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SYMBOLIC ANTHROPOLOGY OF CLIFFORD GEERTZ AND BEYOND

Abstract

Clifford Geertz is considered one of the most original and stimulating anthropologists of his generation for being the foremost proponent of the intellectual movement to revive the study of culture as a symbolic system. This explores the symbolic anthropology of Geertz and argues how it lacks a critical engagement with power. The essay moves with a frame that social, cultural and symbolic realities are best understood with a perspective of dialectics of meaning and power which is lacking in Geertz's symbolic anthropology. Towards the end the essay new horizons of dialogues with Geertz for exploring creative pathways between Geertz's local knowledge and Gandhi's vision and perspective of Gram Swaraj which challenge us to create new visions and practices of symbolic realization where symbols are aids in our continued pathways of self-realization and mutual realization with and beyond the conventional systems of self, culture, society and State.

Keywords: *Symbolic anthropology, dialectics of values and power, local knowledge, Gram Swaraj, new hermeneutics of self*

The limitations of symbolic anthropology is not its mysticism, but its lack of systematic sociology, its underdeveloped sense of politics of culture, and its lack of curiosity concerning the production and maintenance of symbolic systems.

—Sherry Ortner (1984), "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties," p. 132.

The webs of signification that we as individuals spin are exceedingly small and fine (and mostly trivial); for the most part they reside in other webs of immense scale surpassing single lives in time and space. [..] The assumption of homogeneous web may mask, instead of reveal, how meanings are generated and transmitted. This is perhaps the point where meaning and power touch

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most closely.

-Sidney W. Mintz (1985), Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History, p. 157.

Clifford Geertz is considered one of the most original and stimulating anthropologists of his generation for being the foremost proponent of the intellectual movement to revive the study of culture as a symbolic system. His critics and admirers alike have pointed out this (Alexander et al. 2011; Scholte 1986; Shankman 1984). His thick description is supposed to have been a revelation for anthropologists and historians. His admirers point out how he has demonstrated so many varieties of subjects as cultural systems starting from Religion to ideology, law and common-sense. Moreover, he is one of the few anthropologists like Levi-Strauss, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas whose work is read at large by the general public and practitioners in other disciplines. For instance he is thought to have influenced American historians considerably. American historian Ron Walters tells us that Geertz was the "patron saint" of a conference which gave rise to the volume *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Walters 1980; Higham and Conkin 1977). Geertz is admired for his symbolic anthropology which has influenced disciplines such as history rescuing symbols from structuralist formalism and giving them a "local habitation" and deriving local knowledge from them. His cultural analysis proposes an interpretive approach which treats cultural phenomena not as merely linguistic but embedded in practical activity.

My objective in this essay is to critically evaluate Geertz's symbolic approach to social reality. It engages with the symbolic anthropology of Geertz. Symbolic anthropology is a vibrant field to which scholars such as Milton Singer, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and J.P.S. Uberoi have creatively contributed (see Douglas 1970; Singer 1984; Turner 1974 & Uberoi 1978). But in this essay I do not engage with their approaches to symbols, self, society and the multi-dimensional field of symbolic anthropology. I only engage with the work of Geertz and as part of this adjacently engage with some other thinkers on the way briefly and tangentially. I engage with Geertizian symbolic anthropology from a different theoretical tradition whose starting point is the assumption, as articulated by Andre Beteille, that society is the dialectic of symbols and power (Beteille 1978). Dialectic of symbols and power mainly refers to the dialectic of meaning and power. In this essay I do not make a thick description of Geertz's thick description anthropology but make a critical encounter with Geertz's texts from the perspective of dialectics of symbol and power which is missing in Geertzian symbolic anthropology. In this essay, I am mainly engaged in a critical encounter with Geertz, especially his theoretical symbolic anthropology but this can begin with an appreciation of contributions of Geertz. Bob Scholte (1986) urges us to understand three-fold theoretical contributions of Geertz: substantive, epistemological and philosophical. Geertz's substantive contribution lies in his emphasis on diversity of symbolic forms and his attendant

critique of reductionism of any kind; his epistemological contribution lies in introducing hermeneutic circle to ethnographic praxis, including description, narration, reflexivity and interpretation; and his philosophical contribution lies in his critique of scientific positivism and his advocacy of humanistic holism and descriptive phenomenology (Scholte 1986: 5) This spirit of a unhappy mixture between 'appreciation" and "critique" is best summarized by Eric Wolf who writes: "I can even enjoy the Balinese cock-fight. I just do not think one can draw all these conclusions from it" (Wolf in Friedman 1987: 112).

