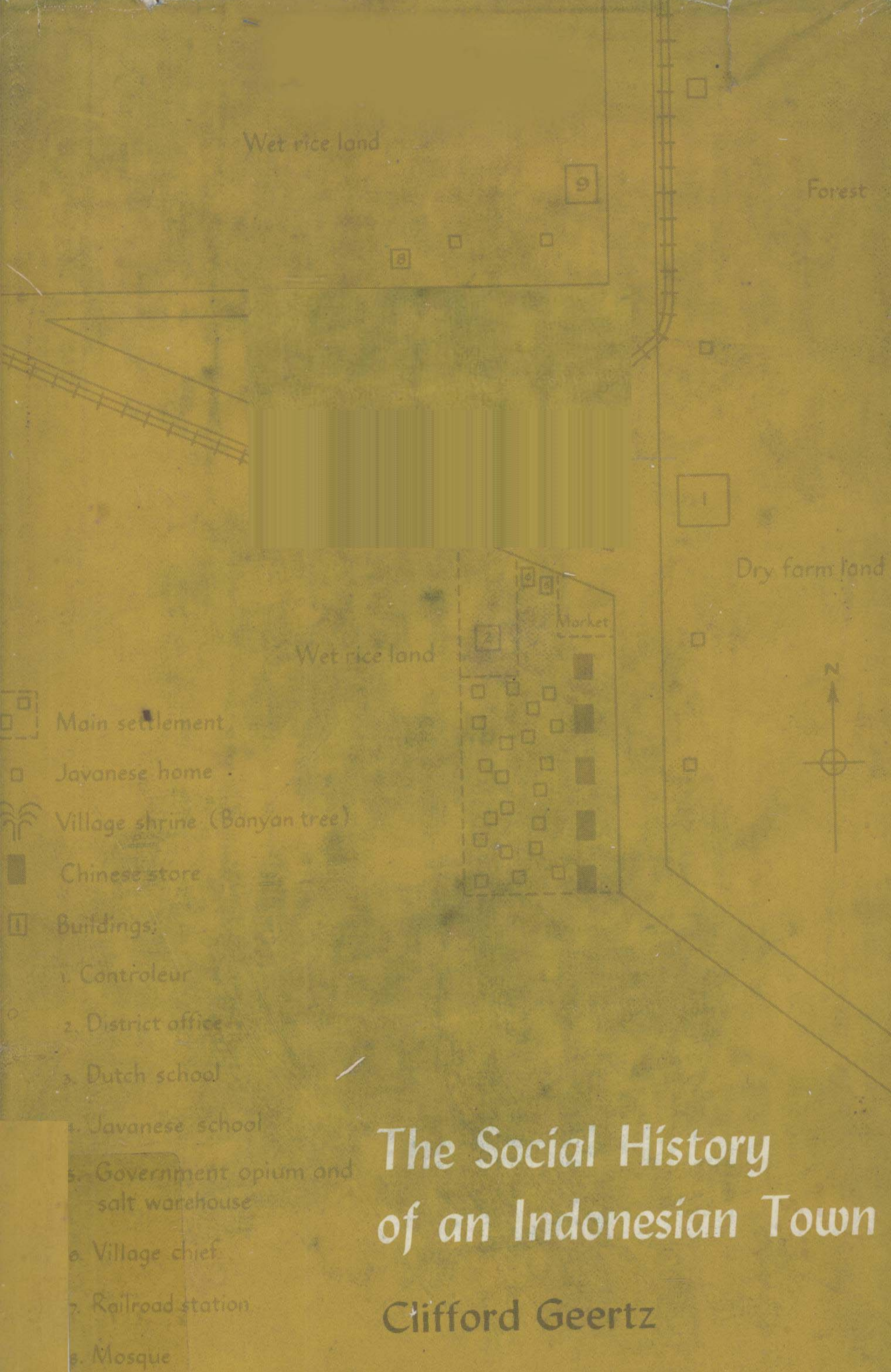

The Social History of an Indonesian Town

Clifford Geertz

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: A Society Stranded

This book represents an attempt to trace the social history of a single Javanese town from about the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was founded, to about the middle of the twentieth, when I lived in it for awhile, though the greater amount of attention is given to the second half of this period. The bulk of the material was gathered in the course of an eighteen-month anthropological field study made of the town and its surrounding villages during 1952–1954, and the work is intended to supplement the mainly nonhistorical cultural-anthropological works which have resulted from that study as well as to give a more synthetic account of the area than could be contained in those more specialized reports.[1]

1 The field work, which took place between May 1953 and September 1964, was sponsored by the Center for International Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology under a grant from the Ford Foundation. Works which have already appeared in the "Modjokuto Series" include: Alice G. Dewey, *Peasant Marketing in Java* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962); Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960); Hildred Geertz, *The Javanese Family* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961). One work on village life by Robert R. Jay, *Javanese Villagers: Social Relations in Rural Modjokuto,* is forthcoming from The Free Press of Glencoe. Two so-far unpublished manuscripts — on the Chinese community by Edward Ryan and on the local bureaucracy by Donald Fagg — complete the series.

