The Religion of Java

Clifford Geertz

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THE RELIGION OF JAVA

For the Wedono,

the Modin,

and my *abangan* Landlord

Nuwun Pangestunipun Sedaja Kalepatan Kula

Foreword

THIS IS the first of a series of descriptive monographs about various aspects of contemporary life in an actual and in many respects typical place in east central Java. For obvious reasons, the names given to locations and persons are fictitious, but the descriptions are based on direct observation.

The other monographs in this series will report on Village Life and Rural Economy (Robert Jay), The Market (Alice Dewey), Administrative Organization (Donald Fagg), Family Organization and Socialization (Hildred Geertz), and The Chinese Community (Edward Ryan).

The field work on which these monographs are based was conceived as a team project, a concerted effort by students of sociology and anthropology to study a segment of what was known to be a highly complex society. The decision to publish separately the reports of the various investigators is due partly to practical considerations, but it is also based on the nature of the phenomena. Since the complexity of even this small segment of Javanese society compelled each investigator to limit his observations to one set of institutions, a truly *joint* general report would not have been feasible, however desirable.

For a fuller and more balanced view of Javanese society, reading of all the reports is of course recommended; but each report has been written in such a way that the specialist can comprehend the relationship between his interest and the whole. For instance, the student interested in, say, farm economy, will find sufficient background in Dr. Jay's monograph to comprehend how peasant farming is related to other aspects of Javanese life.

Because of the nature of its subject matter, the present report by Dr. Clifford Geertz provides perhaps a wider view of Javanese life than the others, and it is therefore fitting that it should be the first to appear.

DOUGLAS OLIVER

Cambridge, Mass.
1959

Acknowledgments

As THE research project upon which this work is based has extended over a six-year period, both in Indonesia and in the United States, the number of people who have given valuable assistance toward the successful completion of it are literally legion. Here, I can mention but a few of those to whom I am indebted.

To Alice Dewey, Donald Fagg, Rufus Hendon, Jane Hendon, Robert Jay, Anne Jay, Edward Ryan, and Anola Ryan, fellow members of the field team, I have a debt which is both professional and personal. Having exchanged ideas and data with them almost continually over the past several years, it is not easy to separate out in the following what is originally my own and what originally I learned from them, although for the general pattern of organization and analysis I am, of course, alone responsible. Particularly my wife, Hildred Geertz, also a member of the group, has shaped the development of this work in every phase, from the collection of the data, through the analysis of it, to the actual writing of the book.

To the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which administered the grant which was provided by the Ford Foundation, I am also grateful. In particular, Dr. Douglas L. Oliver, who originated the research project, Dr. Max Millikan, director of the Center, and Mr. Richard Hatch, publications director, have been very helpful throughout the course of the project.

Selecting Indonesians to whom to offer explicit thanks is an even more difficult task, for kindness, patience, and helpfulness to us was almost universal among the hundreds of people with whom we had dealings in that country. Our official hosts were the Indonesian Government and the National University of Gadjah Mada in Djogjakarta, and I wish to thank in this connection Mr. Suwanto, Cultural Attaché of the Indonesian Embassy at the time the original arrangements for the project were made, Professor Sardjito, President of the University of Gadjah Mada, Mr. Abdur Rachman,

then Secretary to the Resident of Kediri, and R. M. Soemomihardjo, the District-Officer of "Modjokuto." To the other, necessarily more obscure, Indonesians, in Modjokuto and elsewhere, who in countless ways aided my work, I am very grateful, and hope that in some way this book may contribute to the realization of their aspiration to build a strong, stable, prosperous, and democratic "New Indonesia."

CLIFFORD GEERTZ

Berkeley
1959

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Introduction

MODJOKUTO,* the small town in east central Java within which this study was made, lies at the extreme eastern edge of a great irrigated rice plain through which a rambling, circular-swinging river flows northward toward the Java Sea. A half-day's drive from Surabaja, the Republic of Indonesia's second largest city and best port, Modjokuto marks the point at which the flat, fertile countryside begins to tilt upward toward the cluster of active volcanoes which tower over it to the east and whose periodic eruptions provide much of its fertility.

A commercial, educational, and administrative center for eighteen surrounding villages, the town has a population of almost 20,000, of whom about 18,000 are Javanese, 1,800 Chinese, and the remainder a handful of Arabs, Indians, and other minorities. Its spatial form is determined by the juncture of three poorly paved secondary roads, one from Surabaja, the provincial capital, one from the regional capital fifteen miles to the west, and one from a large inland city on the other side of the eastern mountains.