Dialectics of Symbol and Power: A Brief Note

Andre Beteille in his essay on ideology argues that "Sociology is the study of the dialectics between values and power" (Beteille 1978). This social theory of Beteille is best explained in his more theoretical works on social inequality such as *Inequality Among Men* and *The Idea of Natural Inequality and Other Essays* (Beteille 1977; 1984). To have a better sense of this social theory of the dialectics between symbols and power, Beteille's treatment of the two sources of inequality is illuminating. For him, these two sources are— collective representations and collective organization. Taking his inspiration from Durkheim, Beteille argues that the inherent requirement of organization of collective life cannot be solved without devising some types of structures of power. Similarly, categorization and classification are basic to collective representations of any society and this is the source of inequality of values and status. Then Beteille discusses in details the system of values and structure of power as sources and structures of inequality separately and tries to convince us that reducing one level to another would be an act of flight. He shows how the logic of values and symmetry of status has led many scholars to approach social inequality and social reality solely in terms of values and meaning and consider power as subservient to structure of meaning. In case of Indian ethnography, Beteille points out this reductionism in the work of Louis Dumount, who for him, reduces the social structure of caste to the value of hierarchy. For Beteille, study of social reality would be incomplete without understanding the dialectic between values and power (Beteille 1977).

It is interesting to note that in his critique of Geertz, Shankman (1984) cites Abner Cohen (1974) as a source of an alternative relationship between symbolism and politics. Cohen's work is important because what Beteille does for sociology, Cohen does it for social anthropology. Cohen also defines social anthropology as the study of the relationship between values and power. Man is not only symbolic but also political, hence man is two-dimensional (Cohen 1974).

Geertz and Analysis of Religion

Geertz starts his essay on religion with the following: "I shall confine my effort to developing, what following Parsons and Shils, I refer to as the cultural dimension of religious analysis" (1973: 89). But the title of Geertz's

essay is "Religion as a Cultural System." But cultural dimension of any phenomenon also does have a social aspect the distinction between them being only an analytical one. This means that one cannot even make a cultural analysis of a system unless one keeps in mind the point that the analytically abstractable cultural aspect of any system exists in a real structural context in which culture and social structure are inseparably interwoven. The problem with Geertz is that he takes this distinction to be a real one (cf. Foster 1981). Geertz's analysis of religion as a cultural system suffers from this confusion of mistaking the analytical distinction to be a real one and lacking in systematic treatment of social structures in the working of religious systems.

In fact anthropologist Sherry Ortner's critique that Geertz lacks a notion of systematic sociology is best illustrated in his definition of religion. Hence it is no wonder that excepting a passing reference to Durkheim's analysis of sacred (Geertz 1973: 88), there is not a single bibliographical reference to Durkheim's seminal work on religion in Geertz's text (cf. Durkheim 1976). Instead Geertz seems to fight with the ghost of Durkheim when he writes: "Religion is sociologically interesting not because, as vulgar positivism would have it, it describes the social order—, but because, like environment, political power, wealth, jural obligation, personal affection, and a sense of beauty, it shapes it" (Geertz in Bhavananda 2005: 46). But the seminal contribution of Durkheim lies in the fact that he shows us how religion shapes society. For Geertz the logical status of religious belief is that it is *apriori*: "Religious belief involves not a Baconian induction from everyday experience – for then we should all be agnostics but rather a priori experience of authority which transforms that experience" (ibid) But Geertz does not explore the sources of this *apriori* experience. There is no explanation for the *a priori* status of religious beliefs in Geertz. But Durkheim links the *apriori* status of religious beliefs to the *apriori* nature of social categories. Geertz starts by saying that the anthropological approach to religion is in a state of theoretical stagnation but in the end one wonders whether one has a theoretical advance or just simply a thick description of religion. Shankman sees it as a far more endemic problem in the whole of Geertz's thick description: "Geertz's loose equation of description with analysis, analysis with explanation, explanation with description and theory with all of these does not offer a refinement of debate" (Shankman 1984: 264).

Moreover, what is missing from Geertz's definition is the concept of church which is a key category in Durkheim's sociology of religion (Pickering 1984). But in his own ethnography of Javanese religion religious institutions play a crucial role (Geertz 1960). This perhaps can explain why in Geertz's essay we do not get a sense of what is the source of the symbol-system, what make the disparate symbols into a system, what gives the religious conceptions an aura of factuality and naturalness and how some symbols become part of a religious symbol-system and how some symbols are excluded from it. If Geertz would

have asked these questions he might have been forced to come to term with the issue of power, not only the aspect of its poetics and symbology but also its sociology. Moreover, in his essay Geertz refers to religious performances as important aspects of religious life which points to the need for a more elaborate and systemic engagement with the dynamics of religious rites. Durkheim (1915) here challenges us to understand the crucial significance of rites in religious life which are not only positive but also negative: negative rites are sometimes more significant than positive rites as it creates the condition for positive rites and which is also the place, in many instances, of internalization of religious beliefs. In Geertz, religious conceptions are clothed with an aura of factuality but how an arbitrary system of symbols gains an aura of factuality? To understand this one has to understand the dynamics of internalization which seems to have not received adequate attention from Geertz. It is probably for this reason that Sidney Mintz argues in his critique of Geertz that in case of human beings meanings are learnt and here lies the inescapable relationship between meaning and power (Mintz 1985: 157). On the other hand, internalization is a key concern with Durkheim (cf. Parsons 1949). This is perhaps the reason why institutions with both its coercive and ameliorative power are the single most important category in Durkheim's sociology of religion and education. It is not that Geertz not at all discusses the problem of pain and suffering in learning religious belief. He writes: "The purification rites involve forced sweating, induced vomiting and so on, to excel the sickness from the patient physically" (Geertz 1973: 105). But suffering here is very much a part of belief and theodicy and not the physical suffering inflicted upon the body which constitutes the central element in any negative religious rite.

