

A Critical Review of Clifford Geertz's Interpretation of Javanese Religion

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I. Introduction

Since the publication of his first book, *The Religion of Java* (1960), based on two-and-a-half-years' field research at 'Modjokuto' [Pare] in Java, Clifford Geertz has occupied a critical place in both cultural and social anthropology (Peacock 1981, 123). In particular, he has been of strategic importance in the rebirth of an American cultural anthropology. Mainly based on Javanese religion, his studies of religion as 'a system of symbols', have been at the centre of his anthropological studies on culture as 'a system of logically and meaningfully integrated values, beliefs, and symbols'. His symbolic way of looking at religion in a given cultural context, however, has been challenged by those who see

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religion as a system of beliefs in a functional and structural framework. Bearing in mind both the symbolic approach and structural approach to religion, my aim in this article is, therefore, critically to explore Clifford Geertz's interpretation of religion with and in the Javanese context.

In the next section, this article will consider what Geertz says in relation to Javanese religion. Then it proceeds to sketch out his theoretical framework, together with a critical view of Geertz's understanding. In the next two sections, I will discuss the pros and cons of Geertz's contributions to the understanding of Javanese religion, while being faithful to the original works. Then, I will draw the arguments of this article to a close, suggesting further studies on Javanese religion.

II. What Geertz says in relation to Javanese religions

In his book, *The Religion of Java* (1960), Geertz identifies three religio-cultural categories in Javanese society according to their worldview, including religious beliefs, ethical preferences, and political ideologies (Geertz 1960, 4). The outcome is three main religio-cultural types within the overall religious syncretism: the *abangan*, the *santri*, and the *priyayi*, which he briefly describes as follows:

Abangan, representing a stress on the animistic aspects of the over-all Javanese syncretism and broadly related to the peasant element in the population; *santri*, representing a stress on the

Islamic aspects of the syncretism and generally related to the trading element; and *priyayi*, stressing the Hinduist aspects and related to the bureaucratic element (Geertz 1960, 6).

In the religio-cultural groupings, Geertz adopts the *abangan-santri-priyayi* model to characterise three kinds of religious accommodation of the three social groups in relation to societal structures in Javanese society, viz., the peasantry in the villages, the indigenous trading classes in the markets, and the gentry in the government bureaucracy. As such, for Geertz, Javanese religion is, rather than a system of beliefs, a system of symbols which should be understood with regard to the societal structures of the Javanese. With this in mind, it may be useful here to look at further details of Geertz's so-called 'trichotomy' to appreciate his contribution to an understanding of Javanese religions.

1. The syncretistic beliefs of *abangan*

Abangan, which is commonly followed by the peasant elements of the population, represents a basic Indonesian syncretism, 'a balanced integration of animistic, Hinduistic, and Islamic elements' (Geertz 1960, 5). In the syncretist system, one may find the basic images of Javanese culture and civilisation, Hindu gods and goddesses, Muslim prophets and saints, local spirits and demons. According to Geertz, the religious tradition of the *abangan* is characterised primarily by the *slametan* [also sometimes called a *kenduren*], a religious ritual and communal feast in Javanese peasant society; by an extensive and intricate

complex of spirit beliefs, and by a whole set of practices of curing, sorcery, and magic (Darmaputera 1988, 77). Including complex spirit beliefs and religious tradition practices, the *slametan* in particular symbolises the mystic and social unity of those participating in it. In relation to the symbolic functions, Geertz explains, a *slametan* can be given in response to almost any occurrence one wishes to celebrate, ameliorate, or sanctify: birth, circumcision, marriage, death, curing, sorcery and so on (Geertz 1960, 11). In this context, the *slametan* also represents a reassertion and reinforcement of the general cultural order and its power to hold back the forces of disorder. The *slametan* concentrates, organises and summarises the general *abangan* ideas of order, their 'design for living'. In a subdued dramatic form, it states the values that animate traditional Javanese peasant culture (Geertz 1960, 29).

