



Review: Writing Anthropology

Reviewed Work(s):

Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author by Clifford Geertz
Edmund Leach

American Ethnologist, Vol. 16, No. 1. (Feb., 1989), pp. 137-141.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0094-0496%28198902%2916%3A1%3C137%3AWA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Z>

American Ethnologist is currently published by American Anthropological Association.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/anthro.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

EDMUND LEACH—*Cambridge University*

***Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author.* CLIFFORD GEERTZ. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. vi + 157 pp., index. \$19.95 (cloth)**

One of the most celebrated pieces of fictitious ethnography ever written is J. G. Frazer's account of the Priest-King of Nemi awaiting his execution by his as yet unknown successor. It comes in the first chapter of *The Golden Bough* but its immense verbosity, even in the abridged edition, makes it unquotable. I refer to it now only because the status of Clifford Geertz as Priest-King of American cultural anthropology seems to me to be rather similar.

The book under review originally formed a sequence of Harry Camp Lectures delivered at Stanford University in the spring of 1983; the subsequent editing seems to have been minor but various footnotes refer to work published later than 1983. The symposium of essays edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus entitled *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press, 1986), which reports on the proceedings of a seminar held at Santa Fe in April 1984, is especially relevant. The following is a quotation from an essay by Paul Rabinow in this latter volume:

There is a curious time lag as concepts move across disciplinary boundaries. The moment when the historical profession is discovering cultural anthropology in the [unrepresentative] person of Clifford Geertz is just the moment when Geertz is being questioned in anthropology [one of the recurrent themes in the Santa Fe seminar that gave rise to this volume]. So, too, anthropologists . . . are now discovering and being moved to new creation by the infusion of ideas from deconstructionist literary criticism, now that it has lost its cultural energy in literature departments and Derrida is discovering politics [pp. 241–242].

And then on page 243: "Despite Geertz's occasional acknowledgements to the ineluctability of fictionalising, he has never pushed that insight very far."

These comments need to be borne in mind by the readers of my essay. Geertz's own name for his personal style is "Interpretive Anthropology." What he means by that has shifted over the years and may now be on the way out, at any rate among his younger colleagues.

There is a certain ambiguity about the identity of the subtitled "Anthropologist as Author" whose work is under discussion. Clifford Geertz himself might fill that role though I am sure that was not what he intended. So I shall outline the shape of his book as a whole but my readers should not be surprised if I take an occasional side-swipe at Geertz himself.

The book is quite short. Only 150 pages of main text. Six chapters, the first and last being comments by Geertz on the contemporary anthropological (ethnographical) scene and the other four presenting compressed cameos of what purports to be representative work by Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict—in that order. Geertz's choice of authors suggests that, in his view, each of these celebrated figures had/has a distinctive and contrastable style of writing that is epitomized in Geertz's text.

I doubt if Geertz really believes this and though he claims to admire the work of all four of his targets, his admiration is clearly limited. He writes without obvious malice but somehow the "new criticism" apparatus, which Geertz employs in the manner of Kenneth Burke, does not come off. The theory requires that the critic should pay especially close attention to the

small details of what the author actually writes but, as we shall see, Geertz often fails to do precisely this and, on that account, comes to seem untrustworthy.

His investigation has several facets: How does the anthropological author perceive his/her own "text"? What is it about that text that has led the informed reader to regard its author as a master (as compared with other authors who use similar stylistic devices but are not so reckoned)? Just what is the relationship between the objective ethnographic "reality" out there and the artistic fiction that the text conjures up? These are important questions. What sort of answers does Geertz provide?

The first chapter, entitled "Being There," successfully explains what we are to expect though it never comes to grips with what seems to me to be the crux of the whole matter: Does ethnography have an objective subject matter at all? Ever since the days of Herodotus, who is supposed to have started it all, ethnographers have written as if customs were normally static. When change occurs it has to be explained as if it were an anomaly. But historical records everywhere suggest that what would need to be explained is an ethnography that did not change. I shall come back to that. But Geertz does not discuss this issue. Why should history be made up of descriptions of one happening after another, the individual happenings being quite different, whereas the sequences reported by ethnographers are supposed to be endlessly repetitive?

