

[Catherine Allerton](#)

Decency and megaphones in the rice fields

Article (Published version)

Original citation:

Allerton, Catherine (2012) *Decency and megaphones in the rice fields*. [Anthropology of this century](#), 3.

© 2012 [AOTC Press](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/41541/>

Available in LSE Research Online: January 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

DECENCY AND MEGAPHONES IN THE RICE FIELDS

CATHERINE ALLERTON

A shadow falls: in the heart of Java BY ANDREW BEATTY

Students intending to study anthropology often ask for suggested readings to whet their appetite for their new subject. What do we recommend? An introductory textbook? Levi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques*? Something by Geertz, or Mead, or Malinowski? Since its publication in 2009, admissions tutors would do well to suggest Andrew Beatty's *A shadow falls*, a deeply intelligent but non-academic account of the two and half years he spent living in an Indonesian village with his family. Certainly, as 'popular anthropology', it is a lot more sophisticated than the funny but caricaturing Nigel Barley volumes I read before beginning my own introductory studies. Freed from ethnography's need to explain, cite and cross-reference, Beatty's narrative non-fiction evocatively introduces and describes the unique lives of a cast of diverse characters in a densely-packed village in Banyuwangi, east Java.

Beatty first arrives in Java in 1992, stays for eighteen months, and then returns three years later for a further year, finally exiting in 1997. *A shadow falls*, whilst charting the lives, deaths, couplings and uncouplings of the villagers of Bayu, is primarily an account of religious change. Between his first and second stay, life in the village is overshadowed by a new, zealously purifying strand of Islam that refuses to play by the unwritten village rules of tolerance, respect for diversity and avoidance of confrontation. This ostentatiously pious Islam is personified in the form of Drus, a landowner and motorbike dealer towards whom Beatty takes an instant dislike. Drus has bad breath, he clumsily castrates a cat in the street, and his self-satisfied air provokes the usually neutral anthropologist into saying "too much". Towards the end of his second period of fieldwork, once again unable to sleep due to megaphoned sermons, Beatty goes to ask for the noise to be turned down, and is initially mistaken for Drus's enemy, the village headman. A passionate confrontation follows in which, in classically Javanese style, nothing happens. Drus has insulted Beatty, but it was an insult meant for another; fists have been raised but no blows struck. And yet everything has changed and neutrality is now impossible. Shortly afterwards, Beatty and his family finally leave.

Juxtaposed with this intolerant, culturally alien form of Islam – represented by a young, fluffily-bearded man in "the fancy dress of fanaticism" – are other forms of religious practice. We meet villagers who fast during Ramadan to help understand the "hardships of the poor", a soldier who converted to Christianity during military service in East Timor, and a carpenter who avoids the mosque and the Koran for fear of being accused of sorcery inherited from his murdered Muslim specialist father. However, most significantly, and most revealingly in the context of Beatty's personal and anthropological journey, we meet the mystics.



Mysticism, represented here by the association of Sangkan Paran, is the “philosophical flowering” of the folk religion of Javanism. Its followers are middle-aged and older men and women, and Beatty is drawn to them from the start. In part, this is because of what he often describes as their “decency”. Their charm is their graciousness rather than any esoteric knowledge they might impart. They have “an openness about them, a human sympathy” that he finds hard to resist. Warno, the mystic he gets to know best, is “one of the sanest men I ever met”, whose balanced and poetic way of speaking gets under Beatty’s skin.

Unlike those scholars who approach mysticism through the courts and palaces of Java, or through its ancient manuscripts, Beatty sees it as a “philosophy grounded in experience”, something that lies before the villagers, “half-concealed in the routines of everyday life”. The mystics ask questions about the essence of life and Beatty finds that these are questions he himself (as a man, a father and only finally as an anthropologist) asks. Thus, from an early interest inspired by the mystics’ friendliness and his own anthropological focus on religion, in the later stages of fieldwork Beatty finds himself – against what he calls his “Anglo-Saxon dullness” – becoming initiated into Sangkan Paran. This initiation involves a ritual bath, a ritual death and mystical instruction, before the initiate is asked for a sign. In Beatty’s case, the sign does not come quickly, and the bath is repeated three times before, finally, there is a “squinting flash” of white, gone in an instant, but unmistakable nevertheless. The next day, his neighbours’ varied reactions epitomize the village’s toleration, gentle humour and good sense, though some of the pious are mocking of his return to “babyhood”...

There is much to admire in this absorbing book. In amongst the descriptions of religious practice, and the gradual but shocking emergence of religious intolerance, are repressed but resurfacing memories of the post-coup violence of 1965, as well as stories of intergenerational relations, adoptions and child-borrowings, dragon shows, prayer-meals and even a couple of memorable excursions. The first trip is with the mystics to the sacred forest of Alas Purwo, the second with village children to the beach where, finding the sea an exciting but alien environment, they flounder in the waves “on the brink of happy deaths”. Beatty’s writing is economical but evocative and he can summarise a character with one, brief description. The book is also gently humorous. Standing outside, smoking handrolled “76” cheroots, Beatty imagines marketing them as “The brand the ancestors prefer”. During preparations for a prayer-meal, children being fed sweets by their mothers to keep them quiet are described as “drugged with sugar”, chewing in “a glucosal stupor”. On the trip to

Alas Purwo, Beatty finds himself eating a meal of hornet soup followed by (whole) frog stew and thinks “One for *The Anthropologist’s Cookbook*”. These affectionate asides reveal the contradictions of anthropological fieldwork, during which the anthropologist must go with the flow, setting aside personal judgements and opinions, whilst paradoxically aiming to forge meaningful relationships.

