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Clifford Geertz, Cultural Anthropologist, Is Dead at 80

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Clifford Geertz, the eminent cultural anthropologist whose work focused on interpreting the symbols he believed give meaning and order to people's lives, died on Monday in Philadelphia. He was 80 and lived in [Princeton](#), N.J.



Laura Pedrick, 1998

Clifford Geertz

The cause was complications after heart surgery, according to an announcement by the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he had been on the faculty since 1970.

Best known for his theories of culture and cultural interpretation, Mr. Geertz was considered a founder of interpretive, or symbolic, anthropology. But his influence extended far beyond anthropology to many of the social sciences, and his writing had a literary flair that distinguished him from most theorists and ethnographers.

He won a National Book Critics Circle Award for “Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author” (1988), which examined four of his discipline’s forebears: Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Drawing on history, psychology, philosophy and literary criticism, Mr. Geertz analyzed and decoded the meanings of rituals, art, belief systems, institutions and other “symbols,” as he defined them.

“Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning,” he wrote in his 1973 book, “The Interpretation of Cultures” (Basic Books). The Times Literary Supplement called the book one of the 100 most important since World War II.

Mr. Geertz also wrote voluminously on his fieldwork in Indonesia and Morocco. In one of his most widely cited essays, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” included in “The Interpretation of Cultures,” he analyzed the kinship and social ties that are constructed, emphasized and maintained in this form of ritual “deep play” as if they were “an assemblage of texts.”

In his writings, Mr. Geertz drew a careful distinction between culture and social structure, differentiating himself from functionalists like Lévi-Strauss, who believed that rituals, institutions and other aspects of a culture could be best understood by the purposes they serve.

Whereas social structure embraces economic, political and social life and its institutional forms, Mr. Geertz said, culture is “a system of

meanings embodied in symbols” that provide people with a frame of reference to understand reality and animate their behavior. Culture, he argued, fills the gap between those things that are biological givens for our species and those we need to function in a complex, interdependent and changing world.

In short, in the Geertz formulation, the question to ask about cultural phenomena is not what they do, but what they mean. Mr. Geertz also argued against the idea that one could define the essence of humanity across all cultures.

“The notion that the essence of what it means to be human is most clearly revealed in those features of human culture that are universal rather than in those that are distinctive to this people or that is a prejudice that we are not obliged to share,” he wrote in 1966. “It may be in the cultural particularities of people — in their oddities — that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be generically human are to be found.”

Mr. Geertz was also deeply concerned about the anthropologist’s role and the discipline’s methodology. Recognizing the colonialist and Western heritage of anthropology, he believed that it was difficult for anyone from one culture to represent another accurately and meaningfully. He noted that anthropologists were hardly passive, objective observers, but rather individual creators of narratives, with their own voice.

Arguing that ethnographic reality does not exist apart from anthropologists’ written versions of it, he said that cultures and peoples should speak for themselves, with anthropologists learning to “converse with them” and interpret them.

In his book “Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology” (Basic Books, 1983), Mr. Geertz also addressed the question of whether someone from one culture can objectively understand another.

For him, the anthropologist's task is to use what he called thick description to interpret symbols by observing them in use. Therefore the anthropologist must be both empirically rigorous and a savvy interpreter, akin to a psychoanalyst. In 1972 he wrote that "cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses."

Mr. Geertz's elaborate theorizing and his later doubts about the limits of anthropological knowledge left some scholars nonplussed. As Jonathan Benthall, writing in *The New Statesman* in 1995, said: "He disappoints some colleagues because he comes up with no overarching theories."

Clifford Geertz was born on Aug. 23, 1926, in San Francisco, the son of Clifford and Lois Geertz. During World War II, he served in the Navy.

He received a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1950 from Antioch College, where a professor urged him to pursue his interests in values by studying anthropology. He went on to the social relations department at [Harvard](#), where he studied with the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn and the sociologist Talcott Parsons, receiving his Ph.D. in 1956.

Around this time, he did the first of a half dozen fieldwork stints in Indonesia, spending 1952 to 1954 in the central Javanese village of Pare. His early work on Indonesia combined aspects of more conventional ethnography and history with concerns about economic and political development in the wake of decolonization.

"The Religion of Java" (1960), his first major work, is an ethnographic description of Javanese religion. "Agricultural Involution" (1963) takes a big-picture view of modernization and economic development in the wake of Indonesian independence, while "Peddlers and Princes" (1963) focuses on development from the more microscopic level of the towns of Modjokuto in Java and Tabanan in Bali. A

century of social development in Modjokuto is the subject of “The Social History of an Indonesian Town” (1965).

“Kinship in Bali” (1975), written with his first wife, the anthropologist Hildred Storey, posited “an underlying order in Balinese kinship practices” in the cultural realm of symbols, patterns and ideas, despite differences in practices, or social structure, in different parts of the island.

“Negara: The Theater State in 19th Century Bali” (1981) examined the nature of royal families in tiny pre-colonial south Balinese kingdoms, while challenging the “power-centered tradition of political theory from Machiavelli and Hobbes to Marx.

Mr. Geertz’s marriage to Ms. Storey, who accompanied him on some of his early fieldwork, ended in divorce in 1982. She is a professor emeritus in the department of anthropology at Princeton. He is survived by his wife, Karen Blu, an anthropologist whom he married in 1987; his children from his first marriage, Erika Reading of Princeton, and Benjamin, of Kirkland, Wash.; and two grandchildren.

After beginning his academic career as a research associate and instructor at Harvard, Mr. Geertz spent two years in California. From 1958 to 1959, he was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto; he was later an assistant professor of anthropology at the [University of California, Berkeley](#). From 1960 until 1970, Mr. Geertz taught at the [University of Chicago](#), becoming a full professor in 1964. He joined the Institute for Advanced Study in 1970 as its first Professor of the Social Sciences and from 1978 to ’79 taught at [Oxford University](#).

Because of political turmoil in Indonesia, Mr. Geertz later turned his attention to Morocco, where he began doing fieldwork in the ancient village of Sefrou in 1963, returning five more times over the course of his career.

Profoundly influenced by his fieldwork there, he honed his comparative and historical approach in “Islam Observed” (1968), which the anthropologist Edmund Leach praised as “a highly insightful comparison between Islam as interpreted by Indonesians and Islam interpreted by Moroccans.”

By the end of his career, Mr. Geertz had grown discouraged about the ability of social science to generalize or develop sweeping theories, concluding that circumstances are too different among cultures, across time, and within societies. At the same time, he was heartened by the what he called the deprovincialization of anthropology, as the profession came to embrace ever more Asian, Middle Eastern and other non-Western scholars.

In his 1995 memoir, “After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist,” Mr. Geertz eloquently meditated on his field work and academic career, concluding that anthropology is “an excellent way, interesting, dismaying, useful and amusing, to expend a life.”