

Obituary

Clifford Geertz, 1926-2006: meaning, method, and Indonesian economic history

In January 2000, the Indonesian newsmagazine *Forum Keadilan* published a special issue featuring “One hundred Indonesian figures of the 20th century”.¹ It presented a more or less uncontroversial listing of acclaimed Indonesians, including such notables as Sukarno, Cokroaminoto, Syahrir, Suharto, Sumitro Joyohadikusumo, Kartini, Wahidin and Rendra. Interestingly, however, included amongst the hundred were eight foreigners, most of them legendary Dutchmen like Van Deventer, Van Vollenhoven and Snouck Hurgronje. But also included was the name of Clifford Geertz; the accompanying notes labelled him the “pillar” of Indonesian anthropology, a powerful marker by Indonesians themselves of Geertz’s extraordinary influence on the ways all of us, Indonesians and foreigners alike, have thought and come to think about modern Indonesia.

The discussion that accompanied the *Forum Keadilan* piece, like many of the commentaries written on the occasion of his passing last year, highlighted Geertz’s distinctive, deeply influential role as anthropologist and interpreter of Indonesian culture, notably his analysis of religio-political streams (*aliran*) and his contribution to the understanding of Javanese religion, including his famous *priyayi-santri-abangan* distinction. The piece might just as easily and usefully mentioned his path breaking work on Bali, where he read behaviours as texts and constructed a sense of what being Balinese, distinctively, meant, or his broader founding contribution to the development of what has been called symbolic or interpretive anthropology, with his signs and thick description and his uncommon knack (not a knack at all, of course) of presenting a poetically compelling “sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go”.² That emphasis on Geertz’s specifically cultural engagement with Indonesia and upon his methodological and theoretical innovativeness is well-grounded, but there is a risk that Geertz’s other commanding contribution to our study of modern Indonesia, his work on economic history, will remain unfortunately and inappropriately unrecognised and unhonoured. I must confess here to a deep personal

1 “100 tokoh Indonesia abad XX”, *Forum Keadilan*, edisi khusus, 9 January 2000, especially p. 80.

2 Clifford Geertz, *After the fact: two countries, four decades, one anthropologist* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 3.

interest, since my earliest efforts at understanding Indonesia came broadly within the genre of social and economic history, and it was Geertz's path-shattering/path-making work on Javanese social and economic history that inspired and drove me on in those early years. It is that aspect of his work that I wish specially to remember, and pay tribute to, here.

Like many of us, Geertz came to the serious study of Indonesia in an accidental, roundabout, fortuitous way. Emerging from the U.S. Navy in 1946, he "entered the academic world in what has to have been the best time to enter it in the whole course of its history".³ His entry ticket was the G.I. Bill, which saw him, twenty years old, at "painfully earnest, desperately intense" Antioch College in southern Ohio, majoring first in English before switching to philosophy where his grazing intellectual instincts could be more easily catered for. And then—"looking for something rather more connected to the world as it was"⁴—to Harvard and anthropology, by means of some shrewd academic advice and fortuitous circumstances. And then, equally fortuitously, to Indonesia to study the religion of Java as a member of a graduate student team from—eventually, after some misunderstandings and confusions—the vantage point of a small upcountry town, "Modjokuto" (Pare, in Kediri).⁵ "As improbably and as casually as we had become anthropologists", Geertz was later to remark, "and just about as innocently, we became Indonesianists".⁶ That period in Pare, doubtless the defining intellectual and cultural experience of Geertz's life, gave issue to an astonishingly rich and diverse torrent of publications. Later, of course, Geertz was to conduct fieldwork in Bali, in Sumatra, and later in Morocco. But it was in Pare that Geertz began to think about—or better, was concretely confronted with—fundamental questions concerning the relationships between culture, ecology, economics and history that were to frame his contributions to Indonesia's economic history.

The earliest formal intimation of the trajectory of his thinking came in April 1956 with the appearance of a mimeoed report, "The development of the Javanese

3 Clifford Geertz, *A life of learning: Charles Homer Haskins lecture for 1999* (American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper no. 45, 1999), p. 3.