Talal Asad (1983) argues in a similar vein that Geertz does not consider the conditions under which religious symbols can actually produce religious dispositions. Asad tells us about Augustine's emphasis on coercion as the condition for realization for truth. In Augustine's formulations, it is not mere religious symbols that implant true Christian dispositions but power—ranging all the way from law to the power of other human bodies. For Asad, Geertz does not abide by his own dictum that study of religion should relate meaning to socio-structural processes. For Asad, a mistaken distinction between instrumental and expressive aspect of social action does not allow Geertz to consider religion as a "technical action" involving disciplining of body and speech. This urges us to understand the link between sociology of religion and sociology of body (cf. Turner 1984). In Geertz's ethnography of Javanese religion we see this concern. For Geertz, the difference between man and animal is that the former is the bearer of bodily self-discipline (Geertz 1960: 247). Bodily discipline is a key concern for Geertz (1960) in his *Religion of Java*.

Asad goes on to argue that for Geertz the same symbols induce dispositions and place these in a cosmic framework. But for Asad, the symbolic process by which religious motivation are placed within a "cosmic framework" is

surely quite a different operation. "Theological discourse is not identical with liturgical utterances" and for Asad, Geertz's stance on religion seems more to be theological. While insisting on the primacy of meaning, Geertz does not treat the discursive practices by which meanings are constructed as problematic. Here it is not easy to escape the key question of power. Furthermore, for Asad, in Geertz's notion of symbols cognitive and communicative questions are mixed up which makes it difficult to inquire into the ways in which two are connected (Asad 1983: 239). Asad quotes Vygotsky to show that a symbol is not object or event to carry meaning but a set of relationships between objects uniquely brought together as complexes. Once symbol is defined in this way, the question of formulation of this complex becomes essential. And here one can not leave out the question of power, at least, as a constitutive element.

Geertz and the Analysis of Ideology

Geertz analyses ideology as a cultural system and tries to rescue it from the grip of what he calls interest theory and strain theory which treat ideology solely in terms of power.[1] For Geertz, these theorists have "the most rudimentary conception of the processes of symbolic formulation. The link between the causes of ideology and its effects seems adventitious because the connecting element – the autonomous process of symbolic formulation–is passed over in virtual silence" (1973: 207). But can the process of symbolic formulation be completely autonomous? For Geertz, "Both interest theory and strain theory go directly from source analysis to consequence analysis without ever seriously examining ideologies as systems of interacting symbols, as patterns of inter working meanings." But can one study the medial ground of the "interacting symbols" without interacting with their "source" and "consequence"? The problem here is that in his enthusiasm to rescue ideology and culture from crude grip of power theorists, Geertz imprisons them in a lofty world of `symbols' and `theatre' in which, as Asad argues, "occasionally it is people who do with symbols, more often it is symbols that do things to people" (Asad 1979: 241).

In this context, in his discussion of ideology, Beteille tells us that we lose as much by treating every ideological statement as a symbolic statement as much as we lose by treating it as simply a statement of power (Beteille1978). Beteille discusses two ideologies in great details-Marxism and the ideological system of Bankim Chandra, a nineteenth century Indian thinker. As against the usual interpretations, Beteille cautions us that in treating Marxism as an ideology neither should we see it as a mere quest for power nor should we see in Bankimchandra's *Anand Math* only a system of symbols.

The problem here is Geertz's notion of symbol and theory of culture. For Asad (1979), this is the problem of "the ideological conception of social structure and culture." Such a theory gives "logical priority to the system of authentic meaning supposedly shared by an ideologically defined community, and independent of political activities and economic conditions of its members"

(ibid: 614). The problem in such a theory of culture is a notion of rule and the determining role of `grammar'. Such a theory of culture is heavily mentalistic and linguistic. In the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Michael Jackson (1983) and Jean Comaroff (1985), we get an alternative view of culture and rule which interestingly enough also draws its inspiration from the language theory of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the philosophy of mind of Gilbert Ryle (1949) – the two frequently cited authors in Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*. The seminal contribution of Wittgenstein and Ryle lies in their successful fight against what Ryle has aptly termed as the `Official Ghost' of Descartes. Both of them point to a theory of culture and symbols in which neither of them has an autonomous domain because both of them are situated in a complex framework of embodiment, materiality and habitus.[2]