2. The 'puristic' and 'syncretic' Islam of *santri*

The *santri*, associated with market life in both the rural and urban sectors of the society, represent what Geertz calls the 'puristic' and 'syncretic' Islamic elements known as Islamic orthodox practice and various Islamic organisations (Geertz 1960, 6). Secondly, the word *santri* indicates those traders who control the cigarette, cheap cloth, and small hardware businesses, and dominate the fairly extensive trading that goes on among the various local markets in the area (Geertz 1950, 16). At the same time, the term *santri* is applied only to those who follow the

Islamic orthodox practice more carefully, e.g., perform the five prayers daily, attend the services on Fridays in the mosque, keep the month-long fast in the month of Ramadhan, learn to recite verses from the Holy *Qur'an*, and if possible, make the holy pilgrimage to Mecca (Darmaputera 1988, 77). Geertz sees the Islamic beliefs as divided into two kinds: the syncretic and the puristic. The syncretic indicates the Islam which is relatively more ready to make some accommodations to indigenous custom and is not concerned primarily with making Islam more relevant to the modern situation, while remaining basically loyal to the orthodox faith and doctrines of Islam. On the other hand, the puristic strongly attempts to purify Islam in Indonesia from such non-Islamic elements as materialism and Christianity, animism and Hindu-Buddhism, and is concerned with making Islam the answer to modern problems.

3. The aristocratic and bureaucratic belief system of *priyayi*

The term *priyayi* originally referred to Hindu-Buddhistic cultural elements in the hereditary aristocracy (Geertz 1960, 6). *Priyayi* in the narrow sense signified someone who could trace their ancestry to kings and who consequently was permitted to write their name with a title before it. Today it has the broader sense of the educated bureaucracy. Religiously, the *priyayi* have been particularly interested in neither *slametan* nor the *Qur'an*. Rather, they have been concerned with a search for ultimate

mystical enlightenment, with elaborate philosophical and mythological speculation upon the nature of man and the basis of his spiritual life, and with secret systems of mystically supported prophecy and moral exhortation. Their religious pattern has been more intellectual than ritualistic, more psychological than physicalistic, more private than public (Geertz 1950, 19). *Priyayi* culture takes form in the cultivation of a highly refined court etiquette, a very complex art of dance, drama, music, poetry, and the multi-faceted system of Javanese philosophical mysticism. Today *priyayi* implies the whole set of world view, ethics, social behaviour and westernised elements of nearly every white collar bureaucrat.

III. The theoretical surroundings and framework

Clifford Geertz's understanding of religions is to a great degree based on intensive field-research at Modjokuto, a small town in east central Java. To appreciate appropriately his standpoint in considering Javanese religions, therefore, it is necessary to refer to the theoretical surroundings and framework, with and in which his works were mainly written.

1. Modjokuto

Modjokuto lies at the eastern edge of the great bend in Brantas river, some one hundred miles south of its mouth at Surabaya, Indonesia's third seaport. It is typical of the drab,

overcrowded, busily commercial little crossroads towns which occur every fifteen or twenty miles along the main thoroughfares of the central Java rice plains. Until the mid-thirties, the market-oriented town was composed of four main groups: the gentry [*priyayi*], the traders [*wong dagang*], the 'little people' [*wong tjilik*] consisting of landless labourers and small-scale peasants, and the Chinese [*wong tjina*] (Geertz 1963, 7). In the mid-twenties, the town had a population of almost 20,000, of whom about 18,000 were Javanese, 1,800 Chinese, and the remainder a handful of Arabs, Indians, or other minorities (Geertz 1950, 1). Modjokuto provided the main local arena for cultural contact between 'East' and 'West', 'traditional' and 'modern', and 'local' and 'national'; and it showed clear evidence that it was undergoing fundamental social, political and economic changes (Geertz 1963, 11).

2. Religion as a cultural system

In his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz defines religion as follows:

A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz 1973, 90).

In his quest for a cultural explanation of religion, at the same time, he emphasises a two-stage operation in the anthropological study of religion: first, an analysis of the system of meanings

embodied in the religious symbols, and, second, the relating of these systems to socio-structural processes (Geertz 1973, 125). In the light of this view of religion, one may more appropriately review what Geertz says in relation to Javanese religions and then assess his contribution to their understanding.

IV. Geertz's contribution to understanding Javanese religion

Of his contributions to understanding of Javanese religion, the most significant is that Geertz adopts the Weberian (1) '*actor-oriented perspectives*' in constructing (2) the '*cultural dimension*' and (3) a '*thick description*' of religion as '*a system of symbols*' in the context of Java. By means of the Weberian perspective, he enriched the conception of the relationship between religious 'meaning' and Javanese 'action'.