4 Geertz, *After the fact*, p. 98.

5 Geertz's witty, drily self-effacing reminiscences of the tensions and misunderstandings that accompanied the arrival of the team in Yogyakarta, and its eventual re-siting to Pare, may be found in *ibid.*, pp. 104-09.

6 Geertz, *A life of learning*, p. 7.

economy: a socio-cultural approach”.⁷ There he wrote of his “socio-cultural approach” which aimed to depict the “slow but patterned alteration” of development whereby gradual adaptations in the Javanese economy had “shown a tendency towards rigidification which has now nearly reached its absolute limits” (p. 2). Underlying this approach was his conviction of the “necessity for seeing economic development as part of a broader process of social, political and cultural change” (p. 4). There already we can see the influence of Boeke (though Geertz had little time for Boeke’s dualist arguments or the theories that underlay them) and of Furnivall, the outlines of his portrayal of the unchangingly mercantilist, protectionist intent of Dutch colonial economic policy (“isolating native society from international economic and political currents”, p. 16), his characteristic tendency to see social tension and incipient class friction absorbed and transmuted into a dazzling multiplicity of ingenious redistributive arrangements and roles aimed at preserving rather than changing things in any structural sense, and, ever strongly, the abiding refusal “to sacrifice cultural form to economic substance” (p. 67).

Peddlers and Princes,⁸ an cross-referencing outcome of his reflections on both his Pare and Bali interpretive experiences, demonstrated a considerable debt to Weber’s analysis of the relationship of (certain kinds of) religion to prosperity (and its opposite), shaped as it was around the search for a class or classes that might lead Indonesia to a higher, better stage of economic development (Rostow’s “take-off). Geertz found the elements in the “thrifty, industrious and pious” modernist Muslim traders of Modjokuto (p. 12) and the aristocratic “upperclass entrepreneurs” (p. 26) of Hindu Bali’s Tabanan; in both cases it was their cultural orientation that provided the key to their potential success, the one in hardy, exceptional individualism, the other in the power to command traditional loyalties and bend them to newer entrepreneurial purposes. But what made them what they were made them consigned them to failure; the flinty individualism he found in Muslim modernists in Modjukuto and Tabanan’s enduring traditionalism meant that “Modjokuto firms failed to grow, Tabanan’s failed to rationalize” (p. 140).

7 Cambridge MA: Centre for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1956.

8 *Peddlers and princes: social change and economic modernization in two Indonesian towns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

The elegant, stylistically spare (by comparison with later works, at any rate) and highly readable *The social history of an Indonesian town*⁹ was Geertz's considered description of what he found in Pare. It was a kind of natural history (though not a very optimistic one, it needs to be said) of what he thought Pare's society was and had been about, and was a model of his interpretive reading of the complex interplay of social process and culture ("or, if you will, systems of ideas"). "No actual event can be explained without them", Geertz insisted, "because whatever happens, for whatever reasons, happens in terms of them Culture orders action not by determining it but by providing the forms in terms of which it determines itself" (p. 203). For me, *Social history* is the most complete, most dextrous and most satisfying of all Geertz's excursions in economic history; nothing of its power and persuasiveness has appeared before or since.

But the most influential, engaging, broadly popular and stimulating of all Geertz's works on Indonesian economic history was undoubtedly *Agricultural involution*.¹⁰ In 1983 Jamie Mackie remarked that the book had enjoyed "a quite extraordinary degree of acceptance and admiration over the twenty years since it was published".¹¹ It was to become, another scholar claimed, "as influential as Boeke's 'dual economy'".¹² The book was greeted with acclaim within the academic world and met almost no criticism.¹³ It became the standard portrayal of the unhappy impact of Dutch colonial policy in rural Java, and the concept of agricultural involution the regnant explanation of long-term Javanese rural poverty, an idea taken up holus-bolus in text-books by scholars like J.D. Legge and G.F. Missen.¹⁴ Within the broader reaches of development-oriented, rural-focussed social science, the text exercised a very pervasive influence upon the thinking of a generation of scholars and practitioners searching for ways (especially, after Geertz, culturally grounded ways) to deliver Javanese rural society (and its numerous companions elsewhere) from its apparently endemic, apparently hopeless immiseration. Perhaps to separate himself from the admiring throng, one scholar later professed himself to have been "always ... amazed

9 Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965.