Chapter 2 is about Lévi-Strauss, especially *Tristes Tropiques*. I agree that this is a good representative work of Lévi-Strauss as author. The French text contains all the peculiar stylistic features that characterize the author's oeuvre. It was designed from the start as a work of literature to be read by Parisian intellectuals rather than simply by anthropologists. It proved to be a best-seller. Geertz quotes extensively but always in English. He uses Russell's translation, *A World on the Wane*, but notes that Lévi-Strauss prefers the Weightman version. He gives the page references of both English versions and of the French original as well. What more could one ask of a serious scholar? But actually it is very odd because the Russell translation lacks four chapters of the original, a fact that Geertz does not report. How can those of his potential readers who do not read French be expected to pay close attention to the text if large parts of it are missing?

All the same I think that Geertz is right to emphasize the "extraordinary air of abstracted self-containment" that is characteristic not only of *Tristes Tropiques* but also of Lévi-Strauss's more explicitly anthropological writings. The ethnography is nearly always second hand. A report from before the First World War that makes everything seem neat and tidy will always be preferred to more recent accounts in which the data is palpably contaminated by European influence. The ethnographic "not-here/ not-us" exists only in Lévi-Strauss's text, not in his experience, which, ethnographically, has been rather meagre.

Chapter 3 focuses on Evans-Pritchard. Whereas *Tristes Tropiques* was a best-seller, at any rate in France, Evans-Pritchard's stylistic oddities are here represented by a very short (nine pages), little-known article in *The Army Quarterly* for July 1973 entitled "Operations on the Akobo and Gila Rivers, 1940–41." It seems to be Geertz's thesis that it is characteristic of Evans-Pritchard's ethnography that the scene is built up by recollection, as one might tell stories about the pictures in a photograph album. The objective reality as experienced is decorated but not actually invented. Geertz shrewdly suggests that the Akobo battle piece was composed by trying it out on various attentive audiences in an Oxford pub!

What Geertz says about this Akobo paper intrigues me greatly for quite a different reason. My own military adventures in the far north of Burma from the summer of 1942 to the winter of 1943 were strikingly similar. My guerrillas were untrustworthy Kachins; E-P's were untrustworthy Anuak. My largely invisible enemy were Japanese; E-P's were Italians. The guerrillas in both cases were armed with antique rifles. Both E-P and I got on very badly with our military superiors while colluding well with the civilians (both white and non-white) . . . and so on. But

these similarities of military experience have not led to any similarity of anthropological style, and I cannot see why they should.

Consequently Geertz's claim that the British "school" of social anthropology—whom he lists by name as Evans-Pritchard, Radcliffe-Brown, Meyer Fortes, Max Gluckman, Edmund Leach, Raymond Firth, Audrey Richards, S. F. Nadel, Godfrey Lienhardt, Mary Douglas, Emrys Peters, Lucy Mair, and Rodney Needham—"is held together far more by this manner of going about things in prose than it is by any consensual theory or settled method . . ." seems to me very astonishing. Is there really a British school of social anthropology? What are its characteristics? The persons named do not (did not) even speak English in the same way, let alone write it in the same way. Raymond Firth and Meyer Fortes were both my teachers and former colleagues and I admire the work of both, but I do not admire the written style of either. If, from the other side of the Atlantic, my own texts appear to resemble those of either of these scholars, then all my literary efforts for the past 35 years have been completely vain.

