

AFTER THE FACT

Two Countries

Four Decades

One Anthropologist

CLIFFORD
GEERTZ

After the Fact

*Two Countries, Four Decades,
One Anthropologist*

Clifford Geertz

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Towns

Suppose, having entangled yourself every now and again over four decades or so in the goings-on in two provincial towns, one a Southeast Asian bend in the road, one a North African outpost and passage point, you wished to say something about how those goings-on had changed. You could contrast then and now, before and after, describe what life used to be like, what it has since become. You could write a narrative, a story of how one thing led to another, and those to a third: “and then . . . and then.” You could invent indexes and describe trends: more individualism, less religiosity, rising welfare, declining morale. You could produce a memoir, look back at the past through the blaze of the present, struggling to re-experience. You could outline stages—Traditional, Modern, Postmodern; Feudalism, Colonialism, Independence—and postulate a goal for it all: the withered state, the iron cage. You could describe the transformation of institutions, structures in motion: the family, the market, the civil service, the school. You could even build a model, conceive a process, propose a theory. You could draw graphs.

The problem is that more has changed, and more disjointly, than one at first imagines. The two towns of course have altered, in many ways superficially, in a few profoundly. But so, and likewise, has the anthropologist. So has the discipline within which the anthropologist works, the intellectual setting within which that

discipline exists, and the moral basis on which it rests. So have the countries in which the two towns are enclosed and the international world in which the two countries are enclosed. So has just about everyone's sense of what is available from life. It is Heraclitus cubed and worse. When everything changes, from the small and immediate to the vast and abstract—the object of study, the world immediately around it, the student, the world immediately around him, and the wider world around them both—there seems to be no place to stand so as to locate just what has altered and how.

The Heraclitan image is in fact false, or anyway misleading. Time, this sort of time, part personal, part vocational, part political, part (whatever that might mean) philosophical, does not flow like some vast river catching up all its tributaries and heading toward some final sea or cataract, but as larger and smaller streams, twisting and turning and now and then crossing, running together for a while, separating again. Nor does it move in shorter and longer cycles and durations, superimposed one upon another as a complex wave for an harmonic analyst to factor out. It is not history one is faced with, nor biography, but a confusion of histories, a swarm of biographies. There is order in it all of some sort, but it is the order of a squall or a street market: nothing metrical.

It is necessary, then, to be satisfied with swirls, confluxions, and inconstant connections; clouds collecting, clouds dispersing. There is no general story to be told, no synoptic picture to be had. Or if there is, no one, certainly no one wandering into the middle of them like Fabrice at Waterloo, is in a position to construct them, neither at the time nor later. What we can construct, if we keep notes and survive, are hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things that seem to have happened: pieced-together patternings, after the fact.

To state this mere observation about what actually takes place when someone tries to “make sense” out of something known about from assorted materials encountered while poking about in the accidental dramas of the common world is to bring on a train of worrying questions. What has become of objectivity? What

assures us we have things right? Where has all the science gone? It may just be, however, that all understanding (and indeed, if distributive, bottom-up models of the brain are right, consciousness as such) trails life in just this way. Floundering through mere happenings and then concocting accounts of how they hang together is what knowledge and illusion alike consist in. The accounts are concocted out of available notions, cultural equipment ready to hand. But like any equipment it is brought to the task; value added, not extracted. If objectivity, rightness, and science are to be had it is not by pretending they run free of the exertions which make or unmake them.

To form my accounts of change, in my towns, my profession, my world, and myself, calls thus not for plotted narrative, measurement, reminiscence, or structural progression, and certainly not for graphs; though these have their uses (as do models and theorizings) in setting frames and defining issues. It calls for showing how particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there, can be woven together with a variety of facts and a battery of interpretations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go. Myth, it has been said, I think by Northrop Frye, describes not what happened but what happens. Science, social science anyway, is much the same, save that its descriptions make claim to solider grounding and sounder thought, and aspire, sometimes, to a certain dispassion.



I first went to the Southeast Asian town, Pare, Indonesia, a district seat in the great Brantas river plain of east central Java, in 1952. It was less than two years since the Kingdom of the Netherlands had transferred sovereignty, after five years of scattered and intermittent fighting, to the Republic of Indonesia. I was part of a team of graduate students sent out from Harvard to open up that part of the now unowned world for American social science. There were ten of us, including my then wife, and we arrived in Jakarta by ship three weeks from Rotterdam (Gibraltar, Suez, Colombo, Singapore, names with a romance they now have largely lost) a day

after the first attempted coup in the new state's history. There were tanks in the streets, and the political living rooms of the capital were alive with rumors, hopes, dashed hopes, and imaginings of new conspiracies.