10 *Agricultural involution: the processes of ecological change in Indonesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

11 J.A.C. Mackie, "Agricultural involution and economic history", unpublished paper (1983).

12 Arthur van Schaik, *Colonial control and peasant resources in Java* (Den Haag: CIP-Gegevens Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 1986), p. 11.

13 See, for example, the approving reviews by J.R.W. Smail (*Journal of Southeast Asian History* 6 (1965), pp. 158-61), and W.F. Wertheim (*Pacific Affairs* 37 (1964), pp. 307-11).

14 J.D. Legge, *Indonesia* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964); G.J. Missen, *Viewpoint on Indonesia: a geographical study* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1972).

at the lack of critical examination of this concept".¹⁵ He might have been more patient, as we shall see; as Geertz was later to observe drily, "I had danced for rain; I got a flood".¹⁶

Like all Geertz's work, *Agricultural involution* is complexly argued, full of richly revealing metaphor and crowded, suggestive listings, and vitalised and sustained by Geertz's wittily seductive, evocative, turn of phrase.¹⁷ Geertz's argument about Java's rural fate was rooted in what he saw as the social and economic implications of the Dutch system of forced cultivations introduced in 1830. While Geertz was by no means the first scholar to point to the allegedly socially immobilising character of the Cultivation System and colonially-driven rural practice in general,¹⁸ his characterisation and explanation of that tendency was by far the most complete and compelling yet presented. The Cultivation System, said Geertz,

was decisive in at least three ways. By its intense concentration on Java it gave a final form to the extreme contrast between Inner Indonesia and Outer which thenceforth merely deepened. It stabilized and accentuated the dual-economy pattern of a capital intensive Western sector and a labour intensive Eastern one by rapidly developing the first and rigorously stereotyping the second And, most important of all, it prevented the effects on Javanese peasantry and gentry alike of an enormously deeper Western penetration into their life from leading to autochthonous agricultural modernization at the point it could most easily have occurred (p. 53).

This calamitous state of affairs, argued Geertz, was a consequence of the peculiar ecological circumstances of wet-rice (*sawah*) cultivation, which came into a "mutualistic" relationship with forced village-based colonial sugar cane cultivation,

15 William L. Collier, "Declining labour absorption (1878-1980) in Javanese rice production", *Kajian Ekonomi Malaysia* 16 (1979), p. 134.

16 Clifford Geertz, "Culture and social change: the Indonesian case", *Man* 19, 4 (1984), p. 514.

17 So beguiling was the prose, indeed, that at least one of his critics was accused of paying "implicit tribute to the master in language which echoes his thought and style" (Tony Day, "Who's boss? The problem of peasant autonomy in Southeast Asian history", *ASAA Review* 10, 2 (1986), p. 148).

18 See, for example, K.W. van Gorkom, "Gedwongen arbeid en kulturen", *Tijdschrift voor Nijverheid en Landbouw in Nederlandsch-Indië*, 12 (1866), p. 395. G.H. van der Kolff pointed to what he saw as the role of the colonial sugar industry in preventing the emergence of an entrepreneurial Javanese middle class ("A economic case study: sugar and welfare in Java", in Phillips Ruopp (ed.), *Approaches to community development: a symposium introductory to problems and methods of village welfare in underdeveloped areas* (The Hague: 1953), p. 194. See also G.C. Allen and Audrey G. Donnithorne, *Western enterprise in Indonesia and Malaya: a study in economic development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), pp. 81-82.

with which it was rotated. Growing more sugar cane meant increasing the amount of sawah, irrigating it better allowed more peasants to be absorbed into rice cultivation and, as peasant populations inevitably increased, in turn made available a larger number of people to work on the sugar cane fields. Geertz's analysis of agricultural statistics from the 1926 *Landbouwatlas van Java en Madoera* (*Agricultural atlas of Java and Madura*) seemed to clinch his point about the tie between sugar, wet-rice cultivation and population intensity: "all three 'flourish', if that is the proper word, together" (p. 75). Structurally locked in by the requirements of Dutch economic policy to "peasant modes" of production ("one long attempt to bring Indonesia's crops into the modern world, but not her people", Geertz labelled it (p. 48)), and ecologically enabled to remain so by the extraordinary labour-absorbing qualities of wet-rice cultivation, the Javanese did the only thing they could: grew rice ever more intensively in an effort to feed themselves, and populated their island ever more thickly. This, then, was "agricultural involution", elaborated not only on the productive side but also on the distributive side in the shape of ever more intricate tenancy and cropping arrangements, and expressing itself amongst a more or less socially homogenous peasantry as "shared poverty" (p. 97). The result, for the Javanese, was "the worst of two possible worlds: a static economy and a burgeoning population" (p. 70).