Geertz tells us that he wants to pursue an actor-oriented approach to social reality. But this seems to be missing. In the words of one of his admiring interpreters, "he limits particularity of his studies so as not to be concerned with particular individuals or the variations among them' (Rice 1980: 212). In his discussion of Balinese personhood and notion of time, Geertz himself writes: "the ceremonialisation of Balinese social interaction is no closer to being complete than is the anonymisation of persons or immobilization of time" (1973: 399). In his essay on law, Geertz gives us the example of one Mr. Regreg, who was excommunicated by the village council, whom even the king could not save. For him this was a case of a "form of life" (Geertz 1983). But Geertz does not tell us why he was excommunicated and what happened to him. What is lacking here is the perspective of the victim or what we may call a subaltern perspective (see Guha 1993). Geertz's efforts to break from structuralist formalism in favour of localization in itself does not go very far. It does not touch the life of victims. Thus For Scholte, "where feminists and Marxists see exploitation symbolic anthropologists discover there symbols" (Scholte 1986).

Geertz's Analysis of the Theatre State

Geertz's explores his symbolic anthropology of power in *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Geertz 1980). Here Geertz says that the state might be concerned with three things— Estates (Ranks), Governance and Pomps. For him, in the analysis of State we are so impressed with command that we see little else (Geertz 1980: 121). But with his study of the theatre state, he wants to restore "our sense of the ordering force of display, regard and drama." He resents that "The connection between dignified parts of government and efficient ones has been systematically misconceived.' (ibid: 122). Geertz argues that for Marx and Pareto, the conception of state is very much one of mystification in which "the semiotic aspects of the state remain so much mummery.' But Geertz again does not tell us what he exactly means by semiotics. In the whole of *The Interpretation of Cultures*, there is reference to CS Pierce only once. Pierce who is considered the pioneer of the semiotic

approach has been an inspiration for the emergence of a different kind of symbolic anthropology in which symbols do not have an autonomous domain but are continuously located in contexts of mediation (Singer 1984; Daniel 1984). Pierce explores tradic aspects of sign—sign, index and symbols. Once we understand semiotics as concerned with the triadic aspects of signs, then an agenda of semiotics of power and semiotics of state can not confine itself only to theatrical performance. Geertz himself writes: "no one remains dominant, who can not promise violence to recalcitrant, yet to reduce Negara to such tired common places is to miss the point" (ibid). But who decide which one is "tired commonplace"? The analyst / anthropologist / sociologist or the participant of the system? For Geertz, the theories of Marx and Pareto do not "actuate anything" (ibid). But what is "actuality" and what is not? Is it theoretically determined *apriori* in Geertz? In his programmatic "thick description" essay Geertz tells us not to be bound to any *apriori* theory but Negara seems to be working out an *apriori* theory of symbolic power which can so easily explain away violence as 'tired commonplace."

In *Negara*, status was its ruling obsession. For Geertz, "The Balinese state was pointed not towards tyranny, but rather towards spectacle.' In this state, the crucial task of legitimation was effected by the paradigmatic myth of the *madjapahit* which also explained the actual relations of command and obedience. The Ballinese politics, for him, can be seen as the opposition between two opposing forces-centripetal one of exemplary state ritual and the centrifugal one of state structure. In describing the relationship between village and the state, Geertz wants to break away from both the theories of "oriental despotism" and "village republic." He also argues that the relationship between gentry and peasantry in traditional Bali can not be formulated in terms of the contrast between town and country, but in terms of two polities – one centered in regional process (which mainly performs the expressive function) and the local polity (which performs the instrumental function). The relationship between the *Desha* and *Negara* was maintained by superintendents linking individual villagers to the individual lord. From the peasant's point of view, he had obligation only to the state was only a matter between him and the state, not between Desha as a group and Negara as a group. Geertz also gives us some picture about the taxation system in Bali. But once he comes to the dusty problem of taxation, he quickly points out that the whole apparatus was built by participation. There was no alienation of the basic means of production (Geertz 1980: 69). But this seems to be an assertion.

Geertz discusses in details the ceremonies of the state. "The state ceremonies of classical Bali were metaphysical theatre: theatre designed to express a view of the ultimate nature of reality and to shape the existing condition of life to be consonant with that reality" (ibid). It was in the court rituals that the Negara came alive. They exacted the main themes of Balinese political thought. But Shankman (1984) asks why Balinese Negara assumed

its unique configuration is neither answered nor even raised. Shankman draws on the works of James Boon to argue that slave trade made up one of the most important sources of the Raja's income. For Shankman, "Taxation was oppressive, slavery existed, how to explain all these in terms of poetics of power?" (1984: 267).

