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Anthropologist and Author: The Works and Life of Clifford Geertz

Clifford Geertz is easily one of the most influential cultural anthropologists of the late twentieth century. From humble beginnings, his influences are widespread and hard felt. From his development of the field of interpretive anthropology and his multi-disciplinary approach to anthropological research, he reshaped the way we learn. From his thick description ethnographies to the literary analysis of his fellow anthropologists, he changed the way we teach. By breaking away from the traditional, Anglo-European mold of anthropology, Geertz played a major part in opening the field for the development modern anthropological perspectives.

An old saying goes 'anthropologists aren't born, they're made' and this cannot be any more true than it was for Geertz, who was not even exposed to the field of anthropology until just before he decided to peruse a PhD in it. He was born August 23, 1926, in San Francisco, where he lived with his parents up until their divorce in 1929. After the divorce however, he went to live with his grandmother in a rural part of California, where he grew up, poor and largely isolated from the outside world. In an interview, he claims to remember hating the small town life, even though it was all he knew, and reminisced how he turned to books and writing to escape (Geertz 2004). From a very early age, Geertz expressed a strong liking for literature, and quickly distinguished himself from his fellow classmate. By the time he reached high school, the U.S. was deeply entrenched in the Second World War, and as soon as he graduated he joined the Navy to fight for his country, but more importantly, to get out of California.

Though, he never saw any action, his stay in the Navy was a life changing experience. He got to visit foreign lands and experience the world outside of the Californian countryside. But more than that, his service came with an educational stipend. Before the military, Geertz confessed to having never considered furthering his education, he explained that in his town, people graduated high school, sometimes, and then went off to work in a factory or on a farm. It was only with the cajoling of his endeared high school professor, a Mr. Larson Tardy, and because he had the money for it that he even considered enrolling in a university.

With Tardy's recommendations, he applied and was accepted to Antioch College in Ohio, a new concept institution that utilized a new work-study program that employed students in their field of interest, while they pursued their degree. Geertz originally enlisted as an English major, but shifted over to Philosophy, partially because his experience working as an intern for the New York Post made him reconsider his career choice, but mostly because he was amazed by the intellectual prowess and teaching style of Dr. George Geiger, head of the Philosophy department. During this time, he also met and married his first wife, Hildred "Hilly" Storey, who was a fellow literature major. After his graduation, his friendship with Dr. Geiger proved to be well worth it. Geiger not only suggested that both Geertz and his wife apply to the new Harvard department of Social Relations to study anthropology, but he gave them a grant, which paid for both of their educations.

However, before diving into anthropology, Geertz and Hilly did some digging to learn a little more about the topic. As it turned out, one of their friends at Antioch was working for Margret Mead, and was able to get them an appointment with her. So they met with her, simply looking for some insight into the field, but ended up staying for hours, talking about anthropology and Mead's work in Bali, and ended up forming a long lasting and fruitful

friendship with her. So while Geertz denies that his work, and theory, has been influenced by Mead's works, but she is certainly responsible for him getting into the field (Handler 1991:603).

Encouraged, persuaded and financed, Geertz applied to, and got accepted into the Social Relations Department at Harvard, where he experienced a cross-field kind of study program, that greatly influenced his future outlook on fieldwork. Recapping his school days Geertz explained that he "took sociology with Talcott Parsons… anthropology from Clyde Kluckhohn, clinical psychology from Harry Murray and social psychology from Jerome Bruner and Davis Krech" within his first year alone, and extended his studies into more psychology, archaeology, along with his ethnography and anthropological theory and methods classes (Handler 1991:604). He remembers the institution fondly, and finds it amusing how it produced such great students, but failed to reproduce itself, because all of the students who graduated from the program veered away from careers in education, and eventually the program dissolved. However, during the 1950's, when Geertz attended the program, it was strong and greatly shaped his outlook of the social sciences, collectively, including anthropology.