Strangely, Geertz's method in *Agricultural involution*—"doing history backwards", he calls it at one point (p. 70)—was in some senses at serious odds with that employed in much of his other work. Characteristically, Geertz's passionate interest was in uncovering the cultural meaning of behaviours, why people expressed themselves in the ways they did. In the case of *Agricultural involution*, however—though he was later to reject the charge that it was atypical ("an unaccountable lapse from my general, supposedly dreamy, approach to things")¹⁹—there is a curious determinacy, almost a mildly reductionist/materialist flavour, a structuralist quality, to the analysis, even though Geertz later presented it as an assault on Marxist and neo-classical models of Third World Change. Here, the behaviour to be explained is the mutuality of interests that made peasants share ever-declining resources of land and produce. For Geertz, such notions of mutual assistance and shared access to resources

19 Geertz, "Culture and social change", p. 515.

were themselves the creature of the interplay of larger political and ecological (material?) forces, made necessary (or possible, perhaps?) by these larger determining forces. Thus, “a greater intensification of labour ... [was] made both possible and necessary by the increasing population” (p. 77). More flatly, he argued, “the superimposition of sugar cultivation on the already unequal distribution of sawah and population over Java left the Javanese peasantry with essentially a single choice in coping with their rising numbers: driving their terraces, and in fact all their agricultural resources, harder by working them more carefully” (p. 79). Culture asserts itself, as it were, after the fact, as a means to explain the kind, range and style of otherwise mystifying involuntarily behaviours that Javanese peasants adopted to accommodate their worsening plight.

Be that as it may, the book was, and in some contexts remains, extraordinarily powerful.²⁰ Like all good history books, it encapsulated and deployed a succinctly packaged past in order to solve a pressing, confusing, contemporary puzzle, that of enduring Javanese rural poverty and apparent social immobility. Conceived in the 1950s, it seemed, notwithstanding the very limited sources upon which it was based, to capture the essence of Javanese rural life at that time: huge and surging rural populations, peasants eking out a barely marginal existence on tiny, heavily worked rice plots, intricate and apparently heavily ritualised protocols and mannerisms in both input and output arenas of rice production and, most of all, a sense of economic stagnation, of a rural economy and rural standard of life that was, in a strangely self-satisfied and, up to a point, economically satisfying way, going nowhere or at least nose-diving only slowly. There were, of course, potential policy implications and pertinence as well, in a context of the dominance of modernisation theory and Western concern for probing the roots of rural poverty as a means of forestalling Java’s potential to become a fertile source of Communist troublemaking.

Further, the book was a revelation for Indonesianists in terms of its ambition to address a long and little known stretch of history, and to provide that stretch with a comprehensive and beguiling explanation. Nothing remotely like it in style and content had appeared in the field of Indonesian social and economic history before. It

20 I have recently noticed, for example, Yoshiyuki Sato, *Agricultural involution in late imperial Russia :reality and transformation* (Niigata-shi: Graduate School of Modern Society and Culture, Niigata University, 2006).

brought new attention to the broad notion of ecology and its interrelationships with agriculture in ways that we take for granted now but that were startling when Geertz first presented them. It was, as Mackie recalls, “a brilliantly creative and plausible insight a vast step forward beyond Boeke’s theory of ‘dualism’ or anything that Higgins or Wertheim had written”.²¹ “Agricultural involution” had the advantage, as well, of being one of those nicely concise “euphoric couplets” identified by Robert Cribb,²² which seem to parcel and structure the ways we conceptualise things and organise knowledge for its efficient transmission. Its immense intellectual power came from Geertz’s unrivalled gift of connecting disparate things in ways that no one before had thought or dared to do, and relating them so effortlessly and compellingly as to make one wonder why it had not been done before—in this case, the ecology of the rice terrace, the history of Western capitalism on the island of Java, the rights and rituals of planting and tending, the organisation of cropping and processing, long-term Javanese rural poverty. While deeply pessimistic about Java’s rural progress on the productive side, it was laudatory, optimistic even, of Javanese ingenuity-in-survival on the distributive side. And it was a hard, shifting target. The components of the argument, at once both complexly interrelated and strangely self-contained, that make up *Agricultural involution* make it difficult to assail; to dispense with one part is not necessarily to deliver a mortal blow to the whole, larger vision, which remains uninjured.