1. Actor-oriented perspectives

Asserting that 'culture is context', Geertz argues that we must attempt to grasp it from the native point of view; therefore 'our formulations of other people's symbol systems must be actor-oriented' (Geertz 1973, 14). Such a standpoint is apparently based not only on the outcome of his field-research but also on a Weberian theoretical paradigm. In an interview, Geertz expressed his opposition to the social-structural tradition which sees the actor as merely a constrained object.

It was positivist social science [social-structuralist tradition]. I didn't believe it. [...] Radcliffe-Brown [...] was trying to put Bertrand Russell's program of rationalist empiricism into anthropology. [...] I never did buy this stuff (Handler 1991, 607).

A primary contribution to both social and cultural anthropology that is derived from the Weberian perspective is a richer conception of the relationship between symbolic meanings and action: the character of cultural meanings, the way in which meanings frame action and the methodology of portraying this relationship through the ethnographic variant of the ideal type (Peacock 1981, 128). In this regard, Geertz proposed that social scientists study symbolic meanings rather than behaviour, seek understanding rather than causal laws, and reject the mechanistic explanations of the natural-science variety in favour of interpretive explanations. He invited his colleagues to take seriously the possibility of considering symbolic action as drama (Shankman 1984, 261).

Similarly, in taking religious 'action' as his basic unit in understanding Javanese religion, Geertz would seem to resemble Parsons and Weber (Peacock 1981, 126). In Geertz's analysis of Javanese religion, for instance, the three religio-cultural types are characterised significantly by the character of each religious action, as well as the traditional hierarchy: the traditional religious practice, *slametan*, in the peasant society is the feature of the *abangan*; in distinguishing the *santri* from any other groups, adherence or otherwise to orthodox Islamic religious practice is

the key criterion; and the *priyayi* are represented by religious practice in bureaucratic form.

2. Cultural dimension

In the introduction to his book, *Islam Observed* (1968), Geertz convincingly said

I think religion comes down to us as a social, cultural and psychological phenomenon (Geertz 1968, xii).

Unlike Durkheim who argued in a single-minded way that God is the symbol of society, Geertz thinks 'it remains true that particular kinds of faith flourish in particular kinds of societies, and the contribution of the comparative sociology of religion to the general understanding of the spiritual dimensions of human existence both begins and ends in an uncovering of the nature of these empirical interconnections' (Geertz 1968, 20). He therefore attempts to view religion as a system in a given cultural context. In this regard, Geertz has elaborated the Weberian viewpoint in accord with the more particularistic strengths of cultural anthropology of religion. He then focuses on the construction of the meaning of religious action through a kind of interpretive methodology which elucidates the relationship of religious action to culture.

For this reason, when Geertz studied religion in Javanese society, the cultural dimension, especially of social change, was at the centre of the research, as he said in an interview

I was still interested in the cultural dimensions not just of development but of social change of all sorts. I had studied Java, which is mixed-a little Hinduism, a little Buddhism, a little Islam (Handler 1991, 606).

In his book, *The Religion of Java* (1960), Javanese religion was treated as a cultural system in which the three religio-cultural types are associated with economic activities. To Geertz, therefore, Javanese religion denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in religious symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life in social transition (Geertz 1973, 89). In particular, in categorising the *abangan* and the *priyayi*, the cultural dimension of religious beliefs is predominant. Geertz sees the syncretistic implication of *slametan* in Javanese peasant society with and in the psychological phenomena and cultural diversity in transition. Similarly, he views the bureaucratic beliefs of the *priyayi* with and in the socio-cultural context of Javanese in transition.

3. 'Thick' description toward interpretive theory

In his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz puts emphasis on the 'interpretive' description of cultures as he says:

The concept of culture I espouse, [...] is essentially a semiotic one. [...] I take [...] the analysis of it [culture] to be therefore not an

experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz 1973, 5).

As such, Geertz challenges the 'theoretical' understanding of cultures. In this regard, he recalls his field research at Modjokuto:

I did have-because you had to have a thesis proposal, a hypothesis (which I don't believe in, and didn't then, but you had to do it)-a test of the Weberian hypothesis, that the strongly Muslim sector would be the functional equivalent of the Protestants in the Reformation (Handler 1991, 605).