As will be apparent from the notes that follow, I have relied heavily on these and other writings of my colleagues in the Modjokuto project and I have also drawn a great deal from personal discussion with them, both in the field and since the project's conclusion. But they are in no way responsible for my views nor is anything which I have written here to be taken as a consensual summary of the findings of the project as a

It is also intended to present a picture of the interaction of ecological, economic, social-structural, and cultural factors over a reasonably extended period of time and to come to some conclusions as to the relative importance of these factors in shaping human life. It is a history not of particular men and specific occurrences but of the changing forms of a particular sort of human community. It represents an attempt not so much to re-create the past as to discover its sociological character. As such, it is not a story and so need have neither moral nor plot. It is a theoretically controlled analysis of certain processes of social change and contains instead an argument.

Or, more exactly, several arguments. The first is that the "contemporary" (that is, mid-1954) village pattern of overcrowded settlements, hyperintensive wet-rice agriculture, rather flaccid social structure, and widespread cultural disorientation is the result, at least in significant part, of a peculiar form of interaction between capital-intensive commercial agriculture in European hands and labor-intensive subsistence agriculture in Javanese hands.

I have developed this thesis in more general terms and for Java as a whole in another volume.[2] But here I have tried to give it body by applying it in some detail to a particular case, the case which, in fact, originally suggested the general theory. In Modjokuto the dynamics of the confrontation between the large sugar-mill corporations and what the Javanese like to call the "little man" (that is, themselves) can be seen in its full concreteness and as it unfolds. The first major section of the book — that on rural development — conse-

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group. Finally, I should like to thank Professor W. F. Wertheim of the University of Amsterdam for valuable and extended criticism of an earlier version of this study (issued, in ditto form, as document C/56-18 of The Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology), though he is not to be held responsible for my arguments either.

[2] Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Cal.: The University of California Press, 1963).

quently stresses this theme: the more open and resilient quality of the original pattern of life established by the immigrant settlers of 1850 onward; the rigidification and closing up of this pattern during the heyday of the sugar plantations after the First World War; and the attempts, increasingly desperate, on the part of the peasantry to readjust to the fundamentally altered conditions of existence after the sudden collapse of these plantations in the depression and the occupation.

In its narrowest terms this first argument is that what has been called "dualism" — a radical segregation of modern and traditional economic, social, and cultural systems into sharply distinct, contrastively organized sectors — was not an inevitable result of the impact of Western activism upon Eastern passivity but, at least in the case at hand, of a particular sort of colonial policy which, with some deliberateness, rewarded activism among Europeans and passivity among Javanese. In so doing, this policy projected the Modjokuto countryman into a series of dilemmas from which he has yet to be freed, even now, when the men, the ideas, and the institutions that brought him to such a pass have for all intents and purposes disappeared into the same crosscurrent of world history — "the meeting of East and West" — that originally produced them.

The second and, so far as this study is concerned, more central argument is that urbanization in Modjokuto has consisted not of the conversion of a village into a town through a gradual elaboration of local customs and institutions but of the integration of extralocal groups into a, for this area, wholly novel pattern of social and cultural organization. Cosmopolitanism, such as it was, grew here not out of a sophistication of the parochial traditions of leading elements in the local population but rather out of the intrusion of already highly cosmopolitan groups into the local setting. In more technical but by now reasonably familiar terms, urbanization here was predominantly heterogenetic, not orthogenetic. It came from outside instead of emerging from the

body of the society in whose midst, physically speaking, it occurred.[3]

There were in turn a number of important results of this inpouring pattern of town formation. The first was that in its earliest stages the town was more a loose collection of estatelike social groups than an integrated municipal unit. It was a composite of self-contained status communities whose real basis was regional and interurban, not local and intra-urban, a collection of impermeable strata living, one might almost say, side by side, rather than a structure of interrelated classes engaged in continuous interaction. To use a term I shall employ again, it was a "hollow" town; and the history of its development is in large part a description of how and to what extent this hollowness was overcome and something resembling an organic urban unit — a "solid" town, as it were — was formed.

