

“At the Skin’s Edge”

Hildred and Clifford Geertz, Otherness, and the Craft of the Ethnographer

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Abstract: This paper presents a reconstruction of the hitherto untold story of (a leg of) Clifford and Hildred Geertz’s first trip as members of the Modjokuto Project. In 1952 the Geertzses, then doctoral students in social anthropology at Harvard, left the United States to spend three months in the Netherlands and then set out for Java. The paper addresses a number of methodological problems in anthropology and the history of anthropology: Where and how do anthropologists first encounter their “other”? Is the difference between “us” and “them” always stark as Malinowski’s classic palimpsest assumes? In addition to published sources, the article relies on 300 pages of field notes by both Geertzses and 100 pages of correspondence (from the Clifford Geertz Papers preserved by the University of Chicago Special Collections).

NOTE: This is a very rough draft of a paper. Since it is my first time working with ethnographic fieldnotes as primary sources (and I found it dramatically difficult to do), you will see that footnotes abound with references to fieldnotes. I did this because I wanted to use the footnotes as a map/index of sorts for writing the corresponding chapter of my Clifford Geertz biography, which will be much more narrative in style.

Also, the references are sketchy at best, and I remained in doubt if adding a section §.1, as a theoretical introduction on anthropology, otherness, and the encounter with alterity. I thought that I could briefly explain the point in my presentation and that, given the circumstances, it would be better to present my original historical data and reserve the discussion to the epilogue, but I am not sure if it works like it is now.

In your patience, benevolence, and criticism I trust.

Thanks

Matteo

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“The wogs begin long before Calais”
Clifford Geertz, *The Uses of Diversity*

On December 22, 1952, the publisher and editor in chief of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* magazines, Henry R. Luce, drafted a three-page report on his recent Asian trip in view of an imminent meeting with the President-elect of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower. As an informal but powerful

¹ I wrote this paper mostly using the 300 pages of fieldnotes and 100 pages of correspondence home by Clifford and Hildred Geertz kept as part of the Geertz Papers at the Special Collections Library of the University of Chicago (henceforth CGP). In a previous paper I privileged correspondence over fieldnotes, writing that “while (some) letters might not be fully transparent or truthful, fieldnotes seem to be too idiosyncratic (and often chaotic) to become a reliable source for historical research” (Bortolini 2023: 17, n. 1). After a thorough reading and coding of Clifford and Hildred Geertz’s fieldnotes from the first four months of the Modjokuto project and serious consideration on my part, I am now more confident in using fieldnotes as primary sources, but I strongly recognize the need of a more focused and sustained methodological reflection on the use of fieldnotes as primary sources for the story of ethnography-based forms of knowledge. The Geertzes wrote their fieldnotes continuously and used a simple system of numeration, which I will use for reference in this paper, together with the following abbreviations: CGF: Clifford Geertz’s fieldnotes (CGP, box 5, folder 1; box 10, folder 1); HGF: Hildred Geertz’s fieldnotes (CGP box 26, folder 5).

ambassador of American geopolitical interests and vision, he had traveled through a handful of countries in the Far East meeting, among others, the Presidents of Taiwan, Korea, and the Philippines, the Prime Ministers of Japan and Vietnam, and the Governors of Hong Kong and Singapore. Describing the overall situation as “fluid” and lacking any strong political culture apart from Chinese Communism, Luce singled out Indonesia as the “the most shocking example of [this general] ideological welter and confusion.” Inebriated by their recently won independence, Indonesians lacked the political awareness and the moral solidity to comprehend that freedom should always go hand in hand with responsibility.²

In a longer preparatory memo dedicated to Indonesia, Luce went even further, describing the locals as “very touchy about white men, suspicious, sophomorically arrogant,” and persuaded to be blessed by an exceptional combination of Nature and, again, Freedom—a naïve view doomed to be smashed by reality. With a patchy institutional system and a composite, problematic version of Islam as their only cultural collant, Indonesians were content to comfort themselves blaming all their troubles on the international situation and the ensuing Cold War. What struck Luce the most, however, was their blatant inhospitality, which he attributed to a feeling of distrust towards all Westerners as proxies of those Dutch who gave “the impression of wanting to sabotage the whole thing,” but also, and maybe mostly, to “plain bad manners.” “We want nothing from them,” he closed, “and need nothing; if they want anything from us, let them ask.”³

² Henry L. Luce, untitled memo dated December 22, 1952, pp. 3, N-YHS Henry Luce Papers, box 21, folder 3. On Luce’s interest for Asia see Herzstein 2005.

³ Henry L. Luce, “Indonesia,” undated memo, pp. 5, N-YHS Henry Luce Papers, box 21, folder 3.

Writing from Java's cultural capital, Yogyakarta, to a couple of friends in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a 26-year old American graduate student in social anthropology shed a rather different light on Luce's days in Jakarta. On December 10, 1952, he wrote, the media tycoon had gotten to the Provisional People's Representative Council to meet its deputy speaker and a member of the Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia, Arudji Kartawinata. Luce, however, was thirty-five minutes late and found nobody to receive him. After a lively argument with the deputy chairman of Protocol, who was at that very moment closing the doors of the Parliament building, the American turned on his heel and walked away in a fury. "So if you begin to see our favorite magazine of news and opinion," wrote Clifford Geertz to Victor and Millah Ayoub, "printing stories about corruption, communism and catastrophe in Indonesia you may be able to figure out why."⁴

At the time of writing these words, Geertz had been living in Java with his wife, Hildred Storey Geertz, for a couple of months, and his confidence was given by his conviction to possess observational skills and a scientific method that were much better than Luce's impressionistic and biased approach to understand Indonesian culture and politics. In fact, their trip had begun long before their arrival in Jakarta.⁵ As the vanguard of a composite group of nine would-be scholars who had been recruited some two years earlier by the Harvard anthropologist Douglas L. Oliver to be part

⁴ Clifford Geertz to Victor and Millah Ayoub, December 15, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1. See also "News of the World," December , 1952, page 6, #14.

⁵ As recounted in MacFarlane 2022, Hildred Storey and Clifford Geertz had first met at Antioch College, and had applied to Harvard to become anthropologists after an inspiring encounter with Margaret Mead.

of the so-called “Modjokuto Project,” the two Americans had spent some three months in the Netherlands before reaching Indonesia. The Geertz, who had met at Antioch College in the late 1940s and had decided to study anthropology after an inspiring encounter with Margaret Mead, had been the best students of their graduate cohort at the Harvard interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations.⁶ Indeed, their decision to leave the United States way before their fellow group members to meet with Dutch scholars and former colonial officers had been prompted by their profound commitment to pursue a career as social anthropologists.