Before receiving his PhD, however, Geertz, like all anthropology students of the time, was expected to participate in a study that included fieldwork in a foreign environment, the further removed the better. So when Douglas Oliver, a professor of anthropology at Peabody, offered Geertz and his wife an opportunity to join his team in a study of Javanese culture in Indonesia, they were quick to accept. As far as first fieldworks go, they probably had one of the best experiences of all time, but that depends on one's definition of a good experience. Before leaving for Indonesia, Oliver backed out of the project because of illness, so the team of grad students left the states without a leader, and arrived in the middle of a political revolution. So for the first week, the students were stuck, hiding in a basement in a foreign country, without any

authority figures or communication with the outside world. Fortunately, the rebellion ended quickly, and they all escaped harm and were free to pursue their studies. However, once they reached Jogjakarta, a big university town where they were teaming up with some professors and grad students from Gadjah Mada University, they learned that their field was not what they had expected. Instead of studying the culture by going out and interacting with the people, the university had arranged for the researchers to sit in a meeting room, where interviewees would be sent in, one at a time to be questioned. This set up was absolutely unacceptable, and the team stepped on quite a few toes trying to rearrange the set up. Eventually Gadjah Mada lost interest in the study and the team was allowed to do their research their own way, going out and into the field, and relying heavily on participant observation.

The team did a wide sweep of Javanese culture, and spent two and a half years in the country, with Geertz and his wife stationed in the village of Mudjokuto, now known as Pare. Each member of the team focused on a specific aspect of Indonesian life, then at points throughout their study, they would group together to exchange notes and information, but for the most part, they each worked alone. Some of the subjects covered included: village organization, bureaucracy, the market place, and the Chinese minority. Hilly focused on family structures, which led eventually to the creation of the Javanese family book (H. Geertz 1964). Geertz was assigned to study their religion, specifically because he had shown such great interest in while back in school. His testable hypothesis, which he had to have to participate, even though he disagreed with it, was to see if the "strong Muslim sector would be the functional equivalent of the Protestants in the Reformation" (Handler 1991:605). However, once he reached the island and began his research, he openly admits to almost forgoing his research plan, "I got interested in so many other things about religion, that I didn't do that much [of my specific study]" (Handler

1991:605). So he determined that his hypothesis, like almost all hypotheses in social sciences, was "half true and half not," but that was not what he ended up writing his thesis on, instead it focused on Javanese religion in general[1] (Handler 1991:605). However, he also found himself immensity interested in their economic development, which led to the publication of *Agricultural Involution*, and *Peddlers and Princes*, both of which were published in 1963. Though the research experience ended up being quite successful in and of itself, Geertz often look back at the whole experience as a lesson that when it comes to fieldwork, anything can, and likely will, happen, which he regularly shares with his audience.

After his first fieldwork in Java, he spent a few years writing up his thesis and then a year teaching at Harvard, but quickly found himself longing for the field. Since his study of religion in Java had been very mixed, including Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, he wanted to study some examples of a more cohesive religious structure. So he and his wife set up an excursion, where they had planned on spending four months in each Hindu Bali, Indonesia, Islamic Minangkabau, in Sumatra, and Christian Minabassa, in Celebes. The first leg in Bali went perfectly, however, when the couple arrived in Sumatra, a civil war had just broken out, and they were forced to flee back to Bali, where they stayed for the remainder of their time in South Asia. Though their original plan fell through, looking back, Geertz explained that it as for the best, "in a sense it was a failed plan, though I think we were lucky, I don't think it would've worked. It was unrealistic. And my work in Bali would've been quite insufficient" (Handler 1991:606). It was during this stay in Bali, that Geertz really founded his style of interpretive anthropology[2], where he realized that culture was an assemblage of symbols, which had specific meanings to the people who practiced and perpetuated them.

[1] Published his findings as *The Religion of Java*, 1960.
[2] Publications from this time include *Person, Time and Conduct in Bali: An Essay in Cultural Analysis* in 1966.

His third location of major anthropological study was in Sefrou, Morocco, during late sixties and early seventies. He had originally wanted to continue his research in Indonesia, but political turmoil and unrest in the area made it too dangerous for him and his new family. So instead, a colleague recommended that he look into Morocco, the land was still Muslim, which opened the doors for comparative studies, but it was also a peaceful country, with a very different political and cultural climate than Indonesia. So he went about setting up a system of relaying researchers, so that at no point were there more than three researchers in Sefrou, but instead there was a researcher present for a better part of a decade. Again they took a multi-perspective approach, though the religious similarities between Java and Morocco were what had originally attracted Geertz[3], he also studied their economy, kinship, and family organization, all of which he compared to his research in Java (Handler 1991:610).

