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## CELEBRATING CLIFFORD GEERTZ' CONTRIBUTIONS TO ANTHROPOLOGY: A TRIBUTE ON HIS 15TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY

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### ABSTRACT

After the second world war in 1960s, there were two currents of thoughts to understand culture, symbolic and postcolonial. The symbolic school included Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), while the postcolonial school included scholars like Talal Asad and Edward Said. Both of these attempted to understand how colonialism shaped multiple societies. They also filled a vacuum in anthropology by raising questions on 'inequality' and 'discrimination' by the researcher. The data was biased to those who funded the research and critical questions were not usually asked. In this light, the discipline witnessed the birth of 'Action Anthropology'. Postmodernists like Geertz and Bourdieu criticised the notion of a 'researcher as a detached scientist', and 'objectivity' which were emphasised in the Functional Anthropology (Durkheim). In this article, light is drawn to Geertz' style of writing about cultures through 'ethnographies of experiences.' It is an affective turn that focuses on cultural pluralism and respecting differences. The article attempts to highlight on Geertz' significant contributions in writings like '*Religion in Java*' and '*Interpretation of cultures.*'

**Keywords:** *Anthropology; ethnography; writing cultures; State; Thick description*

Geertz was an anthropologist who used his knowledge in a multidisciplinary manner. He reflects on the State politics and the birth of new States in his book, '*Interpretation of Cultures*'. The 'new states', for Geertz refers to those countries that gained independence after the second world war (1939-45). He dismantles the views of the theorists, who while writing of new states tend to focus only on economic and political modernisation. While the religious modernisation in the new states of Asia and Africa is seen either as an obstruction to progress or as a repository of cultural values which is under threat of social change, the case in Bali is different. It is different from the expected linear shift to either flourish or decline. Geertz proposes the element of a 'change'. Previously, he had delved into the

tensions emerging in the new states like Indonesia and Ghana due to the interplay of essentialism and parochialism. The intent of choosing Bali for his study was due to two reasons namely, that despite certain studies being done on religion's interactions with political modernisation, the views on Asian religions had remained static. Also, because Balinese civilisation was undergoing certain transformations imperative for his study. Geertz also grappled with this idea in his 1980 book *Negara*. In *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, he asked "What Is a Country if It Is Not a Nation?"

Geertz argued that there has been a recent change in the theorisation of social sciences. He noted that the third world had

been a common object of study for social sciences including history, economics, psychology, sociology and political science. Though they were dealing with the same data, this change meant that they were not doomed confinement within their own disciplines. He was aware that there was a revival of interest to understand the structure and functions of traditional states. There had been significant re-interpretations of the traditional politics. Karl Wittfogel's analysis of Marx's theory on Asiatic mode of production, social anthropologist's understanding of segmentary states, re-questioning of the comparative feudalism, archaeologists reconsideration of the scope and size of ancient states and their developmental stages were significant for the change in anthropological turn.

These new involvements however had certain limitations. Anthropologists by indulging in the area of study, which is beyond anthropology, have made them self-questioning of being anthropologists rather than a self-made investigators in sociology, history or political science.

### **THE CASE OF BALI**

Geertz discussed the case of Bali, which had been a part of Dutch empire and in nineteenth century had an indigenous structure. He discussed the Balinese cultural foundations, its values and beliefs

that gave life to existence of State. The supralocal politics included three doctrines, namely, of exemplary center, of sinking status and the expressive conception of politics.

According to the doctrine of exemplary center, the court and capital plays the role of both of being an image of the state and a material manifestation of the political order. The court thus has a ritual aspect to it, which is paradigmatic. The pivotal function of legitimation was done through the myths. As Geertz discussed in previous chapters on Ideology, which is a patterned reaction to the patterned strains of a social role, a similar strain is witnessed throughout the political realm. The myth of Madjapahit Conquest in the state not just dictates the centre of power but also the benchmark of the civilisation. But unlike the American myth of 'founding fathers', it harnesses diversity out of unity does not force a unity out of the diverse units.

It was after the Gelgel period, that Bali stopped being ruled from a single capital, rather it had dispersed capitals in multiple regions. This 'federal' structure was like a pyramidal structure of 'kingdoms' wherein the main lords were placed at the apex. This diffusion of power not only led to a decline of status of peripheries moving away from the core but also of the core as others were moving away from it. This

doctrine of shrinking status holds gravity in the Balinese society, as the process of state formation is more affected by status than the statecraft. The concept of religious rationalisation in 'Internal conversion' in contemporary Bali can be seen more visibly in this chapter as the symbol of social inequality, hierarchy and ranks is the linchpin of governing political organisation.

The expressive nature of this Southeast Asian State, is highlighted through its ceremonies, public dramatisation of the ruling. This court ceremonialism was not a means to political ends, but on the other hand was an end in itself. The driving force of politics were these rituals and power served to this pomp.

He looks into Bali's structural arrangements, including its political instruments. What constitutes elites is not an organised class but a dispersed collection of sovereigns in competition. The efficacy of the government is enhanced by its local nature. The structural ties between the court and the village are multiple. Since the power is personified more in an individual and less in property, it highlights the overpowering importance given to prestige as compared to territory. In chapter Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example, the individual was seen as a small duplicate of the state, and the

state was an extension of the individual. The ideology of the newly found republic was based on President Sukarno's 'Five Points'. These included Monotheism, social justice, democracy, nationalism and humanitarianism. The state cannot exist without the individual, nor the individual without the state.