This early departure had brought them into contact with a number of “others” who were not included in the original plan. As soon as they left Hoboken on the SS Vendaam ocean liner, “Hilly” and “Cliff” discovered that “foreignness does not start at the water’s edge but at the skin’s” (Geertz 1986, 261). In fact, in the 107 days it took them to reach Indonesia, they got to know Dutch scholars, taxi drivers, secretaries, teens, repairmen and housewives; they met with expat Javanese and Ambonese who lived *la dolce vita* between Amsterdam and Paris, as well as Chinese Indonesians who had traded their dream to become anthropologist for a steady job in business; they spoke with former civil servants and colonial officers, some of whom had held prominent positions before the war; they casually befriended

⁶ Geertz 1989: 340. They were admitted at Harvard on June 7, 1950 (UAV 801.2010, box 6, DSR Correspondence etc. 1950-1951, F-J, folder “Graduate students, General 1950-1951”). See also the document on “Qualifying Examinations, Fall Term 1950-1951” (UAV 801.2138, HD/DSR, box 1, folder “1950-51”); the minutes of the DSR Committee on Higher Degrees, June 13, 1951, where both Cliff and Hilly are reported to having passed their Qualifying Examinations with distinction (UAV 801.2005, DSR, box 1, Book minutes 1950-51);

Indonesian citizens at a dance festival and visited with them the vast South-East Asian collections of the Leiden Museum Volkenkunde; and, as a coda, they were able to observe Chinese and Malay peasants in a quick stopover they did in Singapore during their trip from Rotterdam to Jakarta. Against the dictates of the so-called “Malinowskian palimpsest,” according to which fieldwork begins in “the moment when [the ethnographer] sets the foot upon a native beach, and makes his first attempts to get into touch with the natives” (Malinowski 2005, 7; Bortolini 2023, 3-5), the Geertzes encountered their others well before they reached the field and spent ten months thinking, discussing, and evaluating how to better approach their subject (and themselves) via the mediation of a panoply of colonial and colonized others. What Luce had accomplished in a few hours in Jakarta, they had not been able to realize in months.

Embracing a microhistorical attitude (Levi 1991; Ginzburg 1993), this paper focuses on a rather particular case to raise general questions in both anthropology and its history: Where and how do ethnographers first encounter their other(s)? Is the difference between “us” and “them” always stark as the Malinowskian palimpsest assumes? What happens when ethnographers find otherness where they anticipated sameness? How does the mediation of others such as scholars, former colonial officers, language teachers, expats, émigrés, and elites influence the ethnographers’ view of their subjects? As symbolized by the iconic photos of Bronislaw Malinowski among the Trobrianders (Clifford 1988), the Malinowskian palimpsest collapses geographical and cultural distance as to produce a sharp demarcation between observers and observed, “we” and “them.” In the last fifty years, this overlap has been at the center of postmodern, postcolonial,

and decolonial reflections in the social sciences, and various critical perspectives emerged to criticize and understand the complex, not self-evident relationship between ethnographers and their subjects (Asad 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Harrison 1991; Stocking 1991). The Geertz's early departure to the Netherlands and their long trip to Modjokuto form a particularly interesting case to argue that these issues are not only the turf of radical critics of doing (or writing) ethnography, but might also help us in reconsidering our images of past practices and the methods we use to access, describe, and understand them.

1. *Ki*: On the SS Vendaam

As recounted elsewhere (Bortolini 2023; Gilman 2003; Price 2016), the Modjokuto Project was envisioned early in 1951 by Douglas L. Oliver at the suggestion of his colleague and director of the Harvard Russian Research Center, Clyde Kluckhohn, and the MIT economist and CIA assistant director Max F. Millikan. Preoccupied by the nearly absolute lack of reliable social scientific data on Indonesia—a young country which represented a strategic interest for the United States (Roadnight 2002; Fasih 2020)—Oliver penned a wide-ranging research plan focused on the political life of the newborn Republic.⁷ After the end of Dutch colonialism in 1949, the project read, “the

⁷ I have been unable to find the original research proposal for the Modjokuto project, and what follows is based on a grant request submitted in the late spring of 1952 (the document is not addressed, but since the project was financed by the Ford Foundation I guess it was directed to them). See MIT-CIS, “Proposal for a field project in Indonesia,” Rockefeller Foundation Records, Projects, SG1.2, series 100, International, Series 253 Washington (FA387a), box 532, folder 4550:

native elite now hold power but the masses are stirring and are already exerting pressures on the leaders, who must now adjust their foreign-inspired doctrines to bazaar and rice-paddy politics.”⁸ This latent conflict between outside-looking elites and their all-too-vernacular citizens was made worse by the fact that the “masses” remained “mysterious”—no one, let alone the Indonesian Government, had reliable data of any kind about the 150 millions of Indonesians that linguistic unification and rising literacy rates were bringing, slowly but surely, into the public political sphere.⁹ Given its dense population, its role as the vanguard of the revolution, and the prominence of its nationalist leaders, Central Java was the perfect setting for investigating “political behavior in the broadest meaning of the term” in its relationship with “the everyday affairs and values of the populace.” The ethnographical study must be conducted “in a *sample community* [of about 15,000 inhabitants] and against the backdrop of total community life.”¹⁰

When this grant proposal was sent to the Ford Foundation early in 1952, Oliver had already recruited eight graduate students from various Harvard departments. In preparation for their trip, Clifford and Hildred Geertz, Alice Dewey, Donald Fagg, Robert Jay, John Rodrigues, Edward Ryan, and Lea E. Williams became acquainted with the (few) printed sources on Indonesian economy, culture, and society, got some quick smattering in

“MIT Indonesia Study (Geertz Clifford and Gertrude),” 7pp., Rockefeller Archives.

⁸ MIT-CIS, “Proposal for a field project in Indonesia,” p. 2.

⁹ MIT-CIS, “Proposal for a field project in Indonesia,” p. 2. This preoccupation for the connection between literacy, the mass media, and political behavior was typical of the MIT Center for International Studies, which started its works in 1952 with a programme in “International Communication.” On this see Blackmer 2002; Gilman 2003; Shah 2011; Bortolini 2021.

¹⁰ MIT-CIS, “Proposal for a field project in Indonesia,” p. 3.

fieldwork techniques, and received some intensive schooling in Dutch and Bahasa Indonesia, with both American and Indonesian teachers.¹¹ The research plan underlined the very importance of this kind of training for the future of the social sciences in the United States: “When the project is completed each of the participants will possess rare qualifications of training and experience in a practically untenanted field of area knowledge.”¹² From the perspective of “Cliff” and “Hilly” Geertz, however, this was not enough; they asked and obtained from their home institution, the MIT Center for International Studies, the permission to anticipate their colleagues and spend some time in the Netherlands to meet with local social scientists and explore the colonial collections of the libraries of the University of Leiden and the Amsterdam Instituut voor de Tropen. On July 10, 1952—that is, some three months before the group was supposed to reach Jakarta—the Geertzes embarked on the Holland Amerika Lijn SS Vendaam for a eleven-day trip across the Atlantic.¹³

As it always happens, however, their travel was not only a physical relocation of bodies or minds: on board Cliff and Hilly had the venture to meet their first “real” others. Sitting at dinner with a naive girl from Friesland who had spent her last year in Canada working in a farm and chatting with a physical anthropologist from the University of Amsterdam,

¹¹ Hildred Geertz to parents, June 52, CGP box 5A, folder 8. See Bortolini 2023 for a more detailed assessment of the beginning (Fall 1951 to July 1952) and the end (October 1952 to May 1953) of the first two years of the Modjokuto Project. The present paper mainly covers the “middle period” between the two (July to November 1952).

