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Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues

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Shweder, Richard A. & Byron Good (eds).

Clifford Geertz by his colleagues. ix, 145 pp.,

bibliogrs. London, Chicago: Univ. Chicago

Press, 2005. \$15.00 (paper)

Perhaps you had to be there. *Clifford Geertz by his colleagues* archives papers presented at the 2002 American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting by past students and colleagues that offer insightful, but mostly admiring reviews of his contributions to the field of anthropology with particular but not complete attention towards Geertz's direct and indirect contributions to the field of psychological anthropology. The organizers of this Presidential Session assembled an eclectic mix of presenters, representative of Geertz's habit of blurring genres. This volume is worthwhile, perhaps even necessary. Just when it seems the world surrounding a discipline intent upon the study of human diversity in its universality and plurality appears intolerant of its own humanity, salvaging Geertz and his ideas offers some remedy.

Like Richard Shweder, I too am a fan, and was fortunate to attend this Presidential Session. Shweder, evoking Geertz's comparative approach through families of resemblances (the value pluralism of Isaiah Berlin and the antirealism of Richard Posner), illustrates the

centrality of his 'theory of cultural pluralism' (p. 8) for his relativist approach and interpretation of alternative moral universes. In a similar vein, Lawrence Rosen follows with a discussion of Geertz's 'senses of judgement' (p. 10) inherent in the 'act of interpretation', which critics who have found fault in his ethnographic and theoretical writings for shying away from power and politics have either missed or ignored. Psychologist Jerome Bruner marks Geertz's vanguard role in rescuing anthropology, psychology, and presumably other fields of study from the scientism of the cognitive revolution with his emphasis on 'meaning-making' (p. 20). James Peacock agrees, claiming that Geertz 'saved anthropology', and even 'the wider society', with his particular rendition of culture which at the time filled a void that structuralism and ethnosience were dangerously close to filling. Robert Levine notes the contributions of Geertz's 'symbolic action theory' and its attention to 'coded communications' that 'draw their meanings from the history, values, and conceptions of a community' (p. 25). Historian Natalie Zamon Davis offers a defence against the critique that Geertz, and his brand of anthropology, is ill fitted to deal with change. Noting that change 'is

everywhere in the writings of Clifford Geertz’
(p. 39), Davis reminds critics that Geertz’s
ethnography is nearly always concerned with
‘enduring styles, moderated, adjusted, recast in
new circumstances, but still recognizable’
(p. 40). Dale Eickelman also notes Geertz’s

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contributions to historiography, with special
attention to religious and Islamic studies, and
the influence of Geertz to ‘close the practical
gap in academic training and styles of writing
between anthropology and history’ (p. 68).

James Boon’s playful, parodic, off-beat reading
of Geertz’s style of writing brings to this
volume the humour characteristic of ‘Cliff’s
special knack’. Michael M. J. Fisher’s chronicle
of Geertz’s work maps out a kind of trajectory
along and through the ‘interpretive cockfight
arena’ for which the modern, realism,
interpretation, and knowledge are ‘at play’.

Amelie Rorty highlights Geertz’s use of
‘happenstance’, the ‘unexpected, unrehearsed
events’ that serve as literary technique to draw
up the convergences of multiple layers of
meaning with human actions. Ulf Hannerz
moves from the arenas of the particular to
‘large issues’ which erupt as ‘contexts explode’

(p. 89). Although Geertz is often accused of revelling in the particular, his interest in the 'sense of coexistence of local and cosmopolitan stories' is long-standing, according to Hannerz, and was nurtured during fieldwork experiences anchored in the 'early postcolonial' histories of countries like Indonesia and Morocco (p. 90). Finally, Byron Good and Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good end this volume with rumination on Geertz's 'view of subjectivity and the relation of the subject to culture' (p. 98). Meant as a review in light of current debates, this paper re-locates Geertz's analysis of the self or person as 'symbolic "all the way down" ' with other scholarship on Javanese selves, including their own.

Many of the papers re-tell personal experiences with the celebrant over the years, and Geertz's own commentary, which addressed intellectual contributions and personal remembrances with a kind of pondering in the present of these things past, was as delightful to listen to and watch as it is to read. Jim Boon divined how Geertz himself would end this celebration – 'unfinished' (p. 35). The text version of his comments, however, does not capture his presence at the podium and his 'unfinished' final words spoken as he waddled away shrouded in a flurry of

notes and pages. You had to be there.

So what use is a celebration of meaningful action in this current fascination with power and the global? As Victor Turner once said, textual archives of celebratory processes merely render 'the dead husk of the living celebratory fruit', failing to capture fully the 'withinside' of such events that revel in the experience of shared social being (editor's 'Introduction' to *Celebration: studies in festivity and ritual*, 1982, p. 19). Predictably, then, the book fails, or, perhaps better, pales as lived archive. However, the real value of this volume is that it archives a 'celebration' in which the 'vital emblems of culture' as Roger Abrahams has consistently asserted, are visible and viable ('The language of festivals', in *Celebration*, 1982, p. 161). The various facets of Geertz's interpretivism, his concept of culture, his particular form of relativism, his intellectual cross-breedings and fertilizations, his 'inimitable style', his 'existential anxiety', emblems of his life and works, resonate a particular way of being-in-the-world by a man whose intellectual history insists upon understandings of understandings.

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