Finally, one might suggest that *Agricultural involution* appeared at a time when there seemed little factual or interpretive material which might compete with it or against which it might be weighed. Dutch scholars, who might have provided that material on the basis of their knowledge and practical experience of Indonesia (though they had evidenced little interest in economic history to that point), had for the most part abandoned their study of that country in the wake of the sour experiences of decolonisation. There was little enthusiasm for the study of Indonesia in the U.S. at that time, and Australian research on Indonesia was then in its very infancy, with little or no detailed knowledge even of what sources might even be available for the

21 Mackie, “Agricultural involution”, pp. 1, 2.

22 Robert Cribb, “Circles of esteem, standard works, and euphoric couplets: dynamics of academic life in Indonesian studies”, *Critical Asian Studies* 37, 2 (2005), pp. 296-97.

scholarly study of the country.²³ In those circumstances, *Agricultural involution* remained supreme.

Within a couple of decades, however, the story told in *Agricultural involution* had been discounted and generally rejected. The book does not appear in the bibliography of any of the three editions of Ricklefs's general history of Indonesia, nor is the concept anywhere invoked.²⁴ The same can be said of Anne Booth's detailed survey of the Indonesian economy over the last two centuries,²⁵ though she did pay the concept more attention, albeit in critical vein, in her earlier history of Indonesia's agricultural development.²⁶ A more recent general economic history of Indonesia, in its chapter on "Java in the 19th century", remarks flatly (presumably in the interests of definitiveness) that "the progress of both Western and indigenous economies disproves the Geertzian thesis that the rural economy of Java was characterised by a process of involution".²⁷ How come? How did the classic account fall so far and, eventually, so fast?

There are, it seems to me, two key answers to this problem. The first is that the picture of Javanese rural stagnation that Geertz had painted and that had captured a generation of Indonesians and Indonesianists with its apparently uncanny reflection of reality began to change rapidly and in significant ways. As the Green Revolution and its accompanying social and technological changes began to take root in Java under the imposed orderliness of the New Order, shared poverty seemed suddenly less apposite. What we no longer saw (or, at least, saw much less of) was a "socially vague" and relatively undifferentiated peasantry. What we saw, at least in ways that hadn't been quite so evident before, were stronger examples of peasant entrepreneurship, the rise of larger landholding and the rapid growth of landlessness, the introduction of labour-saving technologies in rice production, harvesting and processing, and the astonishing (and closely associated) development of off-farm

23 It seems difficult to appreciate now just how limited Australia's expertise on Indonesia was at this point. It was only in the 1970s that a new generation of graduate students, people like Crouch, Ingleson and Dick began their earliest work on Indonesia. Few knew what sources might be available to them in the archives in the Netherlands. Even less was known of the Indonesian archives; as far as I am aware, I was one of the very first Australians (or foreigners, for that matter) to be permitted systematic use of those archives in 1976.

24 M.C. Ricklefs, *A history of modern Indonesia* (London: Macmillan, 1981; Houndmills: Macmillan, 1993; Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001).

25 Anne Booth, *The Indonesian economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: a history of missed opportunities* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998).

26 Anne Booth, *Agricultural development in Indonesia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1988), pp. 4-8.

