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## “From the Native’s Point of View”: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding

CLIFFORD GEERTZ

*At the Annual Meeting in May 1974, the American Academy awarded its first Social Science Prize to Clifford Geertz for his significant contributions to social anthropology. Mr. Geertz has taught at Harvard University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Chicago; in 1970 he became the first Professor of the Social Sciences at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.*

*Mr. Geertz’ research has centered on the changing religious attitudes and habits of life of the Islamic peoples of Morocco and Indonesia; he is the author of *Peddlers and Princes: Social Changes and Economic Modernization in Two Indonesian Towns* (1963), *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (1965), *Islam Observed: Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia* (1968), and a recent collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). In nominating Mr. Geertz for the award, the Academy’s Social Science Prize Committee observed, “each of these volumes is an important contribution in its own right; together they form an unrivaled corpus in modern social anthropology and social sciences.”*

*Following the presentation ceremony, Mr. Geertz delivered the following communication before Academy Fellows and their guests.*

Several years ago a minor scandal erupted in anthropology: one of its ancestral figures told the truth in a public place. As befits an ancestor, he did it posthumously and through his widow’s decision rather than his own, with the result that a number of the sort of right-thinking types who are always with us immediately rose to cry that she — an in-marrier anyway — had betrayed clan secrets, profaned an idol, and let down the side. What will the children think, to say noth-

ing of the laymen? But the disturbance was not much lessened by such ceremonial wringing of the hands; the damn thing was, after all, already printed. In much the same way that James Watson's *The Double Helix* exposed the nature of research in biophysics, Bronislaw Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* rendered the established image of how anthropological work is conducted fairly well implausible. The myth of the chameleon field-worker, perfectly self-tuned to his exotic surroundings – a walking miracle of empathy, tact, patience, and cosmopolitanism – was demolished by the man who had perhaps done the most to create it.

The squabble that surrounded the publication of the *Diary* concentrated, naturally, on inessentials and, as was only to be expected, missed the point. Most of the shock seems to have arisen from the mere discovery that Malinowski was not, to put it delicately, an unmitigated nice guy. He had rude things to say about the natives he was living with and rude words to say it in. He spent a great deal of his time wishing he were elsewhere. And he projected an image of a man as little complaisant as the world has seen. (He also projected an image of a man consecrated to a strange vocation to the point of self-immolation, but that was less noted.) The discussion eventually came down to Malinowski's moral character or lack of it; ignored was the genuinely profound question his book raised, namely, if anthropological understanding does not stem, as we have been taught to believe, from some sort of extraordinary sensibility, an almost preternatural capacity to think, feel, and perceive like a native (a word, I should hurry to say, I use here "in the strict sense of the term"), then how is anthropological knowledge of the way natives think, feel, and perceive possible? The issue the *Diary* presents, with a force perhaps only a working ethnographer can fully appreciate, is not moral; it is epistemological. If we are going to cling – as in my opinion, we must – to the injunction to see things from the native's point of view, what is our position when we can no longer

claim some unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification, with our subjects? What happens to *verstehen* when *empfinden* disappears?

As a matter of fact, this general problem has been exercising methodological discussion in anthropology for the last ten or fifteen years; Malinowski's voice from the grave merely dramatized it as a human dilemma over and above a professional one. The formulations have been various: "inside" versus "outside," or "first person" versus "third person" descriptions; "phenomenological" versus "objectivist," or "cognitive" versus "behavioral" theories; or, perhaps most commonly, "emic" versus "etic" analyses, this last deriving from the distinction in linguistics between phonemics and phonetics — phonemics classifying sounds according to their internal function in language, phonetics classifying them according to their acoustic properties as such. But perhaps the simplest and most directly appreciable way to put the matter is in terms of a distinction formulated, for his own purposes, by the psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut — a distinction between what he calls "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts.