¹² MIT-CIS, “Proposal for a field project in Indonesia,” pp. 4-5.

¹³ Hildred Geertz to parents, 3/25/52; Hildred Geertz to parents, 4/1/52, both CGP box 5A, folder 8. MIT-CIS, “Proposal for a field project in Indonesia,” p. 5.

Rudolf Bergman, who had lived between Batavia and Surabaya for twenty years they discovered that Indonesia was a “highly emotional topic for the Dutch.”¹⁴ What for the Geertzes was a subject of study as any other,¹⁵ for their conversational partners seemed to be a rather complicated symbolical object and the target of an unstable blend of national (and nationalistic) pride and bitter resentment. It is also true that even the most difficult conversations were eased by the “gezellig” (jolly) atmosphere of the SS Vendaam and its circular bar, where passengers from all over the world sat together drinking, chattering, and singing songs in three or four languages in a “continuous party” of sorts. Instead of studying in their cabin, Hilly and Cliff would thus spend most of their days at the counter, sipping beer and making the best of their new condition of worldly anthropologists. When they finally arrived in sight of the French coastal line at Le Havre, the ruins of World War Two were a harsh wake up call. It was the first but not the last shock that Europe would provide for the Geertzes.

2. *Sho*: Three months in the Netherlands

Hilly and Cliff spent their early days in the Netherlands between Rotterdam and Leiden, where they found a sublet in a village called Oegstgeest. While the reconstruction of cities and harbors was much advanced, the country still bore the physical and spiritual scars of the war.¹⁶

¹⁴ Hildred Geertz to parents, 7/21/1952, CGP box 5A, folder 8.

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz has often recalled that he did not even know where Indonesia was when he was first summoned by Oliver. *After the Fact*

¹⁶ On the Netherlands after World War Two see Schuyt and Taverne 2004; Loeber 1992;

As they got off the ship, Cliff and Hilly discovered that the resentment against the former occupants had all but waned: no German could find a room to sleep in a Dutch town, hence the rush of some of their fellow travellers to catch a taxi to get to Germany as soon as possible.¹⁷ Rotterdam looked new and cosmopolitan, with most people speaking perfect English and international dailies and American pocket books on the newsstands, but also old and romantic, with its “many canals, some with weeping willow trees and waterlilies and lawns.”¹⁸ Once in Leiden, Hilly described the town as “quaint” to her parents and commented that it was “completely unlike any place in America, and so close to the American dream of what Europe is like, that it is hard to see it as it is.”¹⁹ At the same time, Hilly struggled to differentiate Leiden from the United States: “Except for the everpresent canals,” she wrote in the same letter, “it looks very midwestern.” And again: “It’s allittle (*sic*) like and American suburb but somehow different.” Puzzlement reigned supreme.²⁰

Soon after their arrival the Geertzes realized that this first leg of the trip might be more than a quick stopover aimed at doing some “background research of one sort or another and read the results of 150 years of colonialism.”²¹ Besides obvious differences and endless curiosities—When

Oostindie 2011.

¹⁷ Hildred Geertz to Family, July 21, 1952, CGP, box 5, folder 8. CGF, 3.6. On Dutch resentment against the Germans see Oprel 2021.

¹⁸ Hildred Geertz to Family, July 23-25, 1952, CGP box 4, folder 6. CGF, 3.3,

¹⁹ Hildred Geertz to Family, July 23-25, 1952, CGP box 4, folder 6.

²⁰ Hildred Geertz to Family, July 23-25, 1952, CGP box 4, folder 6. CGF, 3.33.

²¹ Clifford Geertz to George Geiger, December 5, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

to tip and how much?²² How could they manage to ride their bicycles in the crazy Dutch traffic?²³ How to make sense of the Netherland's ubiquitous "army of uniformed civil servants"?—they²⁴ were discovering how difficult it was to pierce the symbolic layer of their commonsensical knowledge of other places and peoples, especially when places and people were not supposed to be exotic at all! Far from being a mere personal matter, this continuous struggle against their own ethnocentrism put their ability to become professional anthropologists into question. As a result, they decided to switch to a "full ethnographer mode" with regard to *all* the people they met.²⁵ Accurate fieldnotes were taken mainly by Cliff while Hilly took photographs, and both wrote long letters to their families and friends in the United States where their narratives about people, places, and events were shaped by the necessity to clarify what they struggled to comprehend—that is, almost everything.

What were the Geertzes discussing with their "grand assortment of ex-colonialists, Indonesian students and exiles, learned scholars deeply steeped in Javanese lore, museum curators, and what not"²⁶? Again, one is tempted to answer: everything, from cars to cinema, from politics to religion, from individual aspirations to collective problems, from the very local to the widest global. Within this frame the three topics that obviously

²² CGF, 2.1,

²³ CGF, 3.2, 9.2,

²⁴ CGF, 4.1,

²⁵ Hildred Geertz to Family, July 23-25, 1952, CGP box 4, folder 6. In fact, Hilly had anticipated their writing journals even before leaving the US: see Hildred to Parents, 3/25/52, CGP b5Af8. CGF, 8.3

²⁶ Clifford Geertz to "Dave" [probably Laundry], December 1, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

connect with our theoretical questions are easy to locate: Indonesian culture (and politics and society), but also Dutch culture and American culture. Seven years after the end of World War Two and slightly more than two years after the birth of the Republic of Indonesia everyone had a clear, and often radical, idea of the complex relationships between countries and cultures. At the same time, the tones and depth of the opinions changed greatly across classes, national provenance, and political position. It is thus convenient to distinguish at least three types of “others” with whom the Geertzes interacted and talked on a daily basis.²⁷

The first category included the scholars and the former colonial officers who were the original focus of the trip: the famous Leiden linguist, Corneli C. Berg, and historian Jan Romein; the former governor of East Java, Charles van der Plas, and that of Yogyakarta, Lucien Adam; sociologist Wim F. Wertheim and philologist Theodoor Pigeaud; the former consul in Jeddah, Emile Gobée, and the *doyen* of Dutch anthropology, J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong, among others. Both former colonial officers and their academic counterparts would give the two would-be anthropologists, eager to start their first ethnographic fieldwork, lists of names of people to meet and books to read, methodological advice, and a wealth of personal anecdotes. To be sure, what the Geertzes found was a type of scholar that was miles away from their American role models (Bortolini 2023: 2, 12). Coming from a long tradition of “Indology” and colonial ethnography, the Dutch

²⁷ It should be added that the Geertzes did not write fieldnotes everyday. In fact, they only wrote 41 (long and very detailed) fieldnotes and 14 letters home in 85 days. Given their focus, their untold days were probably spent in the libraries of Leiden University and the Institute of the Tropics in Amsterdam.