The town is surrounded on three sides by thousands of small mud-walled rice fields, most of them not more than twenty-five yards square. Flooded in the rainy season by means of an age-old irrigation system of gullies, springs, and water traps improved by Dutch-introduced cement dams and steel sluice gates, these fields are cultivated almost entirely in rice for six months of every year. In the dry season, which is pronounced in East Java, the land does not lie fallow but is planted in maize, soybeans, peanuts, onions, peppers, or sweet potatoes—usually two or three of these in turn. Almost all land-holdings are small—under three acres—and although there is, particularly near the town, considerable sharecrop tenancy, the landlords in-

*This description of the town was published earlier in essentially the same form as part of my article, "Religious Belief and Economic Behavior in a Central Javanese Town: Some Preliminary Considerations," *Economic Development and Cultural Change,* Vol. 4, No. 2 (January, 1956), pp. 138–158.

volved are not absentee nor are their holdings any larger, with one or two not very dramatic exceptions, than those of the peasants themselves.

On the fourth side of Modjokuto, the southwest, lies either forest or dry, broken, largely unirrigable land on which, in the early part of this century, an extensive plantation system in coffee, rubber, and sugar was built up. Dutch-owned, Dutch-managed, and Javanese-worked, this network of plantations and sugar mills had a heavy impact on the economy of Modjokuto before the war. As the town was founded only toward the latter half of the nineteenth century, the interaction between the small-scale, intensive wet-rice farming system practiced by the independent Javanese peasant and the large-scale, extensive cash-crop estate agriculture of the Dutch shaped the economic history of the region almost since the beginning.

The Dutch are gone from Modjokuto now, their estate and factory system shaken by the depression and shattered by the war and revolution. What remains is a peasantry very used both to money and to foreign goods, tremendous underemployment both rural and urban, and an overcomplex economic system in which the Chinese minority controls the main streams of trade. The Chinese form the heart of the economic circulatory system of Modjokuto, pressing goods, many of them imported, down through its arteries, pulling back goods, the greater part of them agricultural, through its veins, and passing them on to the large urban centers for further distribution. Javanese commercial activity becomes relevant only between the ends of the two channels—where they braid out into a complex network of tiny, doubled-over, and marvelously interwound economic capillaries reaching into the small crevices of native life.

There are two business districts, both of them lined with small, open-front, wooden stores, almost all Chinese-run. Inside the stores one finds hardware, home furnishings, various types of food, jewelry, false teeth, automobile and bicycle parts, building materials, textiles, and drugs—from sulfa to such promising herbs as crocodile tongue and cat's beard. Even more important in terms of economic power, the Chinese control the trade in dry-season crops grown in Javanese fields, and their mills process the rice from those fields (although for the past few years a great part of the actual buying has been done under government contract and, nominally, under government control). They own almost all the trucking, almost all the string-and-bailing-wire jitneys which carry a great proportion (with the busses and the train) of inter-local travel, and almost all the bicycle rickshaws which, Javanese-pedaled, provide the bulk of passenger transport within the town. The larger small-scale factories in town and outside it—rice, lumber, soda pop, bread, charcoal—are, with a few notable exceptions, in Chinese hands. Chinese own the movie and the theater where Javanese plays are given, and they manage the carnival when it comes to town. They are prevented from totally dominating the economy by only one restriction: they are forbidden, by a Dutch law continued into the Republican period, to hold farm land.

The Javanese stores, almost all of them marginal, number about a dozen, most of them in the secondary business section. The core of native-run commercial life is the market, where each day hundreds of professional or semi-

professional Javanese salesmen and speculators, both men and women, bargain vigorously in a desperate attempt to earn a living or part of a living from small-scale, person-to-person trade. Textiles, daily food supplies, and dry-season crops probably form the bulk of the business; but buttons, dried fish, mats, baskets, perfumes, religious books, cooked food and hot coffee, chairs and tables, nails, ready-made clothing, meat, patent medicines, leather goods, parasols, pots and pans—in fact, almost everything portable—are each day passed from hand to hand to someone's (usually small) profit.

