

Teaching Clifford at Unud : A Preliminary Report

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I am interested in the significance of classical ethnographic descriptions in those societies which became the object of these descriptions. With the aid of ethnographical texts describing traditional Balinese culture, I wish to pursue the following question: What kind of criticism do Balinese intellectuals bring forward about ethnographic descriptions of Balinese culture? And what importance should this criticism be attached within the ethnographic research process.

In order to work on these questions, I held a research seminar at the Universitas Udayana from March to June 1997. During this course, a classical ethnographic text about Bali was to be discussed with Balinese students and lecturers. In order to hold the seminar, the university authorities chose the students of "Program Studi S 2: Kajian Budaya". This is a postgraduate program focussing on cultural scientific questions, which has 26 participants from all over Indonesia and from varying faculties.

Prof. Dr. I Gusti Ngurah Bagus and I arranged to analyse a text by Clifford Geertz with the students. We chose "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (1972). In this classic of ethnographic literature, Geertz claims to describe Balinese culture from the native's point of view. We pursued this claim in a total of 12 sessions. We read "Deep Play" paragraph by paragraph and discussed Geertz's statements about Balinese culture and whether Balinese students and lecturers would have made such statements about their own cul-

ture, too.

In view of mutual language difficulties, the students were asked to read the Indonesian translation of the text. In singular cases, discussions about controversial passages were held in Bahasa Indonesia. However, the original language of the text that is English was adhered to predominantly during the seminar.

The seminar was based on the underlying idea of reciprocity. On the one hand, I wanted to impart the students an access to an ethnographic text about Bali, which was written from a different intellectual tradition, namely the western one. On the other hand, I wanted to learn from the students how they read and understand a text, which from an unfamiliar point of view shows something well-known to them. I was particularly interested in alienating processes which the accustomed is automatically subjected to when described from a strange perspective. Yet, how far reaching are these alienations? Is the ethnographic text - seen from the point of view of the native - a caricature or parody of his own culture? And does it actually have any relevance for him?

In order to answer these questions, I wanted to find out how Balinese intellectuals perceive and understand their own culture when - refracted in a form of description, which belongs to another tradition - it comes across to them in an ethnographic text. I was interested in an exchange about the measure of refraction or alienation to become more aware of the traditions and conventions which the ethnographic genre pursues when describing something foreign. In the broadest sense, the act of reading Geertz's text together with the students was to provide an opportunity to discuss certain aspects of Balinese culture and to analyse the writing of ethnography as a specific cultural practice.

Against this background, it was particularly interesting to see how differently students read the text. Although the group of Balinese students was heterogeneous (they came from both the town and country, were young or old, Christians or Hindus, passionate cockfighters or completely indifferent to this sanguinary spectacle), they read the text in a manner different to that of students from other parts of the country. To the latter group, the phenomenon of Balinese cockfight described in the text is foreign too; thus they shared similar comprehensive problems with the western ethnographer. However, the Balinese students' attitudes were decidedly more critical. To be precise, they found the question posed in the text and the debate thereof either too specific ("There are more important things on Bali than cockfights") or too generalizing ("That is different in my village") or too superficial ("Geertz can't explain why my doctor advises me to let my cocks fight more often in order to im-

prove my child's health").

The statements above show that ethnographic statements can be found on the scale of medium range which is both an advantage and their greatest disadvantage: Balinese students see their culture reduced to a detail which is not central to them and which lacks profound insight. In comparison, the ethnographic text offers those unassociated with the culture described a general orientation and an explanation of those phenomena which make it appear foreign. Yet, by focussing on the foreign and unknown, a thematic selection is met in the frame of ethnographic descriptions which may not necessarily seem convincing. While most Balinese are occupied with problems of everyday life, ethnographic discourses often deal with subjects as tooth-filing, styles of trance, ecstasy techniques, etc. They gain relevance simply by being unknown in the researcher's own cultural background. Thus, through this slanted alignment, the ethnographic text reduces the other culture to the unaccustomed and deviant, basically the exotic, in the broadest sense. Like a caricature, certain characteristics are underlined while others fade. The accustomed appears refracted and thus alienated. Yet, simply reading the text in order to experience this alienation and the irritations caused by it, is an intellectual pleasure available only to very few people. For the majority of Balinese, the following applies: They find it difficult to recognize their culture in the way it is described in the ethnographic text.

Even if I cannot present more extensive results from this research seminar at the moment, I would like to outline a preliminary thesis here. According to this thesis, Clifford Geertz may not have been able to convince the majority of Balinese intellectuals of central statements made in the frame of his interpretation of the Balinese cockfight. The following example illustrates this:

For Geertz, the cock in Bali symbolizes male sexuality. In this context, he emphasizes the possibility of making obscene jokes with the Indonesian word comparable to the word "cock" in the English language. However, the Balinese students point out that the Indonesian word plays hardly any role in the cockfight; in addition, the Balinese concepts are unsuitable for offensive remarks and comments: "Ayam" refers to both the cock and the hen, and the word "siap" has no sexual connotations whatsoever (Degung Santhikarma made a similar statement in an essay published in 1992).

Therefore, Geertz may not have been able to convince the Balinese of his reading of the Balinese cockfight as a culturally specific symbol system. Nevertheless, the more I occupy myself with Geertz, the more his interpretation convinces me. How should one proceed with this foreground paradox? Can the cock in Bali symbolize male sexuality although the Balinese reject such an

interpretation for good reasons? Is the content of such a statement wrong, or did Geertz merely chose an inappropriate way of convincing not only his Western colleagues, but also Balinese cockfighters of his interpretation? Would Geertz have written the text differently, if he had known that it would have been translated into Indonesian and become the subject of a seminar at a Balinese university? Does Geertz's interpretation of the cockfight as a status blood-bath retain its validity, even if his purported sexual equation of cock with masculinity should not prove sound? Can the Western concept of masculinity be applied to Bali, even if Balinese men behave differently in numerous situations and do not fulfill the expectations placed on "real men" in the West?

Those are questions arising in this context, which I will deal with in the further course of my evaluation of the research seminar and the various interviews that I held with Balinese intellectuals. Here I would like to make one closing remark:

Many classical ethnographic texts about Bali are almost unknown among Balinese intellectuals. Even lecturers and professors seem to have little interest in an analysis of these texts with a historical-critical intent. Indeed, a second, more important reason for the lack of distribution and knowledge of these texts should be mentioned:

Books are expensive and those published in the West are beyond people's means. Therefore, many important books are not available at all on Bali. As a consequence, Balinese colleagues are more or less cut off from the discourse held in the West about Bali. This becomes very clear from a tour through the libraries.

Libraries are without doubt among the saddest places that a Western intellectual can visit on Bali. Their equipment reveals an unashamed, biased transfer of knowledge from East to West. Western anthropologists have won knowledge from this country for more than three generations without giving indigenous scientists a chance to partake of this knowledge in an appropriate way. This is easily illustrated: In the country's libraries, the national documentation center "Pusat Dokumentasi" included, there is not one of the numerous series of magazines and journals published in the West about Indonesia and Southeast Asia available.

Even if the formula "intellectual colonialism" sounds very harsh, one must concede this with regard to Bali: Western ethnology is far from a cooperation with indigenous scientists deserving of this label. In this respect, it has remained a science of the nineteenth century.***

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