Stanley J. Tambiah looks at Balinese polity as one instance of a more general specie of a type of polity which he terms as "The Galactic Polity" (Tambiah 1985). Thus Balinese theatre state is not wholly unique and does not completely defy the prospect of "comparison." For a moment we may divert a bit from the issue of state to that of the problem of comparison and uniqueness. For Geertz, Balinese case is a unique case of power situation which calls for a new theory of the poetics of power. But as we shall shortly see in the case of Tambiah this is a specie of a broad genre. The same is the problem with the claimed uniqueness about Balinese trance. Balinese trance is one of the earliest subjects from which Geertz argues for a particularistic, interpretive approach. But Shankman cites the works of Belo and Bourguignon to argue that ritualized dissociations like trance provides the self with an alternate set of roles. "In this view, trance is a wide-spread culturally constitutive mechanism. Hence Balinese trance, the test case for interpretive approach, can be explained by a comparative approach' (Shankman 1984: 267). For Shankman, "We can not know what is truly unique to a particular culture if we lack a comparative basis" (ibid: 270). In a different context, James Boon has argued that "without a comparative analytical framework, every culture remains impenetrable" (Boon 1982: ix). It is of course a fact that excessive zeal for comparative analysis has, in many cases, done violence to the ethnographic uniqueness and particularity of the case and has furthered the cause of Western ethnocentrism (see Beteille 1979). But this should not make us completely blind to the comparative horizon as seems to be suggested by Geertz: "The task of theory building is not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them" (Geertz 1973: 26) But the point is that even with the help of comparative approach we can simultaneously be faithful to unique locality of the case and also see this as part of a broader genre including transnational connections, disjunctions and border crossings (cf. Giri 1993; Giri 2018).

To come back to Tambiah, Tambiah is critical of Geertz's that the Negara is engaged in ritual action while the Desha is in practical politics (and economics): "If there is such a divide between the symbology of ritual and [..] the pragmatics of political and economic conduct [..] then how indeed do we understand their existential basis and the manner of their fits and conjunction? If Geertz ignores or fails to convincingly address this problem, he exposes himself to the Marxist reposte that the Balinese Negara is truly `mystification'" (Tambiah 1985:319). For Tambiah, Geertz does not tell us why the theatre state was full of "dispute, violence and an enormous amount of micro-upheaval" (1980: 133). Tambiah links it to periodic campaigns to "the capture of booty of man power to resettle as

slaves or serfs near one's centre of control." For Tambiah, "Moreover, since taxes in kind were extracted from the commoners, as was their labor power for conducting wars and staging rituals, the expansion and contraction of the warring kingdoms must have a direct relationship to the control of these resources, and these in turn to the symbology of status competition and display [..]" (ibid: 321) For Tambiah, Geertz's dazzling sketches do not transcend the classical disjunctions between expressive and instrumental action, between power as pomp and power as control of resources and people. To overcome all these difficulties, Tambiah develops his theory of galactic polity.

For Tambiah, there is indeed a great deal of overlap between his notion of galactic polity and Geertz's portrait of *Negara*. Galactic polity represents the design of traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms, a design that coded in composite way cosmological, topographical and politico-economic features. This term is a translation of the concept of Mandala which is employed in many contexts ranging from Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and meditational practice, through art, architecture, court ritual, and theatre, to geopolitics and administration. For example in Burma and Thailand this pattern is employed in many contexts to describe the pantheon of gods and demons, the deployment spatially of a capital region and its provinces, the devolution of power on a scale of decreasing autonomies. In Thai case, this could be conceptualized in the case of Chakravartin who was not absolute but considered the "King of Kings." The lesser kings once they recognized the supremacy of the centre were allowed to remain as virtually autonomous vassal states. Hence, the polity could be represented as a centre oriented arrangement where in the satellite principalities of various magnitudes revolved around the central domain. In the Galactic system, there is perennial rebellion, personal strife and competition over the succession to office. It was always marked by political instability and much depended upon one's ability to manipulate networks through one's personal charisma. Geertz tells us that the palace contained the holy mountain which provided sacra and legitimacy to the kings. But we are not told that what happened to them when dynasties changed-whether a conquering king carried away the loser's sacra. Tambiah bases upon Worsely's (1972) document and Geertz's work on *Kinship in Bali* argue that Bali is no stranger to this model of polity. But in Negara itself, in Geertz's discussion of Dadia, one also gets a picture of all these perennial strifes within the ruling gentry. It is perhaps for this reason Tambiah writes: "It remains a mystery why Geertz has not incorporated these facts and trends into his model of Negara" (Tambiah 1985: 336). Moreover Tambiah situates this galactic polity in the native politico–economic context of administrative and agricultural involution.

In his paper on charisma, Geertz probes the inherent sacredness of the sovereign power (Geertz 1983: 123). His objective here, though not stated explicitly, is to prove how everywhere the symbolism of the king is the same as a symbolism of the victim. It is probably for this reason that James Boon

writes: "Geertz's interpretive theory-partly Weberian and Parsonian, developed in the light of Kluchkon, and often citing Burke as well – includes elements of negativity and victimage' (Boon 1982: 141). Boon situates Geertz in the pragmatic-dramatistic tradition where the perspective is one as summarized by Burke, "A dramatistic view of human motives thus culminates in the ironic admonition that the perversions of sacrificial principles (purgation by scapegoat, congregation, aggregation) are the constant temptation in human sciences" (ibid). The problem with this symbology of victimage is that it lacks the victim's perspective and is in fact an apologia of the Brahmins and Kings.

