

L'HOMME**L'Homme**

Revue française d'anthropologie

156 | octobre-décembre 2000

Intellectuels en diaspora et théories nomades

Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion. An Anthropological Account*

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, XIX + 272 p., réf., index, gloss., ph., carte ("Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology" 111)

Stephen C. Headley**Electronic version**URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lhomme/2767>

ISSN: 1953-8103

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2000

Number of pages: 295-297

ISBN: 2-7132-1348-7

ISSN: 0439-4216

Electronic reference

Stephen C. Headley, « Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion. An Anthropological Account* », *L'Homme* [Online], 156 | octobre-décembre 2000, Online since 29 November 2006, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lhomme/2767>

This text was automatically generated on 21 April 2019.

© École des hautes études en sciences sociales

Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion. An Anthropological Account*

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, XIX + 272 p., réf., index, gloss., ph., carte (“Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology” 111)

Stephen C. Headley

- 1 THE TITLE of this innovative volume on the “religion(s)” practised by east Javanese peasants recalls the lectures given at the beginning of the twentieth century by William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902?). James pioneered an empirical approach to comparative religion. One is also led here to measure the progress accomplished since that date by anthropological studies of religion. Andrew Beatty, although dealing with a single set of hamlets in a dictatorial political system, reveals a remarkable variety of religious practices, kept well out of sight.
- 2 Through the elegant prose of this book, one enters into the diversity of Javanese religion. Beatty’s sociological analyses of the self-conscious strategies of the Javanese at defining their religions vis-à-vis their neighbours’ and fellow villagers’ enlighten these descriptions, as does the anthropologist’s occasional amusement at his peasant companions’ explanations of their faiths and practices. Beatty’s work rethinks the ground covered by Clifford Geertz’s *Religion of Java* (1960) which has stimulated much research over the last forty years in the field of the sociology of religion in South-East Asia. Beatty brings us, at the end of the twentieth century, to an understanding of the *effect* of diversity upon Javanese religion.
- 3 This volume elaborates an overview of village “Islam” in its manifold forms. Chapter V is appropriately entitled “Practical Islam”. The preceding four chapters set out the background sociology. Chapter I provides an introduction and chapter II a penetrating analysis of the varying morphologies of the communal meal called *slametan*. That meal provides “semblance of totality” recalling Mauss’s *fait social total*, and paradoxically embodying a shared perspective on the world by representing nobody’s views in particular. As Beatty’s explains, this strange epitome of local traditions is a communal

affair precisely because it defines no distinct community. This gives us a idea of the magnitude of the social tensions created by divergent religious practices. Chapter III presents a non-sectarian sanctuary, belonging to the entire village population, each group frequenting it in their own way. Village politics influences the aesthetics of the *barong* performance (possession of the peasants by their village guardian spirit) more than the fragmentary story which the dancers act out. In chapter IV, at another site, a Javanese cult is the object of a detailed comparison to the *slametan* described in chapter II.

- 4 Beginning with the fifth chapter on Islam, Beatty presents the more exclusive religious affiliations: Islam; Javanism with its “wet book”, the human body, rich in symbolic correspondences inaccessible to the “dry book” or the Koran (chap. VI); a Javanese mystical sect concerning fully a fifth of the village population (chap. VII) and the newly revived Javanese Hindu religion that presents an alternative non-Islamic practice in the eastern “salient” of Java adjoining Bali (chap. VIII). The purpose of having arranged the chapters in this pattern is convincing. One has to work from the general shared frameworks to the specific, exclusive ones. In the conclusion (chap. IX) Beatty reiterates that “each variant embodies –sometimes only suggests– a different conception of the world and one’s place within it [...]. What brings them together is a common social context in which no single element can be fully comprehended without reference to the others [...] borrowing, ambiguity, avoidance, suppression and irony [are] closely tied to the exigencies of Javanese village life” (p. 239).
- 5 The first half of the book is the more sociological; the second half is devoted to explorations of those peasant *modus vivendi*, seeking to personalise religious practice and avoiding any objectification of belief. Beatty deserves our thanks for taking these village philosophers seriously. By bypassing the classical Javanese texts and going directly to the village exegesis of religious practice, the anthropologist has in fact thrown light on many passages in Javanese erotic/religious literature which otherwise are incomprehensible (e.g. p. 209). Beatty’s anthropological account of the mystical sects’ discreet, but elegant deflating of Islamic pretension leads the reader to wonder. Why on this village stage we don’t hear from one equally entertaining Muslim, gently ridiculing the Javanists forests of symbols? Did the Muslims’ comments reflect intolerance? Many of the Javanese tropes of experience are cast exteriorly in the language of Islam, while others reflect independent or pre-Muslim morphologies. As the author says in the Introduction, “style and manner register important factors such as authority, censorship, indeterminacy and compromise” (p. 5). It is only through these “texture(s) of cultural debate” and not through the translocal properties of certain religious practices that one can gain a view of Javanese religion as a whole. For Beatty, as opposed to Geertz, variant religious forms are not to be identified with distinct groups, but reflect their relationships with the other spiritual practices. Thus the values circulated inside these villages bear the mark of each peasant’s observations of the village religious arena. When Javanese Hindus drink holy water from their cupped hands, they then pour it over their heads in a gesture derived from the conclusion of Muslim salat prayers. It was not the program of forced Islamisation that provoked such imitation, but the desire to preserve older Muslim traditions inside of newly adopted ways.
- 6 The author argues that, if we may admit that power creates religion (p. 240), then to explain how this happens we must take religious ideas seriously and not reduce them blindly to the play of material forces. If communal strife (*primordialisme*, in Indonesian) is to be avoided and *civilitas* cultivated, then the deep anxieties caused by the advance of

Islam will require that Javanese syncretism be rethought, says Beatty (p. 247). Under the regime that follows the collapse of General Soeharto's New Order (May 1998), the cultural resilience of Javanese tradition will be at the centre of whatever newly negotiated compromise is settled on. In this political perspective, we have here a forward-looking anthropology. Beatty is to be congratulated.

AUTHOR

STEPHEN C. HEADLEY

CNRS, Équipe de recherche d'anthropologie sociale: morphologie, échanges (ERASME),
Paris.