### **AN OUTLOOK**

Anthropology for Geertz then becomes an important site for debate, as its ethnographic studies do not clearly distinguish the ambitions of the traditional states from the social institutions, which encompass the cultural ambitions itself. It is only this distinction or the 'sociological realism' which will allow one to rightly question the relationship between the old state politics and the New State politics. Though the traditional state like the Third World states, are undergoing certain changes in their cultural apparatus and would in future replace the old rituals with a formal sense of power, there will remain an 'ideology'. It is through the right acknowledgment of this ideological contribution of politics past to politics present, that anthropology can give its vital contribution to better understand the states placed as far as a Pacific Island.

## CULTURE, PERSONALITY AND SOCIETY

The ontology of the 'social' can be seen working throughout the cultural and political realms. Geertz elaborates that it is through 'companionship' or 'socious' that meanings in a culture become public. In Bali, there is no state without individuals as it serves to them. One can see a unique feature in this society as state is not external to individuals, problematising the definition of a 'social fact'. In acknowledging state as a 'Juridico-political concept', wherein sovereign is born out of law, we get a new insight into the working of religion not only as a part of the state but completely being former's decisive factor. In this course, we also debated on the distinction between state and society, as the former being coercive and latter being non coercive. This definition is clearly not seen in Bali, as state does exercise power but the society through its sense of time directs state's actions and legitimises it.

### THE CEREBRAL SAVAGE

In *The anthropologist and the Human Condition*, Levi Strauss had argued that ethnocentrism in itself cannot be termed as a bad thing, but depends on the extent of its application. In *The View from Afar*, he grappled with the idea that cultures do not exist as separate from each other, are not

oblivious of each other. They exist by sharing and borrowing from each other, but in order not to die, they must remain 'impermeable' to each other. Ethnocentrism for Strauss is 'consubstantial with our species'

Levi Strauss in *Structural Anthropology* discussed the difference between historical method and ethnographic methods. For him both are concerned with the same unit of study, which is the society other than the one in which one lives. Though there may be differences on the nature of otherness which may be due to remoteness in time or because of remoteness in space. There are limitations to the capacity of both historian and ethnographer, as both can never make the reader a 'native'. All they can do is make the experience of men from another time or another country accessible to the reader.

Geertz problematises the scientism proclaimed by ethnographers and their claims of ethnology a positive science. The ethnographer under investigation in this essay is Levi Strauss. He abhors his construction of a savage out of Australian aborigines and Brazilian Indians, which was significantly driven by his personal relationship to the object of study. In *Tristes Tropiques*, his documented autobiographical account to Brazilian jungles, he was shocked by the changes in

the landscape and the people. The “unexplored territory” was not as exotic now, and there was not even one native Indian left to be studied for him. There were four groups for him to study: the Caduveo, the Bororo, the Nambikwara and the Tupi-Kawahib. But since the first three had significantly changed their character from what Strauss had thought before embarking his journey, it was the Tupi-Kawahib, the “uncontaminated” which excited him. Even though, after finding “his” savages, he could not understand them due to problem of language. This haste shown in Strauss's work is mockingly commented upon by Geertz, who believes that there are two kinds of anthropologists: a Columbus among true savages or a nostalgic tourist seeking for a lost reality.

Geertz's symbolic-interpretative approach is different from Strauss, as he believes that there is a possibility to comprehend the strangeness of primitive societies by understanding them not through an imposed language but from a psychological level. Since the mind of man, unlike the savage binary, is the same everywhere it could be understood by entering physically into a specific tribe's world. By developing a “universal grammar of the intellect”, understanding the archaeological remains and reconstructing the existing conceptual

systems “of their” world, can anthropologists can get a thick description.

However, Clifford Geertz and Levi Strauss agree on the need of interdisciplinary approach. It is important because a division of labour between the practical and the theoretical tradition will further create a division between Anthropology and history. But if they come together, it becomes evident that science can accomplish nothing without help of each other.

In the second work, *La Pensée Sauvage*, Strauss expands on the cultural forms made out of the limited tools available to the savage. This “science of the concrete” is an arrangement of realities which are directly sensed by the savages. This cognitive working of a savage's mind is compared to peeping inside a kaleidoscope, wherein the quantity and colour remain same yet producing multiple patterns. These multiple chips of the kaleidoscope of pictorial representation of savages rituals and myths. The limitation of Lévi- Strauss in not being explicit of the gravity of these images is problematic. By generalising the process of interpretation by savages into a totemic perspective, he has produced an inaccurate ethnography where symbols are made “residue of events”. It is here that Geertz's distinction

from structural anthropology becomes evident. Totemism works through a construction of a parallel logic between the natural and the cultural world. But the units can be seen as disconnected if analysed through conceptual schemes by selecting particular images. They are coherent when seen in order, for the fundamental logic between a symbolic structure and its referent is not merely functional but logical.

### LINGUISTICS

He seeks a commonality between language and totemism as one can become conscious of his cultural categories by reading ethnological works, similar to the awareness of one's grammatical categories. But it is the binary opposition which writes large in both the treatises on language and savages. Geertz observes a similarity between Rousseau and Lévi Strauss. Both are driven not by a deeper investigation of men but a selective investigation of those by whom they are enthralled. The 'Epistemological empathy' coined by Geertz seeks to bridge the division between our world and their world. One can never understand a savage by mere introspection or by merely observing him, but through attempting to think like them and put oneself in their tasks. So a detailed ethnography must be supplemented with a neolithic intelligence.

### INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

In ethnography, a "thick description" is different from an "explanation". The motive is to provide a vocabulary which uncovers what the symbolic action says about itself. So, anthropologists don't study villages but they study 'in' villages. He criticises Levi Strauss and other anthropologists who have focused more on writing and less on understanding. This in result has made anthropology a scientific adventure rather than a scientific discipline. Geertz emphasises on the adoption of 'double hermeneutics' to interpret the symbolic concept of culture and state. This means to interpret people's interpretations of themselves and not binding them as one's 'savage'.

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