

THE OBSERVER OBSERVED Clifford Geertz on Religion

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Abstract

*In his seminal *Islam Observed: Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia* from 1968, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) placed the comparative study of Muslim societies on the research agenda. In view of my knowledge on the history of Islam in Indonesia, it struck me that the political dimension of religion did not take an important place in the book. This is the more remarkable because during Geertz's fieldwork in Java in 1953-4 manifestations of political Islam regularly popped up, and Geertz did not only notice those, but also recorded them in his book *The Religion of Java* from 1960. In this paper I will go into the question of why Geertz did not give a more prominent place to political Islam in his analysis of Muslim cultures, and what concepts of both Islam and religion he used.*

*[Melalui *Islam Observed: Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia* pada tahun 1968, seorang antropolog Amerika Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) mengetengahkan perbandingan masyarakat Muslim dalam agenda riset. Sepengetahuan saya mengenai Islam di Indonesia, yang mengejutkan dalam pembahasan bukunya, Geertz sama sekali tidak mengulas secara dalam*

¹ This paper was originally prepared for the workshop “Islam (re) Observed: Geertz’s Comparative Study of Morocco and Indonesia 50 years”, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Islam Observed*, which was held at NIMAR (Netherlands Institut Marokko), in Rabat, Morocco, on 27-28 October 2018, and organised by LUCIS (Leiden University Centre for the Study of Islam and Society) and NIMAR. See Leiden Islam blog <https://leidenislamblog.nl/articles/thinking-with-clifford-geertz-in-rabat>.

*dimensi politik agama. Tentu bagi sarjana pengkaji Islam di Indonesia, hal tersebut lebih mengejutkan lagi sebab pada periode Geertz melakukan studi lapangannya di Jawa pada tahun 1953-1954, manifestasi Islam politik kerap muncul. Ia tidak saja mengamati manifestasi Islam politik tersebut, namun juga menuliskannya dalam bukunya *The Religion of Java* di tahun 1960. Artikel ini akan mengulas mengapa Geertz tidak memberi perhatian penting terhadap Islam politik dalam analisis studi budaya masyarakat Muslim and konsep Islam dan agama seperti apa yang dia gunakan dalam analisisnya.*

Keywords: *Clifford Geertz, Political Islam, Concept of Islam*

Introduction

Having a keen interest in the Muslim world, I had ever read some books by Clifford Geertz, but not being an anthropologist, I am only aware of a small part of the entire oeuvre of this productive scholar and, consequently, in giving this paper I feel I am on thin ice. For what follows here might be supplemented or even easily replaced with published research papers of which I am not aware.

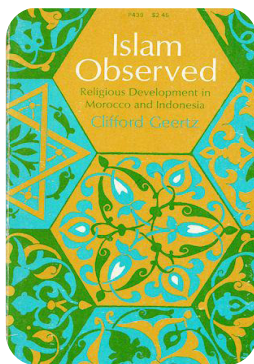
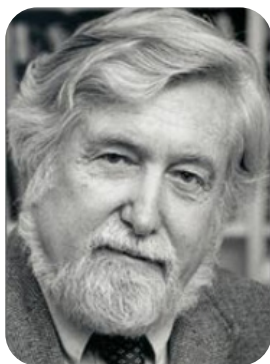


Fig 1. Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) and his *Islam Observed*

After this disclaimer, I would like to start this paper by giving some comments on *Islam Observed* by Geertz. Most of my remarks will deal with Indonesia, the country I am most familiar with. I had ever read the book, perhaps some thirty odd years ago and I knew it was about

“Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia”, as the subtitle of the work reads, but to be frank I could not remember anything else. In re-reading the book (I had it on my own bookshelves), it struck me how well the book is written and how well it reads. On the other hand, I thought that as far as the actual analysis of religious developments in both countries was concerned, it remained rather superficial, and was of a rather essentialist character and I thought Geertz was generalizing too much. Of course, it is inevitable to generalize in the humanities and social sciences, and all other sciences for that matter, but in this case, this feature was very prominent and indeed in the book Geertz himself seems to be aware of this and in a funny way wards off this point of criticism as follows. The insights of the anthropologist depart from a particular intensive fieldwork situation and when the field work data are placed in a broader setting and given a broader relevance, it is better not to let others use the descriptions of the fieldworker. For, when others than the fieldworker himself do this, “the generalization of them is likely to be even more uncritical and uncontrolled.”² In other words: you yourself are the best qualified to generalize your own field work descriptions and research data!