The search for a viable form is in fact the leitmotiv of Modjokuto urban history and, as the town soon became the political capital, the market center, and the cultural focus for the entire area, of its rural history as well. Especially after the 1930's, when the bankruptcy of the old pattern became thoroughly apparent, the town, to speak rather too anthropomorphically, pulled itself together and attached itself more firmly to the local agrarian community, relating the surrounding villages to itself (and hence indirectly to one another) in some difficult-to-define but nonetheless increasingly significant regional unit. But in both efforts it had at best indifferent success. In particular, it proved rather easier to dissolve older forms than to stabilize new ones. The town began to lose both its character as a mere collection of estatelike communities and its aloofness from local life. But what replaced this older pattern was a series of cultural and social experiments, none of which could be solidly established and each of which, consequently, soon gave way to another in a bewildering whirl

[3] On the othogenetic versus heterogenetic typology of cities, see Robert Redfield and Milton Singer, "The Cultural Role of Cities," *Economic Development and Cultural Change,* Vol. III (1954), pp. 53–73.

of directionless changes. The town and its environs became stranded, rather like the country as a whole, in a state of continuous transition.

Thus the recent phases of the town's history came to constitute an unbroken advance toward vagueness. Especially the years after the Revolution (that is, after 1950), when the whirl of innovation engulfed the entire scene, were marked by an increasing ambiguity of cultural categories coupled with a growing irregularity of social behavior. And from this double observation comes the central theoretical argument, also double, of our study: namely, (1) that ordered social change involves the attainment by the members of the population concerned of novel conceptions of the sorts of individuals and the sorts of groups (and the nature of the relations among such individuals and groups) that comprise their immediate social world; and (2) that such an attainment of conceptual form depends in turn upon the emergence of institutions through whose very operation the necessary categorizations and judgments can be developed and stabilized. The investigation of Modjokuto's progressive malaise comes down to an investigation of the reciprocal interplay between the evolving forms of human association (social structures) and the no less changing vehicles of human thought (cultural symbols) — to an analysis of a curious process in which a hundred years of fundamental economic and political transformation culminated in an ideological muddle.

The older pattern, when the town had the aspect of an assemblage of disconnected societies, lasted, as I have noted, until about the 1930's, though it had begun to weaken well before then and persisted in bits and pieces afterward.

There was the plantation-based expatriate community of Dutchmen who had come to the Indies in search of Holland's frontier. Masters in a country they did not understand and to which they did not, whatever they might say, really wish to belong, they lived for the most part outside the town in scattered enclaves near their mills and countinghouses. There was the tight little hierarchical world of patrician civil serv-

ants, clustered around the District Officer's *grande maison* and attempting, a little wistfully perhaps, to sustain the culture of a nobility without the powers of a nobility. There was the fly-by-night, catch-penny traders' ghetto engulfing the mosque and market, its members vigorously Islamic in belief, vigorously self-interested in practice. There were the Chinese, Indonesia's merchant strangers, lining the main highway with their drab stores and warehouses and linked by the defensive solidarity of the collectively despised. And there were the landless villagers pushed out of the countryside into crowded, helter-skelter pocket neighborhoods of thatch and bamboo shanties to form something neither quite a slum nor yet a village but something less substantial than either. Set in a swelling sea of impoverished peasants, this composite community, diverse and disjointed as it was, found and for more than four decades maintained a certain equilibrium that only the massed forces of nationalism, education, technical development, economic collapse, and, in the end, war and revolution finally shattered.

For a town slightly less than a century old, Modjokuto has experienced an incredible number of fundamental crises, all originating from outside itself and all of a kind to which a free and creative adaptation was virtually impossible. In the mid-nineteenth century there was the large-scale migration of central Javanese from the island's heartland eastward, stimulated at first by the upheaval created by the Java War of the 1830's and the forced-cultivation Culture System that followed it (1830–1870), and sustained later on by the intensive agroindustrial development by the Dutch of the previously lightly populated "East Hook" of Java.[4] In the 1910's

[4] The "East Hook" is properly the extreme eastern end of the island but is often used for the whole region east of Malang. Coincident with the commercial development of this, for Java, thinly populated area early in the century was a heavy migration of Madurese from their crowded homeland off the Surabaja coast, but Modjokuto, located on the margin between the hook and the central heartland, received only a moderate number of such immigrants and remained basically central Javanese in language and culture.