Further problems compound in his redefinition of charisma. "Charisma is a sign, not of popular appeal or charisma, but of being near the heart of things" (Geertz 1983: 123). For Geertz, "Heresy is as much as a child of orthodoxy in politics as in religion. It is not, after all, standing outside the social order in some excited state of self-regard that makes a political reader numinous but a deep intimate involvement in the master fictions by which that order lives" (ibid: 146). The politics of this reformulation becomes apparent when Geertz tells us: "the relevance of this approach rests on the perception that though both the structure and expression of social life change, the inner necessities that animate them do not." We are back to an unchanging and essentialist view of human nature and society.

Geertz and the Treatment of the Bazar Economy

Geertz develops his model of Bazar economy in the context of his study of Morocco. For Geertz (1979: 125), "Bazar reflects the meaning of life as it is lived in that part of the world." Geertz treats Bazar economy as a specific economic type, the in depth study of which can provide insight not only to the cultural system in which it is placed, but also to a different type of economic institution. Bazar as an economic system consists of exchange of goods and services. Here the basic problem is one of information: "The search for information is the central thing in the bazaar [..] The search for information one lacks and the protection of information one has is the name of the game [..]" (ibid: 125). Hence Geertz analyses intensely the information situation in the bazaar. Given the centrality of information; the relationship between the buyer and seller which takes a very particularistic and personal patron-client relationship, is not a dependency relationship, but a competitive relationship. This transforms a mob to reasonably familiar antagonists. In this relationship a fine structure of communication is formed that has a high degree of stability. The cliental relationship between the buyer and the seller is an actor-level attempt to counteract the system level deficiency in communication. For Geertz, bargain is competitive but not completely pragmatic as it takes place in an environment of moral expectation. Since bargaining is between a particular seller and a particular buyer, the search for information takes a "particular dimension of depth."

Geertz tells us that conflicts in the bazaar are mediated by the authority system of the *Amin*. The possibility of effective settlement of dispute depends upon the existence of reliable witness and this role is provided by the *Amin*. But Geertz does not tell us about the control of the information situation in the bazaar. If information is so valuable, then it must have been organized, produced and controlled in certain ways that might leave some participants in an advantageous position than others. Geertz himself writes: "Like any convention, bargaining might be breached." But even though Geertz believes in thick description, he does present us even a single ethnographic description of the breach of convention. Hence we have no empirical way of knowing how the *Amin* presents itself when such a situation occurs. Geertz does not investigate whether the delivery of the justice in the *Amin* system is subject to many-sided constraints imposed by the stratified social reality.

Geertz, Text and Dialogue

In the symbolic anthropology of Clifford Geertz, the metaphor of text plays an important role. For Geertz, culture is an ensemble of texts and he adopts a textual approach to ethnography and culture. But this does not necessarily lead to a dialogical mode of ethnography. For Scholte (1986: 110), "The choice of an exclusively textual mode of ethnographic representation prevents the hermeneutic circle from actualizing both its proper self-referential location and its open-ended spiral effect." For dialogical anthropologists, writing protects and even hides the self denying the anthropologist an active role in the direct encounter with the other (Dwyer 1982: 263; Crapanzano, 1977). The textual mode often implies that the other never actually speaks. It is probably for this reason that Tedlock considers thick description as "a gag rule on native discourse" (Tedlock 1983: 337).

William Roseberry sees some additional problems in treating culture as text: "A text is written; it is not writing. To see culture as an ensemble of texts or an art form is to remove culture from the process of its creation. If culture is a text, it is not everybody's text [..] Interpretation cannot be separated from what people say, what they do, what is done to them, because culture can not be so separated. As long as anthropologists are seduced by the intrinsic charms of a textual analysis that takes such separation as a point of honour, they will continue to do something other than what the task at hand calls for" (Roseberry 1982: 1028). Keesing captures similar disillusionment with the notion of the text: "The view of culture as text disguises more subtle problems— the distribution and use of cultural knowledge, the reification involved in depicting a `culture' as a coherent system [..] If anthropology is not to be another passing phase and fad, anthropology as an interpretive quest has to be situated more widely within a wider theory of society and cultural meanings [and] more carefully connected to real humans who live out their lives through them" (Keesing 1987: 169).

Geertz's Symbolic Anthropology and Ethnography

But in ethnographies that Geertz has written mainly in *The Religion of Java*, one sees a rich description of contexts in which human beings live. Geertz's theory of religion does not capture the complexity of institutional relations analyzed in *The Religion of Java*. It is helpful here to note the tension between Geertz's own ethnography and the theories that he propounds. And here we can take his ethnography of *The Religion of Java* as a case in point. For Geertz, to understand Javanese religion, we have to understand religions of different social groups mainly the *Abangan*, the *Santri* and *Prijaji*. Abangans are traditional peasants, Santris are the modern ones and the Prijaji's are the urbanite gentries. The Prijaji gentries emphasize the inner life of refined feeling and the external life of polite form. They emphasize much more the aesthetic aspect of religion. On the other hand, the Abangan peasant religion is ritualistic and tied to customs. Compared to modernistic Santris, they have a totalizing approach to religion. The Santris for Geertz are characterized by a concern for doctrines and apology for the social organization of religion.