27 Howard Dick, Vincent J.H. Houben, J. Thomas Lindblad, Thee Kian Wie, *The emergence of a national economy: an economic history of Indonesia, 1800-2000* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002), p. 80. See also pp. 149-50.

labour, including, of course, rapidly developing opportunities for permanent or seasonal work in urban-based export-industrial complexes, the result of Suharto's version of the Asian economic miracle.²⁸ Such developments increasingly came to the attention of scholars of contemporary Indonesian agricultural adaptation such as William Collier and Benjamin White who sought to adapt, refine, test, contest and elaborate Geertz's paradigm in the context of contemporary rural conditions in Java.²⁹

Second, a new generation of scholars began to appear. Its emergence was, as is ever the case, prompted by contemporary concerns, in this case relating to rural society and its relationship to political and social action in Southeast Asia. (It was, of course, no accident that the *Journal of Peasant Studies* was inaugurated in 1974). They were most clearly manifest in Vietnam, of course, but also at issue in such societies as Cambodia and the Philippines. The new generation was often influenced by neo-Marxist ideas about economics and politics, but also by efforts to understand better autonomous peasant choice in strenuous circumstances (one thinks here of James Scott's *Moral economy of the peasant*, his work on patron-clientage and quotidianism along with Ben Kerkvliet, and Adas's work on peasant avoidance) and, less frequently, by rational choice models of action. It began to interrogate the past in the attempt to uncover a deeper sense of how rural society might be moved (or, rather, not moved) to act politically. Things get personal here since I was, I suppose, amongst the first such people, at least in Australia, to take up the endeavour. Much influenced by Jamie Mackie, I wanted to explore in the context of Java how, historically, social conditions might feed into expressions of peasant unrest. Under Jamie's tutoring, I was introduced to the Dutch colonial agricultural industry, especially its sugar system, which I quickly recognised as the most intrusive and invasive form of Western capitalism practised upon the Javanese. To make sure I got the full story in all its detail, I decided on a detailed, long-term study of a specific local area, and picked the most consistently heavily "sugared" of all Java's regions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Pasuruan area of East Java.

Thus prepared, all I needed to do was to proceed to the Dutch and (less certainly) to the Indonesian archives; there I would be sure to find numerous example of peasant

28 See, for example, Gary Hansen (ed.), *Agricultural and rural development in Indonesia* (Boulder: Westview, 1981).

29 For example, William L. Collier, "Agricultural evolution in Java: the decline of shared poverty and involution", in *ibid.*; Benjamin White, "Demand for labor and population growth in colonial Java", *Human Ecology* 1 (1973), pp. 217-36.

unrest caused by nasty Dutch exploitation, and be able to explore in depth the relationship between rural contradictions and peasant social unrest and protest. Unfortunately for my thesis topic (and a rather unnerving experience when one is a world's-breadth away from home), once I arrived in the Netherlands and started sifting through the archives, I soon discovered that—apart from a couple of sit-down protests in 1832-33—Pasuruan passed through the nineteenth and twentieth century without any serious overt peasant expression of protest and dissent.

Naturally enough, my thesis then had to take on a rather different shape and be re-engineered according to a rather different problematic. The task became not one of documenting collisions between modernising, intrusive, disturbing Western capital and traditional fixity, and the sparks that might have been expected to fly from such collisions, but rather of explaining why peasant political quiescence had been so much the master narrative of Pasuruan's sugar belts. Inevitably that led to Geertz, and his ideas of the ecological qualities of wet-rice, and the symbiotic ways in which sugar cultivation were merged into the routines of peasant rice cultivation. He was the beacon, the inspiration, the only who seemed able to shed some light on this untrodden road and who, at the same time, by his mere presence, seemed to make it all rather important.

As it turned out, my analysis of the Pasuruan area's response to the demands of the Cultivation System and subsequent Dutch exploitative endeavours seemed to be significantly different from what might have been expected had Geertz's explanation been correct.³⁰ Basing myself around the huge mounds of Dutch-language archival material in both The Hague and Jakarta, much of which had lain unread for more than a century, and which included the extraordinarily detailed information contained in the Umbgrove commission of enquiry into the government sugar system and the huge local Residency archive, I started to mull over what it all meant. There was, it appeared, no strong evidence that more heavily "sugared" areas were more productive in terms of rice agriculture, nor of the "more careful, fine-comb cultivation techniques" Geertz had invoked (p. 35), and significant evidence, indeed, that the forced cultivation of sugar was a positive hindrance to enhanced rice production.