One senses, in reading the book, that Beatty relished breaking free from the chains of academic scholarship. He is able to present the contradictory accounts of villagers without always explaining or accounting for difference. Moreover, not only is his writing peppered with ironic comments, he is also honest about the complex entanglements, inconsistencies and unanswered questions of fieldwork. When certain pious Muslims insult him by using overly familiar forms of address (the kind appropriate for children), Beatty is bewildered, not knowing how to respond, and so learns to avoid these men, in part to save other villagers from embarrassment. When recalling a desperate, childless woman who had pulled down her bodice to reveal breasts lacking nipples, he asks, “How can you prepare for this kind of revelation?” He also struggles with constant questions and comments on the immorality and war-mongering of the Western world he represents. When people return from day-trips to Bali and ask him, incredulous, about the “fat girls in bikinis” and other strange westerners they have seen, he learns to create distance between himself and such “wealthy savages” by categorising them all as “Australians”.

Key to Beatty’s integration in the village is the presence of his wife and young children. Indeed, somewhat poignantly, he describes his wife as physically blending in with the village “in a way I found impossible”. She spends more time than him with the neighbours, sitting in the yard shelling peanuts, and she helps out in the kitchens at prayer-meals and weddings. The paradox of participant observation for Beatty seems to be the impossibility of fully “blending in” whilst being a “spectator”. This is a paradox his accompanying family can avoid. However, given the villagers’ intense interest in his baby daughter – his wife finds herself having to fend off the endless attentions of the girl’s many “aunts” – and given that Javanese men have been described as only fully relaxing in the status-free company of young children, I found myself wanting to know more about Beatty’s experiences of fieldwork-with-children. This was particularly the case given a wildly general comment Beatty makes (in the context of a discussion of Javanese children) about the “intense, indifferent, aggressive world of North European and American children”. Beyond the questions of birth and life that stir up his interest in the mystics, the children are primarily presented as his wife’s concern, and the reader is left wondering how Beatty himself coped with juggling the dual roles of father and anthropologist? How were his relationships with key male informants shaped by the presence of his children? Did he, with his apparent antipathy to western childhood, consciously hope for his children to become Javanese?

Indeed, though an honest, affectionate and engaging account, the book only dips its toes in the waters of self-reflexivity. When discussing Warno’s decision to abandon the mosque and its prayers, Beatty recalls his own final communion, aged 17, at which he experienced a sudden awareness of “the oddness of things”, the beginnings of a journey towards anthropology. Such revelations of private thoughts and feelings are, however, rare, brief and controlled. This is of course part of the book’s strength – the focus is always firmly on Java – but when it came to Beatty’s initiation into mysticism, I found the ambiguity and brevity of his account frustrating. He is initially worried about losing neutrality by “joining the club”, but in the end “curiosity, congeniality and friendship” lead him to an almost inevitable initiation. But why is this an inevitable step? Why, in his case, should curiosity and friendship have motivated an initiation when, for many other anthropologists, they would not? What were the

final revelations that initiation allowed? What is the ongoing nature of the thread that connects him with the mystics?

A more serious, though by no means fatal, flaw of the book is the huge cast of characters whom the reader must meet, engage with and keep in mind. Though the preface states Beatty's intention to go beyond the usual anthropological account, and to reveal how individual people "get caught up in history", the book seems haunted by the ghost of ethnographic holism. Whilst being evocative and eclectic in its story-telling, it still tries hard to be representative. What novel of this length, though, could successfully juggle a cast of 73? I felt the desire to cut out peripheral figures, to leave room to explore key characters in more depth. Some individuals whose actions are central to the narrative – such as Sri, the first woman in the village to take up the veil – fail to emerge as three-dimensional characters. Indeed, in his account of the shocked response to Sri's veiling, Beatty makes a rare slip, arguing that the shock would make most sense if we were to imagine our own mother or sister suddenly covering, strangely assuming the character of his book's readership. More generally, and connected with the decisions of Sri and later village veilers, Beatty has problems accessing the perspectives of "youth", the younger generation who have "never learnt to think for themselves". We never hear why young women – as individuals caught up in history – might be drawn to veiling, and how they might have their own, original perspectives on Islam. In fact, the reader senses that Beatty sees such decisions as primarily influenced by men, just as he wonders why one father would "allow" his daughter to marry an unsuitable man. Perhaps Beatty's gradual movement towards mysticism, and in spite of the relaxed relations between Javanese men and women, led him away from the thoughts and ideas of those who were physically embodying the shift to new religious practices.

Now that *A shadow falls* can stand alongside his ethnographic account of *Varieties of Javanese religion*, Beatty is apparently completing a non-fiction narrative of his earlier fieldwork on Nias. Provisionally entitled 'After the Ancestors', this will in turn shadow the academic analysis documented in *Society and Exchange on Nias*. The publication of this account is an intriguing prospect, since Nias operates as something of an elephant in the room in *A Shadow Falls*: an aggressive and demanding context implicitly contrasted with the grace and "utter calm" of Java. When Beatty says that village Java was "not a hard place to live", the reader senses that Nias very definitely was. One wonders whether Javanese "decency" finds any parallels on "that remote and sad island". This makes the potential publication of Beatty's second popular account an intriguing and welcome prospect.