academics and curators they met in Amsterdam and Leiden had mainly studied *adat* customary law, philology, artistic practices, and religion from the armchair. In the few instances when they did fieldwork themselves, they rarely bore to learn languages and would rather use interpreters to talk to natives or even local envoys to gather empirical data. Well before meeting them the Geertzses had found most of their books boring and useless. Moreover, most of them had also taught specific academic courses to would-be colonial officers, and were intimately entangled with what was called “the most anthropological” civil service in the world (Held 1953; Kennedy 1944; Vermeulen 2007). Maybe it was to distinguish themselves from their local colleagues that the Geertzses started to introduce themselves as “historians” or even “sociologists.”²⁸

Meeting after meeting, the short paragraphs reporting Cliff's “impressions” came to shape a diverse and intriguing gallery of human types, where qualifications, charm, and humanity only rarely matched. Wertheim, who was much more pessimistic about Indonesia in person than he was in print²⁹, was the only academic described as “quick and nervous.” Most of the others were “quiet,” “undynamic” or “shy,” chiefly focused on their reputation (Romein),³⁰ obsessed by the dangers of Java (Pigeaud)³¹ or almost completely unacquainted with the island that was unanimously

²⁸ Clifford Geertz to “Don” [Fagg], August 24, 1952, CGP, box 4, folder 8; Hildred Geertz to Family, July 23-25, 1952, CGP box 4, folder 6; Hildred and Clifford Geertz to “Arnie,” November 20, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Hildred Geertz to Warren Storey, February 28, 1953, CGP, box 4, folder 7. On the anthropologist's presentation of the self see Warner and Lunt 1955: 43. CFG, 46.1

²⁹ CGF, 49.11,

³⁰ CGF, 48.11

³¹ CGF, 54.11

considered the very center of Indonesian culture (de Josselin de Jong).³² Among academics, the most interesting was by far C. C. Berg, a “fascinating thinker, brilliant and exciting” and an excellent professor “with a helluva imagination,”³³ who inspired Geertz a Mertonian comparison between European and American scholars that is worth quoting at length:

The European scholar combines a careful detailed scholarship into facts with a speculative, almost non-empirical kind of theorizing (...) Criticism then consists in research to find new facts that will contradict the other man’s scheme. In America the emphasis is, at least in the circles that I most know, different. A fairly low level of scholarship, a superficial knowledge of things, is combine with an attempt for methodological rigor in the establishment of theoretical propositions in a carefully worked out system.³⁴

The other branch of the fallen Dutch elite, former colonial officers, seemed cut from a wholly different cloth. Geertz described Van der Plas, the first officer to go back to Indonesia after independence, as weathered and rugged, original and un-naive, but also vain, romantic, and extremely pleasant to chat with.³⁵ Adam was a true believer, “a basically kind, generous

³² CGF, 52.11

³³ CGF, 46.11

³⁴ CGF, 46.11. In all his brilliance, however, Berg remained grounded in “typical colonial notions” in his defence of Dutch past policies. See CGF, 51.11. With researchers and academics the Geertzes also spoke of other categories of liminal post-colonial people like the *toto*s (Dutch whites born in the Indies) and Indos (mestizos who lived a difficult condition of ghettoization in the Netherlands), but also of the important Chinese minority and its ways and even of the impact of Japanese occupation during World War Two. See CGF, 48.2

³⁵ CGF, 40.11, 41.11

man who feels that colonialism was the only thing for the Indonesians and should have continued.”³⁶ Another interesting individual was Charles Grader, a former chief of the Bureau of land organization and the author of a recent book, *Rural Organization and Village Revival in Indonesia*. Tall and well-meaning, he was the typical colonial officer who wanted to help the natives nudging them into “their own good.” In one of his rare acts of judgment, not only did Cliff slammed the Dutch paternalistic approach to colonialism, but also expressed his position in a rather colorful way:

At any rate there is something both pathetic and frightening, and revolting, about a bunch of highly trained, highly idealistic, highly bureaucratic Dutchmen six-foot two 200 pounds rushing around Java everytime somebody, despite, I think, their bureaucratic apparatus rather than because of it, shows a little of what, after thoro check, officially qualifies as “initiative,” promising to “give them everything they need.”³⁷

These highly trained and clever men could not understand why Indonesians had fought their system. Wheter bitter, depressed, withdrawn,³⁸ or affectionate in tone, the grievances of these colonialist others were understandably, albeit not justifiably, similar. The revolution had come too early, they repeated almost obsessively, and the Indonesians were not ready for self government—so much so that it would take another 50-70 years of colonial rule to help them reach maturity. In Amsterdam, Leiden, and elsewhere, Hilly and Cliff heard this version of the white man’s burden *cliché*

³⁶ CGF, 25.2,

³⁷ CFG, 23.4.

³⁸ CFG, 23.4

again and again, together with the warning that, once in Indonesia, they would find a country in economic and political shambles, where extremist groups like Darul Islam put in serious jeopardy the safety of foreign travelers. In fact, one individual who was often mentioned to the Geertzses was a specialist in Southeastern studies from Yale University, Raymond Kennedy, who had been murdered two years earlier during an ethnographic expedition in West Java (NYT 1950; Embree 1951). Some described him as a rude, insulting white man whose behavior was unacceptable for the quiet, restrained Javanese, and used his story to lecture the students about the importance of adhering to the basic deontological rules of anthropology.³⁹ Other simply mentioned him to underline the risks that any Western ethnographer (and in general any Westerner) would meet in such a dysfunctional country, and heartily but somewhat ominously wished Hilly and Cliff not to end up like him.⁴⁰

Dutch common people, starting with the Barnards, were another category of others with whom the Geertzses had intense, wide-ranging conversations. Besides the intricacies of their national politics and the echoes of Raymond Westerling's attempted coup of 1950, the United States were a favorite topic of discussion. Given the disastrous economic and social conditions of the Netherlands at the end of Nazi occupation, it was not surprising that the country had fastened its connections with the Americans and had become a major recipient of Marshall Plan aids, getting more than one billion dollars between 1948 and 1954 (Loeber 1992: 13-18; Schuyt and Taverne 2004: 62 ff.). Although the United States had had a major part in shattering Dutch