An experience-near concept is, roughly, one which an individual — a patient, a subject, in our case an informant — might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one which various types of specialists — an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist — employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. "Love" in an experience-near concept; "object cathexis" is an experience-distant one. "Social stratification," or perhaps for most peoples in the world even "religion" (and certainly, "religious system") are experience-distant; "caste" or "nirvana" are experience-near, at least for Hindus and Buddhists.

Clearly, the matter is one of degree, not polar

opposition: “fear” is experience-nearer than “phobia,” and “phobia” experience-nearer than “ego dyssyntonic.” And the difference is not, at least so far as anthropology is concerned (the matter is otherwise in poetry and physics), a normative one, in the sense that one sort of concept as such is to be preferred over the other. Confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon. The real question, and the one Malinowski raised by demonstrating that, in the case of “natives,” you don’t have to be one to know one, is what roles the two kinds of concepts play in anthropological analysis. To be more exact: How, in each case, should they be deployed so as to produce an interpretation of the way a people live which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch, nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer?

Putting the matter this way – in terms of how anthropological analysis is to be conducted and its results framed, rather than what psychic constitution anthropologists need to have – reduces the mystery of what “seeing things from the native’s point of view” means. But it does not make it any easier nor does it lessen the demand for perceptiveness on the part of the field-worker. To grasp concepts which, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with those experience-distant concepts that theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else’s skin. The trick is not to achieve some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants; preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.

In one sense, of course, no one knows this better than they do themselves; hence the passion to swim in the stream of their experience, and the illusion afterward that one somehow has. But in another sense, that simple truism is simply not true. People use experience-near concepts spontaneously, unselfconsciously, as it were, colloquially; they do not, except fleetingly and on occasion, recognize that there are any "concepts" involved at all. That is what experience-near means — that ideas and the realities they disclose are naturally and indissolubly bound up together. What else could you call a hippopotamus? Of course the gods are powerful; why else would we fear them? The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives — and that uncertainly enough — is what they perceive "with," or "by means of," or "through," or whatever word one may choose. In the country of the blind, who are not as unobservant as they appear, the one-eyed is not king but spectator.

Now, to make all this a bit more concrete I want to turn for a moment to my own work, which whatever its other faults has at least the virtue of being mine — a distinct advantage in discussions of this sort. In all three of the societies I have studied intensively, Javanese, Balinese, and Moroccan, I have been concerned, among other things, with attempting to determine how the people who live there define themselves as persons, what enters into the idea they have (but, as I say, only half-realize they have) of what a self, Javanese, Balinese, or Moroccan style, is. And in each case, I have tried to arrive at this most intimate of notions not by imagining myself as someone else — a rice peasant or a tribal sheikh, and then seeing what I thought — but by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms — words, images, institutions, behaviors — in terms of which, in each place, people actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another.

The concept of person is, in fact, an excellent vehicle by which to examine this whole question

of how to go about poking into another people's turn of mind. In the first place, some sort of concept of this kind, one feels reasonably safe in saying, exists in recognizable form within all social groups. Various notions of what persons are may be, from our point of view, more than a little odd. People may be conceived to dart about nervously at night, shaped like fireflies. Essential elements of their psyche, like hatred, may be thought to be lodged in granular black bodies within their livers, discoverable upon autopsy. They may share their fates with *doppelganger* beasts, so that when the beast sickens or dies they sicken or die too. But at least some conception of what a human individual is, as opposed to a rock, an animal, a rainstorm, or a god, is, so far as I can see, universal. Yet, at the same time, as these offhand examples suggest, the actual conceptions involved vary, often quite sharply, from one group to the next. The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe; a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. Rather than attempt to place the experience of others within the framework of such a conception, which is what the extolled "empathy" in fact usually comes down to, we must, if we are to achieve understanding, set that conception aside and view their experiences within the framework of their own idea of what selfhood is. And for Java, Bali, and Morocco, at least, that idea differs markedly not only from our own but, no less dramatically and no less instructively, from one to the other.