As we know, the book of Geertz developed different “classical religious styles” for both Morocco and Indonesia, based on the past and at work in the present; Moroccan Islam, he characterized as being “activist, rigorous, dogmatic and more than a little anthropolatrous”, while Indonesian Islam was “syncretistic, reflective, multifarious and strikingly phenomenological.”³

Reactions to *Islam Observed*

The book provoked an enormous amount of reactions, and of these I will mention here a recent one by the recently deceased Harvard

² Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. vii-viii.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20.

scholar Shahab Ahmed in his book *What is Islam?* which has as the subtitle *The importance of being Islamic* from 2015. This book is a broad and ambitious attempt to provide a definition of Islam, which does justice to “the historical and human phenomenon that is Islam in its plenitude and complexity of meaning”.⁴ The book includes the bewildering variety of manifestations of what Muslims have called Islam, from for instance the Qur’an, Islamic philosophy, Persian Sufi poetry, but also architecture and Mughal wine cups, a copy of which embellishes the dustcover of his book. In the book Ahmed develops a new paradigm of studying Islam as “a meaning-making for the self in terms of hermeneutical engagement with the Revelation to Muhammad as Pre-Text, Text, and Con-text”,⁵ which gives room to ambiguity, polyvalence, relativism and cultural practices, like e.g. music, literary and fine arts and even wine drinking. Geographically, his research covers – what he calls – the Balkan to Bengalen complex and unfortunately does not make observations on Islam in Southeast Asia.

However, he does go into the work of Geertz a few times, based on his *Islam Observed*. The first time deals with the issue of whether there is just one Islam or whether we should rather speak on Islams (in the plural). Here the name of Geertz pops up (in the work of the Egyptian-American anthropologist Abdul Hamid El-Zein, 1934-1979) as someone who sees unity in diversity in studying Muslim societies, while what we see is actually diversity in diversity.⁶ In Geertz’s own words Indonesia and Morocco are: “At once very alike and very different, they form a commentary on one’s another’s character”, and in a beautiful phrase: “They both incline toward Mecca, but, the antipodes of the Muslim world, they bow in opposite directions”.⁷

⁴ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development*, p. 4

In another chapter, dealing with “culture” as a possible answer to the question of *What is Islam?* Ahmed is again discussing the work of Geertz, whom he regards as probably the most influential scholar in this field. According to Geertz culture is “a system of symbols and meanings, or a domain of symbolic communication”. Here Geertz is criticized for focussing entirely on meaning itself, without going into the issue of how meaning is constructed and how a community itself produces meaning, or culture or religion for that matter (referring to Talal Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion*).⁸ Applied to his book *Islam Observed*, Ahmed comments as follows:

“Geertz’s analysis by privileged guesswork and charismatic impressionism is exemplified in his monograph *Islam Observed: Religious developments in Morocco and Indonesia*, which is remarkable in that one is hard pressed to find it in any evidence that Geertz has actually taken into serious consideration a single text from the intellectual tradition of either of these two countries.”⁹

I fully agree with these three points of criticism on Geertz, and I found a telling illustration of this disregard for textual evidence in chapter two of *Islam Observed* on the different classical styles. In relating the lives of Sunan Kalijaga and Sidi Lahsen Lyusi, who embody these two different styles, Geertz is not so much interested in textual accounts, but in informants’ renderings, for, as he claims, in the case of his informants’ knowledge on Sunan Kalijaga, “what they lack in historical accuracy, they more than make up in cultural penetration.”¹⁰

In fact, in formulating his criticism Ahmed was building on the 2005 book of the anthropologist Daniel Varisco (b. 1951, currently attached to the university of Qatar), with the telling title *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation*,¹¹ who considered the book of

⁸ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

⁹ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 249.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development*, p. 32.

¹¹ The phrase “Islam Obscured” was used twenty years earlier by W.R. Roff in his “Islam Obscured? Some Reflections on Studies of Islam and Society in Southeast

Geertz “neither scientific nor ethnographic”, while in it “Geertz idealizes what he is in fact not an expert on.”¹²

Geertz on Religion and Politics

In addition to these critical observations (privileged guesswork, charismatic impressionism and insufficient engagement with the textual traditions), what stroke me most in reading *Islam Observed*, is that Geertz used a rather narrow concept of religion. According to him the researcher can come across manifestations of religion in “symbolic forms and social arrangements”,¹³ but the political dimension of religion does not seem to gain a lot of attention.¹⁴ Actually, as the result of the increase of science, Geertz sees the role of religion decline altogether, not only in the West, but also in the Muslim world, perhaps culminating in a “religionless Islam”, advancing under the banner, “Allah is dead”.¹⁵

To me this seemed strange, because in post-war Indonesia politics have always played an important role in the religious domain, and the other way around.¹⁶ Well known are, for instance, the persistent and protracted attempts to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia under the name of the so-called Darul Islam (DI) movement (1947-1962) under the leadership of Kartosuwiryo (1905-1962) and others throughout the entire archipelago, which led to many military confrontations between factions of DI and

Asia”, *Archipel*, Vol. 29, 1985, pp. 7-34, in which he noticed that there has been “an extraordinary desire on the part of Western social science observers to diminish, conceptually, the place and role of the religion and culture of Islam, now and in the past, in Southeast Asian societies”.