³⁹ The comment was by de Josselin de Jong, CGF 52.1

⁴⁰ CGF, 49.1,

colonial claims in Indonesia (Loeber 1992: 25-30), the Netherlands was a founding member of NATO and somehow reconciled with Germany within the alliance's framework (Loeber 1992: 41 ff.; Schulten 1992: 88 ff.). From an social and cultural point of view, the connections between the United States and the Netherlands had a rather robust surge in many sectors: hundreds of Dutch engineers, managers, and farmers were brought to "America" on study trips aimed at improving their agricultural and industrial production techniques, and the Fulbright and the Foreign Leader Programs were activated in 1949 (Roholl 1992: 109 ff.; Schuyt and Taverne 2004: 66 ff.; Scott-Smith 2015; Scott-Smith 2008); emigration towards the United States, which had been *the* favored destination of Dutch emigrants since the 1850s, continued steadily in spite of the fact that the receiving shore admitted very few Dutch nationals (Roholl 1992: 117 ff.); and finally, in the realms of culture and consumption, American influence was strong, even if the Dutch were somehow able to "distill" and translate it in their own way (Roholl 1992: 121 ff.). These intensified relations materialized in the multiple entanglements and intense exchanges taking place between the two Atlantic shores. The Geertzes found their room in Oestgeest via the the Netherlands Office for Foreign Students Relations, founded in 1926 and particularly active in its connection to the American National Study Association in the Postwar period (Schwartz 2006). The family who took them in, the Barnards—parents, two children in their mid-teens, and two cats—had been to the States many times and had some relatives there.⁴¹ Some of the professionals and the scholars they met, such as the Radio

⁴¹ CGF, 3.42, 4.6, 10.1, 10.4, 13.1,

Nederland Wereldomroep executive Rudy Simons-Cohen, had attended the Salzburg seminar (Parmar 2010) and were clearly influenced by it.⁴² The atmosphere was also congenial, as major cities were full of American tourists, students, and expats, and most Dutch spoke excellent English.⁴³

What the Geertzes found among “the natives” was a rather strong oscillation between economic and cultural pro-Americanism and political anti-Americanism.⁴⁴ In spite of their young age and their condition as graduate students, they were commonly seen as “rich” when compared to the Dutch, in an extension of a cultural imaginary where the United States was seen as the next promised land and Europe as old and done⁴⁵—the few who dared to talk of European unification at the exact time when the Treaty of Paris was coming into force generally expressed a well-founded skepticism.⁴⁶ At the same time, “America” was also seen as a major player in the early Cold War—a concept that nobody used but that was literally everywhere. Not only reconstruction and international debt,⁴⁷ but the fear of a Soviet invasion of Europe loomed large as a constant threat, and many Dutch citizens thought of leaving their country, especially in the direction of South Africa or Australia, to keep themselves safe.⁴⁸ Last but not the least, Dutch common citizens shared with their elites a profound preoccupation

⁴² CGF, 15.3, 21.7,

⁴³ CGF 5.1, 8.1, 8.4, 14.1, 15.10,

⁴⁴ CGF, 15.3, 16.1,

⁴⁵ CGF, 3.42, 6.1, 10.1,

⁴⁶ CGF, 3.3, 3.32, 11.1,

⁴⁷ CGF, 3.6, 4.6, 15.10,

⁴⁸ CGF, 11.1, 15.10, On Dutch preoccupations toward the Soviet Union see Loeber 1992: 34 ff.

for the future of Indonesia, for they “can’t seem to do anything right.”⁴⁹ At the same time, Cliff and Hilly saw the paternalistic attitude towards the former colony they had found in people like Charles Grader in other places—at the Radio Nederland Wereldomroep, for example, it was told them that the Indonesian-language channel would never broadcast anything about the political situation, because it was too explosive and volatile.⁵⁰

The third and last group of people met by the Geertzes in the Netherlands was a varied hodgepodge of students and expats who doubled as their first “real Indonesians”—they had had a Bahasa language teacher at home, but the situation here was clearly different than in Harvard Yard.⁵¹ The most articulate among them was Emir Suryasumirat, a 21-year old student at the University of Amsterdam they met casually at a performance of regional Indonesian dances followed by a night-long party hosted by the Republic’s Embassy.⁵² Westernized but idealistically anti-Western (he had an active part in guerrilla during the war of independence), Emir was profoundly enamored of his country, and was considered by Cliff and Hilly as a nice, generous friend—⁵³he was the individual they met most often while in the Netherlands. Close second came sociologist Raden Bambang Oetomo, the son of a former Djakarta acting mayor, Sastromoeljono, who gave the Geertzes language lessons in exchange for endless chats about every possible matter of human discernment. Cliff described him as the most

⁴⁹ CGF, 15.5

⁵⁰ CGF, 15.7

⁵¹ See MIT-CIS, “Proposal for a field project in Indonesia,” p. 7.

⁵² CFG, 17.2, 17.3,

⁵³ CFG, 17.15, 57.1.

intelligent” and “the most critically minded and frank Indonesian” they had met; unlike other intellectuals coming from the Republic, Oetomo was also utterly realist in his judgments, a feature much cherished by the Geertzes, who wanted firsthand, credible, and useful information about the country in which they would be living for a couple of years.⁵⁴

A typical conversation with Oetomo, like the one that took place during the language lesson of August 28, 1952,⁵⁵ would start from the Pancasila—the five principles introduced by Sukarno in 1945 as the official philosophy of independent Indonesia (Ricklefs 2008, 246)—and then went on to the class structure of Indonesia, its national character (“one aspect of it was their love of taking it easy, their pleasure-loving easygoingness”), and the structure of language education in Indonesian schools between Bahasa, island and regional dialects, and Dutch. From here they moved easily to the Republic’s educational system and the serious training problems that the Geertzes would find among the university students they were supposed to collaborate with in Yogyakarta.⁵⁶ Among Gadjah Mada students and professors, said Oetomo, anti-Americanism was widespread because of the suspect that “America was trying to get everyone think their way.” The conversation ended with a bitter reflection on the growing rift between the Republic’s Westernized and connected political elites and the general citizenry, increasingly unable to understand the necessities of Cold War international politics—Oetomo was here unknowingly pointing to the same

⁵⁴ See CGF, 59.1. After leaving for Java, Clifford Geertz would sometimes write letters to Oetomo to inform him of their progress and experiences.

⁵⁵ For what follows see CFG, 39.2

⁵⁶ A rather prophetic comment: see Bortolini 2023.

problem that had prompted Douglas Oliver and his Harvard and MIT colleagues to initiate the Modjokuto Project.

It should be clear by now that the Indonesians whom the Geertz befriended in Leiden and Amsterdam were themselves part of a Westernized, secularized elite of high civil officers, industrialists, and landowners, and thus in no way representative of the mass of their countrymen—some⁵⁷ of them were even former loyalists who had decided to flee the newborn Republic. As anticipated, the image of Indonesia that most of these individuals tried to convey to the Americans was exactly the opposite of the chaotic, dangerous, and immature country that was put forward, in various guises, by the former colonial dominators. Hilly and Cliff found themselves somehow in the middle, but probably leaning towards the Europeans: as Cliff confessed to Rudy Simon-Cohen, he was becoming more and more “realistic” than he was in the United States, and while he remained confident about the prospects of the Republic, he could not suppress a looming sense of discomfort.⁵⁸ The arrival of some of the members of the Harvard-MIT group in mid-September announced that time was tight and that departure for Indonesia was getting closer.