In his recall, he distinguishes the 'thick' description of Javanese religion drawn with and in the Javanese context from the 'thin' theoretical understanding [*verstehen*] of religion drawn without the Javanese context. First of all, the outcome of his interpretation of Javanese religion is based on intensive research in the field. In the field, he focused on the sketching out of Javanese religion in the cultural context rather than explaining religious behaviour or building up a theory within the conventional framework: how *slametan* functions and various traditional beliefs are intertwined in the *abangan* society; how the Islamic elements have been perpetuated and practised in the *santri* echelon; and how the *priyayi* have accommodated Javanese beliefs within their bureaucratic value system. In this way, Geertz continually contrasts the rich, thick, textured qualities of the interpretive description of religion with the worn, threadbare qualities of a mechanistic, reductionist social science. Geertz is explicit in calling the thick description an interpretive theory, but it is a theory with a difference. For example, while Geertz allows

that interpretive theory should somehow 'fit' realities, past and future, he acknowledges that interpretive theory 'is not, at least in the strict meaning of the term, 'predictive' (Shankman 1984, 263). According to Geertz, 'a good interpretation of anything-a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society-takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation' (Geertz 1973, 18). The essential task of the interpretive theory here is, however, not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases, but to generalize *with* and *in* them (Geertz 1973, 26).

V. Deficiencies of Geertz's Interpretation of Javanese religion

Now I move on to explore some deficiencies of Geertz's understanding of Javanese religion in terms of structural and functional interpretation. In spite of the various contributions mentioned earlier, Geertz's understanding of Javanese religion also implies several deficiencies in relation to the context of Java. Here I will first mention a Javanese anthropologist's critiques of Geertz's interpretation of Javanese religion and beliefs so as to consider the 'insiders' perspective of their own religion'. Then I proceed to discuss my personal view of further major deficiencies of Geertz's anthropological studies on religion: (1) ambiguous generalisation; (2) a modernisation-oriented perspective; and (3) lack of dynamics.

1. An insider's criticism on Geertz: Koentjaraningrat

Such anthropologists as Koentjaraningrat (1986), Harsja W. Bachtiar (1973) and Mark R. Woodward (1989) are said to be the major critics of Geertz's interpretation of Javanese religion. Of them, although his interpretation of Javanese culture cannot be all-encompassing due to the socio-cultural diversity throughout the island of Java, Koentjaraningrat's criticism appears to be most incisive since, as a Javanese anthropologist, he presents an insider's view of Geertz's work, which encompasses arguments of other critics.

Similar to Geertz, in the understanding of Javanese religion, Koentjaraningrat adopts the concept of the difference between the traditions within a culture and distinguishes Javanese culture in the village communities from that of the more urban environments. In his book, *Javanese Culture* (1986), however, Koentjaraningrat poses a gentle critique of Geertz's understanding of Javanese religion in two respects. His critiques are more or less characterised as follows. The first criticism concerns Geertz's 'narrow' interpretation of Javanese beliefs. In describing *Agami Jawi* [Javanese religion] concepts of the creation, for instance, he criticises Geertz's interpretation that *Agami Jawi* is not merely 'a system of symbols' but also the creation myths of Java and Javanese kingdoms, and he argues that it is the creation myths of the earth and of man, hence the Javanese cosmology and cosmogony (Koentjaraningrat 1986, 331-2). The second criticism is of Geertz's 'thin' interpretation of culture. For example, he criticises Geertz's interpretation that *semedi* [meditation] and *tapa*

[self-denial ascetic exercises] are the same, enumerating the differences between the two religious behaviours in detail (Koentjaraningrat 1986, 371-5). He also challenges Geertz's perception that all *slametan* ceremonies are religious in nature. In contrast to Geertz, instead, he argues that not all *slametan* ceremonies fall within the realm of religious action. Rather, there is a Javanese distinction between sacred and secular *slametan* (Koentjaraningrat 1986, 349-50). The last criticism here is of Geertz's 'static' interpretation of religious activities; for Koentjaraningrat, religious forms are constantly evolving. For example, he observes that nowadays in towns and cities in Java, assisting at a funeral [*tetulang layat*] is only done by the relatives, acquaintances of the deceased, and friends of the individual members of his family, while Geertz observed in the 1950s that in village communities, as well as in towns like Modjokuto, sympathy is immediately expressed to the family of a deceased person by relatives, neighbours, friends, and acquaintances, who also offer their assistance in preparing for the funeral (Koentjaraningrat 1986, 361).