30 R.E. Elson, *The Cultivation System and "Agricultural Involution"*, Working Paper no. 14, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1978.

More important than that finding, however, was my slowly dawning realisation that peasant society in this corner of nineteenth century Java was much more socially complex and more mobile than I had previously imagined, that Java's different regions were themselves highly diverse in cultural, geographical, political, and economic terms and, moreover, that the working of the Cultivation System had had important social and economic effects upon Java's peasantry which had escaped Geertz's attention and analysis.

I was by no means a groundbreaker in the endeavour to make better sense of Indonesia's recent economic and social history. Both Robert Van Niel, in an early series of important, path breaking articles based around the "cultivation reports" (*kultuurverslagen*) produced by the colonial government's Directorate of Cultivations, and Cornelis Fasseur, in his 1975 Leiden dissertation, pointed to the revolutionary effects of the injection of significant amounts of money in the Javanese village as a consequence of the Cultivation System.³¹ Pieter Creutzberg was labouring away in a little corner of the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam, editing an important series of documents on the development of economic policy in the Indies,³² and inspiring and initiating the production, in the footsteps of W.M.F. Mansvelt's earlier efforts, of an invaluable statistical series under the general title of *Changing economy in Indonesia* which detailed developments in such fields as rice prices, food and export crops, population trends, and manufacturing. Other researchers, such as M.R. Fernando who worked on a local economic and social history of Cirebon Residency, made scholars more deeply aware both of the increasing social "differentiation" within peasant society, itself partly a function of increased monetisation and commercialisation, and partly a consequence of the Dutch-sponsored strengthening of village authority relations in the interests of the Cultivation System's operations, and also of the associated rapid development of off-farm labour.³³ Roger Knight showed in detail the complex political interplay of peasant, official, capital, technology and market along

31 See, for example, Van Niel's "The function of landrent under the Cultivation System in Java", *Journal of Asian Studies* 23 (1964), pp. 357-75, and his "Measurement of change under the Cultivation System in Java, 1837-1851", *Indonesia* 14 (1972), pp. 89-109, and C. Fasseur, *Kultuurstelsel en koloniale baten: de Nederlandse exploitatie van Java 1840-60* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1975), later published as *The politics of colonial exploitation: Java, the Dutch, and the Cultivation System* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992).

32 P. Creutzberg (ed.), *Het ekonomisch beleid in Nederlandsch-Indië: capita selecta* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1972-75).

33 See, for example, M.R. Fernando, "Growth of non-agricultural economic activities in Java in the middle decades of the nineteenth century", *Modern Asian Studies* 30 (1996), pp. 77-119.

the north coast of Java.³⁴ Peter Boomgaard engaged himself in a detailed study of the nature and scale of population growth in nineteenth century Java.³⁵ Jan Breman showed how villages were creations of, rather than splendidly isolated and self-contained refuges from, the gathering colonial state. Indonesian scholars such as Onghokham, Loekman Soetrisno and Djoko Suryo entered the fray as well in different ways.³⁶ Meanwhile, Paul Alexander was bringing a different set of anthropological eyes, sharpened by long Sri Lankan experience, to test Geertz's conclusions.³⁷ Just as I had, nearly all of them found themselves forced to grapple seriously with Geertz's dominating vision, even if they also found it wanting in different ways. Later, Benjamin White pulled these and more variant different streams of inquiry together in a long article which attempted to summarise the state of critical play on the concept of agricultural involution.³⁸

Astonishingly, in all this gathering welter of criticism (much of it, in hindsight, including my own, bearing the unfortunate marks of the brash arrogance of youth pretending to have unseated the mighty), Geertz remained impassive. "Except when driven beyond distraction", he later noted, "or lumbered with sins I lack the wit to commit, I, myself, am shy of polemic".³⁹ When he was finally so driven to respond to the clamour in 1984,⁴⁰ he found some useful and instructive observations among the clattering critiques, but was generally unimpressed by them. He found what he called a "strongly 'economistic' turn" in the critical responses made to *Agricultural involution*, responses which cheapened, marginalised and externalised "the cultural dimensions of change" (p. 511). If, he asked, "the members of the Javanese rural elite have been so exquisitely capitalistic, why aren't they rich?" (p. 518). Critics, in ignoring that cultural dimension, their failure "to situate processes of change within local ways of going at life" (p.524), had inevitably misunderstood both him and the period. In general, his response was of the same seamless quality as his earlier

34 See, for example, G.R. Knight, *Colonial production in provincial Java: the sugar industry in Pekalongan-Tegal, 1800-1942* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993).