3. *Ten*: Two days in Singapore

When the Geertz left Europe on October 3, 1952, they had been in the Netherlands for seventy-four days and besides the intense chatting with

⁵⁷ See for example, Hilly's comments on Oetomo's and Emir's families they met in Djakarta, EGF, 2., 3.,

⁵⁸ CFG, 45.1

different kinds of people they had also had a number of rather ambivalent experiences with Indonesian artistic practices and objects. In Amsterdam Cliff and Hilly had attended two different performances of native dances that had left them amazed and dubious at the same time.⁵⁹ With Emir and Husain Djajadiningrat they had visited the Leiden Rijksmuseum of Volkenkunde, where they had seen for the very first time an extensive collection of historical artifacts from the Indonesian islands.⁶⁰ The visit had also been interesting because their friends candidly admitted that they had only studied their cultural heritage in school and knew very little about it—in a sense, the knowledge of Indonesian art and archeology on the part of the two American graduate students was deeper and more refined than theirs. At that point they could not wait to see “the real thing” themselves.

Their trip at sea lasted three long weeks. Rotterdam, Southampton, Port Said, their stopovers were rather uneventful, up to the point that both Geertzes quit writing their fieldnotes and Cliff focused mostly on beer.⁶¹ A couple of days before docking in Djakarta, however, the ship stopped in Singapore, where the Geertzes were welcomed by an old friend of Hilly’s, geographer Jim Blaut (Mathewson and Stea 2003), who led them in a busy fourteen-hour tour of the Crown Colony and its surroundings. After a fried-rice lunch at the University of Malaya campus—a “lovely place of long low rambling building connected by porticos” which the Geertzes found “very

⁵⁹ CFG, 17, 21.5

⁶⁰ CFG, 24

⁶¹ The whole narrative of the Singapore stopover is thus built on a single letter: Clifford Geertz to “Mom” [Lois Brieger], October 24, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1. See also Clifford and Hildred Geertz to “Vic and Millah” [Ayoub], October 30, 1952, and November 4, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

unreal, very slow, very relaxing” when compared to Harvard’s buzzing intellectual life—the trio drove outside of town to an amazingly populous Chinese *kampong* where parents and children worked hard to cultivate small plots of land with the utmost dedication and care. There they also visited a number of huts and a temple that Cliff described as “thatched malay-type [houses], rickety, [and] dirty.”

After that, Blaut brought them further in the countryside to a rather poor Chinese hamlet, where they got drawn in a huge Festival of the Dead as “the only Europeans” and visited a number of halls—one adorned with hundreds of candles producing a thick smoke, another one displaying paper figures of the dead, and a third full of priests engaged in a rite of devotion. Every corner was “packed with people” chanting, praying, eating, and wandering around, just like the bazaar in town where they ended their visit (not before stopping in a quiet Malay *kampong* where loyalist Malays and independentist Chinese faced each other in a low-intensity conflict). The sheer quantity of people and their closeness really impressed Cliff and pushed him to write a rather lyrical piece:

It was only a Wed. evening but the place looked like the worlds fare (*sic*). Literally thousands of people were in the streets, milling around, buying things—a small piece of meat, a pamphlet, a shirt, a toy, god-knows-what, from all the hawkers in the street or the shops along the side open to the street, or they were listening to the barkers, watching a man do card tricks, or mostly, just sort of walking around, pushing aside only to allow an automobile, honking wildly, to pass thru now and then. Above the shops, where the people lived, the windows were open (shuttered; without glass as is usual in the tropics) and you could see that some 20 or so people were living in one room, many of the rooms being partitioned by curtains hanging down the middle. Inside the people slept everywhere, on the steps, in the closets, everywhere, renting

what is euphemistically called floor space. We wandered around for a couple hours in this throng, stopping once for some bean-curd in a small restaurant.

Months later the Geertz would learn a word, *rame*, used by the Javanese to indicate this (much sought after, at least by them) experience of being in the midst of noisy crowds where “all kind of different things [are] jumbled together.”⁶² In this late October of 1952, however, this was “it”—a completely different version of “Asia” from the polished, assimilated, musealized farce they had met in the Netherlands. As Clifford Geertz’s letter to his mother shows, however, their first experience of the real thing was nonetheless filtered through a symbolic layer of taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes. This, in more than one sense, was the “Asia” they expected and the one they thought they had found. Their first days in the capital of the newborn republic of Indonesia confirmed this image but also made it much more complex, elusive, and even disturbing.

4. *Ketsu*: Two weeks in Jakarta

Starting on October 24, 1952, Hilly and Cliff spent a fortnight in Jakarta, where they had their first *in situ* encounter with Indonesian culture and society. Indeed, the people they met were either old acquaintances from Harvard or relatives of the Indonesian friends they had made in Leiden and Amsterdam. Upon their arrival, they settled in the luscious but decadent Hotel der Nederlanden, in the very center of the capital, where they had a first taste of “the advantages of colonialism and the life of the old ‘tropical

⁶² Clifford Geertz to “Amy,” December 9, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

nobility.”⁶³ Their stay had been arranged by their old friend Sam Udin, who had majored in sociology at Harvard but was now a officer of the Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij, the Indonesian branch of the Royal Shell Petroleum.⁶⁴ Together with his Dutch wife and five children, Sam lived in a fancy mansion in the former colonial part of town, complete of a Javanese maid whose deference stunned the Geertzes during their first dinner in Jakarta. The atmosphere was clearly one of privilege and cosmopolitanism: the Udin children were homeschooled, were taught four languages, and sent out for dance, theatre, and singing lessons⁶⁵.

No more representative of the general Indonesian population was the second group of people they met. Emir’s family was indeed a very westernized *ensemble* of entrepreneurs engaged in different types of business—mainly import of arms from the United States and timber commerce—but also the owners of vast tracts of land devoted to rice cultivation just outside town.⁶⁶ The Geertzes would spend most of their time with Emir’s siblings and their friends, going to the movies and having endless chats on the United States and the dangers represented by the *gorombblan* (bandits) who infested West Java.⁶⁷ Last but not the least, Oetomo’s father, Sastromoeljono, was a lawyer educated in the Netherlands who had been the acting mayor of Djakarta in 1950 and now worked at the Ministry for Communications. His wife, Raden Ajoe Sastromoeljono, ran a

⁶³ Clifford Geertz to “Mom” [Lois Brieger], October 24, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

⁶⁴ Hildred Geertz to Parents, October 25, 1952, CGP, box 4, folder 7.

