

This file is part of [HyperGeertz@WorldCatalogue\(HTM\)](#)

Lively anthropologist tells of a changing profession. Geertz speaks with Williams students during Convocation weekend.

by *Emily Rees* (including numerous citations directly from Clifford Geertz)

in: *The North Adams Transcript* (North Adams/Mass./USA: MediaNews), no ISSN, Monday, September 16, 1991, p. 5.

online source: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/545536965>

Using this text is subject to the general [HyperGeertz-Copyright](#)-regulations based on the Austrian copyright-law ("Urheberrechtsgesetz 1936", version 2018, par. 40h, par. 42), which - in short - allow a personal, nonprofit & educational (all must apply) use of material stored in data bases, including a restricted redistribution of such material, if this is also for nonprofit purposes and restricted to a specific scientific community (both must apply), and if full and accurate attribution to the author, original source and date of publication, web location(s) or originating list(s) is given ("fair-use-restriction"). Any other use transgressing this restriction is subject to a direct agreement between a subsequent user and the holder of the original copyright(s) as indicated by the source(s). HyperGeertz@WorldCatalogue cannot be held responsible for any neglect of these regulations and will impose such a responsibility on any unlawful user.

Original copyright 2020 by



Each copy of any part of a transmission of a HyperGeertz-Text must therefore contain this same copyright notice as it appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission, including any specific copyright notice as indicated above by the original copyright holder and/ or the previous online source(s).

Lively anthropologist tells of a changing profession

Geertz speaks with Williams students during Convocation weekend

By EMILY REES
Special to The Transcript

WILLIAMSTOWN — Anthropologist Clifford Geertz displayed his story-telling talents this weekend while on campus to receive an honorary doctorate.

"As five o'clock one morning I was woken by a crowd of Balinese peasants gathering under my window. 'We heard that the Soviets had put up a moon,' they said, speaking of a satellite, 'but of course we can't trust the national radio so we came to ask you if it's true.' I confirmed the news and they continued out to the fields, convinced 'If an American says that about a Russian, it must be true,'" Geertz said, concluding his story. "This is how you find out what they really think about you."

Taking advantage of Geertz's trip to Williamstown for Convocation, a group of students arranged to meet with him for an informal discussion. Geertz explained his approach to his profession and how that profession is changing, much like the places he began studying 40 years ago.

In the anthropologist's quick, enthusiastic conversation were the

same sort of field work stories which enliven his writing. Geertz's storytelling style has won him respect from colleagues and popularity among students. His writings in anthropology are read for courses ranging from philosophy to political science and have earned him ten honorary degrees, most recently a Doctor of Letters from Williams on Saturday.

Geertz's expertise in the field of cultural anthropology, which he has defined as the study of a people's culture to figure out "what the devil they think they're up to," comes from four decades of studying people in Java, Bali, and Morocco.

As a working anthropologist, Geertz has a complicated role. He must immerse himself in the respective communities to learn about the culture, yet keep himself distant to be able to analyze social relations objectively.

He cannot be closed-minded or ethnocentric, nor can he be a "player" in the society or adopt the world view of the natives he studies. For this reason, he said, "I would have a hard time studying Christian Funda-

mentalism in the U.S. South because I have feelings about that. But I can study Muslim Fundamentalists with no problem."

At times his conflicting roles as objective observer and American tear him in different directions. Geertz shared his most concrete experiences of "moral torture," which have related to health care. "Once I was off in a Balinese village that was very hard to get to, and we anthropologists had the only jeep. A kid got very sick and the father asked us to take his son in our jeep to be cured.

"We wanted to take him to a Western doctor, but the father wanted treatment from the local doctor. So what do you do, insist that you're right? 'We're from the West, we know this is a good thing.'" If the boy had suffered under the care of either doctor, Geertz would have blamed himself, he said, but luckily the boy regained his health.

Geertz spoke with enthusiasm about his field work experiences, his discussions with other intellectuals, and his work on his current book, "After the Fact," which will re-examine his work in Indonesia during the

1950s. He visited Java again a few years ago and found that in addition to historical changes to the town he had studied, he too had changed since he began his work 40 years before. Then he entered the community as an "anonymous grad student." Now he goes as a famous anthropologist.

"I used to talk only to average Indonesians," he said, "but now I talk to scholars and give lectures at the local university."

Fame can be a complication. His widely published writings have inspired admirers to travel to his study locations, turning remote areas into tourist centers. His cultural analyses are read in university classes by the natives themselves, and his visits are no longer anonymous.

When Geertz returned to Java in the 1980s, he learned his native informant from an earlier study had revealed the identity of his subjects. "When the book came out, he wrote the real names above the pseudonyms, Xeroxed it, and sent it to all the appropriate people," the anthropologist laughed wryly.



Cultural anthropology has traditionally been first-world anthropologists venturing off by themselves to study the culture of small non-Western groups. However, as interest increases in studying more developed societies closer to home, Geertz explained, "anthropologists can no longer have the whole thing. We have to share" with sociologists, political scientists, and economists. Even in more traditional work, "on islands — I shouldn't pick on islands — on tribes," an anthropologist now runs up against "other voices." They are other social scientists and indigenous scholars, who have an inside perspective on the culture.

The new interaction among the social sciences — the topic of this year's Williams Convocation address and panel discussion — has meant a rethinking of the "intellectual division of labor."

Anthropology is a special discipline, said Geertz, and can add something to the discussion of culture and society that others cannot. One of Geertz's contributions to anthropology, and to the social sciences gener-

ally, has been his "thick description," the recounting of observed incidents which concretely illustrate his analysis.

"You can't represent a whole society that way, of course, but I've never been under the illusion that I represent the whole society. But I think there is room for that kind of scholar, too."

Judging from Clifford Geertz's ten honorary degrees, there does appear to be room for his kind of scholar.

Meetings posted for week

WILLIAMSTOWN — Meetings scheduled this week include:

TODAY — The Hoosic River Watershed Association, 7:30 p.m., Municipal Building

TUESDAY — Library Trustees, 4 p.m., Public Library

WEDNESDAY — Hoosac Water Quality District, 7:30 p.m., Simonds Road

THURSDAY — Zoning Board of Appeals, 7:30 p.m., Municipal Building

United Way video to air Wednesday

NORTH ADAMS — The Northern Berkshire United Way local cam-