35 *Children of the colonial state: population growth and economic development in Java, 1795-1880* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1989).

36 Onghokham, "The residency of Madiun: priyayi and peasant in the nineteenth century", PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1975; Loekman Soetrisno, "The sugar industry and rural development: the impact of cane cultivation for export on rural Java: 1830-1934", PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1980; Djoko Suryo, "Social and economic life in rural Semarang under colonial rule in the later 19th century", PhD dissertation, Monash University, 1982.

37 See, for example, his "Labour demands and the 'involution' of Javanese agriculture", *Social Analysis* 3 (1979), pp. 22-44.

38 Benjamin White, "'Agricultural involution' and its critics: twenty years after", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 15 (1983), pp. 18-31.

39 Geertz, *A life of learning*, pp. 15-16.

40 Geertz, "Culture and social change", pp. 511-32.

contributions. It seemed immune to the detailed probings of history (thus, for example, the effects of the depressions of the 1880s and 1930s and, earlier, of the economic stagnation occasioned as the Cultivation System ran out of political and productive steam, on the “virile yeomanry” he had always hoped to see emerge).

The fact that I have spent some pages outlining the dimensions of *Agricultural involution* and the enormous reaction and contestation it eventually raised amongst historians, rural sociologists and others indicates something of the extraordinarily stimulating quality of Geertz’s work. Whether or not *Agricultural involution* presented an accurate and (even now) persuasive account of Java’s recent economic history now seems a strangely irrelevant matter. What does matter, and what in an important sense of Geertz’s greatest legacy, is the effect he had in worrying and exciting a bevy of scholars to devote large slabs of their lives to testing his ideas, fleshing them out, reading them against their readings of the historical record. That they stretched so far is because Geertz’s imagination and reach forced them on. In the end, the result was an enhancement of our detailed knowledge of economic and social change during the Dutch colonial period, and after, which might not otherwise have eventuated, certainly not in the terms that it did. Not unimportantly, there have been other beneficial effects as well which have flowed beyond the realms of economic history. Merle Ricklefs, for example, devoting himself to a study of the emergence of Islamic influence and power in Java in the later nineteenth century, built upon Geertz-responsive research on Java and made fertile connections between Islamic enhancement and the kinds of economic development and localised prosperity and power which have been shown to have emerged there as a consequence of the operations of the Cultivation System and its successor schemes.

None of this investigative fluorescence, I dare to suggest, would have happened without the spark that Geertz’s fertile mind generated. It is difficult to conceive what, if anything, might have eventuated in the field had he not intervened as and when he did. Probably not much. That he was able to excite such a flurry of diligent and mostly productive oppositionism was, I suggest further, a testament to his (then) idiosyncratic method and his relentless search for the inner meaning of things, for

“culture” (“the *mot*, not the *chose* ... there is no *chose*).⁴¹ That was, in the end, a speculative, interpretive and necessarily limited, indefinite and incomplete adventure, forged first in Geertz’s intensely literary intellectual interests, and refined and extended through borrowings in philosophy, semiotics, linguistics, history and other branches of the humane sciences bent on grasping at the meaning of action and the complex codings of its significance. There was, in Geertz’s work, little space for scientism in whatever guise. One finds in his footnotes no wearying listings of obscure sources or objectified procedures through which some might imagine that they have arrived at a definitive, incontrovertible conclusion. Geertz’s footnotes spark and strive just as his text does, often more fiercely. The search for meaning is, in the last analysis, a matter of the interpretive leap or, as Geertz would have it, a matter or “contriv[ing] my own fable”.⁴² The sheer poetic power of his imaginativeness, that capacity to inspire intellectual awe (and sometimes, it must be said, less noble sentiments), to challenge others to reach in the same general direction, to reach for meaning in ways they might not otherwise have aspired to, was his greatest, lasting gift to us.

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41 Geertz, *A life of learning*, p. 10.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 18.