In Java, where I worked in the fifties, I studied a small, shabby inland county-seat sort of place: two shadeless streets of white-washed wooden shops and offices, with even less substantial bamboo shacks crammed in helter-skelter behind them, the whole surrounded by a great half-circle

of densely packed rice-bowl villages. Land was short; jobs were scarce; politics was unstable; health was poor; prices were rising; and life was altogether far from promising, a kind of agitated stagnancy in which, as I once put it, thinking of the curious mixture of borrowed fragments of modernity and exhausted relics of tradition that characterized the place, the future seemed about as remote as the past. Yet, in the midst of this depressing scene, there was an absolutely astonishing intellectual vitality; a philosophical passion, and a popular one besides, to track the riddles of existence right down to the ground. Destitute peasants would discuss questions of freedom of the will; illiterate tradesmen discoursed on the properties of God; common laborers had theories about the relations between reason and passion, the nature of time, or the reliability of the senses. And, perhaps most importantly, the problem of the self — its nature, function, and mode of operation — was pursued with the sort of reflective intensity one could find among ourselves in only the most *recherché* settings indeed.

The central ideas in terms of which this reflection proceeded and which thus defined its boundaries and the Javanese sense of what a person is were arranged into two sets of, at base religious, contrasts: one between “inside” and “outside,” and one between “refined” and “vulgar.” These glosses are, of course, crude and imprecise; determining exactly what was signified by the terms involved and sorting out their shades of meaning was what all the discussion was about. But together they formed a distinctive conception of the self which, far from being merely theoretical, was the means by which Javanese in fact perceive one another, and, of course, themselves.

The “inside”/“outside” words, *batin* and *lair* (terms borrowed, as a matter of fact, from the Sufi tradition of Muslim mysticism, but locally reworked) refer on the one hand to the felt realm of human experience and on the other to the observed realm of human behavior. These have, one hastens to say, nothing to do with “soul” and “body” in our sense, for which there are in fact quite other words with quite other implications.



*Batin*, the “inside” word, does not refer to a separate seat of encapsulated spirituality detached or detachable from the body, or indeed to a bounded unit at all, but to the emotional life of human beings taken generally. It consists of the fuzzy, shifting flow of subjective feeling perceived directly in all its phenomenological immediacy but considered to be, at its roots at least, identical across all individuals, whose individuality it thus effaces. And, similarly, *lair*, the “outside” word, has nothing to do with the body as an object, even an experienced object. Rather, it refers to that part of human life which, in our culture, strict behaviorists limit themselves to studying — external actions, movements, postures, speech — again conceived as in its essence invariant from one individual to the next. Therefore, these two sets of phenomena — inward feelings and outward actions — are regarded not as functions of one another but as independent realms of being to be put in proper order independently.

It is in connection with this “proper ordering” that the contrast between *alus*, the word meaning “pure,” “refined,” “polished,” “exquisite,” “ethereal,” “subtle,” “civilized,” “smooth,” and *kasar*, the word meaning “impolite,” “rough,” “uncivilized,” “coarse,” “insensitive,” “vulgar,” comes into play. The goal is to be *alus* in both separated realms of the self. In the inner realm this is to be achieved through religious discipline, much but not all of it mystical. In the outer realm, it is to be achieved through etiquette, the rules of which, in this instance, are not only extraordinarily elaborate but have something of the force of law. Through meditation the civilized man thins out his emotional life to a kind of constant hum; through etiquette, he both shields that life from external disruptions and regularizes his outer behavior in such a way that it appears to others as a predictable, undisturbing, elegant, and rather vacant set of choreographed motions and settled forms of speech.