2. Ambiguous generalisation

Geertz proposes a kind of ideal type mode of generalising cultures. In his programmatic statement concerning 'thick description', Geertz rejects the search for laws or statistically-grounded statements of regularity, and he proposes instead that cultural anthropology seeks to elucidate generalised principles

through delicately crafted description which embodies the universal through the particular (Geertz 1973, 26). He confirmed the search for a general framework for studies of cultures, especially of religion, when he said in his book, *Islam Observed* (1968):

I have attempted both to lay out a general framework for the comparative analysis of religion and to apply it to a study of the development of a supposedly single creed, Islam, in two quite contrasting civilisations, the Indonesian [Java] and the Moroccan (Geertz 1968, ix).

Nevertheless, the difficulty here is that in his sketching out of Javanese religion, in particular in *The Religion of Java* (1960) and in *Islam Observed* (1968), the theoretical explanation and thick description become almost indistinguishable, as Geertz views the distinction between description and explanation as 'relative in any case' (Geertz 1973, 26). The comparative analysis of the religio-cultural types [*abangan*, *santri*, *priyayi*] in relation to the generalised categories, for instance, remains too ambiguous and general to take sufficiently into consideration the interrelation and interaction between the social groups. Moreover, Geertz's cultural analysis of religion seems to be at the level of guessing the symbolic implications and describing the generalised principles through the guesses, as he says that:

Cultural analysis is [or should be] guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodies landscape (Geertz 1973, 20).

3. Modernisation-oriented perspective

From an interview, it becomes clear that Geertz has had a great concern for economics as well as philosophy. He said:

At Antioch [Antioch College in Ohio], there was no anthropology taught. [...] I took a lot of economics; except for that, I took no social science. [...] I got my final degree in philosophy. [...] I had been puzzled about the problems that are raised in 'Agricultural Involution' locally, in Pare [Modjokuto], because I wanted to see whether anthropology could speak from small problems to large. The economists were interested in development, and so was I. So I shifted away from religion for the moment and wrote 'Agricultural Involution' (Handler 1991, 603-5).

Similarly, over all his works, whether or not concerned directly with religion, especially in *Religious Belief and Economic Behaviour in a Central Javanese Town* (1950), *The Religion of Java* (1960) and *Agricultural Involution* (1963), one may find Geertz's economics-oriented perspective on Javanese religion. Given the fact that the theoretical setting, Modjokuto, was typical of the 'drab, overcrowded, busily commercial little crossroads towns', it may be taken for granted that Javanese religion was analysed and categorised in terms of the characteristics of economic activities in that context. Furthermore, in particular after 1960, Geertz's viewpoint of culture in terms of 'modernisation' may be understood on the same lines as that of such modernisation theorists as Rostow, arguing the concept of 'take-off' from tradition to modernity. Geertz convincingly said in his book *Peddlers and Princes* (1963):

The “take-off” concept has sharpened our awareness that the problems of development are quite different in nations just entering the transition [...] than in those which, having successfully passed through it, are well launched into a phase of steady rise in per capita income. [...] Although this book follows in the anthropological tradition in attempting to evaluate Indonesia’s development prospects by focusing on concrete examples of social change found in two Indonesian towns, it is clear that a really effective theory of economic growth will appear (Geertz 1963, 1-5).

In the same book, he goes one step further, emphasising that the same process of modernisation takes place in all societies.

Most recent writers have stressed the totality, the thoroughgoing nature of the change involved in the transition to sustained economic growth. Modernised industrial societies tend to take a form specific and peculiar to them. They come to resemble one another more and more closely as they develop, not merely in their economic functioning but in their type of value system, [...] and their religious beliefs (Geertz 1963, 143).

However, here lies a theoretical problem. It is, that modernisation theory, including the Weberian understanding of religious beliefs, is deeply rooted in the past experiences of the western societies since the mid-1750s, and it assumes that all societies go through the same pattern (Martinussen 1997:64). Geertz’s understanding of Javanese religion within the paradigm of modernisation may therefore remain inconsistent with his claim, ‘I don’t believe in the Weberian hypothesis’ (Handler 1991, 605).

4. Lack of dynamics

In Java, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, a rather curious process of cultural and religious diversification took place under the general cover of overall Islamization. The indigenous trading classes [...] were driven away from international commerce toward domestic peddling, and thus away from the sea toward the interior; the highly Indicized native ruling classes were reduced to the status of civil servants, administering Dutch policies at the local level; the peasantry, drawn more and more into the orbit of a colonial export economy, folded back upon itself in a paroxysm of defensive solidarity. And each of these major groups absorbed the Islamic impulse in quite different ways (Geertz 1968, 12-3).