As an academic, Geertz actually did very little work within the walls of any anthropological association, but instead preferred to work in an environment that brought in specialists from all different fields. Aside from his year of teaching at Harvard, he also spent a year at Berkley, from 1959 to 1960, but was dissatisfied with the overwhelming size of the anthropology department. “[It] was as large as Antioch! I never got a chance to see anyone else,” he explained, so when he was offered a position at the Comparative Study of New Nations program at the University of Chicago, where he would be doing research with academics from a number of fields like law, economic and political sciences, he accepted in a heartbeat. He continued to work at University of Chicago for ten years, where the majority of his time was dedicated to research, but he also did some teaching. In 1970, Geertz was invited to found the

[3] His findings were published as *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* in 1968.

school of social sciences at Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies, where he continued to work until his retirement in 2000.

His long and distinguished career has not gone unnoticed, and to this day Geertz is one of the most quoted and cited anthropologists both within and outside of the field. His teachings on the interpretation of symbols and cultures have had a great effect on fields like sociology, psychology and even law. Jerome Bruner, a cognitive psychologist at the New York University School of Law, exalts the Storrs Lectures, where Geertz explained the application of interpretation of cultural symbols within a legal field, as potentially his greatest contribution outside of anthropology. Geertz is accredited with connecting interpretive cultural studies to the functionality of law.

> "Interpretation is, of course, the heart of law. Legal interpretation, we know more clearly, is the assigning of factual accounts, usually in story form, to normative standards in the law that specify what is a violation. But the normative standards specified in the law must be congruent with and in some obvious way derivable from the norms of culture" (Bruner 2005:25).

Likewise, his version of interpretation has been spread and molded to fit different disciplines throughout the realm of social sciences.

But who is it that influenced Geertz, to make him such a noted anthropologist across a variety of fields. By now it must not come by any shock, but the scholars that Geertz claims to have found to be the most influential in his studies are not anthropologists. He identifies Ludwig Wittgenstein, a philosopher of mathematics and logic, and Max Weber, who is usually associated with Marxist sociology, as his two strongest influences. Geertz claims that Wittgenstein's fight for the usage of common language within scientific fields, which allowed for public examination

and review, opened up all the right doors to allow Geertz to pursue his interests (Geertz 2000:xii). Secondly, he sees Weber as the one who laid the foundation for his line of interpretive anthropology.

> "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one, in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973:5).

It is though Wittgenstein's open academic door and by decoding Weber's web of significance, that Geertz was able to establish his theories and style that he has become so famous for.

And establish he did, as mentioned above, Geertz took over what was once referred to as symbolic anthropology and revamped it into his own version, which he called interpretive anthropology. This variation of anthropological though is complex and multilayered, but is perhaps best summarized by Richard Shweder, a follower of Geertzian anthropology by the following four themes:

> "Theme 1: Diversity is inherent in the human condition.
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> Theme 2: There is no universal essence to human nature that *strongly* determines human behavior.
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> Theme 3: Across time and space (history and culture) human nature is continuously transformed by the never-ending attempt of a particular group of human beings – Balinese, Moroccan, or Northern European Protestant – to understand themselves and to create a social world that makes manifest their self-understanding.

> Theme 4: Securing universal agreement about what is good, true, beautiful, or efficient in life is rarely possible across cultures and, even more importantly, the ecumenical impulse to value uniformity over variety and to overlook, devalue or even eradicate 'differences' is not a good thing" (2005:2).

All of these themes can be found throughout Geertz's works, if not implicitly stated. Geertz founded his school of thought upon the idea that every culture will create a society that revolves around symbols that the people themselves are aware of, and actively recognize. This sort of a perspective is drastically different from the works of other symbolic anthropologists, who all too often believed that they were searching for a deeper subconscious meaning behind human activity. Geertz however, saw no need for any meaning that was not observed by someone within the very culture that constructed it.