I first went to the North African town, Sefrou, Morocco, a district seat at the foot of the Middle Atlas Mountains thirty kilometers due south of Fez, in 1963, with the notion of perhaps setting up there a rather different sort of collective study. (I was, by then, an assistant professor at the University of Chicago, positioning graduate students much as I had myself been positioned.) It was about six years after the end of the French Protectorate, and Muhammad V, the charismatic hero-king who had returned from French-imposed exile in Madagascar to capture the nationalist movement and lead his people to independence, had suddenly died after a nasal operation, supposed to be minor. His son, Hassan II, thirty-two years old, a hard-set military figure and reputedly something of a sports-car playboy, a Moroccan Prince Hal, had just been precipitated onto the throne. Amid a passionate outburst of mass grief, frightening sometimes in its sheer abandon, the political cafés of Rabat—where, having flown in, more or less on impulse, from a sort of anthropology summit conference in Britain, I then was living—were humming with suspicions about the old king's death, doubts about the new one's staying power, and speculations about who would be the first to test it.

Entry of this sort into an *entr'acte* where all the really critical things seem just to have happened yesterday and just about to happen tomorrow, induces an uncomfortable sense of having come too late and arrived too early, a sense which in my case never afterward left me. In Pare or in Sefrou, in 1952, 1958, 1963, 1964, 1966, 1969, 1971, 1972, 1976, or 1986, it always seemed not the right time, but a pause between right times, between a turbulence somehow got through and another one obscurely looming. Change, apparently, is not a parade that can be watched as it passes.

Pare in the early fifties was a shabby, alternately hot and dusty and hot and muddy crossroads town of perhaps twenty thousand (a

couple thousand of them Chinese), and the regional hub, depending on how and for what purposes you defined its hinterland, for anywhere between a hundred thousand and a quarter million villagers. A few years away from its first, and, as it turned out, last, experience with genuinely open parliamentary elections, it, with the countryside around it, was caught up in a rising clamor of political bitterness. Four major parties, each determined, or so it seemed, to capture absolute power and do away, legally if possible, physically if necessary, with the others, dominated public life, and made of it, as it also turned out, a prelude to killing fields. Two of these parties were religious, that is, Islamist, one purportedly progressive and reformist, one purportedly traditional and revivalist, though the differences between them were more cultural than anything else. The other two were at least ostensibly secular, though much encrusted with local belief and deeply hostile to all forms of rigorist Islam: a so-called Nationalist Party, claiming fidelity to the glowing, if rather haphazard, ideas of Indonesia's founding spirit, President Sukarno, and the Communist Party, the largest then outside the Sino-Soviet bloc.

The elections were held in 1955, precisely a year after I left. By the time I got back in 1971 (having been to Morocco—and to Bali—in the meantime), the killing fields had come and gone, the national regime had changed from civilian to military, and what politics existed was dominated by a semi-official umbrella party promoting a semi-official civil religion. Pare was still physically about what it had been. With a net outflow of population nearly matching natural increase, it was not even much larger. The same people, the same groups (though there were no Communists, and fewer Sukarnoists), the same bureaus, were still in charge, and most of them operated with the same, formal and status-ridden, ideas of right and propriety. Daily life, except for the fact that the ideologues were quiet or silenced, was not much different, nor, the Green Revolution only beginning to take hold, was the economy. What was different, or anyway seemed different to me, was mood, humor, the color of experience. It was a chastened place.

In the 1955 elections the Communists won about three-quarters

of the town vote, the revivalist Muslims about three-quarters of the village vote. The Sukarnoists and the reformist Muslims divided most of the rest, though as they were rooted among the more influential elements in both town and countryside, the result was less lopsided in power terms than the sheer numbers might suggest. But it was lopsided enough, and it got rapidly more so as the decade wore on. A nasty surprise to both the winners and the losers, who suddenly realized what high stakes they were playing for and how near the showdown was, the election results led to an explosion of to-the-knife conceptions of political combat. An “it’s us or them” frenzy descended upon the town and the region around it, not to be dispersed until the 1965 bloodbath finally determined who was the us, who the them.