There is much to all this because it connects up to both an ontology and an aesthetic. But so far as our problem is concerned, the result is a bifur-

cate conception of the self, half ungestured feeling and half unfelt gesture. An inner world of stilled emotion and an outer world of shaped behavior confront one another as sharply distinguished realms unto themselves, any particular person being but the momentary locus, so to speak, of that confrontation, a passing expression of their permanent existence, their permanent separation, and their permanent need to be kept in their own separate order. Only when you have seen, as I have, a young man whose wife — a woman he had raised from childhood and who had been the center of his life — has suddenly and inexplicably died, greeting everyone with a set smile and formal apologies for his wife's absence and trying, by mystical techniques, to flatten out, as he himself put it, the hills and valleys of his emotion into an even, level plain ("That is what you have to do," he said to me, "be smooth inside and out") can you come, in the face of our own notions of the intrinsic honesty of deep feeling and the moral importance of personal sincerity, to take the possibility of such a conception of selfhood seriously and to appreciate, however inaccessible it is to you, its own sort of force.

Bali, where I worked both in another small provincial town, though one rather less drifting and dispirited, and, later, in an upland village of highly skilled musical instrument makers, is in many ways similar to Java, with which it shared a common culture until the fifteenth century. But at a deeper level, having continued Hindu while Java was, nominally at least, Islamized, it is quite different. The intricate, obsessive ritual life, Hindu, Buddhist, and Polynesian in about equal proportions (the development of which was more or less cut off in Java, leaving its Indic spirit to turn reflective and phenomenological, even quietistic, in the way I've just described), flourished in Bali to reach levels of scale and flamboyance that have startled the world and made the Balinese a much more dramaturgical people with a self to match. What is philosophy in Java is theatre in Bali.

As a result, there is in Bali a persistent and systematic attempt to stylize all aspects of personal expression to the point where anything idiosyncratic, anything characteristic of the individual merely because he is who he is physically, psychologically, or biographically, is muted in favor of his assigned place in the continuing and, so it is thought, never-changing pageant that is Balinese life. It is *dramatis personae*, not actors, that endure; indeed, it is *dramatis personae*, not actors, that in the proper sense really exist. Physically men come and go — mere incidents in a happenstance history of no genuine importance, even to themselves. But the masks they wear, the stage they occupy, the parts they play, and, most important, the spectacle they mount remain and comprise not the facade but the substance of things, not least the self. Shakespeare's old-trouper view of the vanity of action in the face of mortality — "all the world's a stage and we but poor players, content to strut our hour" — makes no sense here. There is no make-believe: of course players perish, but the play doesn't, and it is the latter, the performed rather than the performer, that really matters.

Again, all this is realized not in terms of some general mood the anthropologist in his spiritual versatility somehow captures, but through a set of readily observable symbolic forms: an elaborate repertoire of designations and titles. The Balinese have at least a half dozen major sorts of labels, ascriptive, fixed, and absolute, which one person can apply to another (or, of course, to himself) to place him among his fellows. There are birth-order markers, kinship terms, caste titles, sex indicators, teknonyms, and so on, each of which consists not of a mere collection of useful tags but a distinct and bounded, internally very complex, terminological system. To apply one of these designations or titles (or, as is more common, several at once) to a person is to define him as a determinate point in a fixed pattern, as the temporary occupant of a particular, quite untemporary, cultural locus. To identify someone, yourself or anyone else, in Bali is thus to

locate him within the familiar cast of characters – “king,” “grandmother,” “third-born,” “Brahman” – of which the social drama is, like some stock company roadshow piece – *Charley’s Aunt* or *Springtime for Henry* – inevitably composed.

The drama is, of course, not farce, and especially not transvestite farce, though there are such elements in it. It is an enactment of hierarchy, a theatre of status. But that, though critical, is unpursuable here. The immediate point is that, in both their structure and their mode of operation, the terminological systems conduce to a view of the human person as an appropriate representative of a generic type, not a unique creature with a private fate. To see how they do this, how they tend to obscure the mere materialities – biological, psychological, historical – of individual existence in favor of standardized status qualities would involve an extended analysis. But perhaps a single example, the simplest further simplified, will suffice to suggest the pattern.