Geertz's first book, *'The Religion of Java'* (1960), was written in a context in which the socio-economic and cultural mechanism mentioned above was still operative all over the island of Java. In his book, however, the mechanism was not paid sufficient attention. Only the last chapter, 'Conflict and Integration', considered the mechanism between religion and society, while the other chapters took a rather static view in describing the religio-cultural types. The last chapter, however, also revealed the lack of dynamics: it considered the interaction between the three categories inside Indonesia but paid insufficient attention to socio-cultural forces from outside Indonesia, such as Christianity.

Turning to the contemporary Javanese context, the gap between Geertz's understanding of Javanese religion and the socio-cultural mechanisms in the modern society of Java becomes even wider than before. There is now the national ideologisation of religion called *Pancasila* which is an attempt to create a rather

Javanised version of an all-Indonesian culture. There are also such socio-cultural trends as secularisation, materialism, and consumerism. In this context, inner need, community pressure, and what Max Weber called 'the problems of meaning' no longer converge so powerfully to impel the 'reflexive' individual toward ritualised contact with sacred symbols (see Giddens 1976:31-33; Habermas 1987:151; Bourdieu 1990:52).

V. Conclusion

I have considered Geertz's understanding of Javanese religion. Firstly, I have said that Geertz mainly understands Javanese religion in terms of the three religio-cultural types: animistic aspects of the overall peasant syncretism in *abangan*; Islamic aspects of the syncretism in *santri*; and Hinduist aspects in *priyayi*. It has also been revealed that the framework of understanding Javanese religion in this regard is also related to socio-economic activities: the peasant element in *abangan*; the trading element in *santri*; and the bureaucratic element in *priyayi*. Secondly, I have said that Geertz's understanding of Javanese religion is based on two theoretical settings: a market-oriented town Modjokuto in Java and a symbolic approach to religion. Finally, I have established that Geertz's understanding of Javanese religion makes a valuable contribution in terms of introducing a symbolic and cultural approach to religion, but also contains some

deficiencies as regards his structural and functional approach to religion.

After having said all this, no one doubts that Geertz's contribution to the understanding of Javanese religion has a great degree of significance in anthropological studies on religions and beliefs. However, matters in Java have changed in so many diverse ways that even his 'thick' description of cultures cannot sufficiently explain the socio-cultural transition. For that reason, Geertz's understanding of Javanese religion, based mainly on works on Java in the 1950s and 1960s, is not entirely relevant to the understanding of religion in contemporary Java. There is, hence, a need for a more 'reflexive' and 'immersed' attempt to compensate for the deficiencies, in addition to Geertz's contribution (see Bourdieu *et al* 1973:67; Giddens 1995:277). Thick description with actor-oriented perspectives and a cultural dimension cannot sufficiently interpret the cultural implications of Javanese religion in the contemporary environment. The modern world, where there is a tension between progressive secularisation and materialism and the essentials of the religion, makes almost all religious beliefs harder to maintain. For many religions, it is virtually impossible to maintain the symbolic meanings which are essential to a Geertzian analysis.

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클리포드 기어츠의 자바 종교 해석에 대한 비판적 고찰

김예경

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본 논문은 미국 문화인류학의 개척자인 기어츠(Clifford Geertz)의 인도네시아 자바섬을 중심으로 한 종교연구를 종합적으로 고찰하고, 이에 나타난 문제점들을 규명한다.

첫째, 기어츠의 자바섬 종교에 대한 해석들을 체계적으로 살펴보고, 또 이러한 해석들의 이론적 배경과 개념들을 고찰한다. 둘째, 기어츠의 종교 해석에 대한 비판에 앞서, 기어츠의 종교 연구 전반에 끼친 이론적·방법론적인 공헌, 즉 ‘행위자 지향적 관점’, ‘문화론적 접근론’ 그리고 ‘중층기술(thick description)’ 등을 분석한다. 셋째, 기어츠의 종교 해석에 대한 문제점들, 다시 말해서, ‘내부자 관점과의 괴리성’, ‘모호한 일반화’, ‘근대화 지향적 관점’ 그리고 ‘역동성의 결핍’ 등을 심도 있게 천착한다. 마지막으로, 본 논문은 앞의 논거들을 종합하면서, 시대 반영적인 인도네시아 현대 종교 연구를 위한 대안적 방향을 제시한다.

주제어: 클리포드 기어츠, 자바의 종교, 인도네시아