

## Précis: Geertz' "Native's Point of View": Anthropological Understanding

### Introduction

According to Geertz, after the posthumous publication of noted anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's diary, the illusion that anthropology was possible due solely to the ability of the anthropologist to place himself within the culture being studied (most likely born from a heightened imagination and an extraordinary amount of compassion) was (or should be) dismissed. Yet, despite the "leaving of the garden," anthropology still needed to attain the "native's point of view;" how can that "grail" be captured given the diasporatic state of anthropology ushered in by Malinowski's diary? Geertz argued that the "grail" was attainable by relocating the anthropological search for meaning to within the boundaries of epistemology. Instead of seeking the native's point of view by detailing what sort of character and traits were necessary on the part of the anthropologist, Geertz insisted on reframing the task in terms of how the anthropological analysis was to be conducted and how the results should be evaluated. Specifically, Geertz called for the examination of symbolic forms, e.g. words, images, institutions, behaviors, etc. within the epistemological approach to defining meaning. Within this essay, Geertz examined the concept of person across three cultures as a sort of crucible, i.e. a way of demonstrating how the new epistemological approach could render fruitful results even when the concept under scrutiny varied wildly.

### Case study – the concept of person

- The Javanese – within Geertz' study of the Javanese, he noted a dualistic notion of the self. The inner self, *batin*, referred to the "felt realm of human experience," while *lair* referred to the external observable actions – both were understood as independent realms being disciplined and ordered but doing so independently of one another
- The Balinese – the concept of self was framed within a sort of "grand drama." Instead of placing importance on the individual, the Balinese stressed the importance of the grand drama perpetually being repeated within the narrative of human existence. The formal roles each type of self plays in the drama was stressed over the individual. The term, *lek*, often translated as shame, argued Geertz, should really be translated as "stage fright." When an individual lost sight of the drama and tried to assert his or her self over the formal role as demanded by the drama, that individual acted wrongfully and threatened the normalcy that the drama guaranteed.
- Morocco – Geertz introduced the concept of *nisba* to explain how the Moroccan culture defined person. At the highest level, a *nisba* is an identifier that associated a person with a specific community, location, or ethnicity. Yet the *nisba* invoked seems to be a matter of reference frame; different *nisbas* may be rightfully called by dissimilar people within similar locations. Despite the strange logic and syntax supporting the *nisbas*, the individuals seem to want to define the self in terms commensurate with the *nisba*. In short, the *nisba* creates "a framework within which persons can be identified in terms of supposedly immanent characteristics" and at the same time, these characteristics shape practical relations and how the self sees the self within Moroccan culture.

### Conclusion

Geertz likened his prescribed approach to the well-known "hermeneutical circle." That is, his epistemological approach called for a tacking between the most general observations to the most specific, from the objective to the subjective. He described a rhythm involved in interpreting that moves the knower from "the whole conceived through the parts" and "the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them." The end result was a better understanding of the native point of view but not necessarily the achieving of communion with the group under scrutiny.