In the market you can have your hair cut, your bicycle fixed, and your pants mended while you wait. For an Indonesian quarter you can rent a spot under a tree or a wooden shed and sell cigarettes for a cent more than you just paid for them in a Chinese store across the street. You can buy a basket of corn in the morning and sell it at noon, never leaving the market—getting your profit out of the slight rise in price which takes place every day as the market day wears on. (If you are a friend or a paying acquaintance of the man who runs the scales, you may make something out of the greater weight the corn has when you sell it than when you bought it.) Or, for two rupiahs a day (and a few hundred rupiahs capital), you can become one of the aristocrats of the market with a three-meters wide stall of your own, selling imported and domestic textiles for as much more than they are worth as you can wheedle an unwary peasant into paying. For the Modjokuto Javanese, whether buyer or seller, the market is the very model of commercial life, the source of nearly all his ideas of the possible and the proper in economic behavior.

Aside from petty commerce, three other nonagricultural activities play an important part in the Javanese sector of the economy: simple manual labor, independent craft and repair work, and white-collar office work. The manual laborers, if they find work at all, may be employed by the Chinese in their rice mills, lumber yards, or other enterprises; by the government fixing roads, building irrigation dams, or sweeping streets; or by one of the scattered "here today, gone tomorrow" Javanese cottage industries. A great many are employed on the narrow-gauge railroad which runs four short passenger trains a day from the regional capital through Modjokuto to connect with the main Surabaja line fifteen miles northward. Many, too, are servants of the richer townsmen, although the departure of the Dutch has markedly reduced job opportunities in this field. The independent artisans—carpenters, chauffeurs, bricklayers, blacksmiths, watchmakers, barbers, tailors—are spread unevenly throughout the town, for they work mostly in their own homes, accepting jobs as they come fitfully to them, and drifting uneasily into unskilled occupations if forced to by economic pressure.

The white-collar clerks, teachers, and government officials form the intellectual and social elite of Modjokuto, inheritors of a political tradition in which the ability to read and write was confined to a hereditary court class born to rule and venerated for doing so. Many of the old caste marks of the literati are nearly gone now—the variously colored parasols symbolizing rank, the deep bow of the inferior to touch the knee of the standing superior, the proclamation of pedigree through the use of court title, the tongue-tied

shame of the peasant in the presence of the government official—but the general attitude of respect and subservience on the part of the uneducated toward the educated remains.

The number of the educated has been increasing rather rapidly of late with the post-revolutionary expansion of the school system. In Modjokuto there are a half dozen six-grade government elementary schools, a government technical school at the junior high level, three private junior high schools, a government school for elementary teachers, and scattered other private schools including Chinese and Catholic elementary schools. Further, each of the surrounding villages has a school of its own, and there is still a number of old-style religious schools in the area which have recently been semi-modernized. The result of this sudden florescence of educational activity is that teachers, on the one hand, and advanced students, on the other, form two of the most clearly defined and dynamic social groups within the society, perhaps the two groups who are least closely bound to the Javanese past and whose relationships with the rest of the society are the most ambiguous.

There are two major government offices in Modjokuto, for it is the capital both of a district (*kewedanan*)* and a subdistrict (*ketjamatan*). The subdistrict, the lowest level to which the wholly appointive national bureaucracy reaches, administers eighteen villages all lying within ten miles of town. The district administers five contiguous subdistricts, including that of Modjokuto itself, and is in turn subordinate to the regional (*kebupaten*) government, the capital of which is the nearby city of Bragang. In addition, the regional headquarters of the central government police force is in Modjokuto rather than in Bragang, as are also the government pawnshop and the government hospital for the area. Offices concerned with the repair of roadways, the building and maintenance of irrigation systems, the improvement of agriculture, and the administration of the market further swell the total of white-collar workers employed or underemployed by the government, as do the post office and the office of the local representative of the Ministry of Religion.

These five major occupational types—farmer, petty trader, independent artisan, manual laborer, and white-collar clerk, teacher, or administrator—represent the Javanese population of Modjokuto, grouped according to their economic activity. The crystallized typology of work patterns reflects the underlying organization of the economic system of the town of which it is an outcome. Similarly, the same population grouped according to their world outlook—according to their religious beliefs, ethical preferences, and political ideologies—yields three main cultural types which reflect the moral organization of Javanese culture as it is manifested in Modjokuto, the general ideas of order in terms of which the Javanese farmer, laborer, artisan, trader,

* The spelling of Indonesian words conforms to the current official orthography. Javanese words are spelled in accordance with the system currently employed by Balai Pustaka (a publishing agency of the Ministry of Education) in its publications in that language. This is identical with the orthography of Th. Pigeaud's *Javaans-Nederlands Handwoordenboek* (Groningen, n.d.), except that *oe* is replaced by *u*. Arabic words are also spelled in accordance with the Javanese system.