All Balinese receive what might be called birth-order names. There are four of these, “first-born,” “second-born,” “third-born,” “fourth-born,” after which they recycle, so that the fifth-born child is called again “first-born,” the sixth “second-born,” and so on. Further, these names are bestowed independently of the fates of the children. Dead children, even still-born ones, count, so that in this still high birth rate-high infant mortality society, the names don’t really tell you anything very reliable about the birth-order relations of concrete individuals. Within a set of living siblings, someone called “first-born” may actually be first-, fifth-, or ninth-born, or, if somebody is missing, almost anything in between; and someone called “second-born” may in fact be older. The birth-order naming system does not identify individuals as individuals nor is it intended to; what it does is to suggest that, for all procreating couples, births form a circular succession of “first,” “seconds,” “thirds,” and “fourths,” an endless four-stage replication of an imperishable form. Physically men appear and disappear as the ephemerae they are, but socially

the acting figures remain eternally the same as new “firsts,” “seconds,” and so on; they emerge from the timeless world of the gods to replace those who, dying, dissolve once more into it. Thus I would argue that all the designation and title systems function in the same way: to represent the most time-saturated aspects of the human condition as but ingredients in an eternal, footlight present.

Nor is this sense the Balinese have of always being on stage a vague and ineffable one either. It is, in fact, exactly summed up in what is surely one of their experience-nearest concepts: *lek*. *Lek* has been variously translated or mistranslated (“shame” is the most common attempt), but what it really means is close to what we call stage fright. Stage fright is the fear that, for want of skill or self-control, or perhaps by mere accident, an aesthetic illusion will not be maintained, the fear that the actor will show through his part. Aesthetic distance collapses; the audience (and the actor) loses sight of Hamlet and gains, uncomfortably for all concerned, a picture of bumbling John Smith painfully miscast as the Prince of Denmark. In Bali, the case is the same: what is feared is that the public performance to which one’s cultural location commits one will be botched and that the personality (as we would call it but the Balinese, of course, not believing in such a thing, would not) of the individual will break through to dissolve his standardized public identity. When this occurs, as it sometimes does, the immediacy of the moment is felt with excruciating intensity, and men become suddenly and unwillingly creatural, locked in mutual embarrassment, as though they had happened upon each other’s nakedness. It is the fear of *faux pas*, rendered only that much more probable by the extraordinary ritualization of daily life, that keeps social intercourse on its deliberately narrowed rails and protects the dramatisical sense of self against the disruptive threat implicit in the immediacy and spontaneity which even the most passionate ceremoniousness cannot fully eradicate from face-to-face encounters.

Morocco, mid-Eastern and dry rather than East Asian and wet, extrovert, fluid, activist, masculine, informal to a fault, a wild west sort of place without the bar rooms and the cattle drives, is another kettle of selves altogether. My work there, which began in the mid-sixties, has been centered around a moderately large town or small city in the foothills of the Middle Atlas, about twenty miles south of Fez. It is an old place, probably founded in the tenth century, conceivably even earlier. It has the walls, the gates, the narrow minarets rising to prayer-call platforms of a classical Muslim town, and, from a distance anyway, it is a rather pretty place, an irregular oval of blinding white set in the deep-sea green of an olive-grove oasis, the mountains, bronze and stony here, slanting up immediately behind it. Close up, it is less prepossessing, though more exciting: a labyrinth of passages and alleyways, three-quarters of them blind, pressed in by wall-like buildings and curbside shops and filled with a simply astounding variety of very emphatic human beings. Arabs, Berbers, and Jews; tailors, herdsmen, and soldiers; people out of offices, people out of markets, people out of tribes; rich, super-rich, poor, super-poor; locals, immigrants, mimic Frenchmen, unbending medievalists, and somewhere, according to the official government census for 1960, an unemployed Jewish airplane pilot — the town houses one of the finest collections of rugged individuals I, at least, have ever come up against. Next to Sefrou (the name of the place), Manhattan seems almost monotonous.