This furious mixture of fear and bravado was pervasive in Pare as early as 1958, when I visited it for a week during the time I was working in Bali. (It had not yet set in on that supposedly dreaming island, though it eventually did so with a vengeance and, if anything, an even bloodier outcome.) In the country at large, the balance among the major parties in the 1955 election was reasonably even. The Sukarnoists and the reformist Muslims got a shade more than a fifth of the vote each, the revivalist Muslims and the Communists a shade less. In its polarized state between popular radicalism and popular revivalism, romantic democracy right and left, as well as in the relentlessness of its passions, Pare was thus atypical. But, a moral for enthusiasts of statistical “representativeness” as the only basis for generalization, and for those who think large-scale conclusions can come only from large-scale investigations, it turned out, over the course of the decade, to have been marvelously predictive of things to come: the leading edge of national disaster.

After the elections, and most especially after 1959, when Sukarno, beset, as he put it in that expansive way of his, like Dante in the *Divina Commedia* by the devils of liberalism, individualism, adventurism, factionalism, rebellion, and the multi-party system, suspended constitutional democracy, the politics of terror took hold in Pare with astonishing speed. Squatters flooded onto former Dutch plantation lands and forcibly resisted government efforts to

remove them, leading to capsized tractors, swishing sickles, and panic shootings. Muslim youths organized paramilitary training centers, which were then attacked by Communist youths. Sharecropping peasants, enraged by evasions of land reform laws, pronounced the fields they were working their own and challenged the legal owners to do something about it. The reformist Muslim party was banned, driving the religious rightward; Sukarno backed away from the Nationalists, driving the secularists leftward. Mass rallies became daily affairs, increasingly large, increasingly aggressive. Parades of shouting militants marched on government offices. Civil servants cowered in their houses. Religious schools were attacked. Left-wing newspaper distributors had their offices trashed. "Outside agitators" arrived from all directions calling for the elimination of imperialist satans or soulless kaffirs. Weapons got distributed. Lists got drawn up. Letters got sent.

Panic and intransigence grew, thus, in tandem, mutually reinforcing one another and deepening the conviction that the losers were really going to lose and the winners really to win. When the massacres finally arrived, they seemed, as do most popular convulsions—takings of Winter Palaces, stormings of Bastilles—a postscript to a story long in the writing. If, as the local leader of the Nationalist Party, you know not only that the Left has marked you for a festive execution but that it plans to use your grand and rambling house as its Kremlin afterward, or, if, as the head of a Communist peasant union, you have seen yourself, horned, tailed, and hanging from a crescent, stenciled onto various walls around town, the actual eruption of violence comes more as a completion, a rounding off, than as a breaking into something new. The oft-remarked end-game quality of the massacres, the readiness and near-ritual calm, some called it resignation, others dissociation, with which the victimized delivered themselves up to those who victimized them, had less to do with cultural attitudes or the power of the army, both of which were more agent than impetus, than with the fact that ten years of ideological polarization had convinced virtually everyone that the only thing remaining to be seen was which way, in the event, the balance would tip.

It tipped, of course, in the rightward direction. The failure of

the palace guard coup in Jakarta at the end of September 1965, a confused and brutal affair still ill-understood, led to a series of small-scale iterations of it as its example spread, place by place, across Java and on to Bali, west to east. In each place there was the initial uncertainty, lasting a day or two at most, as to which way things would go. Then there was the realization on all sides, usually in the space of hours, as to which way, always the same way, things would go. Then there were the killings, halted after a while by the army. In each locality the whole convulsion took hardly more than two or three weeks (in my Balinese village it took one night, during which thirty families were burned alive in their houses), was repressed or subsided, and then moved on to be repeated eastward, summing, after about five months, to perhaps a quarter million, perhaps three quarters of a million deaths.

The killing got to Pare in early November, set off there when a countryside religious teacher, whose father, a reformist leader, I had worked with in 1952, made a reconnaissance into an adjoining village, where my colleague Robert Jay had worked, to check out rumors that peasant union militants there were about to attack, and was stabbed to death. His compatriots retaliated the following night by setting fire to a large number of houses in the offending village, after which right-to-left assaults exploded, incident by incident, across the whole area. Rather than retail cases, a newspaper or TV roundup of the day's atrocities, let me instead quote an account of "what it was like then" given to me by that Nationalist Party leader—by 1971 retired, disheartened, and done (or almost) with patrician maneuvering—whom I mentioned earlier as marked for death and expropriation. (I omit my prompt questions, which were merely that: the psychiatrist's ineffable "Ah, yes?" and "Why do you say that?")

Nineteen sixty-five was as bad here as anywhere in the country. Most of the killings were by Muslim youth groups. Except for Plosok Klaten [an outlying village near the squatter areas], where there was a brief battle between the Communists and the Muslims, which the Muslims, helped by the army, soon won, the Communists all just

surrendered, confessed openly to plotting, and were killed, unresisting, next to open graves which the Muslims had waiting for them. (The Communists had graves ready for the Muslims too, in case things went their way.)

