IN PLACE OF AN INTERVIEW *

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It is thirty-five years since the publication of *The Religion of Java*. I thought of making an interview with Clifford Geertz; I would ask him, in particular, how he wrote his first book. He has explained how in the book itself but I wanted more. One asks anthropologists what students today must read in order to become anthropologists. They can always answer. But in ten years, their answers change. It is because ethnography is directed at doing away with books. Only by being there; only by hearing and by seeing can one find something one is not sure one is looking for. The aim of an ethnography is commemorative but it is also to make previous books useless. Many books have been written about religion in Java in the last thirty-five years, but *The Religion of Java* has not been replaced. I have taught *The Religion of Java* perhaps thirty times; more or less once a year every year since I began teaching in 1965. I have found something different to say about it each time. I wanted to know how one writes a book that escapes the law of anthropological writing.

Then I decided that an interview would not do. An interview helps one understand at the moment one starts reading. It supplies the voice of the person who wrote the book from outside the book; the voice, then, of someone in the same position as the reader, but more knowledgeable. Or the voice of an author who reflects on the book later on; but again from outside of it. I wanted to hear someone else, and I had reasons for it. *The Religion of Java* is known to people who scarcely know where Indonesia is on the map and who know nothing of Indonesia's place in the world. The book began an important change in ethnography. One was presented with the voices of the Javanese. The book continues to speak. But Indonesia remains unknown. I wanted to speak with the author of the book from inside the book. With someone I had confused with the narrator, no doubt. Perhaps he could tell me why people hear him and no one remembers Indonesia.

It is by no means Geertz's fault. It is the case with the study of Indonesia in general. People who work there become fascinated; a couple of decades ago, I would have said, "fall in love." They return to the country often the rest of their lives. Compare this, for instance, with a place said to have the same language, Malaysia. It is likely that one works in Malaysia once; the next time one goes to Nigeria. Malaysia is ripe for comparison because it is recognizable. Indonesia is no longer attractive to me, but I cannot rid myself of it, even

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though I often would like to, and that is because I still cannot recognize the place. I wanted the narrator-author of *The Religion of Java* to speak to me again. To tell me his method. To tell me how it is that not only he, but the rest of us can sometimes speak in the place of Indonesia and yet Indonesia guards its unrecognizability.

> I talked to Djojo on the corner the other night about his marvelous grandfather. . . . He said his grandfather was able to disappear magically. Also he could go great distances in a short time. He would walk out of his house and announce to his wife that he was going to Semarang [three or four hundred miles away] and in fifteen minutes he would walk back in, saying he had just come back from Semarang. He had pupils to whom he taught this *ilmu*, but none of them are left now, and the *ilmu* is lost. No one can do these things any more now, said Djojo. . . . His grandfather was arrested once by the Dutch and taken to Bragang and put into jail because of his *ilmu*—all his pupils walking along behind as he was led in. When they returned home, found him there in the house ready to teach, and it turned out later that he was in both places at once: in jail and in his house teaching. He evidently applied his magical powers in the jail toward freeing the prisoners, and so the Dutch thought perhaps it would be better if they just let him go. But now he was stubborn and wouldn't leave. "You sentenced me to seven years," he said, "so I'll stay here seven years. . . ." I asked Djojo whether his grandfather could cure people, and he said, yes, he could. He said that now there are plenty of people who say they can cure people, but they really can't they are just swindlers deceiving people. I asked Pak Parman (the village's best known dukun), and he said, "Oh he is just a stupid man; he can't do anything and just cheats people out of their money. There was a man out in Sumbersari who could really cure, but he died a few years back and now there is no one."
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> Today the leading dukuns in Modjokerto are all at least middle aged, but none is really old. Of the really well-known ones, three are abangans; one is a santri; and one, the subdistrict officer, a prijaji.[1]