But Geertz's long list of names deserves another comment that relates to his own literary style. A psychiatrist friend of mine once told me that he had a patient who spent all his waking hours copying lists of names out of a telephone directory. Geertz writes like that. Every point of argument is reinforced as if it needed to be supported by a thesaurus. The resulting garrulity quickly becomes intolerable. Where should one stop? For example, even if the social anthropologists in Geertz's list do have some kind of social solidarity, why leave it like that? What about Bronislaw Malinowski, Isaac Schapera, Ian Hogbin, Monica Wilson, Elizabeth Colson, Phyllis Kaberry, William Stanner, Jack Goody . . . and Uncle Tom Cobley and all. . . ?

That Evans-Pritchard's renown rests on his work relating to the Azande and the Nuer and Sanusi is mentioned, but its connection with the Anuak campaign seems to exist only in Geertz's imagination. Geertz does refer to the deep hostility that developed between Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard, but he does not discuss the marked difference between the Azande witchcraft book where the stylistic influence of Malinowski is still strong, the early Nuer publications where the model is Radcliffe-Brown, and the later publications where there begins to be a strong whiff of Lévi-Straussian structuralism. There is no explicit reference to E-P's Catholicism or to his homosexuality, both of which had marked influence on his style of writing.

Chapter 4 is entitled "I-Witnessing: Malinowski's Children." In these days I suspect that the only work of Malinowski's that gets a reading from the potential audience of a series of Harry Camp Memorial Lectures is *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, so perhaps it was predictable that Geertz would use this lamentable and easily misunderstood work to display what he claims to be the peculiarities of Malinowski's thought and style.

Geertz does not seem to be worried that Malinowski, as author, never had any intention that this document should be published nor does he comment on the fact that the first half of the *Diary* has nothing whatever to do with the Trobriand Islands and was written before Malinowski had had any significant fieldwork experience or had developed anything resembling a distinctive anthropo-literary style. He does not mention that the expression "Exterminate the brutes," which has been cited against Malinowski (by Francis Hsu when giving a Presidential address to the AAA) is a quotation from Conrad which, in context, is a rebuke by Malinowski against himself! (*Diary*, 21 January 1915; Geertz p. 74.)

Even more misleading is the passage quoted here at page 133 (in the final chapter) and said to come from the *Diary* at page 150. In fact it comes from page 140. The quote from Geertz reads as follows: "Malinowski's happy 'Eureka!' when first coming upon the Trobrianders—'Feeling of ownership: it is I who will describe them . . . [I who will] create them.'" It is a remarkable example of *not* paying close attention to the text! The *Diary* entry is dated 1 December 1917. It does not contain the word "Eureka!". The people whom Malinowski plans to "create" (by writing about them) are not the Trobrianders at all but the pot makers of the Amphlett Islands. By that date Malinowski spoke fluent Kiriwinan and had lived among Trobrianders for more than 18 months. That Geertz, whom many consider to be the most distinguished

ethnographer in the United States, should write as carelessly as this seems to me absolutely extraordinary.

But let us get back to Geertz's Chapter 4. The title refers not to Malinowski but to "Malinowski's Children." Who are they? First, Kenneth Read, author of *The High Valley* (1965). Actually Read's links with Malinowski, whom he never met, are somewhat remote. He is by birth an Australian and he learned his basic anthropology from Ian Hogbin, one of Malinowski's first-generation pupils. He obtained his Ph.D. at the London School of Economics in 1948 when Raymond Firth was the senior professor. His subsequent academic career was mostly on the faculty at the University of Washington, Seattle. The "High Valley" is located in the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea. I share Geertz's views about the excellence of this book, which is one of the first anthropological monographs to be frankly subjective and autobiographical. Read went back to the High Valley for brief visits in 1981 and 1982 but was unable to recapture the romance of his original fieldwork. Read had personal problems that might account for this but Geertz seems to suggest that it is an inevitable consequence of pursuing Malinowski's style of "immersionist ethnography" and attempting to be honest about it that the high romance should end by going completely flat.