In *The Religion of Java*, Geertz also discusses "instrumental aspects of religion" (Geertz 1960: 160). He discusses a dance form called Penjak which is "half-dance, half-fight [..] It is at the same time a practical system of self-defense" (ibid).

Geertz's symbolic anthropology bases upon the distinction between culture and social structure. Even though Geertz writes in *The Religion of Java* "The relationship between cultural patterns—beliefs, values and expressive symbols—and the set of social structures in which they are embedded is rarely one to one" (ibid: 160), he does not totally divorce cultural patterns from social structures in his ethnographic half as he does in his theoretical other half. This is also true of the spirit of his other ethnographies—for example, *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* and *Peddlers and Princes*—where Geertz shows the "reciprocal interplay between the evolving forms of human associations (social structures) and the no less changing vehicles of human thought (cultural symbols)."

On the Way With Some Concluding Reflections

Geertz's symbolic anthropology and his theoretical constructions of religion, ideology and state as cultural systems do not treat symbols in the sociological context of institutions, namely the institutions of power. But the relationship between symbols and power, culture and social structure is more complex in his ethnographic works. This suggests a tension between his ethnographic self and theoretical self which is not simply confined to Geertz and is at the heart of sociological and anthropological practice. But an acknowledgment of this tension can help us to move beyond a one-dimensional model and be attention to the dialectic of symbols and power in the constitution

and ongoing dynamics of self, culture and society.

A Postscript

This essay was first written in the spring of 1987 when I was a graduate student in Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA fresh from my master studies in Sociology from Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. In the mean time, I had also a chance to meet with Clifford Geertz in October 1994. One afternoon I just arrived at the reception of Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton and called Professor Geertz and he so cordially received me. The present essay discusses his work only up to 1983 but in the mean time he has gifted us many thoughtful works such as *Works and Lives: Anthropologists as Authors* (1988) and *Available Lights: Reflections on Anthropological Topics* (2000). I have also read Fred Inglis' (2000) book on Geertz, *Clifford Geertz: Culture, Custom and Ethics* where I was moved to read Inglis' description of Geertz's intervention in the release of human rights activists and political prisoners during Suharto's military dictatorship in Indonesia.

It was an enriching experience for me to attend the special session in the 2002 American Anthropology Association Meeting in New Orleans on Clifford Geertz. But during the evening I was speaking with Professor Pauline Kolenda from University of California, Berkeley that how interesting it would have been if there were some scholars from outside the Euro-American world reflecting upon the work of Geertz. After reading *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections On Philosophical Topics* where Geertz (2001) discusses Wittgenstein as his Guru, I have wondered how the trajectory of cultural anthropology would have been if Martin Heidegger was also a guru for Geertz. With Wittgenstein Geertz looks at culture as a "form of life" but if Heidegger would also have been his guru he would have probably also explored the dimension of silence integral to any work of language and communication (cf. Giri 2006). Probably this could have make him open to the spiritual ground and horizons of symbols and cultures including spiritual struggles over forms of life and cultural and symbolic systems that Geertz was so keen to describe thickly.[3]

If Geertz considered Wittgenstein his Guru, many considered Geertz their Guru and treated him as an iconic figure (see Alexander, Smith & Norton 2011). Acharya Bhabananda, known earlier as Bhabagrahi Mishra, is a noted writer and thinker from Odisha. He had been influenced by Geertz and considers Geertz as his Guru as does he consider Gandhi. Here what he writes deserves our careful consideration:

> I remember clearly how I nominated him as one of my *Guru* in the study of Anthropology and dedicated one of my books to him in Oriya titled MU (bellels-letters) [meaning I], written before-during-after the

'declaration of emergency' in India, expressing rhetorically as much as I could in discovering or rediscovering my 'inner-self/soul' (Atma). I am tempted to redefine what the word *Guru* means—it is he who dispels darkness and shows the light, the propounder of a new 'doctrine' or performs the purificatory rites (of course for Cultural Anthropology). [..]

[..] I think his [Geertz's] analytical interpretations have survived the passage of time—also space. To understand Geertz again and place his thought (of course anthropological) I quote him in his own words.

> We have moved (logically, not chronologically..) from Anthropology as the State of affairs upon which History acts, through Anthropology as the jungle through which History stumbles, to Anthropology as the grave in which is History is buried.