¹² Daniel Martin Varisco, *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005), p. 249 (nt. 13).

¹³ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development*, pp. 2.

¹⁴ A footnote on p. 124 of *Islam Observed* shows that Geertz was aware of the religious aspects of Sultanate, but he does not include this in his analysis. See *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development*, pp. 103, 117.

¹⁶ Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to the Present* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), pp. 80-105.



Fig 2. Geertz's
The Religion of Java

the Indonesian armed forces.¹⁷ This absence of the political dimension of religion is the more remarkable because during Geertz's fieldwork in Java in 1953-1954 manifestations of political Islam formed part of daily life, and Geertz did not only notice those, but also recorded them in his book *The Religion of Java*.

The Religion of Java was first published in 1960, and is one of the most influential books in Indonesian studies. The book is based on fieldwork in the village of Pare in East Java between May 1953 and

September 1954, and, in the book, Geertz describes three overlapping types of Javanese religiosity within the overall syncretistic religion of Java: the *abangan*, the *santri* and the *priyayi*, each with a particular social base. The first group are mainly guided by animistic concepts and although they call themselves Muslim, they are only partially guided by Islam, and they are in fact nominal Muslims. The second group, the *santri*, follow a more orthodox interpretation of Islam and try to purify Islam from pre- and non-Islamic elements, based on a normative understanding of Islam. The third group, the *priyayi*, are mainly to be found in the court culture of the Javanese nobility, which is strongly influenced by Hindu and Buddhist concepts and practices, as these are still present in the form of *wayang* puppet performances, dance, and other forms of artistic expressions. This tripartite division of Javanese religion provoked a lot of reactions from both Indonesian and Western scholars, and especially the including of the *priyayi* group in a religious division was commented

¹⁷ Chiara Formichi, "(Re) Writing the History of Political Islam in Indonesia," *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2015, pp. 105-140.

upon, because they were not primarily regarded as a religious group, but as a social category. Also, the division was refined and further developed by others, but the concepts of *santri* and *abangan* gained an iconic status and have been in use ever since Geertz wrote his *The Religion of Java*.¹⁸ This very rich book contains a number of passages which are of relevance for my present paper. When Geertz describes the development of Islam in Pare, he records that in Pare in 1953-1954 there were three Islamic political parties active, namely the Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia, the Nahdlatul Ulama and Masjumi.¹⁹ But he also notes that “the tendency for the religious to widen out to engulf the secular” (like e.g. the prohibition to wear Western dress) was not as strong any longer as before the World War.²⁰ There are aspirations to form an Islamic state within NU circles, but this is mostly aspired by old members, while the younger members and member of other organizations are more interested in how to bring religion and modern life in harmony.²¹ In the chapter on the Administration of Moslem law Geertz describes how the aspirations to implement Islamic Law has been channelled by the state in the religious bureaucracy with a limited scope.²² In this chapter there is a paragraph on what Geertz calls “the problem of Church and State”. Here he goes into the political military organisation which I just mentioned, the Darul Islam movement, which aimed at establishing a *Negara Islam* or an Islamic State, and based on a number of interviews with politicians in Jakarta and his own experiences during his fieldwork, Geertz concluded that this ideal was extremely vague meaning different things for different groups, and that a compromise in realizing Islamic ideals in society were possible

¹⁸ Huub De Jonge, “Western and Indonesian Views on the Abangan-Santri Division in Javanese Society: The Reception of Geertz’s ‘the Religion of Java,’” in *The Politics of Ethnographic Reading and Writing, Confrontations of Western and Indigenous Views*, ed. Henk Driessen (Saarbrücken: Fort Lauderdale, 1993), pp. 101–123.

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 146.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-170.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 199-214.

within the state through the Ministry of Religious Affairs.²³ In another passage, Geertz is commenting upon a passionate plea for establishing an Islamic state by an important national Masjumi leader by the name of Muhammad Rais. According to Geertz, his words were just rhetoric and demagogic, and did hardly have any effect.²⁴

Geertz's Definition of Religion and Some Reactions

We thus see that in his *The Religion of Java* and in his *Islam Observed* Geertz is aware of political manifestations of Islam but does not give those a prominent place in his analysis. This made me curious to learn how Geertz conceptualised religion in the first place and, for this reason, I looked into another very famous publication of Geertz, namely a later essay originally published in 1966, so in between *The Religion of Java* from 1960 and his *Islam Observed* from 1968. In this essay, entitled “Religion as a Cultural System”, Geertz goes into the definition of religion, which of course builds on his fieldwork experience in Java. In this famous essay he defines religion as follows. Religion is (1) a system of symbols which (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²⁵

There is a lot to say about this definition, but what strikes me is that it locates religion mainly in the domain of symbols and concepts, or in a more pedestrian way “between the ears of the believer”, and that the definition is not very practice-oriented.²⁶ On a more theoretical level,

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 212-214.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

²⁵ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966), pp. 1–46.