Yet, no society consists of anonymous eccentrics bouncing off one another like billiard balls, and Moroccans, too, have symbolic means by which to sort people out from one another and form an idea of what it is to be a person. The main such means — not the only one, but I think the most important and the one I want to talk about particularly here — is a peculiar linguistic form called in Arabic the *nisba*. The word derives from the trilateral root, *n-s-b*, for “ascription,” “attribution,” “imputation,” “relationship,” “af-

finity,” “correlation,” “connection,” “kinship.” *Nsīb* means “in-law”; *nsab* means “to attribute or impute to”; *munāsaba* means “a relation,” “an analogy,” “a correspondence”; *mansūb* means “belonging to,” “pertaining to”; and so on to at least a dozen derivatives from *nassāb*, “genealogist” to *nīsbiya*, “(physical) relativity.”

*Nisba* itself, then, refers to a combination morphological, grammatical, and semantic process which consists of transforming a noun into what we would call a relative adjective but what for Arabs becomes just another sort of noun by adding *ī* (f., *īya*): *Ṣefrū*/Sefrou — *Ṣefrūwī*/native son of Sefrou; *Sūs*/region of southwestern Morocco — *Sūsī* / man coming from that region; *Beni Yazga* / a tribe near Sefrou — *Yazgī* / a member of that tribe; *Yahūd* / the Jews as a people, Jewry — *Yahūdī* / a Jew; ‘*Adlun* / surname of a prominent Sefrou family — ‘*Adlūnī* / a member of that family. Nor is the procedure confined to this more or less straightforward “ethnicising” use but is employed, in a wide range of domains, to attribute relational properties to persons. For example, occupation (*hrār* / silk — *hrārī* / silk merchant); religious sect (*Darqāwā* / a mystical brotherhood — *Darqāwī* / an adept of that brotherhood); or spiritual status (Ali / The Prophet’s son-in-law — ‘*Alawī* / descendant of The Prophet’s son-in-law, and thus of The Prophet).

Now, as once formed, *nisbas* tend to be incorporated into personal names — Umar Al-Buhadiwi / Umar of the Buhadi Tribe; Muhammed Al-Sussi / Muhammed from the Sus Region. This sort of adjectival, attributive classification is quite publicly stamped upon an individual’s identity. I was unable to find a single case in which an individual was generally known, or known about, but his (or her) *nisba* was not. Indeed, Sefrouis are far more likely to be ignorant of how well-off a man is, how long he has been around, what his personal character is, or where exactly he lives, than they are of what his *nisba* is — Sussi or Sefroui, Buhadiwi or Adluni, Harari or Darqawi. (Of women to whom he is not related, that is very likely to be all that he knows — or, more

exactly, is permitted to know.) The selves that bump and jostle each other in the alleys of Sefrou gain their definition from associative relations they are imputed to have with the society that surrounds them. They are contextualized persons.

But the situation is even more radical than this. Nisbas render men relative to their contexts, but as contexts themselves are relative, so too are nisbas, and the whole thing rises, so to speak to the second power: relativism squared. Thus, at one level, everyone in Sefrou has the same nisba, or at least the potential of it — namely, Sefroui. However, within Sefrou such a nisba, precisely because it does not discriminate, will never be heard as part of an individual designation. It is only outside of Sefrou that the relationship to that particular context becomes identifying. Inside it, a man is an Adluni, Alawi, Meghrawi, Ngadi, or whatever; and similar distinctions exist within these categories: there are, for example, twelve different nisbas (Shakibis, Zuinis, etc.) by means of which, among themselves, Sefrou Alawis distinguish one another.