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and 1920's — colonialism's apogee in the Indies — there was the great sugar boom that turned the entire area into one of Java's most heavily commercialized regions, with large, very capital-intensive sugar mills locked in a symbiotic tie with peasant villages (upon whose rented land the cane was grown). In the 1930's there was the great depression and the disintegration almost overnight of the whole of this externally imposed factories-in-the field structure. In 1942 the Japanese arrived amid local rejoicing; in 1945, having subjected the Javanese to a style of rule that made colonialism appear beneficent by comparison, they left amid even more fervent rejoicing. Between 1945 and 1950 the town was plunged into the midst of the revolutionary struggle for independence, first being Republican territory and then — between 1948 and 1950 — occupied by the Dutch army. Since 1950, when sovereignty was finally transferred, the whole area has been of course part of the new *Republik*, experiencing on the one hand the general sense of release and promise that independence brought and on the other the general malaise resulting from the failure of the new state to deal effectively with the pervasive economic, political, and social problems it inherited from the old regime.

Through all this turmoil the town and its rural environs alike were at the mercy of distant events that they — or their populations — could neither understand nor, in any very resolute way, come to terms with. The response of both peasant and townsman to the local repercussions of these events was often ingenious and, at times and for a time, not altogether unsuccessful. But it was always defensive, reactive, evasive, and in the end, especially after the older patterns could no longer be shored up by makeshifts of one sort or another, sterile and debilitating.

Only after independence did a genuinely novel and creative response begin to emerge, and it was soon frustrated — whether permanently or not is uncertain — by the disorder into which a baffled, erratic, and at bottom, for all its brave words, thoroughly insecure national elite soon plunged the

entire country. From all this a strange sort of society emerged, one neither of the past nor of the present, but rather lingering on that deceptive threshold between them, which looks at once so very narrow to the eye of the ideologist and so very broad to that of the anthropologist.

The description of this strange sort of society — the *terminus ad quem* of our microhistory — occupies the final pages of this monograph. All societies, unrealized ones included, have a characteristic order, a particular sort of structure, even if that order and structure are incomplete, contradictory, and, in Republican Modjokuto at least, vague and inconstant in outline.

To discover and present that order, or a reasonable approximation of it, I have had recourse to a somewhat unusual sort of analysis of the main conceptual categories in terms of which the inhabitants of the Modjokuto of 1952 – 1954 themselves perceived their society — of the principles of social grouping they used, the manner in which they regarded those principles to be interrelated, and the qualitative characteristics in terms of which they assigned concrete individuals to particular groupings. Thus ethnography completes history, and the result is the construction of a model of Modjokuto's postrevolutionary social organization which, in my opinion anyway, the great bulk of its inhabitants in fact employed (if but half-consciously, very flexibly, and not always consistently) in order to comprehend that loose and unstable organization and evaluate their own place within it. This model is essentially a symbolic structure, that is, a system of public ideas and attitudes embodied in words, things, and conventionalized behavior. And as social action was not only understood in terms of this symbolic structure but also, in part and to a degree, judged and regulated, I have called it a "cultural paradigm."

The elements of this paradigm were drawn of course from the past — from the old system of loosely aggregated estate-like groups, from the hollow town and the encapsulated village. Islamic orthodoxy versus Javanist syncretism, gentry

versus peasantry, urban versus rural, progressive versus old-fashioned, learned versus ignorant — all these established contrasts remained the main axes of differentiation among men and groups. But their significance was altered in the light of new concerns and new aspirations drawn from the overpowering ethic of radical nationalism.

A technically trained intelligentsia, looking toward the emerging metropolitan culture of the great cities to the north and west, now appeared among the elite to challenge the traditional literati, who were striving to preserve classical forms and defend established perquisites. A landless rural mass expanded in lockstep with an underemployed urban proletariat. Religious puritans vied with left-wing secularists, defenders of inherited wisdom with celebrants of borrowed knowledge. Such summary terms as "modern" and "backward," "leader" and "(the) people," "town" and "village," "committed" and "impassive," "Islamic" and "Javanist" came to have somewhat different meanings, meanings at once sociologically less precise and ideologically more evocative.

The symbols in terms of which the differential life styles, the contrasting world views, and the varying moralities that characterized the older, compartmentalized society had been expressed were thus not discarded. On the contrary they were extended and generalized, and the over-all tenor at least of their content was maintained. But they were no longer simple indexes of received practice, untaught expressions of what Burke called "the golden assemblage of ancient opinions and rules of life." They were, even when their message was reactionary, emblems — banners even — of consciously adopted and vigorously defended ideological positions. The cake of custom crumbled into an assortment of doctrines. What had been concrete became abstract; what had been specific became general; what had been unquestioned grew apologetic. The new paradigm dotted a strange terrain with familiar landmarks artificially reconstructed. Half-formed, ill-defined, and, in the event, frustrated as it was, it consisted of an attempted adaptation of older cultural categories to an emerging system

of social relations — a system both less regular and less stable than the one it was replacing, and driven by a new set of values derived from the grand, if indistinct, ideals of the nationalist revolution.

