology can hope for is to create a rich documentary of multiple interpretations, none denied and none privileged. This means that anthropology cannot be a science since it cannot generalize from truth statements or test the statements against empirical data; the nature of culture precludes this.

For anthropology, Clifford Geertz's major contribution has been to force anthropologists to become aware of the cultural texts they interpret and the ethnographic texts they create. He has also touched off a major debate within anthropology about the fundamental nature of the field (see "Postscript: Current Controversies"). Geertz's "evocative metaphor of interpretation as the reading of texts both by observer and observed," Marcus and Fischer (1986:26) write, ". . . has led to the present dominant interest within interpretive anthropology about how interpretations are constructed by the anthropologist, who works in turn from the interpretations of his informants." That key point has triggered a profound rethinking of the anthropological enterprise. ♦

## Bibliography

- Barrett, Richard  
1991 *Culture and Conduct: An Excursion in Anthropology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Brettell, Caroline, ed.  
1993 *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Geertz, Clifford  
1960 *The Religion of Java*. New York: The Free Press.  
1963a *Peddlers and Princes: Social Change and Economic Modernization in Two Indonesian Towns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.  
1963b *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.  
1965 *The Social History of an Indonesian Town*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.  
1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.  
1983 *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.  
1988 *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Higgins, B.  
1963 Preface. *In Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia*. By C. Geertz. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Johnson, A. and W. Ross  
1991 Clifford Geertz. *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series* 36:148-154.