Despite being an essential part of the ‘Balinese way of life’, cock-fighting was deemed backward by the Indonesian government and therefore illegal. On this occasion the police raised the event, suddenly and without warning. As everyone ran in different directions, Clifford and Hildred Geertz instinctively did the same. After the dust had settled and the police had left, both were accepted by the community. Running from the police together with the villagers, it was, as in their opinion, a sign of solidarity and good intentions.

So begins one of the most famous arrival stories in anthropological lore. Geertz goes on to argue that it is possible to understand the cockfight as a microcosm of Balinese culture. Culture should be understood as a text and the anthropologist’s task is to interpret it. As he puts it in one of his most famous lines: ‘The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong’ (p.452).

If one looks carefully, Balinese conceptions of self and society, status and hierarchy, are all found in and around the cockfight where ‘the sentiments upon which...hierarchy rests [are] revealed in their natural colors’ (p.447). This is the reason, Geertz claims, that men get involved in ‘deep play’ – games where the stakes, in money and status, are so involved in ‘deep play’ – games where the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong’ (p.452).

If one looks carefully, Balinese conceptions of self and society, status and hierarchy, are all found in and around the cockfight where ‘the sentiments upon which...hierarchy rests [are] revealed in their natural colors’ (p.447). This is the reason, Geertz claims, that men get involved in ‘deep play’ – games where the stakes, in money and status, are so high that it would appear irrelevant for anyone to take part.

‘Deep play’ became the defining article in Geertz’s version of interpretive anthro-
pology. In the 1980s and 90s, however, Geertz sustained increasing criticism from a wide range of scholars. The most powerful critique problematised his understanding of culture as a coherent whole (Clifford 1989). Not all Balinese, it was claimed, think in the same way and there is not just one bounded ‘Balinese’ culture. Geertz was not merely reading a text over the shoulders of his informants, his critics claimed, he was constructing one himself.

Forty years so after Geertz left Bali, I witnessed my own cockfight near Tanjung Batu, a small port town on the Indonesian island of Kundai in the Riau Archipelago, located just off the coast of Singapore and the Malayan Peninsula. In 1844, five years after the founding of Singapore, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty made the Straits of Malacca the border between the English and Dutch colonial empires, dividing the Malay Peninsula from the Riau Archipelago and creating the geographical basis for what would become Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singa-

The still largely rural island of Kundai covers 50,000 inhabitants who have mainly subsisted on rubber planting and fishing. Kundai is nowhere to be found in tourist guidebooks. Like many other islands in the region, it has been affected by the Growth Triangle project, but remains on the periphery of formal economic development. Informal change has been more obvious. Most notably, Kundai has the dubious dis-
tinction of having some 1,000 young women in the largest brothel village in the region. Batu 7 is located seven km from Tanjung Batu and caters mainly to Singaporean tourists.

As I witness these events in an era and place very different from the one Geertz was a part of, I couldn’t help but think the cockfight is a still helpful met-
aphor to understand the broader world of which it is a part. It was not, however, the particular ‘culture’ of Kundai that it helped me think about. What kind of homogeneous culture could I possibly find in a place where Singaporean gam-

When anthropologists Clifford and Hildred Geertz arrived in a small village on Bali in the late 1950s, they were outsiders. It was, Clifford Geertz wrote, ‘as though we were not there. For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were non-persons, specters, invisible men’ (1973:412).

Images changed ten days later when they visited their first cockfight.