The whole matter is far from regular: what level or sort of nisba is used and seems relevant and appropriate (relevant and appropriate, that is, to the users) depends heavily on the situation. A man I knew who lived in Sefrou and worked in Fez but came from the Beni Yazgha tribe settled nearby — and from the Hima lineage of the Taghut sub-fraction of the Wulad Ben Ydir fraction within it — was known as a Sefroui to his work fellows in Fez; a Yazghi to all of us non-Yazghis in Sefrou; an Ydiri to other Beni Yazghas around, except for those who were themselves of the Wulad Ben Ydir fraction, who called him a Taghuti. As for the few other Taghutis, they called him a Himiwi. That's as far as things went here but not as far as they can go in either direction. Should, by chance, our friend journey to Egypt he would become a Maghrebi, the nisba formed from the Arabic word for North Africa. The social contextualization of persons is pervasive and, in its curiously unmethodical way, systematic. Men do not float as



bounded psychic entities, detached from their backgrounds and singularly named. As individualistic, even willful, as the Moroccans in fact are, their identity is an attribute they borrow from their setting.

Now, as with the Javanese inside/outside, smooth/rough phenomenological sort of reality-dividing, and the absolutizing Balinese title systems, the *nisba* way of looking at persons — as though they were outlines waiting to be filled in — is not an isolated custom but part of a total pattern of social life. This pattern is, as the others, difficult to characterize succinctly, but surely one of its outstanding features is a promiscuous tumbling in public settings of varieties of men kept carefully segregated in private ones — all-out cosmopolitanism in the streets, strict communalism (of which the famous secluded woman is only the most striking index) in the home. This is indeed the so-called mosaic system of social organization so often held to be characteristic of the Middle East generally: differently shaped and colored chips jammed in irregularly together to generate an intricate overall design within which their individual distinctiveness remains nonetheless intact. Nothing if not diverse, Moroccan society does not cope with its diversity by sealing it into castes, isolating it into tribes, dividing it into ethnic groups, or covering it over with some common denominator concept of nationality, though, fitfully, all have now and then been tried. It copes with it by distinguishing, with elaborate precision, the contexts — marriage, worship, and to an extent diet, law, and education — within which men are separated by their dissimilarities, from those — work, friendship, politics, trade — within which, however warily and however conditionally, they are connected by them.

To such a social pattern a concept of selfhood which marks public identity contextually and relativistically, but yet does so in terms — tribal, territorial, linguistic, religious, familial — which grow out of the more private and settled arenas of life and have a deep and permanent resonance

there, would seem particularly appropriate. Indeed, it would virtually seem to create it; for it produces a situation in which people interact with one another in terms of categories whose meaning is almost purely positional — location in the general mosaic — leaving the substantive content of the categories, what they mean subjectively as experienced forms of life, aside as something properly concealed in apartments, temples, and tents. Nisba discriminations can be more or less specific; they can indicate location within the mosaic roughly or finely; and they can be adapted to almost any changes in circumstance. But they cannot carry with them more than the most sketchy, outline implications concerning what men so named as a rule are like. Calling a man a Sefroui is like calling him a San Franciscan: it classifies him but it doesn't type him; it places him without portraying him.

It is the capacity of the nisba system to do this — to create a framework within which persons can be identified in terms of supposedly immanent characteristics (speech, blood, faith, provenance, and the rest) and yet to minimize the impact of those characteristics in determining the practical relations among such persons in markets, shops, bureaus, fields, cafés, baths, and roadways — that makes it so central to the Moroccan idea of the self. Nisba-type categorization leads, paradoxically, to a hyper-individualism in public relationships because by providing only a vacant sketch (and that shifting) of who the actors are — Yazghis, Adlunis, Buhadiwis, or whatever — it leaves the rest, that is, almost everything, to be filled in by the process of interaction itself. What makes the mosaic work is the confidence that one can be as totally pragmatic, adaptive, opportunistic, and generally *ad hoc* in one's relations with others — a fox among foxes, a crocodile among crocodiles — as one wants without any risk of losing one's sense of who one is. Selfhood is never in danger because, outside the immediacies of procreation and prayer, only its coordinates are asserted.