But from this 'grave,' I also, discover Gandhi (my political *guru*) as I find much of the 'ideas' of Geertz concurrently, already reflected or echoed in the writings of Gandhi—of course not so clearly articulated by Gandhi as he was not an academician. But his 'inner voice' prompted him to make irreconcilable statements sometimes bordering the academic territory in which 'culture' is being studied now, including Anthropology and other Social Sciences. I leave this innovative and finer analysis to Richard G. Fox whose book *Gandhian Utopia: Experiments with Culture* (I am thankful to Geertz, who had drawn my attention to the analysis of Richard G. Fox) seeks to establish this aspect in reinterpreting *Satyagraha*.

In conclusion, let me say now, I wish to fathom the *Prajna-Brahmanda* (the intellectual universe) and understand the thought process and methodological sensibility of Geertz. [..] Geertz can be 'taken over' by literary scholars interested in 'rhetorics' and composition, or by philosophers interested in the philosophy of pragmatism (*Local Knowledge*! or Gandhi's concept of *Gram Swaraj!*) (Bhavananda 2005: 7).

In the above paragraphs Bhavananda points to many issues and one of these is the theme of grave and birth from grave. This is the dynamics of regeneration of self, culture and the world to which symbols and symbolic realization can make a contribution. But symbols are here not just references of social and cultural systems as Geertz primarily engage with but also realities and possibilities of self-awakening and unrealized possibilities in self, culture Nature and the Divine—a possibility we find in J.P.S. Uberoi's approach to symbols which he terms semiological (Uberoi 1978). Uberoi here builds upon Goethe's approach to symbols and this journey with the symbolic is not just confined to social and cultural systems or symbols as cultural facts of thick description but realities and pathways of self-realization and mutual realization. Such a symbolic approach deals with symbols as pathways and invitations for

further self-realization and mutual realization, a new hermeneutics of self, other, Nature and Divine beyond fixed grammars of the symbolic order (see Foucault 2005). Bhavananda's last reference to Geertzian attention to local knowledge and Gandhian striving for Gram Swaraj challenges us to build further bridges between Gandhi and Geertz. A concern with local knowledge also calls for building social and political institutions where local knowledge is fostered and this challenges us to go beyond the prism and prison of the Nation-State. This is the theme of one of the last writings of Geertz (2004) which is so evocatively titled "What is a State if it is not a Sovereign?"

I was sad to hear from my friend Gernot Saalman of University of Freiburg in June 2007 that Geertz is no longer with us physically. I was meaning to email him thanking him for his generosity in sending me his Sidney Mintz Memorial Lecture at The Johns Hopkins University in honor of my teacher Sidney Mintz, "What is a State if it is not a Sovereign: Reflections on Politics in Complicated Places?" (see Geertz 2004). In this lecture Geertz reflects on the somberness of our times especially our broken hopes and dreams and how we can move forward. My email would not reach him physically but I dedicate this essay written when I was much more sociological than I am perhaps now to this great savant of humanity who has gifted us so much and who has nurtured so many creative beings.

Notes

1   Paul Ricouer (1986) tells us about three approaches to ideology in social thought—ideology as distortion, ideology as authority and ideology as integration. For Ricouer (1986: 261), the seminal contribution of Geertz lies in treating ideology as integrative: "Ideology integrates not only in space but also in time." For Ricouer, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson also treats ideology as integrative and finds parallels between Geertz and Erikson. Even though Geertz wants to break from both interest theory and strain theory, his approach, as Ricouer argues, seems closer to strain theory. This suggests psychoanalytic thrust in his symbolic anthropology. This psychoanalytic thrust is not confined only to his work on religion but also touches his work on religion where he talks about religious moods and motivations.

2   One does not necessarily have to agree with Marvin Harris's theory of cultural materialism fully in order to plead for a more grounded view of symbol and culture. Harris argues that Geertz's is a "a dematerialized concept of culture." For Harris, "Schneider and Geertz both reject the reductionist formalisms attempted by ethno scientists and structuralists but their commitment to cultural idealist principles is no less intense" (Harris 1980: 282).

3   In this context what Veena Das writes deserves our careful consideration:

When anthropologists have evoked the idea of forms of life, it has often been to suggest the importance of thick description, local knowledge or what it is to learn a rule. For Cavell [Stanely Cavell, the philosopher from Harvard] such conventional views of the idea of form of life eclipse the spiritual struggle of his investigations. What Cavell finds wanting in this conventional view of forms of life is that it not only obscures the mutual absorption of the natural and the social but also emphasizes form at the expense of life [..] the vertical sense of the form of life suggests the limit of what or who is recognized as human within a social form and provides the conditions of the use of criteria as applied to others. Thus the criteria of pain do not apply to that which does not exhibit signs of being a form of life—we do not ask whether a tape recorder that can be tuned on to play a shriek is feeling the pain. The distinction between the horizontal and vertical axes of forms of life takes us at least to the point at which we can appreciate not only the security provided by belonging to a community with shared agreements but also the dangers that human beings pose to each other. These dangers relate to not only disputation over forms but also what constitutes life. The blurring between what is human and what is not human sheds into blurring over what is life and what is not life (Das 2007: 15-16).

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