Djojo's grandfather, alas deceased, could appear and disappear at will and could occupy two places at once. One can simply dismiss this story as superstition or one can understand it as a belief, appropriate to them but not to us, readers of ethnographies. But the description is not given as simply what Javanese believe, as part of something constituted in advance as "the religion of Java." "The religion of Java" was a name that Geertz applied later to the body of material he presented. He was obliged to make subcategories. The most disputed aspect of his book was, in fact, the adequacy of these subcategories; but his distinctions of "abangan," "prijaji," and "santri" were also quickly accepted and used by scholars in various fields. His method had the same double valence: on the one hand, quoting sources, reporting not generalities but what people said, was widely adopted. But on the other, he was accused of merging the voices he heard with his own, of paraphrasing rather than quoting. But I do not believe the accusation is justified. It is quite true that he paraphrased, but in doing so, he reduced what he heard not to an idea but to what he remembered hearing. "I talked to Djojo on the corner the other night about his marvelous grandfather. . . ." He quotes his notes for us, giving us not "an informant" but "Djojo" and giving either the place he was when the conversation occurred or where it is Djojo lives. In either case, the information does not help in understanding magical curers. Like "Djojo," however, it indicates a uniqueness, a coincidence of time, place, persons, and speech. We are given an actuality.

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[1] *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960), p. 89.

This matters quite a lot when we come to consider the grandfather who could be in two places at once, who could appear and disappear at will. Geertz was told about the possibility of appearance and disappearance as such, as much as possible outside Geertz's rational understanding but also outside Djojo's. For this to be a belief, it has first to be a conversation. Something presumably outside discourse has to be admitted to it. Admitted not as a curiosity, but as something that reasonably passes between two persons speaking to each other. Geertz shows himself listening to this remarkable story, taking it in, not doubt resisting it as a real possibility, but doing more than tolerating a Javanese fantasy. In this instance, paraphrase is stronger than quotation because something unreasonable that demands recognition gets it and we glimpse it happening.

I sense a certain admiration on Geertz's part; admiration for the grandfather but also for Djojo. Or if not admiration, pleasure. The pleasure that comes when one hears something one knows one will pass on. Geertz writes, "I" spoke with Djojo; and he writes this first to himself, in his notes. The "I" that will later read these notes is easily confounded with "we," his readers. I, at least, am summoned to Java when I hear his pleasure. Geertz's faculty for listening is heightened. And it is precisely this capacity to listen that wedges open a barrier between cultures. Belief is no longer at issue; only whether Geertz can remain attentive and thus cause us, years later, to do the same.

"There was a man out in Sumbersari who could really cure, but he died a few years back and now there is no one." Djojo's marvelous grandfather is gone and there are no equivalents today. But the receding reality of which Djojo speaks is not echoed by any nostalgia on Geertz's part. His commentary is matter of fact. "Today the leading dukuns in Modjokerto are all at least middle aged, but none is really old." The voice that speaks of miracles is replaced by one which comments neutrally. Geertz's neutrality authenticates what he passes on. He is disinterested, a mere knowledgeable observer. "Three are abangans; one is. . . ." The observer makes me feel that I could listen myself. One need not be as knowledgeable about Java as he is in order to hear. Listening and understanding have become different activities. Achieving the latter does not satisfy the former.

Let us leave this imaginary interview behind us and speak of Indonesia. I have chosen the example of curing, hence of the irrational. However I might have chosen one of the excellent political analyses of Indonesia. There too, often, the difference between what I read and what I understand leaves me wanting more.

> Authoritarian colonial attitudes were mingled with the precepts of Dutch parliamentarian democracy; the result was not so much a compromise between the two as the inconsistent application of the one philosophy or the other, depending largely on which individual or branch of government decided the case. As a result, people were jailed for the mildest criticisms, while at the same time outspoken revolutionaries urged the overthrow of the government with impunity.[2]

On the one hand, revolutionary statements are allowed and, on the other, mild criticism results in the jail for the critic. It all depends on who reacts. Ruth McVey, in a book the anniversary of whose publication 30 years ago also well deserves to be noted, describes authority which cannot even be called inconsistent. Certain authorities act one way; others in another way. One might think one could predict, but it is not certain. A world is opened for expression and closed at the same moment. The precision of the sentences makes me think I can recognize what McVey describes. But the situation described, thanks precisely to the

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[2] Ruth T. McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), p. 26

concision and accuracy of the description, opens an abyss before me. Indonesia, again, becomes for me unrecognizable.

The best books about Indonesia stimulate a desire for more that outweighs whatever they tell me. I become fascinated with the possibility of listening. But when what I hear is turned into understanding, it seems as though there is much more to know, but it has escaped me. Indonesia vanishes the instant it comes into view.