⁶⁵ HGF, 1.5

⁶⁶ HGF, 3.1, 3.2; CGF, 57.1, 57.31,

⁶⁷ HGF, 6.

high-end batik business whose most august patron was the family of current President of the Indonesian Republic, Sukarno. Very Javanese and yet very modernized, Oetomo's family was, in Cliff's words, "as good an example of successful Western penetration with out (*sic*) loss of cultural background as we are likely to find."⁶⁸ Given these encounters and the various experiences they had with them, it is not surprising that in their letters home the Geertzes described their various hosts as a homogeneous group of formally educated and well connected locals "specialized in meeting foreigners."⁶⁹ This "outward face" of public officers, entrepreneurs, students, hotel managers, and cops was a "shell of the Western surface" that they had to pierce if they wanted to find their "real others"—Javanese peasants and Chinese businessmen. In this sense, the capital was "as far from the villages of Central Java or Sumatra as is San Francisco"⁷⁰ and families like Emir's and Oetomo's were "probably very different from most of the families [they would] meet."⁷¹

While in Jakarta, the Geertzes also began to discover that most of the "horrendous tales, warnings, and the like" they had heard in the Netherlands (and in the United States) were far from true. Jakarta looked fairly chaotic, but much less dangerous than Westerners imagined, and the locals were much less hostile than prospected—except than when, in a paradoxical

⁶⁸ CGF, 59.11

⁶⁹ Clifford and Hildred Geertz to Victor and Millah Ayoub, October 30, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Clifford Geertz to Victor and Millah Ayoub, December 15, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

⁷⁰ Clifford Geertz to "Barbara," December 10, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Clifford and Hildred Geertz to "Rudy" [Simons-Cohen], November 30, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1. See also the Geertzes conversation with their hotel's coordinator, CGF, 57.2.

⁷¹ HGF, 6.

reversal of roles and alterity, Cliff was mistaken for a Dutch.⁷² This was not a surprise, given that most Europeans and Americans never ventured far from their hotels, and their contacts beyond the “outward face” of the Javanese upper-middle classes were scarce if not nonexistent. So far, their trip had only scratched the surface of “the East”: as Hilly wrote to her parents, “in Singapore we got no deeper than the camera and Jakarta no deeper than the Western-oriented chit-chat of first acquaintances.”⁷³ A hundred and twenty-one days after their departure from the States, the Geertzes seemed to be back to square one. In fact, their experiences had sedimented a number of ambivalent and unclear pre-conceptions that would impact on their time in Yogyakarta and the continuation of the project.⁷⁴ As the plan went, they would reside in the so-called cultural capital of Java for another hundred days, with three main purposes: learning Javanese, the main language spoken in Wonosobo; making contact with the Indonesian side of the research team; and waiting for their leader, Yale linguist Rufus Hendon, to join them and start fieldwork.

5. Epilogue: Ethnographers and the Misrecognition of Otherness

⁷² Clifford and Hildred Geertz to “Arnie,” November 20, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Hildred Geertz to “Alice” [Dewey], October 30, 1952, CGP, box 4, folder 7; Clifford Geertz to Oetomo, November 15, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Clifford and Hildred Geertz to “Rudy” [Simons-Cohen], November 30, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Clifford and Hildred Geertz to Victor and Millah Ayoub, October 30, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

⁷³ Clifford Geertz to “Barbara”, December 10, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Hildred Geertz to Family, November 6, 1952, CGP, bpx 5, folder 8.

⁷⁴ Clifford Geertz to “Arnie,” November 20, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

Together with some of the members of the Harvard-MIT group, Hilly and Cliff got to Yogyakarta on November 7, 1952. Smaller than Jakarta, the cultural capital looked much more charming, relaxed, and remote from the influx of Western culture. The Geertzes were amazed by the beauty of the architecture, the quiet streets, and the many performances of traditional music, theatre, and dance they attended night after night.⁷⁵ “Yogya,” as everybody called it, looked “completely new” to their eyes, and they finally thought to be in the right place for a real, and much sought for, “culture shock.”⁷⁶ In their repeated encounters with their Javanese counterparts, the Gadjah Mada professors and students who were also part of the Modjokuto Project, the Americans often found themselves doubtful about the norms regulating even the most basic interaction. Their other was finally here: for the first time since their departure, their experiences were so strange and overwhelming that they doubted to be able to fully process them.⁷⁷

In fact, it took a month for a disconsolate Cliff to write to his friends Tom and Mary McFeat that “as yet we are still on the fringes of Western civilization, the fringes but still the West.”⁷⁸ With some disappointment, the members of the Harvard-MIT group had discovered that the Yogya upper classes, to which most of the academics and their students belonged, shared the same prejudices about Javanese ordinary people, and especially

⁷⁵ Hildred Geertz to “Folks” [Family], November 14-16, 1952, CGP, box 4, folder 7. Clifford Geertz to Oetomo, November 15, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

⁷⁶ Hildred and Clifford Geertz to “Arnie,” November 20, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

⁷⁷ HGF, 7. Hildred Geertz to “Folks” [Family], November 14-16, 1952, CGP, box 4, folder 7. HGF, 7.2, 7.6,

⁷⁸ Clifford Geertz to “Tom and Mary” [McFeat], December 5, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Clifford Geertz to George Geiger, December 5, 1952, , CGP, box 6, folder 1.

peasants, they had heard from Dutch former colonial officers and the members of the “outward face” in Jakarta.⁷⁹ Again, *this* other was a *different* other with respect to their *final* (and only imagined, at the moment) other.

The rest of the story is rather complicated, and we do not have to delve in it here (but see Bortolini 2023). Suffice it to say that the group finally reached their very own Modjokuto—not Wonosobo, but Pare, in the Kediri Residency of Central Java—only in May 1953. In hindsight, what is interesting is how the experiences and the relationships that the Geertzses had in the ten months it took them to get to Pare were re-framed and represented in the written reports of their research—the dissertations of the members of the group and the books that came from them.⁸⁰ Although different individuals had followed different paths in getting to Java their rethoric was very similar: each dissertation focused on the results of original fieldwork, and any real, concrete relationship with real, concrete people might appear only as transfigured into abstract images. In this sense, their the individual theses might be situated on a continuum whose “zero point” is Edward Ryan’s *The Values System of a Chinese Community in Java* (Ryan 1961), which sports no methodological section and is thus completely silent about the problem we are addressing. Robert Jay’s *Santri and Abangan. Religious Schism in Rural Central Java* begins as follows:

The field work for this study was done during 1953 and 1954. The writer was one

⁷⁹ Clifford Geertz to Victor and Millah Ayoub, December 15, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

⁸⁰ At the time of writing this paper I had the opportunity to see the dissertations written by the two Geertzses (C. Geertz 1956; H. Geertz 1956), Robert Jay (1957), Edward Ryan (1961), and Alice Dewey (1959).

member in a field team of anthropologists and a sociologist. The team selected a medium-sized town in eastern central Java as the focus of study. The writer carried out his field work during a year's residence in a rural village some four miles outside the town, supplemented with brief periods of residence in three other villages and tours through a great many more.

Jay warns his readers that no sound empirical work has ever been done on rural Central Java, and that the many generalizations of Dutch colonial scholars, often taken at face-value by American students of Java, are in fact built on “inaccurate stereotypes” that “bear a striking resemblance to the stereotypes of village life accepted by sophisticated Javanese”—who have been, in fact, their main source of information (Jay 1957, ix).⁸¹ Thinly disguised beyond these sociological categories were concrete individuals encountered in Jakarta and Yogya, but the reader would never know.