Supporting, nourishing, and to an extent even producing this revised framework of social perception was a revised system of social organization. With the (partial) transformation of habitual judgments into ideological commitments came an (equally partial) transformation of the institutional base of everyday life from the capsule community centered on village, market, or bureaucracy to the social movement centered on the political party. Where the hollow town had been a collection of estates, the solid one was — or more accurately, was slowly and painfully striving to become — a mélange of factions.

In the immediate postrevolutionary period there were at the most general level four such factions in Modjokuto. Each was focused around one of the four major parties but consisted, aside from the rather rudimentary party structure itself, of a whole host of voluntary organizations directly or indirectly identified with it and with the ideological direction it supposedly represented. These major groupings were not themselves solidary, for there were cliques within factions and cabals within cliques, such more delicate nuances finding their reflection in the system of voluntary organizations that shifted, expanded, and differentiated to accommodate them. But the fourfold division formed the most fundamental framework of social alignment for those for whom the new categories of thought and the ideals they projected had become familiar. Even for those for whom they remained rather foreign — outside the town perhaps a majority of the population, and within it a good minority — this emerging system of contending social movements was, now that colonialism had evaporated, the main dynamic force with which they had somehow to come to terms.

Yet this system too was unable to establish itself firmly. It struggled constantly to develop and sink deep roots, but it

consistently failed to do so. The failure was due not merely to the continuing resistance of the older, and for many people still quite viable, pattern of life (though this resistance was real and important) but perhaps even more critically to the fact that the new pattern was a very dependent and very sensitive part of a larger, nationwide political order that, especially at its top, proved unable to find its ideological bearings or to act with the consistency and decisiveness that would have, for almost the first time, set Modjokuto within a social environment upon which it could rely and with which it could cope. Once again, though in a quite different way, the town was a victim of distant events that its inhabitants neither affected nor more than superficially understood. And once again, though also in a quite different way, the result was stagnation, a suspension of a process of cultural and social change, this time a truly revolutionary one, in midpassage. The town, to speak anthropomorphically once more, thrashed about in a desperate attempt to find its way to a new, more dynamic form of life — to become in fact a true town and the authentic capital of its region. But with each new tremor from the national center — and the tremors grew stronger and more frequent as time passed — it was plunged deeper into intellectual and moral confusion, and from that into social and economic disorganization.

Yet at least as late as 1957 (when I made a brief second trip to Modjokuto) the town not only functioned amid this gathering chaos but did so with a certain effectiveness, as though disorder had come to have its own routine. In the last chapter I have given an extended case history of a local election in which the way social activity in fact proceeded can be seen in concrete, detailed, and, above all, human terms. In itself this election — for the office of chief of a village half inside and half outside the town proper — is of little importance. Its passions, though intense, were parochial and have long since been replaced by others no doubt equally petty. Its effect upon the general direction of even Modjokuto's social development can hardly be said to have been

more than marginal; it was a mere incident in her political history and a trivial one at that. Nor should I like to argue that it was in any normal-curve sense of the term a typical instance of anything except the general quality of life in Central Java in the mid-1950's. But it was, like any good case history, immensely revealing of the basic elements of which it was composed, elements which in other forms and with other outcomes are, I am convinced, widespread throughout the underdeveloped world. And what is even more important (for I am less concerned with setting forth empirical generalizations than with penetrating to the forces that shape social action), it gives rise to some pointed questions about the general nature of the relations between cultural categories — the symbols in terms of which men think about and attempt to regulate their collective behavior — and social processes — the forms that that behavior, moved by many more forces than the merely ideational, actually takes.

Definitive answers to such questions are hardly to be looked for; it is enough merely to replace the questions with better ones. The record of Modjokuto's history — a history that continues as one writes it — is of course open to varying interpretations. One can see it, as no doubt some will, as but more proof that the premature introduction of "Western" ideas into countries like Indonesia is the main source of their malaise; or, as I do, as evidence that that malaise springs from the fact that the introduction of such ideas has been too partial, too long delayed, and, most importantly, too dissociated from the social arrangements that alone give meaning to the ideas. One can read it, as the emerging school of disenchanted internationalists no doubt will, as a case in point of the vanity of popular government and the inevitability of autocracy in underdeveloped nations; or, as I do, as a testimony to the vitality of such institutions when they are given a genuine opportunity to function and to how quickly, when truly available to those whom they are supposed to serve, they are taken up and mastered. One can read it, as will those connoisseurs of the simple folk who are always with us, as a

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