This was a weird reaction, even to me, a Javanese who has lived around here all his life. Apparently, the Communists reasoned: "If I'm dead, that's an end of it. It's 'settled,' 'complete,' 'cleaned up,' 'finished' [*bèrès*]. But if I'm arrested, I'll suffer. There will be no food. I will be in prison." So they just accepted "The End" [*puputan*].

Everyone here was terrified. A Communist leader's head was hung up in the doorway of his headquarters. Another's was hung on the footbridge in front of his house with a cigarette stuck between his teeth. There were legs and arms and torsos every morning in the irrigation canals. Penises were nailed to telephone poles. Most of the killing was by throat cutting and stabbing with bamboo spears.

The whole population of a village would be herded onto the public square in front of the District Office by the army. They were then told to point out who was an activist and who was not. The activists were then delivered back to the people to take home and execute, or, more often, handed over to people of neighboring villages in exchange for their victims. That made it easier, because you weren't killing your next door neighbor, but someone else's who was killing yours.

At one point, there was a rumor that the town was going to be attacked by leftists from Sekoto [the village in which the religious teacher had been killed]. Tanks came from Kediri [the regional capital] and there was firing all night and in the morning almost everyone from Sekoto had been rounded up. They were asked if they had intended to attack the town and kill the local officials. They answered yes and gave details. Five of the leaders were executed in the public square by the army, the others were let go to be dealt with by their neighbors, who took them back to the village and killed them.

All this lasted only about a month, but it was a terrible month. There was no one in the streets at all. Women were killed as well as men, but, though a few stores were looted, no Chinese were harmed. They were not involved: it was a matter between Javanese. Most of the important Communist leaders were not Pare people by that time,

because the party moved their cadres around every few months, like the civil service. One of the most prominent local leaders—a man named Guntur—hanged himself, but others escaped to the larger cities where they hoped they would be less noticeable. Local doctors would not treat Communist wounds, because they were threatened with death if they did so. My younger brother saw three people executed at the District Office, there were lots of people watching, and he couldn't sleep for a week.

In the beginning, things could have gone either way. Each side was trying to kill the other side first, and when the Communists saw that the Muslims had the upper hand, they just gave up. There was no resistance from the Left at all, once the killings began. The army, which was upset by the murders of the general staff in Jakarta at the time of the coup, just let the Muslim youth have their head, at least for a while, after which they called a halt and began just arresting people and carting them off to Buru [a prison island in eastern Indonesia] or somewhere.

There is still a good deal of bad feeling around on the part of friends and relatives of the victims. But anti-Communism is now so strong here they don't dare say anything; they just conceal it, like good Javanese. I myself am as anti-Communist as I always was. But the real hatred, the murdering and the being murdered, was a matter between Muslim militants and Communist ones. Sukarno people, like me, were, in the end, really just bystanders. Like, in the end, Sukarno himself.

If in 1971, six years after the event, all this was but a bad memory, by 1986, twenty-one years after, it hardly seemed a memory at all, but a broken piece of history, evoked, on occasion, as an example of what politics brings. Those branded as having been Communists or supporters of them (twelve percent of the electorate, five percent in the town) could not vote or hold a government job, but were not otherwise much bothered. Faded maps showing the location of Communist households, including the one I had lived in in 1953–1954, still hung, like folk ornaments, on village office walls. Aging Muslim militants occasionally reflected, especially when confronted by an outsider who had known them when both were young, on how close they had come to a messy

end. But, in general, the town was like a pond across which a terrible storm had once swept, a long time ago, in another climate.

For someone who had known it before the storm, the place seemed to have exchanged the gathered-up energies of politics for the scattered-out ones of trade. The conjunction of the Green Revolution, which began to be effective in this part of Java only toward the end of the seventies when problems of implementation got finally worked out, and the settling in of military rule, which found an operational style to suit its conception of itself as an engine of progress at about the same time, led to a commercialization of town life at least as pervasive, and nearly as obsessive, as its politicization once had been. Buying and selling—diverse, intricate, virtually continuous buying and selling, reaching into all levels and corners of society and operating on all sorts of scale and degrees of extension—replaced getting ready for doomsday as the dominant preoccupation of just about everyone. A peasant agriculture drawn bodily into the market by an increased need for capital inputs, an officially homogenized political life, and a lingering sense that both were precarious had brought on the tone and look of an enormous, bustling, rather driven emporium.