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Now, without trying to tie up the dozens of loose ends I have not only left dangling in these rather breathless accounts of the senses of selfhood of nearly ninety million people but have doubtless frazzled even more, let us return to the question of what all this can tell us, or could if it were done adequately, about “the native point of view” in Java, Bali, and Morocco. In describing symbol uses, are we describing perceptions, sentiments, outlooks, experiences? If so, in what sense is this being done? What do we claim when we assert that we understand the semiotic means by which, in this case, persons are defined to one another? That we know words or that we know minds?

In answering this question, it is necessary I think first to notice the characteristic intellectual movement, the inward conceptual rhythm, in each of these analyses, and indeed in all similar analyses, including those of Malinowski – namely, a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously. In seeking to uncover the Javanese, Balinese, or Moroccan sense of self, one oscillates restlessly between the sort of exotic minutiae (lexical antitheses, categorical schemes, morphophonemic transformations) that make even the best ethnographies a trial to read and the sort of sweeping characterizations (“quietism,” “dramatism,” “contextualism”) that makes all but the most pedestrian of them somewhat implausible. Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts which actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explanations of one another.

All this is, of course, but the now familiar trajectory of what Dilthey called the hermeneutic circle, and my argument here is merely that it is as central to ethnographic interpretation, and thus to the penetration of other people’s modes of thought, as it is to literary, historical, philological, psychoanalytic, or biblical interpretation,

or for that matter to the informal annotation of everyday experience we call common sense. In order to follow a baseball game one must understand what a bat, a hit, an inning, a left fielder, a squeeze play, a hanging curve, or a tightened infield are, and what the game in which these "things" are elements is all about. When an *explication de texte* critic like Leo Spitzer attempts to interpret Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," he does so by repetitively asking himself the alternating questions, "What is the whole poem about?" and, "What exactly has Keats seen (or chosen to show us) depicted on the urn he is describing?"; at the end of an advancing spiral of general observations and specific remarks he emerges with a reading of the poem as an assertion of the triumph of the aesthetic mode of perception over the historical. In the same way, when a meanings-and-symbols ethnographer like myself attempts to find out what some pack of natives conceive a person to be, he moves back and forth between asking himself, "What is the general form of their life?" and "What exactly are the vehicles in which that form is embodied?" emerging at the end of a similar sort of spiral with the notion that they see the self as a composite, a persona, or a point in a pattern. You can no more know what *lek* is if you don't know what Balinese dramatism is than you can know what a catcher's mitt is if you don't know what baseball is. And you can no more know what mosaic social organization is if you don't know what a nisba is than you can know what Keats' Platonism is if you are unable to grasp, to use Spitzer's own formulation, the "intellectual thread of thought" captured in such fragment phrases as "Attic shape," "silent form," "bride of quietness," "cold pastoral," "silence and slow time," "peaceful citadel," or "ditties of no tone."

In short, accounts of other peoples' subjectivities can be built up without recourse to pretensions to more-than-normal capacities for ego-effacement and fellow-feeling. Normal capacities in these respects are, of course, essential, as is their cultivation, if we expect people to tolerate

our intrusions into their life at all and accept us as persons worth talking to. I am certainly not arguing for insensitivity here and hope I have not demonstrated it. But whatever accurate, or half-accurate sense one gets of what one's informants are "really like" comes not from the experience of that acceptance as such, which is part of one's own biography not of theirs, but from the ability to construe their modes of expression, what I would call their symbol systems, which such an acceptance allows one to work toward developing. Understanding the form and pressure of, to use the dangerous word one more time, natives' inner lives is more like grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, seeing a joke — or, as I have suggested, reading a poem — than it is like achieving communion.