At any rate Geertz includes among "Malinowski's Children" three recent works of Moroccan ethnography by P. Rabinow (1977), V. Crapanzano (1980), and K. Dwyer (1982). None of these authors has any sort of connection with Malinowski. Geertz's claim that there is a common stylistic thread but that the whole thing has gone rotten because the author has put too much of himself into his text is a very personal invention. Geertz is of course himself a specialist on Morocco so perhaps he should know; but he is not an entirely unprejudiced witness. The alleged link with Malinowski shows once again how difficult it is for anthropologists who have been reared in the American tradition running from Boas to Kroeber to Talcott Parsons to Edward Shils to grasp what Malinowski thought he was up to.

Chapter 5 is about Ruth Benedict. She is not an author who is widely read on this side of the Atlantic. Even *Patterns of Culture* has now been dropped from undergraduate reading lists and *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was never on them; but Geertz, by picking up an early minor text preserved by Margaret Mead, has managed to convince me that Benedict deserves comparison with Swift. The chapter title "US/NOT-US: Benedict's Travels" is intended as a trope for "Gulliver's Travels" and Geertz would apparently put Benedict in the same class as Montaigne, Montesquieu, Voltaire, W. S. Gilbert, Veblen, and Saul Bellow (pp. 107–108). Note again Geertz's thesaurus type approach! All the same this is the best chapter in the book. Benedict's long-lasting love affair with Margaret Mead is not mentioned, though, as it has been vouched for by Mead's daughter, Catherine Bateson, it is now in the public domain.

The final chapter carries the title "Being Here: Whose Life Is It Anyway?" It is very hard to read because of the repeated listing of names—"a shelved beach in Polynesia, a charred plateau in Amazonia; Akobo, Meknes, Panther Burn . . ."—the *suffisance* of Lévi-Strauss, the assuredness of Evans-Pritchard, the brashness of Malinowski, the impeturbability of Benedict . . . The skeptic in me reacts to this sort of thing by muttering, "Why Polynesia?"—"What is brash about Malinowski?" But the argument seems to be that in the postcolonial era the kind of ethnography that was pursued (or at least attempted) by Geertz's four protagonists no longer has any relevance for anything. In those far off days "Here" and "There" were in quite different parts of the map. Geographical difference was reflected in cultural difference. Cultures had hard edges. They could be thought of as entirely separate. But now no more.

Being a fully certified member of "the British 'school' of social anthropology" (whatever that means!), this does not worry me very much. I have always taken the line that, in ethnographic writing, cultural differences, though sometimes convenient, are temporary fictions. Recently I have become more explicit about this. An ethnographic monograph has much more in common with an historical novel than with any kind of scientific treatise. As anthropologists we need to come to terms with the now well-recognized fact that in a novel the personalities of

the characters are derived from aspects of the personality of the author. How could it be otherwise? The only ego that I know at first hand is my own. When Malinowski writes about Trobriand Islanders he is writing about himself; when Evans-Pritchard writes about the Nuer he is writing about himself. Any other sort of description turns the characters of ethnographic monographs into clockwork dummies. I cannot fathom whether Geertz would agree with this statement or not. Sometimes he seems to be saying something rather like this, but at other times it is quite the reverse.

Perhaps the underlying problem is the one I mentioned earlier. Why should anthropologists take it for granted that history never repeats itself but persuade themselves that, if left alone, ethnographic cultures never do anything else? The answer is that it is often convenient so to believe. Malinowski believed that the Trobriand *kula*, as he observed it, had been working like that for hundreds if not thousands of years. He mentions this belief only in a footnote. The evidence is that it had in fact been in existence for less than 50 years and was changing rapidly all the time. But even the archaeologists would not accept that assertion 100 percent. It was necessary for Malinowski's style of writing about the *kula* that it should have existed for a long time. Without that improbable assumption we would never have had *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Ethnographers as authors are not primarily concerned with factual truth; they convince by the way they write. Montaigne writing about cannibals in the 16th century is still far more convincing than is W. Arens writing on the same topic from Stony Brook in 1979. I suspect that Geertz would agree.

submitted 18 March 1988

accepted 23 March 1988