²⁶ Interestingly, in his *Islam Observed* Geertz also commented upon the defining of religion. According to him the problem is not how to define religion (“We have had quite enough of those”), but to find it. See Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, p. 1.

interesting comments on this definition have been made in the academic study of religion. Within this academic discipline, defining religion has always been a matter of debate. In a recent book, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, Brent Nongbri investigates the history of the concept of religion and concludes that religion is not a universal concept and that the assumption that one simply knows naturally what religion is, is not academic.²⁷ Nongbri regards the concept as a historical blend of Christian disputes about the truth, European colonial projects, and the coming into existence of the nation-states.²⁸

Another historian of religion, Bruce Lincoln commented on the definition of Geertz, in his 2006 book *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, that (following the critique of Talal Asad on Geertz) under Geertz's definition religious dimensions like practice and community "tend to be ignored, rendered aberrant, or relegated to the margins of the religious." Moreover, Lincoln thinks that Geertz "unwittingly normalized features of his own (necessarily parochial) cultural/religious background" in defining religion.²⁹

Thus, here again in Geertz's definition of religion, we also see an understanding of religion which does not take into account more practice-oriented manifestations of religion.

Concluding Remarks: The Future of Islam in the 1950s and 1960s

When we look at Islam in Indonesia in the last few decades, especially after the fall of President Suharto in 1998, we see an ever-increasing presence of political Islam, and we have seen that during the period that Geertz did fieldwork in Java, he regularly encountered manifestations of political Islam. Yet, Geertz underestimated the political

²⁷ I thank Dr. Mattias Brand (formerly Leiden University and currently University of Zurich, Switzerland) for this reference.

²⁸ Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 154.

²⁹ Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 1.

potential of Islam. In doing so, he was not alone, because many other academics who wrote on religion in the 1950s and 1960s did not perceive the potential of political Islam. It would be interesting to investigate systematically how scholars who were active in this period, wrote about the future of Islam.

Here I limit myself to just one example, namely the British scholar of Islam H.A.R. Gibb (1895-1971). I have chosen this example, because in his Java book Geertz took his basic information on Islam from Gibb's work *Mohammedanism* from 1949.³⁰ Although he was a specialist in Islamic studies, also Gibb did not foresee the potential of political Islam. For instance, in his chapter on Islam in the modern world Gibb describes the Muslim Brothers as a social organisation who did have a "political attitude," but were mainly concerned with activities to stimulate religious doctrine and practice, "which might otherwise be submerged in the tides of modern life."³¹ Interestingly, in the few years prior to the publication of Gibb's book, the Muslim Brotherhood had gained a huge number of adherents and exercised an enormous influence in Egyptian society which led the then Egyptian government to dissolve them in December 1948 and this eventually led to the murder of the Prime Minister by a young Muslim brother. In these year the Muslim Brothers had also participated in the armed struggle of the Palestinian Revolt of the 1930s and the Israeli-Arab War in 1948.³² This quote of Gibb then is interesting because it not only downplays the political aspirations of the Muslim Brothers, but also seems to adhere to a common conviction that through "the tides of modern life" religious doctrine and practice would become less prominent, thus believing in an ever encroaching secularization in the modern world.³³

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, pp. 121, 191, 199.

³¹ Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb, *Muhammedanism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 180. I have used the second edition.

³² Olivier Carré, *Mystics and Politics: A Critical Reading of Fī Zilāl Al-Qur'ān by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 3–5.

³³ The Dutch scholar Van Nieuwenhuyze makes a distinction between Darul Islam as an ideal, and DI as a political entity; the latter would go away. See C.A.O. van

We have already seen above that also Geertz was pondering about an “Allah is dead” Muslim world and the evidence for political Islam which Geertz encountered during his fieldwork in Java was reasoned away and seen as just one way to channel as well as cater for social unrest. It would, of course, be unfair to scorn him for not having understood the potential of political Islam and, in fact, the circumstance that in his book *The Religion of Java* he recorded manifestations of political Islam, testifies to the accuracy and completeness of his fieldwork in Java at the beginning of the 1950s. Therefore, it keeps its value and enables us to compare the situation back then with other situations.

However, in the three works of Geertz discussed here, he appears to be a true child of his time and he employs a rather tight concept of religion, which downplays the influence and role of religiously motivated and inspired actions in the political domain. For him religion was basically a set of symbols and he expected that the influence of religion under the influence of secularization would decline in public life.

Nieuwenhuijze, *Aspects of Islam in Post-Colonial Indonesia: Five Essays* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1958), pp. 176–179.

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