Alice Dewey's *Modjokuto Project: The Market*, similarly begins with a description of her fieldwork, but adds another strongly abstracted particular: “I arrived in Java in late November 1952 and left in mid-July 1954. The first six months were spent in perfecting our knowledge of the Indonesian language, in learning Javanese, and in choosing a site for our intensive fieldwork. By June we had chosen the town of Modjokuto (a pseudonym) in East Central Java” (Dewey 1959, i-ii). While acknowledging a *long* period of off-site preparation (that is, slightly less than one third of her time in Java), Dewey does not offer her readers any particular about where she lived or the life she conducted before reaching Modjokuto.

⁸¹ The only other hint at the time spent in preparation to fieldwork is the following: “Prior to actual fieldwork, time was taken in this country to study Indonesian, and in Java to study Javanese. Conversational fluency was acquired in both languages” (Jay 1957, xiv).

There is no doubt that the Geertzes were much more vocal than their companions about the methodological and organizational framing of their research. In *Religion in Modjokuto*, Cliff recounted diffusely the whole history of the research teams, starting from Douglas Oliver's original idea and the constitution of the group and detailing the study of Indonesian language at Harvard before leaving. He then writes:

In July 1953 my wife and I sailed to Holland, where we spent three months interviewing Dutch scholars and former Colonial officials and doing library research. Joined by most of the rest of the team, we sailed for Indonesia in October, arriving in Djakarta at the end of the month. After a few weeks stay in Djakarta, most of the team, including myself, moved on to Jogjakarta, a provincial capital and seat of one of the former Central Javanese sultanates, where we remained (...) In May 1953, we moved into the "field," a town-village complex in east-central Java which I shall call "Modjokuto" (...) I remained in Modjokuto from May 1953 until October 1954, with the exception of most of June and July of 1953, a total field experience of sixteen months (C. Geertz 1956, 5).⁸²

While much more detailed than other narratives, the section remains highly descriptive and fundamentally centered on the Geertzes, with no consideration of their many interlocutors in the Netherlands, Jakarta, and Yogya. The same happens in Hilly's dissertation, *Javanese Values and Family Relationships*, by far the work in which methodological problems are most deeply dealt with. The basic question here is how to conceive the relationship between the subject of ethnographic inquiry—a group of human individuals—and the tools used to extract relevant data and

⁸² This part was slightly edited for publication, with no relevant changes: see Geertz 1960, 385.

information from them. Since in participant observation the instrument is “the anthropologist himself as he interacts with these people,” attention then shifts on one of “preparation and orientation” of the ethnographer (H. Geertz 1956, 2-3). Given the story I recounted in this paper, Hilly seems on the verge of bringing the reader to a very relevant point. In fact, she gives a sketchy description of the prodromes of fieldwork that closely matches and completes her husband’s, and shares with it the absence of any account of what preceded their arrival in Modjokuto:

The first step in preparation for the field trip was becoming familiar with the literature on Java, which meant learning to read Dutch. After some work at Harvard, my husband and I spent three months in Holland, working at the Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, and the University Library at Leiden. At that time I worked particularly on the extensive literature on adat, or customary, law. We left Holland for Indonesia in October, 1952 (H. Geertz 1956, 3).

These examples should suffice to make a point: whatever happened to the Geertzes and their companions and whoever they met before the beginning of “proper” fieldwork got completely hidden from view in the written texts through which the research was put into form and finally published. My point is that this suppression, usual as it has been in the history of ethnography. Cannot be taken for granted. Boundaries are never crystal-clear: any distinction between “here” and “there,” as well as that between “us” and “them,” has to be decided symbolically, theoretically, and practically. The “carving out” or “singling out” of one’s fieldwork from the myriad encounters and experiences one has after closing the door of their home behind one’s back—viz. the difference between one’s “time away from

home” and “one’s research”—is a decision that is made more or less reflectively, probably on a case-by-case basis, and it is one of the most consequential choices that any ethnographer is expected, and forced, to take. In the case of Hilly and Cliff Geertz, it included “forgetting” ten months of traveling abroad to focus on the sixteen months spent in Pare. Indeed, a close examination of their fieldnotes and correspondence shows a recognizable pattern that repeated itself every time they relocated: an initial feeling of puzzlement—“gee, everything is different, we’re finally in the field!”; a period of intense learning—“we’re starting to understand”; and a release that produced a gesture of oblivion of past difficulties and the *de-otherization*, if such a word exists, of the other—“no, we are not in the field (yet).”⁸³ This cycle does not erase, however, the fact that *moment by moment* the Geertzes of 1952-1953 were not confident at all either in their understanding of the situations and the interactions they experienced or in the complex process of defining what “fieldwork” looks like, and what the anthropologist is with respect to their “other.”

As I said in the introduction of this paper, the Geertzes were in no sense atypical. A quick survey of a number of retrospective accounts by different generations of anthropologists shows *both* a diffuse awareness of the existence of long periods of transition between “here” and “there” *and* a strong refusal to write about them (Jongmans and Gutkind 1967; Spindler 1970; Golde 1970; Freilich 1970; Watson 1999; Hewlett 2000). My hypothesis is that the Malinowskian palimpsest of the ethnographer

⁸³ Hildred Geertz to Family, March 22, 1953, CGP box 4, folder 7; Clifford Geertz to Victor and Millah Ayoub, October 30, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Clifford Geertz to “Arnie,” November 20, 1952, CGP, box 6, folder 1; Clifford Geertz to Mom, April 15, 1953, CGP, box 6, folder 1.

“suddenly set down surrounded by all [their] gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought [them] sails away out of sight” worked (and still works) as a professional *sens commun* that makes it completely plausible to start any narrative or analysis “from the beach,” both in the cases where the journey began long before and in those where the field is so close to home that the ethnographer can walk to “their tribe” with a latte in hand—obviously enough, another casualty of the palimpsest is the “armchair time” of bookish study from which any new research begins.

The historian of ethnography and other fieldwork-related endeavors, however, is not obliged to partake in this disciplinary or methodological common sense. The reconstruction of the life and the travels of ethnographers, whether alone or in groups, should submit to careful and deep investigation all those transitional periods, “long boundary travels,” and interstices where “here” and “there” are not easily distinguishable. It is not that, as some critics would argue in the 1990s, “the field is everywhere” (D’Amico-Samuels 1991). Pare is different from Yogya, and Jakarta is different from Leiden. Squeezing them in a single box would hinder our understanding of Hildred and Clifford Geertz’s coming of age as anthropologists. And still, as I have tried to show in this paper, without taking into account the Geertz’s trip to the Netherlands, where they meet their very first other, who also happened to be a colonialist other; their long weeks in urban Java at the contact with some Javanese-but-Westernized others—as well as their early experiences with the Harvard Values Study; their being a couple *and* central members of a loose but nonetheless existing group of scholars; and their clashes with the local academic powers-that-be

(Bortolini 2023)—and, last but not the least, their unfolding reflections on all these events and elements; without taking into account all these elements, I said, the story of the Modjokuto Project would sound completely different—simpler but “wrong.” If it is true that “foreignness does not start at the water’s edge but at the skin’s” (Geertz 1986, 216), then the history of the ethnographer and their fieldwork can never begin too early.

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