Instead, he saw these symbols, be them whatever they are, as almost a cultural text. He first introduces this concept in an essay "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," one of many in his 1973 book entitled *The Interpretations of Culture*. In it he explains that the significance of an event can only be fully understood by recognizing the symbolism of an event and the implied meanings of the symbols. In a sense, the anthropologist is trying to read symbols "over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz 1973:452). Perhaps the single most important aspect of this way of understanding cultural symbols is that they have to be readily understandable by the people who create them. He uses the example of the Balinese cockfight, and the symbolism within it, to express these points. The emotional weight behind a cockfight, "the thrill of risk, the despair of loss or the pleasure of triumph" represent more than just the emotions of a spectator sport, in the regularly emotionally withheld Balinese (Geertz 1973:449). Instead he proposes that the expression of these emotions is not all together significant, but it is

instead the implication that all people and societies are built upon these emotions. The cockfight is small a representation of Balinese society and people, not just a fight between two birds.

To help convey these symbols and interpretations to the public and academics back home, Geertz relied on a form of ethnographic writing. In his book, *The Interpretations of Culture*, Geertz recognizes his writing style to be "thick description" (1973:6). Thick description is an account of an event as more than just a happening, but with particular attention to the context in which the event happened. Geertz himself uses the analogy of a wink compared to an eye twitch. Behaviorally speaking, they are the exact same thing, a physical movement that could symbolize a joke or have been completely involuntary and carry no meaning whatsoever. It is only once the context of the situation has been put in place, the meaning of the wink becomes interpretable. Another important aspect of thick description can be viewed as pealing the layers off of a cultural event, much like one would peel off layers of an onion (McGee and Warms 2008:483). Every layer is different, but still a part of the whole, and there is no deep underlying truth, just the last piece of the onion. So in a brief summary, thick description attempts to look at all of the layers of a cultural event to establish the context in which the event is happening and allow for the interpretations of the symbols involved.

Not only did Geertz change how anthropologists write about cultures, but he changed that way they wrote about themselves. Before him, most ethnographies were written as factual summarizations of a culture, with little to no insight into the anthropologist author and his influences on the people or the study. Furthermore, most ethnographies attempted to focus on an underlying truth, that Positivist anthropologists felt they needed to uncover. Geertz however went about it in a whole new direction. He included his actions, feeling, beliefs and discomforts, right in the middle of the page, to inform the reader of the actions and situations that led to the

development of the data. Geertz put a very high value on literary review and analysis of both other anthropologists and his own works.

He believed that while anthropologists were looking for interpretations of a foreign culture, their findings were just that, interpretations, which, of themselves, were up for the interpretation of other anthropologists. Geertz largely associated his belief in literary review of anthropologists with his origins in English. It is this belief in the review and study of anthropological ethnographies that led to the publication of one of his most famous works, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988). In it, he evaluates and critiques the works of four of the world's best known anthropologists: Levi-Strauss, Evans-Prichard, Malinowski and Benedict. This one of a kind interpretation of his own colleagues won him the National Book Critics Circle Award of 1988, and opened the door for a whole new kind of review. Before this, anthropologists would read each other's works and debate over how specific interpretations may be right, wrong or skewed, but never before had they been subjected to this kind of study. Geertz was interested in why they wrote the way they did, not what they wrote about. He wanted to figure out how an anthropologist constructs a paper, and what that system says about the researcher and they research they conduct. He believes that "anthropology needs to be much more self-reflexive" and he went about the first couple of steps (Geertz 2004).

Clifford Geertz came to anthropology with a multi-disciplinary perspective and turned the field on its head. When he first came to the door, anthropologists were largely academic elitists, who locked themselves up in their ivory towers, and only down to study the small and isolated peoples of the world to determine human truths that they were to naive to see themselves. But Geertz rode in and ruined everything. He proposed that it was what the foreigners knew and the anthropologists did not that was the most important. He changed the

way in which events were recorded and reviewed, and he pulled away the academic curtain that had, for so long, hid the anthropologists from view. He made the world realize that anthropology was not just recording facts and objectively finding truths, but in fact, a messy, unorganized and beautiful process, which alters our understandings of both those studied and those studying.

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