The temptation to take this state of affairs as a terminus point, the completion of a phase, a process, a development, now to be but secured and extended, is great and must be resisted. When after a great convulsion a mere busyness occurs, the sense that things are at last on track arises of itself, especially in a before-and-after witness like me, if not among those who have passed through it all and have some reason to imagine otherwise. The stories one tells naturally take on a beginning, middle, and end, a form coincident less with the inner direction of things than with one's parenthetical experience of them. To remove the parenthesis is to misrepresent at once how you got what you think might be knowledge and why you think it might be.

Sefrou in the early sixties, by then perhaps a thousand years old, still had a sharpness of definition extraordinary even for Morocco,

where everything seems outlined in calcium light. When you approached the town from Fez, then thirty kilometers away, today only twenty, coming up over a small rise from the north, you found yourself confronted with the same scene that had astonished a whole series of earlier experience seekers—Leo Africanus in the sixteenth century, Père Foucauld in the nineteenth, Edith Wharton during the First World War—who stumbled upon what one of them (Foucauld) called “l’Oasis enchanteresse,” another (Wharton) “a stout little walled town with angle-towers defiantly thrust toward the Atlas.” The town, the oasis, the mountains, each enclosed within the next, chalk white, olive green, stone brown, each marked off from the next by a line so sharp as to seem drawn with a pen, gave a sense of deliberate arrangement. Site and settlement looked equally designed.

The initial effect of going on then to descend into the body of the town was, for a foreigner anyway, the total, instantaneous, and, so it seemed for an uncomfortable period, permanent dissolution of this sense of clarity, poise, and composition. Neither the population, in 1961 perhaps twenty thousand, nor the layout of the place was in any way simple or homogeneous. Berbers, Arabs, Jews, merchants, notables, tribesmen, artisans, even still a few French *colons*, teachers, and administrators, coursed through narrow alleys, broad thoroughfares, sprawling bazaars. Part of the city was a maze, part was a grid, part was a coil of winding suburban roads. There were mosques, parks, crenelated walls, caravanserais, moorish baths, lime kilns, waterfalls, tiled fountains, grilled windows, tennis courts, interior gardens, motion picture theaters, castle-houses, schools, sheep pens, black tents, and sidewalk cafes; and everywhere the sound of urgent talk, mostly male. A French-built fort out of *Beau Geste* looked down on all this from one knoll, a white-domed Muslim shrine out of *En Tribu* looked down on it from another. By the towering main gate there were a cemetery, a swimming pool, a bus terminal, an oil press, an outdoor mimbar, a porter’s station, an experimental garden, a bowling green, an old prison, and a tea house. A half mile away there was a cave where Jews lit candles to mythic rabbis.

As so often happens, such first impressions, because they are first, and perhaps as well because they are impressions rather than worked-up theories or pinned-down facts, set a frame of perception and understanding, a Jamesian hum of buzz and implication, that could not afterward be wholly discarded, only critiqued, developed, filled out, moralized upon, and brought to bear on more exact experiences. The double image, clarity from a distance, jumble up close, not only did not dissolve over the twenty-five years or so I off and on worked in Sefrou and in the district around it (another seventy or eighty thousand people, divided into dozens of “fractions,” “tribes,” “circles,” and “confederations”), it turned into my most general conception of what it was that was driving things: an ascending tension between a classic urban form Ibn Khaldun would have found familiar and a swelling and diversifying urban life tumbling across its incised lines. A place where nothing very spectacular happened, and which remained agrarian, peripheral, and rather traditional, it steadily, carelessly, got instructively out of hand.

In 1963, this process had already begun, but only barely. The old walled city, with its satellite “casbah” standing guard above it and its Jewish “mellah” gated-off in the center of it, still dominated the scene. A few “native quarters,” squared corners and straightened streets, had been built under French direction just outside the walls; a small villa area, shade trees and swimming pools, had grown up during the Protectorate; and some glass-front stores had appeared along the highroad. But the place was still your basic, textbook *medīna*: a labyrinth-fortress set round with irrigated olive groves, and divided between deeply urban Arabs, long in place, and deeply urban Jews (still three thousand of them, down from a peak of five or six), quite possibly in place—some of them claimed since the Exodus—even longer.

In 1986, the old city was dwarfed by new quarters spreading out rudely and irregularly in all directions around it. The French and the Jews (“our heads and our pockets,” as the Arabs called them with uncertain irony) had departed, but there were three times as many people, most of them country-born Berbers. Perhaps eighty